

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Introduction

From J. Sidlow Baxter's book *Explore the Book*, we quote the following: "[The Book of Psalms] is the poetry of downright reality; and, as 'the body is more than the raiment,' so here, the reality is greater than the poetry which expresses it. Here, too, is strong theology -- not, however, any merely theoretic theology, but the practical theology of vivid human experience; and, as 'the life is more than meat,' so is concrete experience more than abstract doctrine. It is this, fundamentally, which has made the Book of Psalms such a treasure to the godly."

Baxter quotes John Calvin, who said: "This book I am wont to style an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for no one will discover in himself a single feeling whereof the image is not reflected in this mirror. Nay, all griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, anxieties -- in short, all those tumultuous agitations wherewith the minds of men are wont to be tossed -- the Holy Ghost hath here represented to the life."

The word "psalm" comes from the Greek word *psalmos*, meaning "a poem to be sung to a stringed instrument. The Septuagint uses the word *psalmoi*, which is plural of *psalmos*. The Hebrew name is *Tehillim*, which means "praises," or *Tephiloth*, which is translated as "Prayers."

Hebrew poetry differs from Western verse in many ways. Western poetry is often typified by rhyming words, or parallels of sound and rhythm, or of accent. This, of course, is not true of what is called "Blank Verse," which has a structured meter and length. Rhyme and rhythm are not essential to poetry; a poem does not constitute good poetry merely because of the rhyming of words. True poetry is determined by its contents. In Hebrew poetry, it is not parallelism of sound or rhyme that is important, but parallelism of thought. Traces of rhythm have also been found, however. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: "There is coming to be agreement among Hebrew scholars that the rhythm of Hebrew poetry is largely determined by the number of accented syllables in the line." As far as rhyme is concerned, it is impossible to state positively that it was present or absent since, at the time most psalms were composed, no vowels were used in Hebrew script, so the sound of a word of so many centuries ago cannot be determined retroactively.

Baxter distinguishes three forms of parallels in the psalms: complete, contrastive, and constructive. Examples of complete parallelism are found in Ps. 92:12; 46:1; 19:7; 30:2. Contrasting parallels are found in Ps. 30:5; 32:10; 37:10,11. A sample of constructive parallelism is Ps. 21:1,2. A combination of those elements is also possible, as in Ps. 20:7,8 where we find the constructive and contrasting put together. There are variations in the method of combining, as in Ps. 135:15-19, where the first phrase contrasts with the last, the second with the next to the last, etc. Another term of complete, contrastive, and constructive is synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic parallels.

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In the New Testament, the word "Psalms" is found in Luke 20:42, and Acts 1:20. The Hebrew subscripts of the psalms ascribe 73 of them to David, 12 to Asaph, 12 to the Sons of Korah (that is if we take the title of Ps. 42 to be valid for Ps. 43 also), 1 to Herman the Ezrahite, 1 to Ethan the Ezrahite, and 1 to Moses. This makes a total of 100 psalms. The remaining fifty psalms are anonymous. The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia states about the number of Davidic psalms: "Opinion varies among conservative scholars all the way from 3 or 4 to 44 or 45." It is beyond the scope of our study to go into the authenticity of the subscripts. We will simply accept them as they are stated in the NIV.

The Book of Psalms is divided into five parts:

- Book One – Psalm 1 – 41
- Book Two – Psalm 42 – 72
- Book Three – Psalm 73 – 89
- Book Four – Psalm 90 – 106

- Book Five – Psalm 107 – 150

Some people have seen in this division a parallel with the books of the Pentateuch. The first book deals with man, and is mainly from the hand of David. The second book is also, chiefly, attributed to David as has as the theme the redemption of man. The third book, with Asaph as its main author, is the Leviticus book, and is set against the background of the sanctuary. The fourth book opens with the psalm of Moses and emphasizes the time when all restlessness and wanderings will be finished, and the peoples of the earth will bow before God and His Messiah. The fifth book is the book of thanksgiving and praise. The emphasis is on the word of God and on God's faithfulness.

BOOK ONE**PSALMS 1 – 41****PSALM ONE**

1 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

4 Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

6 For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

The Book of Psalms opens with a beatitude, like the Sermon on the Mount, which our Lord preached. This is no coincidence, because, not only did Jesus live by the Word of God and make it His daily bread, to the point that His words were laced with quotations from the Old Testament, but the whole Old Testament also derives its value from the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

The exclamation with which the psalm opens, “Blessed!” could be better translated with “O, the blessedness!” TLB captures this with the rendering: “O, the joys of those”

The word “blessed” has a strong materialistic connotation in the Old Testament. It was expressed in terms of material prosperity, in oil, wine and success. This does not mean that blessedness and prosperity are considered identical. **Meaning of the word.**

In the New Testament blessing is the result of fellowship with God. In this psalm the word blessed has that meaning.

It is remarkable that the Book of Psalms begins with this exclamation. “Blessedness” is the key to open this hymnal; it is the beginning, the purpose, and the contents of the whole book.

It is true that, in a sense, this places man in the center. The Book of Psalms is the human expression of the whole spectrum of emotions of fellowship with God. There are prophetic parts in the Book of Psalm, where God speaks to man; but in most of the book man is speaking. It is inconceivable that man, who rebelled against God, can address God and say something that has meaning. Only redeemed man can do this. Blessedness is, therefore, the beginning and the basis of most of the psalms.

The life of the psalmist is based on blessedness. The exclamation, “O, the blessedness,” therefore, is not an expression of desire to be blessed, but to maintain the status of being blessed. The question here is not, “how can a man be saved?” but: “how should a redeemed person live?”

Two kinds of people are mentioned in this psalm: the man who is saved and who wants to confirm his salvation, and the man who turns away from salvation and who willfully and purposely rejects this salvation. Holiness of life begins, in the first place, with the drawing of a line of separation between one person and another. This does not mean keeping one’s distance from certain people, but withdrawing from the spiritual powers that influence those people. He who has said “Yes” to God has to keep on saying “No” to the devil. This “No” consists in a confrontation between the devil and the Word of God. We should never enter into a dialogue with the enemy and use our own words, but always answer him with the Word of God. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the desert, He answered with the words: “It is written... ”¹ The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit.² That is why a person should have his delight in the law of the Lord. Our attitude towards the Word of God is a decisive factor in our sanctification.

“Walking in the counsel” speaks about how a man expresses his philosophy of life in his everyday living. It is living out our faith, or the lack of it. We are what we do. It is impossible to confess with the mouth to be a Christian and to follow the customs of people who do not recognize God in their lives. Salvation pertains to our way of life and walking with God means having fellowship with Him. It means sharing our secrets with Him, and His sharing of His secrets with us. As David says in Psalm 25, “The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them,” or in the rendering of the

¹ Matt. 4:4,7,10

² Eph. 6:17

KJV: "The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant."³ This was the kind of life Enoch and Noah led. The Bible says about them that they "walked with God."⁴ "The council of the wicked" is the life of a man who goes his own way. This does not necessarily imply atheism. There probably were very few atheists, if any, in David's time. Anyone, however, who does not trust the Lord with all his heart and who does not acknowledge him in all his ways, does not know what salvation and blessedness is.⁵

In our use of language, "to walk" has a connotation of relaxation. The first verse of this psalm issues a warning against a lack of openness and intimacy with God. After our conversion, this walk is the greatest priority for our spiritual growth. Walking also means progress. A lack of openness and fellowship with the Lord means stagnation. This is expressed in the second line of the psalm. If we do not progress in our fellowship with God we find ourselves immediately in the presence of sinners. When one keeps God out of his life, he becomes automatically a sinner. An act of sin is the result of a broken fellowship. Just as the presence of the soul in the body keeps the body from decomposing, so the Holy Spirit protects us from sin. If we do not busy ourselves with the law of the Lord, we stagnate and find ourselves on the road that will, eventually, lead to perdition. A man's acts determine his course in life and our fellowship with God, or the lack of it, determine our acts.

A person who sits down has given up in the struggle for advance. A scoffer has turned against God. Scoffing is a kind of self-defense. Even the way the sitting of the scoffers is portrayed implies a conspiracy. So is the beatitude of vs. 1 at the same time a warning that the man who separates himself from God and His Word, will gradually become worse. Scoffing is a form of entertainment which makes fun of someone. It is a lesser evil if a person shakes his fist at God than it is to mock Him. Scoffing implies superiority over the object that is being mocked. The lowest point in the history of man was the mocking of our Lord Jesus Christ by the Romans and the Jews. The apostle Paul warns us: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked."⁶ A person who mocks God has lost sight of all proportions. He has reached the deepest point of stagnation.

Over against the fun of the mocker stands the delight of the man who loves the law of the Lord. The poet who wrote this psalm had only the Pentateuch at his disposal, but, obviously, "the law of the Lord" stands for the whole of Scripture. Our walk in life is determined by our attitude toward the Bible. That is why it is so important to have a correct understanding about the inspiration and authority of the Word of God. In this psalm, however, much more is at stake than orthodox convictions. The Bible ought to be our joy of living. We ought to delight in reading it. As a young Christian I went through a struggle in accepting the Bible as a whole as the Word of God. I was shackled by intellectual and emotional prejudices. Reading Billy Graham's testimony tipped the balance for me. It took an act of the will to accept this. But even after that, I did not immediately begin with a systematic study of the Bible. The devil seems to keep his sharpest darts to attack people who have made up their minds to immerse themselves in the Word of God. Sin entered the world with an attack upon the Word of God. I have come to the conclusion that, if I place myself upon the basis of unconditional acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God, most intellectual and emotional objections melt away as snow does before the sun. Another basis would make obedience to the Word something that goes against the grain of our being. Obedience is founded upon love, and love is fed by the Word of God.

Meditating upon the Word suggests memorization. The average Israelite in David's time was, most likely, illiterate. That fact would make memorization imperative. Our memory suffers from too much reading. In order to meditate on the law day and night, one would have to know it by heart. Memorization saturates us with the Word of God, and this strengthens and deepens our fellowship with the Lord, and it makes us Christians who can defend themselves against the onslaughts of the enemy. It also deepens our knowledge of the Word. One can never be finished in his study of the Bible. Texts, phrases, and words acquire a richer meaning as we ponder them. The law is not a dead letter but a sharp sword, that penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.⁷ Paul says: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." It will enrich our relationship with our fellowmen ("as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom,") and it will have a positive influence upon our

³ Ps. 25:14

⁴ Gen. 5:22; 6:9

⁵ See Prov. 3:5,6

⁶ Gal. 6:7

⁷ Heb. 4:12

relationship with God, (“as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”)⁸ It will give us motivation in what we do: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”⁹ This is the kind of activity that will cleanse and sanctify our lives. As Jesus said to His disciples: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”¹⁰ And, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”¹¹ Oh, the blessedness of the person who meditates on the Word of God!

The result of this being saturated with the Word of God has already been examined in the first two verses in a negative way: it keeps us from sinning and isolates us from the fellowship of sinful men. God’s Word is an antidote against peer pressure. The positive aspect is painted in vs. 3. The keyword in this verse is “success,” “Whatever he does prospers.” The man of God is compared with a tree that grows under ideal circumstances and that reaches its goal in life. It is a beautiful and meaningful image. In reality trees and humans are completely different from each other; they have very little in common. Trees belong to an older phase of creation. God made them on the third day. But they are alive as we are and they were made by the same hand that created us. We have a common origin. The main point of comparison in the image is stability. A tree grows where it is planted. It is impossible to transplant a grown tree. The relationship between a tree and the place where he is planted is constant and permanent. It is mainly this fact that becomes a point of comparison between the tree and the Christian in fellowship with God. If we feed upon God’s Word and become rooted in that Word, our relationship with God will be constant and permanent. In that respect, man surpasses all the trees in the world. Trees can be uprooted and fall down, “but he who does the will of God abides for ever.”¹²

“He is like a tree.” The man of God is greater than his surrounding; he rises far above the others. We could elaborate greatly upon this comparison, but we will leave it here.

Trees are refreshing to men. In Paradise eternal life was presented to the first human couple under the image of a tree, (and so was death). In the book of Revelation the “Tree of Life” is shown as a symbol of healing. A tree has the ability to take advantage of the situation in which it is placed. Its roots draw nutrition and moisture from the soil and its leaves clear the atmosphere of carbon monoxide and replace it with oxygen which is needed for all that breathes. And the fruit of a trees feeds man and beast. Trees are the homes of the birds. A tree is a blessing to its environment, simple because it is there. A tree is exactly what God wants it to be. It is also an example of patience for man. Trees grow slowly and sometimes take centuries to come to full maturity. A tree cannot hurry to produce; it has to wait God’s time. It “yields fruit in season.” As Christians, we ought to take to heart the tree’s example. Bearing fruit takes time and requires meeting God’s conditions. The presence of water is important for a tree. Trees do not grow in a desert. In the same way the presence of God’s Spirit is of vital importance for man. Without the stream of God’s life in us, spiritual growth is impossible. It is important for us to know where we are planted. We should learn many lessons from the tree: what we are is more important than what we do; for a tree it is no extraordinary achievement to yield fruit; the fruit of a tree is determined by the nature of the tree and by the season of the year; and if we are what we ought to be, our acts will be the natural outcome of our being.

The leaf does not wither. This is a picture of the Christian’s attitude in adversity. A tree knows the secret of water in a time of drought. One of my missionary friends lost his wife suddenly. His leaf did not wither. “The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him.”¹³ The Bible assures us that we will succeed in everything we do. The apostle John shows us how this works. He says: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us-- whatever we ask-- we know that we have what we asked of him.”¹⁴ If we comply with God’s conditions, He hands us a blank check. Jesus confirms this when He says: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”¹⁵

⁸ Col. 3:16

⁹ Col. 3:17

¹⁰ John 15:3

¹¹ John 17:17

¹² I John 2:17 (RSV)

¹³ Ps. 25:14 (KJV)

¹⁴ I John 5:14,15

¹⁵ John 15:7,8

This shows us the importance of human initiative in the Kingdom of Heaven. There is a difference between men and trees. “Whatever he does prospers.” Trees don’t do anything. Human enterprise is a unique phenomenon in God’s creation. Even the more developed species of the animals do not achieve anything in the sense that humans do. Man makes plans and executes those plans. Being like a tree seems to contradict this, and in a way this is true. Man has to surrender to God his right to take initiative and his urge to achieve, and then only will he prosper. If we say that what we are is more important than what we do, we do not cancel the need for acting.

The psalm ends, as it began, with a reference to the wicked. But here the roles are reversed. In the first two verses the righteous man is the point of comparison; in the last three verses it is the wicked. Sinners and righteous are antipodes. “Not so the wicked!” points to extreme positions. There is no greater contrast in the images used to depict our humanity than a tree and chaff. Spurgeon remarks that chaff exists by the grace of the kernel of wheat. As soon as the wheat is winnowed, the chaff is separated from the wheat kernel and the empty hull has lost its significance. Chaff does not bear fruit; it is useless. Man without God has lost his significance. He is a prey to the wind.

Every man’s life will be judged. We will all have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ.¹⁶ A man who has lived a life without God will not be able to stand.

In the parallel phrase of vs. 5, “the assembly of the righteous” is used as the equivalent of “judgment.” Those who stand on the side of Christ will pronounce judgment upon wicked men and angels. Paul mentions this in his first epistle to the Corinthians. We read: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!”¹⁷

The righteous man has passed judgment already while he was alive on earth. This judgment is the basis of his justification, and it took place when he crossed over from death to life.¹⁸ The people who will be judged are those who tried to avoid judgment in this life and rejected God’s offer of reconciliation in Jesus Christ; those are the one whose knees will buckle when judgment catches up with them.

The difference between the righteous and the unrighteous is not always clearly marked on earth. But in life after death there is no place for misunderstanding. Vs. 6 makes clear what the actual difference was during life on earth. Judgment to come is based on the path one traveled on earth. The two roads are not clearly marked “the good one” and “the bad one,” although the acts of those who walk on either of the roads are important. They are the road that leads to God or the road that bypasses Him. After all, being godless simply means leaving God out of it. Vs. 6 says: “For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” The RSV translates this with: “For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” The Lord knows our way when we know Him. The book of Proverbs advises us: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”¹⁹ Knowing Him means acknowledging Him in all our ways, consulting Him about where to go. Therein lies the secret of performing good deeds. They are the fruit of asking His guidance and following it. The basis of a right walk in life is fellowship with God.

The connotation of “the way of the wicked will perish” is that it doesn’t lead to where the people think it will lead. It twists around to the point that it leads nowhere. Nobody in his right mind will purposely set out to be lost. Everybody hopes that at least something good will come out of it in the end. The ways that bypass God do not lead where the road signs say they will.

The psalm ends as it began: with a way to be walked on or not to be walked on. The psalm gives us three formulas if we obey God’s Word:

1. God’s Word is a formula against peer pressure (vs. 1,2).
2. God’s Word is a formula for success (vs. 3).
3. God’s Word is a formula for greatness (vs. 4-6).

¹⁶ II Cor. 5:10

¹⁷ I Cor 6:2,3

¹⁸ John 5:24

¹⁹ Prov. 3:5-6

PSALM TWO

- 1** *Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?*
2 *The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.*
3 *“Let us break their chains,” they say, “and throw off their fetters.”*
4 *The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.*
5 *Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,*
6 *“I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.”*
7 *I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.*
8 *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.*
9 *You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”*
10 *Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth.*
11 *Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling.*
12 *Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

The first psalm dealt with the personal, intimate relationship between a man and God. The second psalm describes the masses of the world. It paints an international picture of the relationship between the world and its Creator. The psalm is prophetic in character and very relevant to our present time. What the psalmist said forty centuries ago, about the time in which he lived, could have been said of all the previous years since the fall of man into sin, and it applies without any restrictions to the world in the twentieth century. And, after I am dead, if not before, it will be fulfilled at the battle of Armageddon.

The psalm asks the most important question that can be asked: “Why?” and it is God who asks it. What motivates mankind? Why do they act as they do? The purpose for asking the question is to bring man to reflection. For this reason Jesus stopped Saul of Tarsus in his tracks on his way to Damascus with the personal question: “Why?” The answer Paul had to give changed his life.²⁰ Every time God asks the question, it is for the same purpose. It is because, in Peter’s words: “[God] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”²¹ The psalm can, therefore, be interpreted as a peace proposal and an offer of grace.

The “why” question is not answered in the psalm; or, at least, not in a direct way. The answer is to be sought in the direction of death. Death makes all human activity meaningless; that is why man rebels. We shall see that God’s answer to this meaninglessness is in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary, suggests that David probably wrote this psalm in connection with the capture of the city of Jerusalem.²² Looking at this historical background through modern eyes gives the psalm a strange character. We know, in recent history, several examples of people who have conquered other nations in order to protect themselves, and that gives us an uncomfortable feeling when we read what David did with the original inhabitants of Jerusalem. It seems that David denied the Jebusites the right to defend themselves and their city. In twentieth century terms that seems to be an attitude of political irresponsibility. It is, therefore, important not to lose sight of the historical context of David’s day. Israel’s conquest of Canaan was part of a divine mandate. The extermination of the Jebusites, however horrible this may sound to us, was just as much “an act of God” as the Great Flood of Noah’s days. David knew that he had received the messianic call to forcefully subject nations to his rule. The Jebusites had never been exterminated. We find them living among the Jews as citizens with equal rights. Proof of this is found in the report of the plague that threatened Jerusalem. We read then that the angel of the Lord was standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.²³ Later we read that “Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David.”²⁴ So, the point in question was not

²⁰ Acts 9:4

²¹ II Pet. 3:9

²² See II Sam. 5:6-8 and I Chron. 11:4-8

²³ II Sam. 24:16

²⁴ II Chr. 3:1

extermination but the recognition of David's reign over these people. It is very difficult for us to judge the situation of David's days objectively and justly from our distance in time. We should especially pay attention to David's vision that is demonstrated in this psalm. What he says goes far beyond the conditions of his own time. He is conscious of the fact that his acts in space and time have eternal value. He sees the relatively unimportant capture of Jerusalem as an image of Armageddon. The hill of Zion, which is his home, becomes a shadow of God's holy mountain. David demonstrates his own greatness in his vision, and it is because of it that we now possess this pure piece of poetry. David shows us herein that poetry can be the purest form of communicating reality.

What could be said of David's time is valid in a much greater measure of our own time. Nobody reigns anymore by the grace of God. Those who say they do, do so only in name and without any authority. Those in power at present base their government upon the policy of a certain political party and in some instances upon a majority vote. It is naive to the highest degree to identify democracy with religion. Most governments maintain a basis of neutrality toward religion and some are openly atheistic. The majority of power in the world is absolutism in one form or another. The situation was even more complicated in the age of the early church, where the powers that were acted in the Name of God to sabotage the work of the Holy Spirit. This prompted Jesus to say: "They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God."²⁵

As we mentioned above, the psalm begins with the questions, "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?" which it never answers. The KJV renders it with: "Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?" "The nations" is a polite translation of the Hebrew word *choyem*, or heathen. The intent is the people who are without God; those that cannot or will not hear the Gospel. The word "rage" indicates a deep unrest, or rebellion. The idea is revolt against God of people groups, not of individuals only. These are the people who reject God's revelation. Since this revelation had been entrusted to the people of Israel, it was Israel's task to make the revelation known. In a sense, this is the background of this psalm and of the conquest of the city of Jerusalem, which is done in this context.

More is at stake, however; it is the lack of the knowledge of God. The subject of this psalm is the rejection of God's revelation and of the fellowship with Him that follows that revelation. In his rejection, man cuts himself off from the source of life; consequently, death stares him in the face. This is the reason for the tumult. Man cannot deal with the consequences of his own acts. Breaking off the bond with God means self destruction. A man can reject God, but he cannot detach himself from those innate qualities which urge him to find fulfillment in life. Death makes vanity of it all. It is against this that man rebels most of all, often without understanding what he does. The question is, against whom does man rebel?

Another point that is seldom understood is that man can choose between only two possibilities. It is not a choice among God, Satan, or ourselves. If we choose against God, we choose for Satan. Many people do not realize that there is no middle way. Yet most people think they only choose for themselves.

The word "conspire" in Hebrew is *ragash*, which Strong defines as "to be tumultuous"; the KJV renders it with "rage." Rage is the result of a lack of self-control. Sometimes it is triggered by certain facts. The classic example is Jesus' anger at the grave of Lazarus. John pictured Jesus "weeping, [and] deeply moved in spirit."²⁶ The KJV says: "he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled." And TLB paraphrases it correctly with "moved with indignation." More often than not, however, rage or anger is triggered by certain circumstances but not directly toward those circumstances. Some people fall into a rage, not because they are angry with someone else, but with life in general, or with themselves because they are afraid of life. In this sense we could interpret the "rage" of the nations. Man shakes his fist at God because He created him and against himself because he doesn't know what to do with life. The result is a lack of peace in the heart of man which the psalmist describes as "conspire" or "rage." There is also a loss of rationality. The "plotting in vain" means an unhealthy occupation with things that don't lead anywhere, that have no contents or goal. Vanity, in the orthodox sense of the word, and death are identical. Everything that is not geared toward the living God lacks contents and value. When reading the memoirs of Henry Kissinger about his years in the White House, one would get the impression that the result of all his activity was the creation of a better world that was just around the corner.²⁷ We may quote King Solomon, who

²⁵ John 16:2

²⁶ John 11:33, 38

²⁷ White House Years, by Henry Kissinger

said: "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind."²⁸

This "vanity" is expressed in vs. 1 of this psalm in the conspiracy of the kings against God and Christ. This mass revolt will lead to the final battle of Armageddon.²⁹ That will be the Antichrist's final attempt to take over the power to rule the world. Each period in world history has its own manifestations of rebellion. The early church saw the prophecy of this psalm fulfilled in the crucifixion and death of the Lord Jesus Christ. We read that during the first recorded prayer meeting of the church they lifted their voices to Heaven and said: "Sovereign Lord, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."³⁰ The rebelling kings of that time were Herod and Pontius Pilate. Incidentally, this quotation of the psalm proves that the psalm was written by David.

Here also, we find this inexplicable phenomenon that human rebellion reinforces God's hand. This principle becomes even clearer in the book of Revelation, where the opening of the seven seals of God's scroll allows Satan to take the initiative.

The chains and fetters, mentioned in vs. 3, represent the law of God. Man who rebels against God feels himself always restrained by laws and customs which govern his behavior. It seems strange, but, obviously, when man rebels against God and God's restrictions for his life, he never finds inner freedom. One would think that freedom is the goal of all revolution. What rebelling man tries to achieve, without knowing that he does this, is to detach himself from God's image within him and yet remain man; such a detachment is impossible. The revolution starts by exchanging the word law by regulation or taboo; as if our moral behavior would have nothing to do with our humanness. Breaking the chains and throwing off the fetters suggests a moral revolution in which moral absolutes are replaced with situational ethics. "If it feels good, do it!" This is an effort to attach our lifeline to the waves in order to keep ourselves from drowning.

In contrast to this, we find Paul's freedom from the law. Man who rebels against God does not even understand himself why he reacts against the law of God. It is the rebellion of a man's heart against himself, against his sinful nature, which bothers him. For those who have put down their weapons, the law of God becomes the expression of God's character and, at the same time, the ideal standard for their own lives. That is why a Christian accepts the law of God, not as a fetter, but as the element in which he lives. Real liberty is the working of the Holy Spirit in us who fully meets the righteous requirements of the law in us. Paul expresses this in the epistle to the Romans where he says: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."³¹

This conspiracy of the nation is, of course, no real threat to God. But, when we analyze vs. 4 and 5 we should not lose sight of God's love and deep compassion for mankind. What God mocks in man is not his inert dignity and immortality but the misconceptions man has about himself and about God. If a man thinks that his efforts to dislodge God would have any results, he has to be put in his place. God's scoffing serves the purpose of keeping things in the right perspective. We should never forget that the One we are dealing with is the Almighty God who sits on the throne of Heaven and from whose presence the earth and the universe flee.³² A man who shakes his fist in God's face has lost sight of all proportions. Ever since man fell into sin, this kind of short sightedness has been a typical attitude. Eve had visions of grandeur when she looked at the forbidden fruit. "The woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and

²⁸ Eccl. 1:14

²⁹ Rev. 16:16

³⁰ Acts 4:24-28

³¹ Rom. 8:1-4

³² Rev. 20:11

pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom.”³³ But all she really saw was a fruit. The builders of the tower of Babel who kept their eyes on the top of the tower which would reach heaven, did, in reality, see no farther than the border of their village. Their vision was limited by their fear to become the pioneers of the world.³⁴ It is this kind of shortsightedness that God mocks in man. He sees through the inflated image we have of our own importance.

Many revolutions are started out of fear of the unknown. In Psalm One we said that the circle of scoffers considered themselves better than the others. Well, God *is* higher and better than any creature; He doesn't even have to try, and there is no point in trying to compete with Him. The situation would be ridiculous.

The rebellion is not against the Person of God alone, but “against the LORD and against his Anointed One,” that is against the Christ. Jesus Christ represents all of mankind before God. That is what fallen man rebels against. He is a descendant of Adam and he follows in Adam's footsteps. Paul speaks about this dilemma in an unparalleled way in his epistle to the Romans. He writes: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned-- for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.”³⁵ Those verses are, probably, the best commentary on this psalm. Many people have more of a problem in accepting Jesus as their fellowman, than as the third Person of the Trinity. Acknowledging that Jesus died in our behalf and in our stead and that this means forgiveness for us and regeneration entails conceding a defeat of ourselves which is hard for us to acknowledge. Rejection of God's reconciliation in Christ is the essence of the rebellion. Man resists death, but he also resists life.

The rejection of the Messiah, the King of Zion, is the reason that God reveals His wrath to man. As long as God speaks, there is hope. The Word of God is able to deliver man from death. When God speaks no longer, hope is gone. This was the case in the life of king Saul, and for Pilate and Herod. The generation that no longer hears the voice of God is lost. For man who wants to be saved, the Word of God means salvation, even if the Word reveals God's wrath. Being shocked into reality by the wrath of God is good for the soul. God's speaking will make the final judgment heavier for man who is not interested in salvation.

In the vs. 7-9 the Messiah is speaking. He testifies to the Word of the Lord about Himself. Jesus refers here to Himself as Man. The NIV reads: “He said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’ ” In the RSV we read: “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” God does not beget God. The essence of divinity is, after all, His eternal and independent existence. Jesus was begotten by the Father as Man. From Paul's quotation of this psalm we understand that “You are my son, today I have begotten you,” refers to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Speaking to the Jews at the Synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, Paul said: “And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, ‘Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee.’”³⁶ “Begotten” in this context means “raised from the dead.”

Over against man's rebellion God places the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This should have ended man's rebellion against death which robs life of its meaning. God has opened a door of escape from meaninglessness which death had brought about. But the open door does not bring rebellion to an end. Man continues to resist, not only death, but also life. Rebellious man prefers to die rather than to receive life out of the hand of God. This does not, of course, take away anything from the glory of God's offer.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the most important event that ever happened in the universe. In his sermon to the Athenians at the Areopagus, Paul indicates that Jesus' resurrection is proof that God made Him judge of the world. We quote: “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”³⁷ But the philosophers Athens resisted also.

It is easy to understand why man would oppose death, but resistance against life is a deeper problem and demands an explanation that is not visible at the surface. It all harks back to the time when

³³ Gen. 3:6

³⁴ Gen.11:14

³⁵ Rom. 5:12-14

³⁶ Acts 13:32,33 (RSV)

³⁷ Acts 17:31

Satan was tempted by his pride to challenge God's right to omnipotence. It is the same spirit that led man to his disobedience. But disobedient man will not have the last word. Jesus will inherit the world at the end time. At a later date David wrote about the mandate the Father would give to the Son: "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies. Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth. ... 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."³⁸ And the apostle Paul says: "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."³⁹

God's offer to His Son: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession," corresponds with the mandate, given in Ps. 110: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."⁴⁰ About this the writer to the Hebrews says: "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." So the phrase: "Ask of Me" pertains to our salvation, but the stress in the psalm is put upon the rejection of the revolutionary.

The mandate God gave to Adam to reign over His creation is fulfilled here in Jesus Christ. It is His task to bring back under God's rule everything that had been dragged down when Lucifer fell into sin.

What we read in vs. 9: "You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery," and in Ps. 110, "crushing the rulers of the whole earth," does not speak about men who are dashed to pieces but about demonic powers that resist the authority of God. Here also, the "struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."⁴¹ As far as man is concerned, Jesus' dashing and crushing means liberation. Here the real chains are broken and the actual fetters are thrown off. Only man, who rejects God's liberation, shares in the fate of those who will be dashed to pieces and crushed. For us, who belong to Jesus Christ, His intercession for us will save us completely.

The last three verses of this psalm contain a warning and an invitation to the rulers of this world. The warning is, ultimately, the purpose for the writing of this psalm. God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."⁴² In the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God says: "Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth." The tragedy of this world is that kings are dumb and judges of mankind themselves do not submit to the law. What hope is then left?

The word "rejoice" in vs. 11 seems out of place, but the acknowledgment of God's absolute authority over our lives ought to be cause joy. Joy and trembling are no opposites in the presence of God. This trembling is not related to panic. It is merely the reaction of our bodies to the revelation of God's character. The body may tremble while the soul rejoices. To serve the Lord is, of course, an act of the will. It is the opposite of the breaking of chains and tearing off of imaginary fetters of vs. 3. A combination of obedience, awe, and joy is the hallmark of a true Christian.

"Kiss the son!" The kiss is the true expression of love and respect. Even in cultures where kissing is not a mode of intimacy, a kiss is accepted as the highest form of appreciation and respect.

There is an interesting comment on the wrath of the Son in the book of Revelation: "Hide us... from the wrath of the Lamb!"⁴³ This psalm does not speak about the kind of psychopathic fear of Him, who is the symbol of meekness and non-violence. Yet, the situation is the same, and we are speaking about the same person. The fact that "His wrath can flare up in a moment" is the impression the Lord of Love makes upon those who resist His authority. The panic of man is caused by the sin within, not by the Son.

Serving the Lord may begin with fear, but it should not be based upon fear alone. The apostle John comments on this by saying: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."⁴⁴ A man serves God because of love. Fear of the wrath of the Lamb is the result of a bad conscience. It is a sign of self-condemnation.

³⁸ Ps. 110

³⁹ I Cor. 15:25

⁴⁰ Ps. 110:4

⁴¹ Eph. 6:12

⁴² II Pet. 3:9

⁴³ Rev. 6:16

⁴⁴ I John 4:18

“Blessed are all who take refuge in him.” This describes precisely the relationship we have in faith with God. The Hebrew word used is *chacah*, which means “to flee for protection” or “to confide in.” The KJV translates the verse with: “Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.” As Christians, we put ourselves under God’s protection. Woe to the man who tries to protect himself! We need to be protected from ourselves, even more than from the devil! He who wants to protect himself is no safer than the person who is protected by a wolf. To put oneself under God’s protection is the most reasonable decision a man can make. It means recognition of the real source of danger and the real source of security. Blessing is the man who is in his right mind!

“Blessed are all who take refuge in him,” nobody excepted.

PSALM THREE

A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

- 1 O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!**
2 Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." Selah
3 But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.
4 To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill. Selah
5 I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me.
6 I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.
7 Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked.
8 From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people. Selah

The sub-title of this psalm is "A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom."⁴⁵ When we compare this third psalm, written at the end of David's reign, with psalm two, which was written at the beginning, at the occasion of the conquest of Jerusalem, we find the highest and the lowest points of David's life next to each other.

In order to gain a clear understanding of the situation, we must remember the background of David's flight. Absalom's revolt was part of the punishment God sent upon David after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of Uriah.⁴⁶ The prayer of David in this third psalm, therefore, is not the prayer of an innocent man, but of a sinner who has received pardon. The circumstances that press in upon him are the consequences of his own deeds. This gives an awesome depth to this poem!

David surely found it difficult to forgive himself. God's forgiveness was instantaneous, when David confessed. We read: "Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD.' Nathan replied, 'The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.'"⁴⁷ We can understand, though, that the devil will have played on David's emotions; when the pressure built up, he must have asked himself often how real God's forgiveness was.

The psalm begins with David's realization of the overwhelming number of his enemies. But most bitter of all was the fact that his own son, Absalom, threatened his life. From David's words at the death of Absalom, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you-- O Absalom, my son, my son!"⁴⁸ we understand that David felt how utterly he had failed in his parental love. In the opening verses of this psalm, David penetrates immediately to the core of the problem. The point was not that men had forsaken him, however painful that might be, but the insinuation was: "God will not deliver him." His adversaries denied the possibility that God had forgiven David. The devil always manages to find the weakest point in our armor. It is true that David should have died, but his son died in his stead. It is doubtful that David would have understood the depth of this event, but his fasting and prayer during the sickness of the little boy indicate that he wrestled with it.⁴⁹ The analogy between the death of his son and the death of God's Son on Golgotha, however, was hidden from his view. From a legal point of view, David's sins had been paid for and that is the reason that he did find deliverance with God, in spite of the outward circumstances. We can see, therefore, in this psalm a celebration of God's forgiveness and of restoration of the sinner in the most impossible situations.

There is a remarkable resemblance between the lesson God wanted Abraham to learn and the one taught to David. Abraham experienced in his own life what it meant to give up his son; he did this in innocence, without reference to any particular sin in his life. David learned the lesson as a guilty man who had forfeited his life through sin. During his days of fasting and prayer he shared, in a way, in God's deepest emotions regarding Golgotha, but now, since God had made a provision for his sin, there is reconciliation and forgiveness for even the most repulsive sin of adultery and murder. Abraham's prophecy: "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided,"⁵⁰ applied here also.

⁴⁵ See II Sam. 15:13 - 18:33

⁴⁶ See II Sam. 12:9-12

⁴⁷ II Sam. 12:13

⁴⁸ II Sam. 18:33

⁴⁹ See II Sam. 12:16,17

⁵⁰ Gen. 22:14

This psalm was probably written on the occasion of David's first night outside the palace. As a fugitive, he turned to God and he discovered that, not only, did God protect and honor him, but that God, Himself was that protection. Vs. 3 says: "But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head." Let us pause and allow the wonder of this discovery to penetrate: God guarantees, with His own Person, David's safety; He is David's shield that covers him. What does this mean to someone who had to flee for his life because of his own fault? David must have been overwhelmed by the realization of what God's forgiveness would bring about. The greatest joy in my own experience was the discovery that Christ died specifically for those things about which I felt guilty.

In the three images David uses in vs. 3, "a shield," "my glory" and "the lifter up of my head," he says: "God is my protection, my honor and my courage to face life. The lifting up of the head takes away the feeling of shame David must have had. With these words David proclaims the Gospel, probably without knowing it. If God is our shield, the arrows and bullets that are fired upon us will hit Him instead of us. There is no better image to describe what Christ did for us. "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."⁵¹

David knew that his flight from Absalom was part of God's punishment for his sin; but then he discovered that this punishment brought suffering to God Himself and that he went free. "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."⁵² Who could have conceived that God would Himself receive the blows that are meant for us. Even more wonderful is the fact that God covers us with His honor. David's sin of murder and adultery had robbed him effectively of his own honor. God honors the man who confesses his sin, and He becomes his honor. There is no higher honor than the glory of God, and that is the honor God bestows upon us. Sin means "falling short of the glory of God"⁵³; grace covers us with this glory. Not only does God cover and honor us, but He is Himself our shield and the lifter up of our heads; this presupposes intimate fellowship with God. God does not just give us certain things and privileges and then sends us on our way; it is only if we walk with Him that He becomes to us what we are not in ourselves. We do lift up our own heads, but this is a natural reflex to what God does for us. It would be impossible to be covered with God's glory and then let our head hang low.

Verses 3 and 4 are a counterpart to the verses 1 and 2. Over against the many foes stands God Himself. The apostle Paul says: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"⁵⁴

David states: "Many are saying of me, 'God will not deliver him,' " but then he testifies: "To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me from his holy hill." David believes in an "open system" where God intervenes in history as an answer to prayer. We need such a perspective in order to maintain a healthy spiritual attitude when circumstances close in upon us and the horizon dims.

The crying aloud should be seen, more as an expression of intensity of prayer, than as volume of voice. God wants us to be completely involved when we pray, so that we ask with our head and heart and will. The "holy hill" is probably an idiomatic expression such as "the sacred mountain," Isaiah speaks about. It is said about Satan: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.'"⁵⁵ The almighty, eternal God listens to the words of mortal man and answers him when he calls upon Him. The possibilities of prayer are unlimited.

From vs. 5 we conclude that David wrote this psalm on the second day of his exile. According to the record in Second Samuel,⁵⁶ David spent the first night on the other side of the river Jordan. Thus David's prayer was heard; upon hearing that Ahithophel was among the conspirators with Absalom, he had said to the Lord: "O LORD, turn Ahithophel's counsel into foolishness."⁵⁷ Probably to his own amazement, David had fallen asleep tired and exhausted at the end of the first day and found himself refreshed the next morning. He accepted the fact that his body had been able to relax, in spite of the circumstances, as a gift of

⁵¹ Isa. 53:5

⁵² I Cor. 2:9

⁵³ Rom. 3:23

⁵⁴ Rom. 8:31

⁵⁵ Is. 14:13

⁵⁶ II Sam. 17:21,22

⁵⁷ II Sam. 15:31

God. In the same way Peter was able to sleep the night before his supposed execution.⁵⁸ Faith relaxes. David attributes the fact that he slept well to God's sustaining of his soul. The Hebrew word that is translated "sustained" is *camak*, which literally means "to prop." That is a beautiful word in this context. God puts a prop under that which is about to collapse. Emotionally David would have collapsed if it were not for his fellowship with God.

In considering this episode of David's life, we see both the tragedy of his moral failure and the power of God's forgiveness. David sees himself in a different light; he is a warrior for whom to be afraid would be the greatest defeat. It is interesting to observe that a person rarely sees himself as he really is. The real problems will come to the surface from time to time, as we see in David's reaction to Absalom's death, but they are not a conscious part of daily life. Man doesn't know himself as he really is. David seems to be more concerned about the fact that people could take him for a coward than anything else. David's attitude may also indicate that he endeavors to find his balance on the emotional level of his life, after having found it on the spiritual level. He knows that God has forgiven him, but emotionally he has trouble accepting this fact. David was not a coward by nature; yet when he realized that there was an absolute absence of fear in his heart under these circumstances, he considered this to be the result of God's supernatural intervention. When David said: "I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side," he was not bragging, but was amazed that God could bring about this quiet feeling in his heart under these circumstances.

II Sam. 18 describes the battle between David's army and Absalom's. This third psalm describes the spiritual breakthrough in this battle. Wars on earth are shadows of the struggle that takes place in the heavenlies. Victory over the devil was won when David made a profession of faith in God. David's prayer had been: "Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked." The Lord arose and struck all his enemies on the jaw and broke the teeth of the wicked.

David hoped that Absalom's life would be spared in this, but that was not to be. Absalom's death was, probably, the most merciful solution to the problem. The boy had grown into a mature criminal. After the murder of his brother, the conspiracy against his father and the adultery with his father's wives and concubines, there would have been no hope for a restoration of relationships. Absalom knew nothing of the transparent fellowship with God, that was characteristic for his father. He was caught deeply in the net that Satan had spread for him, and when he died, the devil received what was his already. For this purpose, Satan used as an instrument of death a man who had no scruples: Joab.

David was the object of "A Severe Mercy," but he did not understand this yet. He was correct, however in stating: "From the LORD comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people." The only hope for the healing of the rift that had split Israel in two was an act of divine intervention.

⁵⁸ Acts 12:6

PSALM FOUR

For the director of music. With stringed instruments.

A psalm of David.

1 *Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer.*

2 *How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Selah*

3 *Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD will hear when I call to him.*

4 *In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Selah*

5 *Offer right sacrifices and trust in the LORD.*

6 *Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?" Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD.*

7 *You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.*

8 *I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.*

There is no caption above this psalm, as with the previous one, that would indicate to us what David's circumstances were when he wrote this. It is clear, however, that David was between a rock and a hard place when he wrote this poem. The words "distress" and "shame" point in the direction of physical and emotional stress.

Most commentators suppose that the psalms 3 and 4 were written at the same occasion, that is David's flight from Absalom. There were many other occasions in David's life, though, in which he experienced distress; any of these occasions could serve as the background for this psalm. It is difficult to reconstruct such circumstances after thirty centuries, without a caption. We can only say that we do not know.

The subject of vs. 1 is an answer to prayer. David calls God: "my righteous God," or, as the KJV renders it: "God of my righteousness." The Good News Bible translates it with: "God, my defender." That is a beautiful title. David recognizes God as the source of his righteousness. That is sound New Testament theology! He knows that the source of his righteousness is outside himself and that he cannot boast about anything within himself. This is his defense. TLB gives the interesting paraphrase: "O God, you have declared me perfect in your eyes ..." It is the imputed righteousness, resulting from the death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Golgotha that is the basis of our prayers and of God's answer. David did not know the facts of salvation as we know them, but the Holy Spirit gave him the intuitive understanding as to how the relationship with God worked. In his appeal to his righteousness, he actually appealed to what God has done for him. This brought him to the understanding that, if God performed this overwhelming miracle of his justification, His meeting David's lesser needs would be child's play. This is an Old Testament paraphrase of what Paul would later say: "If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns?"⁵⁹

The word "distress" is the translation of the Hebrew *tsar*. It means a narrow, tight place, or a condition of being crowded upon. It evokes the image of a person who has trouble breathing because something or somebody presses upon him. We are surrounded by enough oxygen for the whole creation to breathe, but sometimes there are outward or inward conditions that prevent normal breathing. David was subject to both kinds of limitations: his own iniquity made it hard to breathe and so did the people who tried to rob him of his honor and dignity. If we were always inwardly perfect and balanced, the criticism of others would not affect us. Jesus describes the suffering of hell as a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."⁶⁰ The fire is outside, but the worm is inside. Suffering comes from both sides.

David was on the right track by, first of all, trying to solve the problem of his own iniquity by appealing to God's righteousness, and then by praying for deliverance from the outside pressure. God's righteousness will deny the devil access to His children's lives.

Answer to prayer is related to the measure of our faith. It is easier for us to exercise faith if we can fall back upon previous answers to prayer. At the end of the psalm, David indicated that God had previously delivered him from oppression. A man who has experienced God's intervention in his life, knows that life with Him is a wonderful life.

⁵⁹ Rom. 8:31,34

⁶⁰ Mark 9:48

In vs. 1 David addressed God directly; in verses 2-5 he moralized, in the positive sense of the word, those people who criticized him. He defends himself against them by accusing them of three things: 1. they turn his glory into shame, 2. they love delusion and, 3. they seek false gods. The last phrase is translated by the NAS as: “aim at deception.” The Hebrew word is *kazab*, which *Strong* defines as: “falsehood; literally (untruth) or figuratively (idol).” Every person is honorable inasmuch as he is a bearer of the image of his Creator. Hatred and contempt for our fellowmen are always indications of a worsening relationship with God. One recognizes the image of the Creator only in those who know the Creator.

Speaking about turning his glory into shame, David may have aimed at more than his humanity; he may also have his royal unction in mind. The Holy Spirit elevates our dignity. Jesus accused the Jews of His day that they dishonored Him. When they call Him “a Samaritan and demon-possessed,” He answers them: “I am not possessed by a demon, but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge.”⁶¹ God seeks our honor, as Jesus also said at a later point: “My Father will honor the one who serves Me.”⁶² Evidently, David was aware of these truths. Sin produces shame, but fellowship with God results in honor for us. That is why those who know God will also honor their fellowmen. The question: “How long will you love delusions?” is rendered by the KJV as: “How long will ye love vanity? The writer of Ecclesiastes gives us an extended commentary on this inquiry. The viewpoint of Ecclesiastes is a philosophy that does not take God into account. The conclusion the writer draws is that this leads to a life that is bereft of sense and meaning. The people whom David addresses have not drawn this conclusion yet. They love vanity and are drawn to nihilism. A nihilist who despairs of life is, actually, a better man than he who loves delusions. The intuitive feeling that things ought to have meaning is part of the divine truth. People who enjoy vanity have fallen deeply.

To seek false gods, or to aim at deception, is another result of the broken fellowship with God. A lie is that which is not true, not real. Reality belongs to God. As Paul says: “the reality, however, is found in Christ.”⁶³ A person who aims at deception has lost touch with reality. The chase is in vain because one cannot catch what is not real.

Somewhere, behind this warning to people who make life difficult for David, was his compassion for his neighbor. David did not speak here against the evil powers that manipulate man, but he addressed the person. The love of Christ compelled him, and there is the hope of conversion of these people. He pled with them not to sin, to search their hearts and quiet themselves before the Lord, to put their trust in the Lord and in the substitutionary sacrifice.

Undoubtedly, David spoke about himself when he said: “Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD will hear when I call to him.” But the Holy Spirit also gives testimony here about our Lord Jesus Christ, the Man in whom God was well pleased and of whom David was an image. We may only consider ourselves set apart for God inasmuch as we have partaken in the reconciliation for which Christ provides. God hears us when we call to Him, not for our sake, but for the sake of Christ.

“In your anger do not sin,” is translated in the KJV: “Stand in awe, and sin not.” The Hebrew word *ragaz* literally means “to quiver (with any violent emotion, especially anger or fear),” according to *Strong’s* definition. An overwhelming feeling of awe is the natural reaction of a person who finds himself in the presence of God. The people David addresses in this psalm had lost their sense of reality. It was because of David’s understanding of who God is and his awareness of God’s presence that David stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. What could be said about Saul in a physical sense was true about David in the real sense of the word.

David gave a six-fold advice to his opponents:

1. They should stand in awe before God.
2. They should not sin.
3. They should exercise personal meditation.
4. They should learn to become still before God.
5. They should bring the required sacrifices, and
6. They should put their trust in God.

That is a rather comprehensive program for conversion. We have seen already that to stand in awe before God is an indication of our sense of reality. No one can stand before God without being overwhelmed. One will confess one’s sins, as Isaiah did, or one will make a futile effort to flee, as is

⁶¹ John 8:48-50

⁶² John 12:26

⁶³ Col. 2:17

recorded in Revelation, where John says: "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them."⁶⁴ It is impossible to come into the presence of God and to continue sinning. Man sins because he doesn't realize God's presence.

"Search your hearts and be silent," or as the KJV puts it: "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still," is a beautiful image of coming to one's self. It suggests that quietness is a prerequisite for self analysis. Many of our problems, both in the physical realm and in others, are the result of a lack of physical relaxation. It has been said that God does not speak to overtired people. We come to ourselves when we relax. To "commune with your own heart" is a form of self examination, of introspection and evaluation of one's motives. We have to learn to understand who we are and why we act the way we do. Also, there should be quietness in our lives; to quiet oneself before the Lord is a prerequisite for a healthy spiritual life. Being silent before Him is the result of standing in awe before Him. It is also the highest form of worship. It is during the silence of one half hour in the book of Revelation that the prayers of the saints rise before the Lord.⁶⁵ The prophet Elijah heard the voice of God, not in the earthquake or in the fire but in a gentle whisper.⁶⁶ God usually speaks to us in the quietness of a gentle whisper.

It is, however, impossible to have fellowship with God without a sacrifice. We may appear before God's throne only on the basis of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. David must have had the gamut of the five sacrifices in mind that were prescribed in the book of Leviticus. This meant that man had to confess his sin and pay his fine, when he brought his sin offering. He had to see himself as a sinner who deserved to die and be burnt outside the camp, as he brought the guilt offering. Then he had to come to the realization, in bringing the fellowship offering, that he could demonstrate his gratitude to God and pledge obedience to Him. Finally, he could present himself as a creature before His creator and surrender to Him in love, both as a human and as a spiritual being, as the Son would give Himself to the Father as a pleasing aroma. Both the result and the impetus of those deep spiritual experiences would be confidence in God. Thus man comes from pursuing vanity to faith in God that gives meaning and content to his life. David desires that his opponents would have the same faith as that which guarantees the answer to his own prayers.

In vs. 6-8 David gives again a word of personal testimony. "Many are asking" does not necessarily refer to David's opponents. The question expresses a general search for meaning in life. "Who can show us (any) good?" The word "any" is not in the original. Happiness is usually expressed by man in terms of material prosperity. The "grain and new wine" in vs. 7 testify to this. David's testimony is that true happiness has nothing to do with prosperity. The phrase: "Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD," reminds us of the high priestly blessing: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."⁶⁷ The meaning of the blessing is that man would come to realize the presence of the Lord. God is, of course, omnipresent, but man becomes only aware of this presence when he calls upon Him in truth. The psalmist assures us: "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."⁶⁸ God's presence is the source of light for man, in the moral sense of the word. The image is that of a rising sun. The book of Proverbs describes it: "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."⁶⁹ We do not see "the good," not because the world is not full of God's goodness, but because we live in the dark. Sin blinds the eyes of man. The result of the conversion, which is the topic of vs. 4 and 5, is the discovery of God's goodness and of walking in His light.

In another Psalm David says: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."⁷⁰ God is the source of all light. The physical light we can see is an image of the real light, which is an expression of God's character. John says: "God is light."⁷¹ The light of God's face, therefore, is the reality which gives us insight in the world in which we live. Man who does not know God has the intuitive feeling that life ought to be good, but the reality he sees does not correspond with his instinct. If we are in God's

⁶⁴ Rev. 20:11

⁶⁵ Rev. 8:1-4

⁶⁶ I Kings 19:12,13

⁶⁷ Num. 6:24-26

⁶⁸ Ps. 145:18

⁶⁹ Prov. 4:18

⁷⁰ Ps. 36:9

⁷¹ I John 1:5

presence, we understand that the corruption is in ourselves and that the fact that creation is disjointed has to do with the sin that is in man's heart.

God's presence will also cause inner healing. The whole world is full of the goodness of the Lord for those who have become good by the grace of God. The Seraphs in Isaiah's vision sang to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."⁷²

Vs. 7 describes in a beautiful way the contrast between the spiritual joy of a child of God and the ersatz that causes the world to have fun. Luke testifies to the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ knew this spiritual joy. We read: "At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.'"⁷³ In the instance of which Luke speaks, this joy contrasted sharply with Jesus' circumstances. The unwillingness of the cities of Capernaum, Korazin, and Bethsaida to repent could have been a reason for Jesus to be discouraged. The Holy Spirit gave Jesus insight into the Father's plan, and He saw through the deception of evil and rejoiced. When a man seeks his joy in grain and new wine, he tries to escape reality.

We all ought to flee, but in the opposite direction. Jesus implies this truth when He presents Himself to us as "the true vine."⁷⁴ In the Christian circles in which I move, drinking wine is not customary; therefore, the image of the vine has lost much of its original meaning. Wine has little or no place in our Christian world. Paul places things in their right perspective when he says: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."⁷⁵ He shows us both the similarity and the contrast. Not only is David's spiritual joy greater than the joy of wine drinkers, but also David's reality is greater. The joy and relaxation caused by wine drinking is artificial and is followed by a hangover. The joy the Holy Spirit provides is a natural one. The sleep the Holy Spirit gives is also healthier than the intoxication caused by wine. The presence of the Lord gives us protection, which keeps us safe and helps us to relax. Real safety is found only in God. This does not mean that all sleeplessness is caused by fear and worry. Sometimes God keeps us awake to make us quiet and to bless us. "His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night,"⁷⁶ and "when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent,"⁷⁷ are examples of this. Generally speaking, though, a sound sleep is proof of good health. So, what David says here is that the presence of the Lord makes him emotionally healthy.

The caption in the NIV gives the following instructions: *For the director of music. With stringed instruments.* When we read this psalm we should not forget the music!

⁷² Is. 6:3

⁷³ Luke 10:21

⁷⁴ John 15:1

⁷⁵ Eph. 5:18

⁷⁶ Ps. 1:2

⁷⁷ Ps. 4:4

PSALM FIVE

For the director of music. For flutes.

A psalm of David.

- 1 Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing.
- 2 Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray.
- 3 In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.
- 4 You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell.
- 5 The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.
- 6 You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors.
- 7 But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple.
- 8 Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies-- make straight your way before me.
- 9 Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with destruction. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongue they speak deceit.
- 10 Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you.
- 11 But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
- 12 For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.

This morning song by David is to be sung with the accompaniment of a flute. The sweet restful music of the stringed instruments of Ps. 4 is absent here. From Adam Clarke's Commentary we copy: "This Psalm is inscribed to the chief Musician upon *Nehiloth*, A Psalm of David. As *neginoth* may signify all kinds of instruments struck with a plectrum, stringed instruments, those like the drum, cymbals, etc.; so *nechiloth*, from *chaalal*, to be hollow, to bore through, may signify any kind of wind instruments, such as the horn, trumpet, flute, etc. ... The Septuagint has, *Eis to telos, huper tes kleronomouses*, 'In favour of her who obtains the inheritance.' The Vulgate and the Arabic have a similar reading. The word *n^chiloth* they have derived from *naachal*, to inherit. This may either refer to the Israelites who obtained the inheritance of the Promised Land, or to the church of Christ which obtains through him, by faith and prayer, the inheritance among the saints in light."

We are not told anything about David's circumstances when he wrote this psalm, except for the fact that he awoke in the morning and faced a new and difficult day; he admits that he did not know how to cope with his problems. The flute music in the background must have had a plaintive character. The Hebrew words used in vs. 1 for "words" and "sighing" are *'emer* which means "speech, word," and *hagiyyg*, meaning "a murmur, i.e. complaint." The KJV renders it with "meditation, musing."

"Words" implies that David has looked at the coming events with a logical frame of mind and considered how to approach the problems that were facing him. Now he takes his considerations and he puts them before God, asking Him to listen to his plans. In doing so, he puts into practice the admonition of Proverbs: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."⁷⁸ David trusts in the Lord, he does not lean on his own understanding, and he acknowledges Him in his ways. It is important that he does this in the morning. He does not ask the Lord to pick up the pieces at the end of the day, but he consults the Lord before he acts.

Also, David is not driven by his emotions alone; he uses logical words and explanations when he comes before the Lord. It is part of human dignity to be able to make plans and take initiatives, and God does not deny man this privilege. But man's initiative without consulting God is dangerous to the extreme. The KJV's use of the words "meditation" and "musing" would give the impression of a pious attitude. The intent, however, seems to be a reasonable consultation. Spurgeon sees in this psalm the essence of all prayer, in which our words are directed to a God who listens and who pays attention to what we say.⁷⁹

Jesus warns against hypocrisy in prayer.⁸⁰ We have to realize to whom we speak when we pray.

⁷⁸ Prov. 3:5,6

⁷⁹ Charles Spurgeon - "The Treasury of David"

⁸⁰ Matt. 6:5-8

Luther thought that the opening verses of this psalm are an indication of David's feelings that he actually does not know what to say to God and how to say it; it is as if his feelings are too intense to be put in words. He needs God's help and understanding to be able to express what he feels. This corresponds to Paul's words that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."⁸¹ It is true, what one of my teachers once said, that if we can completely express in words what we feel, our emotions cannot be too deep.

Both our words and our sighs must be brought before the Lord. Our head and our heart have to take an equal part in prayer, and since prayer is the function of our spirit, the organ with which we communicate with God, we see in this first verse a demonstration of the tri-unity of man: body, soul and spirit; spirit and soul expressed in intellect and emotions.

David addresses God as LORD, which is the English translation of *Yahweh* (YHWH.) He also calls him "my King and God, which is *Elohim*. He qualifies his prayer as "my cry for help." Every prayer is a demonstration of our need for help. David was a king himself and he calls God: "my King," realizing that he was king by the grace of God. We all are what we are by the grace of God! We owe what we are to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord," the apostle Paul says.⁸² The king of Israel calls for the help of the King of Israel. It is this realization of who the One is whom we are addressing that makes our prayers so important and imparts such power to them. Prayer and faith do not mean anything by themselves; it is in whom we trust, and to whom we address our prayers that gives importance.

This psalm is David's morning prayer. The first things he does, as he awakes in the morning, is to seek God's face. The RSV translates this verse with: "In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for thee, and watch." The Good News Bible's renders it: "At sunrise I offer my prayer and wait for your answer." A footnote is added to this, saying: "prayer, or sacrifice." *Word Biblical Commentary* notes here: "Many interpreters assume a formal context of worship for the verb translated 'I make preparations' (*arak*) may be used with respect to the making of formal preparations for a sacrifice (e.g. setting the wood upon the altar). But the word may also be used of preparing one's words (e.g. in a legal case or debate) and there can be no certainty that it is used in any technical sacrificial sense here." There is, however, in every prayer a connection with a sacrifice. Prayer is never a matter of arranging words in their right order before God. Without the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ no prayers would be possible. Our words are based upon the shed blood of Christ, which makes our speaking to God a prayer. Whether David personally brought a morning sacrifice or whether he identifies with the public sacrifice, which was brought every morning, does not make a real difference. In either case he begins the day on the basis of God's reconciliation.

It is good to begin the day with prayer. Spurgeon says: "One hour in the morning is worth two in the evening."

David expects God to answer; this is clear from the "I will look up," or "I wait in expectation." The Hebrew word *tsaphah* literally means "to lean forward or to observe, await, look up, wait for, watch." It evokes the image of a watchman. He demonstrates a watchful attitude of faith that waits for the answer.

All ground rules of prayer are found in these first four verses:

- Prayer has to be directed to God in the full recognition of who He is.
- Prayer has to involve all of our being: body, soul, and spirit.
- Prayer has to be based on the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Prayer is most effective in the morning when we wake up refreshed from sleep.
- Prayer should be accompanied by faith that expects an answer.

In vs. 4-6 David describes briefly the character of God and what man's character ought to be like. It is a concise comment on the theme of Leviticus: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy,"⁸³ and on Isaiah's words: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."⁸⁴

David describes the situation in which a man tries to appear before God on the basis of his own merit and not of the sacrifice of Christ. No holiness is possible without atonement. Man cannot approach

⁸¹ Rom. 8:26,27

⁸² I Cor. 1:31

⁸³ Lev. 19:2

⁸⁴ Isa. 59:2

God without a covering for his fallen condition, and without the covering by the blood of Christ, no fundamental inner change in man is possible. The man without God is cut off from the source of life. The result of this is a whole complex of sin. David mentions evil, wickedness, arrogance, wrongdoing, lying, bloodthirstiness, and deceit. God takes no pleasure in those qualities, and He does not tolerate the presence of such people; they will not be able to stand in His presence; He hates them, destroys them and abhors them. The flute music accompanied that accompanied this part must have sounded shrill and piercing.

In vs. 4 David contrasts sharply the character of the man who is reconciled with God with the one who is not. Natural man has no basis for fellowship with God, but redeemed man may enter God's house, not on the basis of his own qualifications, but by God's great mercy. The Hebrew word "mercy" is here *cheched* or *hesed*, which is God's covenant love for His people. It has both a juridical and an emotional content. We enter into the house of the Lord on the solid basis of His covenant and experience fellowship that makes us worship and praise. This kind of experience is life-changing; it makes us into new and holy creatures. One cannot enter into God's presence and remain the same.

When David uses the term "Your house" he does not mean, of course, the temple, since that had not yet been built. The Hebrew word is *bayith*, which comes from the word "to build" and denotes any kind of building. David speaks of the presence of the Lord, of which the ark was an image and Heaven the reality. He probably entered into the tent where the ark stood. The intent was that he bowed down in prayer at the place that was designated in the same way as, later, Daniel would bow in the direction of Jerusalem. There is no indication that David would not have been conscious of the fact that the Lord was a transcendent God. The word "reverence" speaks of his deep respect for God, which the Bible calls "the fear of the Lord." David's attitude before God had nothing in common with that of people who bowed down before the local deities of the epoch— deities that were made and manipulated by man.

In the previous psalm David called God: "God of my righteousness." Here he prays: "Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness." This indicates his awareness that his own righteousness was not enough to give him guidance in life. There is an implicit confession of sin in those words. They also imply that life must go on. Life with God does not only consist of fellowship and meditation; there is also action. God's mercy is the basis of the one and His righteousness of the other. Righteousness is the hallmark of the Christian life.

The enemies mentioned in this verse may have taken human form, but the real enemies are not persons of flesh and blood, but "the rulers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."⁸⁵ The devil lies in ambush along the road of life and tries to lure us into acts of unrighteousness. Unless we are guided by God's righteousness, we fall into the enemy's trap and lose our way. David sees great and insurmountable obstacles on his way, even as Zerubbabel saw a huge mountain in the way between himself and the completion of the temple he was building. Zechariah prophesies to him: "What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!'"⁸⁶ The devil does not only create obstacles to the reaching of God's goals in our lives, he himself is the greatest obstacle. He makes the path God wants us to follow impossible to walk on, but, as we progress, God will make it even for us.

Vs. 9 forms the basis for Paul's condemnation of man in his epistle to the Romans: "As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ... Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.'"⁸⁷ Yet, I believe that David does not speak of man, at least not primarily, but of the demonic powers which influence man's behavior. Only those who are completely in the power of the Evil One conform to this description. Most people are somewhere in between total depravity and mild demonic oppression. For a person who lives in fellowship with God, it is impossible not to have compassion for his fellowmen. But we ought to hate sin without compromise. It seems impossible to me that a man who knows God would pray for the damnation of a neighbor, created in the image of God. Only demons merit this kind of fate. I am not insinuating that a man who resists God would not be responsible and would have to bear his guilt; but our attitude towards them should be one of compassion; we ought to love them with the love of Christ. We should always pray for the conversion of hardened sinners, not for their condemnation.

In vs. 11, 12 David draws a line from time to eternity and back again to the present. Seeing things in the light of eternity gives us the right perspective of the present and it changes our attitude. Eternity

⁸⁵ Eph. 6:12

⁸⁶ Zech. 4:7

⁸⁷ Rom. 3:10-14

influences time and vice versa. Jesus endured the cross and scorned its shame, because of the joy set before Him, says the author of the Hebrew Epistle.⁸⁸ Being glad, singing for joy, and rejoicing in God's Name are elements of the heavenly life. Taking refuge in God and being protected by Him speak about the existence of the needy on earth. We flee for cover to God because we are safe nowhere else. In this world we need protection against the powers of darkness and a man who is under the shadow of God's wing has a foretaste of the measureless joy that will be his in eternity. Nehemiah said to the people of Israel: "The joy of the LORD is your strength."⁸⁹ The Hebrew word for "strength" is *ma`owz*, which is defined by *Strong's* as "a fortified place; figuratively, a defense." The KJV translates it with: "force, fortress, rock, strength, stronghold." It is not only true that the presence of the Lord makes us rejoice, but this joy is our protection. Man needs joy in order to keep his balance emotionally. There is little or no joy to be found in the amusement that the world offers us. The fears and pressures of life make it impossible to live a healthy, balanced life on earth. God opens a door of escape for us through the Holy Spirit so that we can momentarily get out from under the pressure and experience moments of refreshment that enable us to face the hardships again.

The last four lines of this psalm are all parallels. What it comes to is that God loves us and enjoys our presence. When we return His love, we experience His protection over us so that, in the midst of fears and pressures we can say: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"⁹⁰ This is the victory of faith. We have to get used to the fact that we live in God's victory and the best way to practice this is to do exercises of praise, and joy.

⁸⁸ Heb. 12:2

⁸⁹ Neh. 8:10

⁹⁰ Rom. 8:31, 35

PSALM SIX

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. According to sheminith.
A psalm of David.

- 1 O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.**
- 2 Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.**
- 3 My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?**
- 4 Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love.**
- 5 No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?**
- 6 I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.**
- 7 My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes.**
- 8 Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping.**
- 9 The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer.**
- 10 All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.**

This psalm is written completely in a minor key. It contains a complaint of a sick person. The caption in the NIV says: “For the director of music. With stringed instruments. according to *sheminith*. A psalm of David. A footnote suggests that *sheminith* is probably a musical term.

Adam Clarke’s Commentary says here: “This Psalm has the following inscription: To the chief Musician on Neginoth, upon Sheminith, A Psalm of David, which the Chaldee translates ‘To be sung on neginoth, a harp of eight strings.’ The various interpretations given to this inscription, both by ancients and moderns, show us that nothing is known concerning it. We have already seen that neginoth probably signifies all instruments which emitted sounds by strokes, or stringed instruments in general. This Psalm was to be accompanied with such instruments, but one of a particular kind is specified, namely, sheminith, so called from its having eight strings.”

One translation gives as a title: “A prayer in danger of death.”⁹¹ The thought of death is definitely prevalent in the psalm.

This psalm is the first in a series of seven which are called “Penitential Psalms.”⁹² The early church treated them as psalms related to the crucifixion of Christ. We have to read this psalm against that background; otherwise, it degenerates to the complaint of a sick man and nothing more.

Some commentators believe that David wrote this psalm after his sin with Bathsheba and a subsequent sickness, but there is no ground for such a supposition. Reading those commentaries, one would come to believe that the time after his sin with Bathsheba was, from a literary viewpoint, the most fruitful period of David’s life!

There are some thoughts expressed in this psalm which are fundamental for the comprehension of God’s purpose for suffering. First, it suggests that David’s sickness is connected with God’s anger over some sin that was committed, which is not mentioned in this context. Secondly, it indicates that sickness in itself is an enemy, which, in this psalm is personified, and finally, it implies that God permits this hostile power to do its work in David’s body in order to achieve a goal, which is not mentioned in the context of this psalm either.

It is, of course, an established fact that sickness and death are related to sin and to the power of the devil. Before the arrival of sin, death had no place in God’s creation. When sin arrived, death started to reign as an absolute monarch. This does not necessarily mean that every single incident of sickness can be traced to some particular sin the patient would have committed. Even if this were the case for David, we cannot elevate this theory to a doctrinal truth. David, however, sees his physical condition as God’s punishment. He says: “my bones are in agony.” The KJV translates it: “my bones are vexed.” The Hebrew word is *bahal*, which can be translated “to tremble inwardly, to be alarmed or agitated.” What is probably meant is that he is shaking physically. But at the same time, he speaks about his soul being in anguish. So, the probability exists that the real need is in the soul and that as a result of this he struggles with psychosomatic symptoms; this, however, makes little difference in practice. Science has not yet established

⁹¹ Dutch - NBG “Nieuwe Vertaling”

⁹² The other psalms are: 32; 38; 51; 102; 130 and 143

whether the current streams from the psychological to the physical or the other way around. There is probably a reciprocation between these two phases in the life of man.

As we stated at the beginning, however, we should treat this psalm in the light of the cross of Christ. There we find the real meaning the Holy Spirit wants to express here; He speaks here, not in the first place about David's sickness only, but also about the suffering Savior. Isaiah describes our suffering Savior: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, ... 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."⁹³

We have no indication in the Scriptures that Jesus recited this psalm to Himself during His crucifixion, as we know He quoted Psalm 22. Yet, we may believe that, from a prophetic viewpoint, this psalm was written for that occasion. On the other hand, it is obvious that David, when he wrote this psalm, experienced physical pain and felt a need that stimulated him to compose this poem. David wrote because he was sick. From his position he could not draw a line between his own condition and the sufferings of Christ, as we can do now. This seems to be one of the great lessons for us in this psalm. God wants us to related our personal experiences with sickness and death to the cross of Christ and to place our circumstances against this background and judge our circumstances accordingly. The words of the apostle Peter are particularly applicable to this psalm. We read: "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."⁹⁴ It was the Spirit of Christ in David which made him predict the sufferings of Christ. And David was given to understand that he was not serving himself. The significance of his own sickness went far beyond the boundaries of his fever and pain. We should, therefor, draw the first and most important lessons from this psalm that, if God allows us to be sick, we have to understand why we are sick and what we should do with our sickness.

"O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath." David's prayer has been answered by God for each of His children. For us, who belong to Jesus Christ, sickness is no longer a punishment for our sins. "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him!"⁹⁵ This can never be undone again. If God allows sickness in our lives, we have to take that as an opportunity to examine ourselves. If there are sins which we have not yet laid upon Jesus, God may use sickness to draw our attention to the fact. C. S. Lewis said: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks to us in our conscience; but He shouts to us in our pain."⁹⁶ That is why James establishes a connection between confession of sin and healing. We read in his epistle: "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."⁹⁷ We make a mistake if we always, immediately connect sickness with certain sins. As far as we are concerned, sickness is no longer the result of the anger of God; that stage has passed away in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God is for us, not against us.⁹⁸ This should take away the fear of sickness and death for us. We should, however, ask ourselves what God's intention is with us, when He allows sickness in our lives and the search for divine healing should have priority in our thinking.

The Hebrew word for "rebuke" David uses is *yakach*, which has a wide variety of meanings. It can mean: "to justify or convict," but it can also mean "to rebuke," or "to reprove." David does not want to be convicted, but to be taught. David does not plead with God on the basis of his merits, as did Hezekiah, but he bases his supplication on the merits of something outside himself. In doing so, David, again, points in the direction of "The Man of Sorrows." When Hezekiah is told by Isaiah that he will die, we read: "Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, 'Remember, O LORD, how I have walked

⁹³ Isa. 53:4,5

⁹⁴ I Peter 1:12

⁹⁵ Isa. 53:5

⁹⁶ The Problem of Pain, by C. S. Lewis

⁹⁷ James 5:15,16

⁹⁸ See Rom. 8:31

before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.' And Hezekiah wept bitterly."⁹⁹

We do not know what caused David's suffering at that moment. That agony, or vexation in his bones, could mean that his body was weakened to the point that he could not stand up straight. It might have been a form of rheumatic pain. Whatever it was, it influenced him psychologically, as most physical suffering does. His soul was in anguish. This means more than that he simply was not feeling well. Words like that give the impression of an overwhelming fear, or a depression. It is a known fact that most symptoms of physical sickness bear upon our spirit as well as upon our soul and diminish our sense of fellowship with God.

But David also knew that his condition was temporary. The cryptic words, "How long, O LORD, how long?" remind us of Moses' prayer: "Relent, O LORD! How long will it be?"¹⁰⁰ David felt as if God had abandoned him. Sickness has a way of diminishing our sense of reality; as such, it is an attack upon our faith. After all, faith gives us an understanding of the true character of life; it is the proof of things unseen. David's prayer: "Relent, O LORD! How long will it be?" indicates that David considered his sickness to be an abnormality. It was not a situation in accordance with God's original plan for man.

We also get the impression that David longs for more than his physical healing alone. There is in his words something of the sigh of the whole of nature, of the longing for the moment when God will return to what is His and will heal all that is bent and broken. The New Testament prayer is: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."¹⁰¹ Therefore, we should always look at our sicknesses as being a part of a fallen creation. We are never an isolated incident in the history of the universe.

Where the NIV says: "Turn, O LORD, and deliver me," the KJV renders the phrase with: "Return, O LORD, deliver my soul." The Hebrew word *nepesh* can be rendered in various ways. The literal meaning is "a breathing creature," but it can also mean "myself." Evidently, David asks, in the first place, that the Lord will keep him alive on earth a little longer. In the context of his time and age, he saw death as the end of existence. It is a strange phenomenon that the people of Israel had lost the knowledge of resurrection from the dead during the most glorious period of their history. I say, "lost" because in previous periods in the Bible, we read that people believed in life after death. In the oldest book of the Bible, Job, this is overwhelmingly clear. With Solomon the question is raised anew, whether this life on earth actually offers all there is. I believe this is the basic philosophy of the Ecclesiastes. Only at the resurrection of Christ, does the Bible let the full rays of light fall upon the glorious hope we have now. With the major Old Testament prophets, the light begins to dawn again. Isaiah says: "But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead."¹⁰² C. S. Lewis says in one of his books that he was grateful that God did not give him insight in the doctrine of the resurrection immediately after his conversion, but that he had to learn to trust the Lord first, even without hope of life after death. In our day, we seem to find ourselves anew where David was in this psalm. Modern man sees no future after death. Evidently, this does not exclude fellowship with God. One of the miracles in this psalm is the fact that the Holy Spirit uses the language of the ignorant! The text does not state specifically what David meant, but it does say what the Holy Spirit wanted to express.

Death is proof of the absence of God. Primitive people, such as the Me tribe in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, knew the legend of a Creator who withdrew from this world, by which man lost his eternal life and lost his soul. As God returns, as He did in Jesus Christ, the dead come back to life. Death cannot exist in the presence of God. As Jesus said about God: "He is not the God of the dead but of the living."¹⁰³ So David sees his healing in connection with God's return to the whole of creation, which is the moment in time the apostle Paul calls "the revealing of the sons of God."¹⁰⁴

There is also in David's prayer an expectation for the present time. It is as if David had heard Jesus' admonition to Martha, when she saw the resurrection of her brother, Lazarus, only as something to be hoped for in the future. When Martha answered: "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he

⁹⁹ II Kings 20:2,3

¹⁰⁰ Ps. 90:13

¹⁰¹ Rev. 22:20

¹⁰² Isa. 26:19

¹⁰³ Matt. 22:32

¹⁰⁴ Rom. 8:19(NKJ)

dies.”¹⁰⁵ And even when Paul used the words, “the revealing of the sons of God,” he spoke about something that already exists, but is not yet visible. As sons of God, we have the secret of healing and resurrection already within us.

Verses 6-8 do not merely contain David’s complaint, but also an inventory of his ailments. In a certain way this means a spiritual breakthrough. He recognizes his condition and who his adversary is. I believe that David does not speak about men who are threatening his life, but about demonic powers. The numbness which is often the result of sickness, the diminishing of our powers of perception, is often much more dangerous than any physical handicap. Seeing who the adversary is and exposing the power that is behind the sickness puts things in focus.

David also recognizes anew who the God is to whom he unburdened his soul. It is the LORD, YHWH, who has heard the cry for mercy and who accepts the prayer of this little human being. As a mother immediately knows the cry of her little baby among the crying of scores of other babies, so does God react immediately to our tears. The fact that God pays attention to our cry elevates us above ourselves and gives us value. This understanding is the beginning of healing.

It is sometimes hard to determine the tense of a verb in Hebrew, but where the NIV says: “The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer,” the KJV renders the phrase with: “The LORD hath heard my supplication; the LORD will receive my prayer.” This would indicate that, at this point, there has not been any change in David’s physical condition. He bases his hope on faith. Twice he uses the word “ashamed.” The NIV says: “All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace,” but the Hebrew word translated as “disgrace” is the same as the “ashamed” in the first part of the sentence. It is *buwsh*, which literally means “to pale.” The feeling of shame presupposes the knowledge of a moral standard and the realization of a trespass. It is strange that David would use this expression in connection with demons. I do not doubt, however, that the characterization of the Evil One is correct here. He knows better, and he will be ashamed before God. He will experience the same feeling of fear and anxiety that he cultivated and manipulated so cleverly in his victims.

¹⁰⁵ John 11:24,25

PSALM SEVEN

A shiggaion of David, which he sang to the Lord concerning Cush,
a Benjamite.

**1 O LORD my God, I take refuge in you; save and deliver me from all who pursue me,
2 or they will tear me like a lion and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me.
3 O LORD my God, if I have done this and there is guilt on my hands--
4 if I have done evil to him who is at peace with me or without cause have robbed my foe--
5 then let my enemy pursue and overtake me; let him trample my life to the ground and make me sleep
in the dust. Selah
6 Arise, O LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree
justice.
7 Let the assembled peoples gather around you. Rule over them from on high;
8 let the LORD judge the peoples. Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my
integrity, O Most High.
9 O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make
the righteous secure.
10 My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart.
11 God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.
12 If he does not relent, he will sharpen his sword; he will bend and string his bow.
13 He has prepared his deadly weapons; he makes ready his flaming arrows.
14 He who is pregnant with evil and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment.
15 He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made.
16 The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head.
17 I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the
LORD Most High.**

From *Adam Clarke's Commentary* we copy: "This Psalm is entitled, Shiggaion of David which he sang unto the Lord, concerning the words of Cush the Benjamite. The word *shigaayown* comes from *shaagah*, to wander, a wandering song; i. e., a Psalm composed by David in his wanderings, when he was obliged to hide himself from the fury of Saul.

Dr. Horsley thinks it may have its name, a wandering ode, from its being in different parts, taking up different subjects, in different styles of composition. But he has sometimes thought that shiggaion might be an unpremeditated song; an improviso.

As to Cush the Benjamite, he is a person unknown in the Jewish history; the name is probably a name of disguise; and by it he may covertly mean Saul himself, the son of Kish, who was of the tribe of Benjamin. The subject of the Psalm will better answer to Saul's unjust persecution and David's innocence, than to any other subject in the history of David."

F. B. Meyer, in his book *David*, does not share this opinion. He does see a connection between this psalm and David's flight for Saul, but takes Cush to be the name of one of Saul's courtiers, who would have antagonized Saul against David. All of this is, of course, only speculation. We are not told who Cush the Benjamite really was and what he had said. The name Cush is only found in the Bible for the son of Ham¹⁰⁶, and as a name for Ethiopia.¹⁰⁷ Yet the connection between this psalm and David's flight from Saul seems to be a logical one. Even if it could be proven that this is historically incorrect, we can take David's condition to be one similar as when he fled from Saul. This psalm can be taken as the counterpart of psalm three, where David is guilty as he flees from his son Absalom. Here he flees as an innocent victim.

This complaint of Shiggaion, with its irregular rhythm, reminds us of a stream that runs over a bed of rocks; it is syncopated, which means that the beat is on the wrong note in every measure. This translates very well the kind of emotions David wants to express in this poem. Beethoven used this method with great effect in his music to give expression to his anger. David's purpose, however, is not merely to express his emotions in order to experience a psychological sense of relief but also he sings his song before the Lord.

¹⁰⁶ Gen. 10:6

¹⁰⁷ Ps. 68:31

He vents his frustrations in the only way that leads to real healing: that is, before God. Prayer is not always a peaceful occupation. In David's case it was the sigh of a restless heart.

The image of the lion places this psalm for us in the right spiritual perspective. Peter calls Satan "a roaring lion." He says: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."¹⁰⁸ There had been a time in David's life when, in his youthful daring, he killed a lion that wanted to steal a sheep. To Saul he said: "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it."¹⁰⁹ Now, as he is older and less daring, the situation in which he find himself makes him fearful. It is advisable to fear lions. Physical or spiritual recklessness has not merit in itself. David is right to want to flee from the lion and to flee to God. It is good for us to hide in God and to put ourselves under His protection. C. S. Lewis develops the theme of being under God's protection in his beautiful book *That Hideous Strength*.

If we flee to God, we put a distance between ourselves and the enemy. It is obvious that we will only be subject to enemy attacks if we resist him. As long as we have a common cause with the devil, he will treat us as calves to be fattened for the kill. But once we confess our sins before God and ask for forgiveness, he turns against us. This is, undoubtedly, the most positive side of this kind of experience. It is much more dangerous if we are exposed to a sweet, subtle temptation than when Satan turns against us openly with physical threats. In that way he easily crosses the limits God has set for him. There is in open demonic attacks a hidden compliment to our spiritual status.

David shows a very human reaction to fear and, he deals with this in a healthy way. The solution to the problem of fear lies in the spiritual realm, which is only accessible in fellowship with God. When Jesus' disciples were afraid to return with Him to Jerusalem, He told them: "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."¹¹⁰

There is in the persecution of David a semblance of justice which is hard to accept. David is being accused of certain things which would give an air of legality to the case. This air of justice is more repulsive than unlimited absolutism. We are not told what David is charged with. If we do place this psalm against the background of David's flight from Saul, we know that Saul suspected David of revolutionary efforts to take over the throne. The basis for this supposition was not imaginary if Saul was aware of the fact that Samuel had anointed David. Saul would have considered David's irreproachable conduct towards him as a sly political ploy. Why would he have trusted David more than he trusted himself? Saul's reasoning was not illogical. The situation was rather complicated, mainly because God had started to intervene in David's life, in a supernatural way, and at an early stage.

Ironically, David found himself in a tight situation into which he got himself because of the grace of God. From a spiritual viewpoint this kind of conflict is the logical result of God's grace; the devil reacts when the work of the Holy Spirit becomes evident in the life of man. But in the world in which we live, with its inter-personal relations, matters are seldom so easily definable as black or white. We have a hard time accepting that God's interventions can increase the pressure and make life more difficult for us. One example is the one of Israel in Egypt after Moses' first visit to Pharaoh's court. Others include first the life of Joseph, second, the man who was paralyzed for thirty-eight years,¹¹¹ and third, the man who was born blind,¹¹² to mention only a few. Jesus advises us to rejoice and be glad when we find ourselves in similar circumstances. He said: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."¹¹³ We can only rejoice under those circumstances, of course, if our conscience is clear.

There is always the very subtle danger that we will try to manipulate the work of the Holy Spirit to boost our own ego. That was the difference between David and Saul; both were seized by the power of the Holy Spirit. David, immediately, handed over the reigns of his life to God; Saul did not. At first glance,

¹⁰⁸ I Pet. 5:8

¹⁰⁹ I Sam. 17:34,35

¹¹⁰ John 11:8-10

¹¹¹ John 5:1-15

¹¹² John 9

¹¹³ Matt.5:10-12

Saul was the more modest one of the two, but his modesty was a cover-up for his efforts to remain in the saddle. Only “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”¹¹⁴

In vs. 4 David makes reference to an incident in which he saved the life of a person who wanted to kill him. The NIV says: “If I have done evil to him who is at peace with me ...” The NKJ renders it: “If I have repaid evil to him who was at peace with me ...” This reference could describe the incidents at Engedi¹¹⁵ and later Hakilah¹¹⁶, where Saul was cornered and David could have killed him, but refrained from doing so.

In the two parallel couplets of vs. 6 and 7 and vs. 8 and 9, David asks God to intervene on his behalf. The words: “Arise O LORD ...” are the same as in Ps. 3:6, where we commented that God acted on behalf of man against the evil powers in the heavenlies. We should never lose sight of the difference between our struggle against “flesh and blood” and “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”¹¹⁷ David, obviously, believed that God intervenes in the world and in the lives of individuals. If we think that God’s omnipotence only means that God sits on the throne in heaven as a figurehead, we do not understand Who He is. God arises, and sometimes even jumps up in answer to our prayers. The word “awake” speaks of the mistaken notion we often have of God, as if He were asleep. “He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”¹¹⁸

God is also the source of all justice and righteousness, and David is in need of justice. Only God can justify a man. TLB renders vs. 7 and 8 as follows: “Gather all peoples before you; sit high above them, judging their sins. But justify me publicly.” With this prayer David sets the stage for a public rehabilitation. The scene reminds us of the judgment John describes in Revelation, where it is made public whose name is in the Book of Life and whose is not. We read there: “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”¹¹⁹

We find the same thought repeated in the following verses. We conclude again that the Holy Spirit said more in David’s words than David intended to say himself. It may have been true that David was not guilty of the things his accusers charged him with, but nobody is without guilt before God, not even David. If a man is pronounced not guilty and is found to be righteous, this is a miracle that is brought about by the death of Jesus Christ. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”¹²⁰ Righteousness is only our through faith in Christ. Our guiltlessness is imputed to us in Him. David’s words demonstrate how complete this imputation is; so that even the Argus eye of God Himself cannot find anything objectionable in us.

Vs. 9 states all the problems of this world in a nutshell: there is a battle raging between light and darkness, between God and Satan, and man has chosen to be in one of the two camps. David’s choice is with God and His righteousness. This does not mean, however, that the problems of sin within him have been completely resolved. As every descendant of Adam, he too was born in the wrong camp. That is why his heart and mind must be searched. Or, as the KJV puts it: “God trieth the hearts and reins,” an expression which stands for the purifying work of the Holy Spirit. So, this psalm speaks of our justification and our sanctification, and of God’s final victory over Satan, both objectively as subjectively: outside us, in us and by us.

As in the third psalm, here too David calls God his shield. “My shield is God Most High.” In Ps. 3 the shield protected a miserable sinner who had confessed his guilt; here it protects a man who may not be guilty of gross sins but who, yet, has found a righteousness that is not his own. This situation is the same as that which the apostle Peter calls “grace.” He says: “For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain

¹¹⁴ Rom. 8:14

¹¹⁵ I Sam. 24

¹¹⁶ I Sam. 26

¹¹⁷ Eph. 6:12

¹¹⁸ Ps. 121:3,4

¹¹⁹ Rev. 20:11-15

¹²⁰ II Cor. 5:21

of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”¹²¹ The Greek word that is translated “commendable” in the NIV, (“acceptable” in the KJV) is *charis*, which means “grace.” The shield of God’s grace does not, in the first instance, change our circumstance, but it changes us. The salvation of the upright in heart is, in the first place, a being saved from ourselves.

Adam Clarke’s commentary gives an extensive comment on vs. 11. He argues that “God is angry with the wicked every day” (KJV), is a wrong translation, that came from the Chaldean version of the text. He is of the opinion that the phrase should read: “Is God angry every day?” Actually, from a logical viewpoint, both versions are valid. God’s wrath over sin is a constant. He does not change His attitude towards men who do not want to repent. The revelation of God’s wrath against all human unrighteousness is part of His character. As Paul says: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”¹²² If we put a question mark behind the sentence, and thus reverse the meaning, the phrase becomes a demonstration of God’s grace toward people who turn from their sinful way of life. Both facets are part of God’s justice. God is just as consistent when He forgives sin as when He does not forgive. In both cases sin is punished: in the case of forgiveness it is punished in Him, who took upon Himself the punishment for our sins, and in the case of punishment of the sinner, it is when man rejects reconciliation.

Verses 12 and 13 give a vivid description of the judgment that falls upon a man who does not want to repent of his sins while he is still alive. I cannot see in this description a picture of the final moment at which man stands before the judgment seat to give account of his life. What we read here speaks about the pitfalls in which man is caught, traps which he has set up himself in the sins he committed. This also seems to be the case in the vs. 14-16. James’ explanation as to how man is caught in the web of his sins, is probably based upon the 14th verse of this psalm. He says: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”¹²³ The image of a conception that leads to giving birth seems to indicate that the origin of evil comes from outside man, but it becomes part of his being. It also shows that the sinful act is the result of a growing process. Man does not fall into sin, without any previous preparation for it. In the same way, a woman does not give birth without having been pregnant.

We see this principle clearly at work in the life of Saul, who may have been the object, or the cause for the writing of this psalm. The power he obtained when he became king, corrupted him until, at the end the devil could dominate him to the point where he surrendered the reigns of his life completely. David’s analysis of the background of Saul’s acts, we read about here, probably shows his deep psychological insight. David had a better understanding of what Saul did, and why he did it, than Saul himself had. He recognized the growing process of evil in the life of his adversary, that preceded the first attempt to pin him to the wall with a spear. It is possible that Samuel had told David in confidence how Saul’s disobedience had begun with the unlawful bringing of the sacrifice at his own initiative¹²⁴ and, after that, with his neglect to eradicate Amalek.¹²⁵

The basis for Saul’s sin was not impatience but fear of men. He was afraid of his own troupes, because he never really believed that God had anointed him king of His people. The book of Proverbs says: “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.”¹²⁶ One cannot serve God and please man at the same time. Paul says: “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”¹²⁷ David must have understood that the reason Saul wanted to kill him was because he was afraid of him. Ironically, Saul, who had tried to pin David to the wall with his spear, died by being pierced with his own sword. He had hoped David would be killed in his effort to obtain the foreskins of one hundred Philistines as a bride price, but Saul died himself on the battlefield during the war with the

¹²¹ I Pet 2:19,20

¹²² Rom. 1:18

¹²³ James 1:13-15

¹²⁴ I Sam. 13:8-14

¹²⁵ I Sam. 15:8-23

¹²⁶ Prov. 29:25

¹²⁷ Gal. 1:10

Philistines. David's prophecy in vs. 15 and 16 was literally fulfilled: Saul fell into the pit he had made, and the trouble he caused recoiled on himself; his violence came down on his own head.

But what a way to end a song of complaint with a doxology! Vs. 17 says: "I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High." Once again, nothing had changed in outward circumstances. David is still a refugee who flees for his life, but the fact that he has poured out his heart before the Lord made him see his position in the right light. What can man do unto us when we take refuge in the Lord? God's righteousness is imputed to us; His Name is written on our foreheads, as it was on Aaron's: HOLY TO THE LORD. If we realize this, we can hardly do anything else but praise God. He gives "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Isaiah 61:3

PSALM EIGHT

For the director of music. According to *gittith*.
A psalm of David.

- 1 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.**
2 From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.
3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.
6 You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet:
7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.
9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

The eighth psalm is, undoubtedly, one of the pearls in the Book of Psalms . In this psalm, David lets his gaze roam over the whole of creation: heaven and earth as the product of God's hand, and he sees himself in the center of it all. This view is based on the fact that he recognizes the reality of the relationship between creation and its Creator, and because he sees the sense and purpose of it all in the miracle of the macrocosms and the microcosms.

The opening sentence contains the words: YHWH and Adoni with majesty and glory. The accent of the whole psalm is upon the Lord as Creator, but the names used for God are those that make reference to Him as the One who entered into the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and who is the Almighty, who rules over all. YHWH is the "I AM," Adoni is the Lord to whom we owe obedience. When David calls Him "our Lord," he means that the Lord ought to be obeyed by us all. "Our Lord," after all, means that He is Lord of my life and I am His servant. The Redeemer, Ruler, and Creator is one and the same God.

Modern man feels lost in a hostile world; he tries to conquer the space in which he lives. Redeemed man sees the harmony between himself and the rest of creation. The difference is in our relationship with God.

David's choice of words in the poem is superb. He says, not only that God's glory and majesty are seen in creation, but also that His Name is majestic in all the earth. He speaks about God's Name, that is, His character, the essence of His being. It is the character of God that makes creation vibrate with life and beauty. I wrote these words, early in the morning, sitting on the front porch of a friend's home in Jayapura, Irian Jaya, Indonesia. From there I had a breathtaking view of the bay of the city. Just at that moment the sun came up. It was as if the Lord wanted to prove to me the point that the reason this view was so overwhelming was because it expressed His character and beauty. God is light, and this light breaks up in the prism of nature into glorious gold and deep red with purple of this sunrise. I was given a private demonstration of a meaningful expression of God's character. In his book *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis says some interesting things about the observation of beauty. Beauty is not the subjective reaction of a man to what he sees; it is an objective expression of God's absolute being.

The psalm is written from the viewpoint of a redeemed man. Nothing of what David says here would make any sense for a person who still lives in sin. In quoting this psalm, the writer to the Hebrews says: "At present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, ... now crowned with glory and honor."¹²⁹ David sees the relationships between God, himself, and the rest of creation as a harmonious unity, because he "sees Jesus." For a man who does not know fellowship with God, the whole of nature is one hotchpotch of senseless cannibalism and cruelty, of disaster and whim, of nonsense and fate. And this picture is partly true. We find a suggestion of the shadow that falls over the work of God's fingers in the question David asks: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"

David does not shut his eyes for the fallen condition of creation; he is conscious of the presence of evil, but his understanding of God's character makes him see that evil is a temporary phenomenon. This

¹²⁹ Heb. 2:8,9

psalm is, therefore, a confession of faith; it is written from a position of victory, “because of [the] enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.”

In the opening verses David says that God reveals His majesty in the infinity of space, but also in children and infants on earth. We tend to see the inhabitants of the world of David’s time as primitive barbarians, who thought that the world was square and that the stars were like little candles on the ceiling of the planet. This psalm exposes our own ignorance about history. David’s concept of space is quite realistic and up-to-date. If the infinite God fills space, then space must be infinite, and God has set His glory above the heavens.

David looks up into the night sky, we gather from vs. 3. This psalm is a nocturne. Spurgeon entitled the psalm “The Astronomers’ Psalm.”¹³⁰ Modern space exploration, in no way diminishes the greatness of God which David depicts here. The most we can add to David’s vision at the beginning of the twenty-first century, is that God is even greater than David supposed He was. He is the Creator of this universe.

Bishop Robinson, in his book *I Cannot Believe That*, quotes the remark one of his children made, when looking at the starry sky: “Which one is ours?” He saw in this an awareness of human greatness; as if a few satellites would have any significance amidst heavenly bodies that are millions of light-years away from us! In comparison, the achievements of man are like the production of one grain of sand at the beach of an ocean. Isaiah’s words are more appropriate in this context: “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.”¹³¹ And the apostle Paul declares: “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.”

However, just as much as God’s majesty is revealed in the infinite greatness of space, so He manifests Himself also in the infinite smallness of creation. God’s power is founded upon atoms and molecules, upon the testimony of children and infants. J. B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. Our God is not only too small for our understanding, He is also too great. A book should be written, entitled *Your God Is Too Great*. Somehow, we think that God is too big to occupy Himself with small things. The devil is not defeated by God’s overwhelming power, but by His weakness, by the small things of this life. The defeat of the enemy is caused by God’s glory in the microcosms. The foe and the avenger are silenced by the praise from the lips of children and infants. The victory over Satan began when God became a baby.

Jesus quotes vs. 2 in his confrontation with the priests and scribes, thus silencing His opponents. He says: “Have you never read, ‘From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise’?”¹³² The Hebrew word translated “praise” is *oz*, which, according to Strong’s definition means: “strength in various applications (force, security, majesty, praise).” The Greek word used in the New Testament is *ainos*, which literally means “a story.” Little children tell God’s story. Children play an important role in the Kingdom of Heaven and in Jesus’ ministry.¹³³ It is not only by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ that the devil is silenced, but by the birth of every baby in this world. The creation of man is God’s masterpiece.

Yet, the perception of man is limited to the average: our ear only hears tones that are within a certain scale; our eye can only see that which it not too big or too small. Space and infants do not mark the boundaries of God’s strength, but they are sufficient in David’s argumentation. He does not want to indicate the limits of God’s omnipotence, but he wants to determine the place of man in God’s creation. God demonstrates His greatness both in the solar systems of the universe and in the crib of a baby.

I witnessed the birth of my four children and the experience was too great for me to comprehend. My emotions expressed effectively what my mind could not; I broke down and sobbed. The whole process of the making of a person, from the moment of loving conception, via the miracle of the first draught of breath to the maturing into adulthood, is a demonstration of majesty which the devil hates, and in the face of which he is made powerless.

God intended to use man to crush Satan, as Paul says: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”¹³⁴ We often, mistakenly, think that we need spiritual maturity to conquer the enemy.

¹³⁰ Charles Spurgeon - The Treasury of David

¹³¹ Isa. 40:26

¹³² Matt. 21:16

¹³³ See Matt. 11:25; 18:2-5; 19:13,14; Mark 10:15.

¹³⁴ Rom. 16:20

Psalm Eight proves to us that it is the work of a child! The devil is not defeated by what we do, but by what we are. The birth of the babe of Bethlehem was a fatal blow to Satan, because Jesus was more man than anyone else. The devil hates children with a reason.

In the first two verses of this psalm David puts everything he has to say in a nutshell: God is infinite, both in the greatest and in the smallest things. In the verses 3-9 he says the same thing by giving a practical and prophetic application to the theme.

The nocturne of vs. 3 and 4 is a masterpiece of poetry. David stands outside and gazes into the cloudless night sky. It is amazing that we see the relationship between the heavenly bodies in the universe in which we live, the best when it is dark. The sun, which is for us the source of light and life, draws our gaze downward and blocks the perspective. Evening is a wonderful time of the day for man.

For Adam and Eve the evening was specifically a time of fellowship with God. For Abraham it was the time God imputed righteousness to him because of his faith. For David it became the revelation of the divine paradox of his own smallness and greatness.

In the first place, David acknowledges that the universe is the work of God's fingers, as if the creation was something the Almighty played with his fingers on a stringed instrument. God's fingers are usually mentioned in connection with creation; God's arm symbolizes redemption, and God uses His hand to protect man. God says to Israel: "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment."¹³⁵ Moses says in his farewell message: "Surely it is you who love the people; all the holy ones are in your hand."¹³⁶ And David sings in one of the psalms: "Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes."¹³⁷

The Stone Tablets were written by the finger of God.¹³⁸ Jesus says that He drives out demons by the finger of God.¹³⁹ All this fits into the framework of creation, which does not merely consist of the formation of matter, but also has a moral connotation. We find the unity between these two facets described in Psalm 19, where David says in the same breath: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands," and "the law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple."¹⁴⁰

As we said, David must have had a realistic concept of the infinity of the universe, otherwise, he could hardly have seen himself as a puny little creature. Obviously, he gives no indication of being a "primitive" man. Primitive people usually see themselves as "Lords of the Earth."¹⁴¹ There is in this psalm no question of a distortion of God's plan for man, such as many primitive tribes hold. David sees man at the highest rank in God's order of creation, but he is astonished to make this discovery. He certainly does not think that man occupies that place matter-of-factly. His humble questions: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" indicate a sense of reality that forms the basis of David's own greatness. Against the background of this infinite universe, David is utterly amazed by the fact that God even notices him.

Vs. 5, "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings ..." poses seriously hermeneutical problems. In the book *Walvoord: A Tribute*, there is a chapter by Donald R. Glenn entitled: *Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology*. The problem is in the words "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings." The Hebrew reads: *wat^achacreechuw m^aaT mee⁻lohiym*, which according to *The Adam Clarke's Commentary*, means: "Thou hast lessened him for a little time from God." *Wat^achacreechuw* comes from the Hebrew word *chacer*, which is translated as "to lack." *Mee⁻lohiym* is derived from *elohim*, which has the multiple meaning of "angels," "God" or "gods." In the epistle to the Hebrews, this phrase is translated as: "Thou hast made him for a little while lower than the angels." (NAS). The quote in Hebrews is based on the Septuagint and on the Jewish Targums, and the Syriac Peshitta and the Vulgate agree with this. The problem lies in the ambiguity of the Hebrew; *Mee⁻lohiym* can mean either "below God" or "below the gods," since *elohim* is a plural form. The term *b^qneey haa⁻Elohiym* is used in the book Job for "angels."¹⁴² Also the word *wat^achacreechuw* has the double

¹³⁵ Ex. 6:6

¹³⁶ Deut. 33:3

¹³⁷ Ps. 17:7

¹³⁸ Ex.31:18

¹³⁹ Luke 11:20

¹⁴⁰ Ps. 19:1,7

¹⁴¹ Title of a book about Papuan Tribes in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, by Don Richardson.

¹⁴² Job 1:6

meaning of “less” as in degree or in time. Apparently, we are dealing here with another example of divine ambiguity. The Holy Spirit uses the same word to express two different nuances. In David’s vocabulary *Mee-^olohiym* is used to give expression to his amazement that God can take something as low as man and place him in such a high position. In the epistle to the Hebrews, the Holy Spirit uses the same words to convey the opposite idea. Another example of the use of words or phrases with a double meaning is in Caiphas’ speech, where he says: “You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” John comments on this by saying: “He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.”¹⁴³

The most important difference between Psalm 8 and Heb. 2 is the fact that David speaks from the viewpoint of a man who is conceived and born in sin, for whom it is impossible to discover man’s original place in God’s order of creation. For him it is a most amazing discovery that man would be almost on the same level as the angels. The author of the Hebrew epistle, however, speaks as a redeemed person, to whom the Holy Spirit indicated that God created man originally as a being superior to angels, and that his position as being below the angels is temporary as a result of man’s fall into sin. So Psalm 8 and Heb. 2 use the same words to say two opposite things. For David, man’s position is an honor; for the writer to the Hebrews it is a humiliation. The difference is in their insight into salvation. The paradox for David is in what the Holy Spirit shows him about himself as a being who is created in God’s image and in what David sees in himself as a human being who is fallen in sin. This tension provides the background for his amazement and his worship. So the starting point in Psalm 8 is the low position of man and it accentuates the problem of sin. Hebrews’ starting point is the high position of man and it puts the stress on the solution of the sin problem: “Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death.”¹⁴⁴

Also the “crowned with glory and honor” do not have the same meaning in both Scripture portions. For David it is the original glory of God’s image in man, as Adam and Eve possessed on the day of their creation. In the epistle to the Hebrews it is Christ’s victory over sin and death and His ascension to the throne. For David it is man’s authority over the creatures of this world; for Jesus it is victory over Satan and his hordes.

The mandate God had given to Adam was the image of the great task Jesus would take upon Himself and the one He accomplished in His death on Golgotha and later will demonstrate completely at Armageddon.

God’s mandate to Adam and Eve had been to be fruitful and rule over the earth. We read: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground-- everything that has the breath of life in it-- I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.”¹⁴⁵ What this ruling over the earth would imply is not worked out in Gen. 1. In the light of the total biblical message, we believe that the mandate also included subjection of, and ruling over Satan and his demons. But, in choosing the side of the enemy, Adam never came to the point where he asserted authority over demonic powers. When he fell into sin, he also immediately lost his rule of the animal world. As we mentioned earlier, it was never God’s intention that man would rule over man. Each man was to be directly responsible to God.

David’s visionary statement: “You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet,” is not part of visible reality at present. The writer to the Hebrews observes correctly: “Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.”¹⁴⁶ So David prophesies about the victory of Jesus Christ in particular and of the victory of redeemed man in general. This is the moment of revelation of the sons of God for which the whole of creation waits with bated breath. The apostle Paul says: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.”¹⁴⁷

The psalm ends with the same words as in the opening stanza, but the words have gained in depth in the meantime. They have acquired and added dimension, and that dimension is Christ. In the first verse

¹⁴³ John 11:50-52

¹⁴⁴ Heb. 2:9 (NKJ)

¹⁴⁵ Gen. 1:28-30

¹⁴⁶ Heb. 2:8

¹⁴⁷ Rom. 8:19

God is majestic in all of creation because He is the Creator. But in the last verse God's majesty is revealed through the rule of man over this creation. David does not speak in so many words about the Incarnation, but the mystery is hidden under the words. He may not have understood that himself, (how could he?), but the quotation from this psalm by the writer of the Hebrew Epistle confirms this. Man becomes ruler of God's creation because of the love of Jesus Christ, who washed him of his sins in His blood and made him king and priest for His God and Father.¹⁴⁸ When we realize this, what else can we say but: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

¹⁴⁸ See Rev. 1:5,6

PSALM NINE

For the director of music. To the tune of "The Death of the Son."

A psalm of David.

- 1 I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders.**
- 2 I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.**
- 3 My enemies turn back; they stumble and perish before you.**
- 4 For you have upheld my right and my cause; you have sat on your throne, judging righteously.**
- 5 You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name for ever and ever.**
- 6 Endless ruin has overtaken the enemy, you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them has perished.**
- 7 The LORD reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment.**
- 8 He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice.**
- 9 The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.**
- 10 Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.**
- 11 Sing praises to the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done.**
- 12 For he who avenges blood remembers; he does not ignore the cry of the afflicted.**
- 13 O LORD, see how my enemies persecute me! Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death,**
- 14 that I may declare your praises in the gates of the Daughter of Zion and there rejoice in your salvation.**
- 15 The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug; their feet are caught in the net they have hidden.**
- 16 The LORD is known by his justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands. Higgsion. Selah**
- 17 The wicked return to the grave, all the nations that forget God.**
- 18 But the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish.**
- 19 Arise, O LORD, let not man triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence.**
- 20 Strike them with terror, O LORD; let the nations know they are but men. Selah**

In the Hebrew Bible the ninth and the tenth psalm are one poem, and each line begins with one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in its right sequence. Both the Septuagint and the Vulgate treat the two as one psalm.

The subtitle in the NIV reads: "For the director of music. To the tune of 'The Death of the son.' A psalm of David."

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comes to the conclusion that there have been so many interpretations as to the meaning of this subscript that nothing can be deducted from it with final certainty. We copy: "The inscription to this Psalm in the HEBREW text is, To the chief Musician upon *Muth-labben*, A Psalm of David. The CHALDEE has, 'A Song of David, to be sung concerning the Death of the Strong Man, (or champion, *degabra*, who went out between the Camps;' that is, Goliath, on account of whose defeat this Psalm has been supposed by many to have been composed. The date in the margin is several years posterior to the death of Goliath.

The VULGATE: 'A Psalm of David, for the end, concerning the secrets of the Son.'

The SYRIAC: 'A Psalm of David concerning Christ's receiving the throne and the kingdom, and defeating his enemies.'

The ARABIC: 'Concerning the mysteries of the Son, as to the glory of Christ, his resurrection, and kingdom, and the destruction of all the disobedient.'

Houbigant causes the Hebrew title to agree with the Vulgate, Septuagint, and AETHIOPIC, by uniting *'al-muwth*, 'concerning the death,' into the word *'alamowth*, which signifies secrets or hidden things. 'To the chief musician, or conqueror; secrets concerning the Son: A Psalm of David.'

About a hundred MSS. and printed editions unite the words as above. Some translate *'alamowth* 'concerning the youth or infancy; the infancy of the Son.' Several of the fathers have on this ground interpreted it, 'concerning the incarnation of our Lord.' Indeed, the title and the Psalm have been so variously understood, that it would be as painful as it would be useless to follow the different commentators, both ancient and modern, through all their conjectures."

The phrase “To the tune of ‘The Death of the Son,’” may, of course, have been an existing melody to which David set his poem and we should not necessarily conclude that it was written at the occasion of the death of one of David’s own sons. If, as Adam Clarke indicates, the psalm predated the death of Goliath, (but I do not see how this could be done with certainty), David would not even have been married when he wrote it. There is also nothing in the psalm itself that suggest a personal loss. It is difficult to determine what the subject of the psalm is. The title would make one think that it might be a dirge, as in Psalm 7, there is, however, some similarity between both poems, (both speak about a court case in which David is justified), but the differences are greater than the similarities. There are even apparent contradictory points in this psalm, where David gives his personal testimony as if it pertains to an international conflict.

The psalm opens with a praise, or rather with a determination to praise God. David uses the future tense. It sounds as if David has decided that praise is important in facing an oncoming enemy. “My enemies turn back; they stumble and perish before you”; in vs. 3 seems to be the result of the praise given in the previous verses, not the reason for the praise. The lesson we find here is that praise is not always a matter of spontaneous and relaxed fellowship with God. There are moments when one has to force himself to utter words of praise to God because circumstances push us into the opposite direction. Paul and Silas are the classic examples of this in their imprisonment in Philippi. “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”¹⁴⁹ The two Dutch ladies, Corrie and Betsie ten Boom, did the same while in a German concentration camp.¹⁵⁰ This attitude presupposes a recognition of the enemy. Praise can be a form of resistance, when we realize that Satan has overstepped his boundaries and we decide to oppose him.

If we look at David’s use of praise in this light, the psalm acquires new significance. David is determined to praise YHWH with his whole heart. This is an act of the will. We can set ourselves to praise and mobilize our will, our mind and our emotions to this end. Just as loving can be an act of the will, (“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”¹⁵¹ is a command!), so can praise be. If we wait till we are in the mood for praise, we will have very little of it. Man should have enough control over himself not to become the prey of his own moods. If we are governed by our emotions alone, we have lost the initiative in our life, and that can become the beginning of depression. We deceive ourselves if we think that we cannot govern our emotions. We will come to the conclusion that praise is reasonable if we see through the deception of the enemy. The reality belongs to Christ, and praise confirms our relationship to this reality.

The practice of this psychological attitude toward our circumstances consists in the rehearsal of God’s wonders. We will never be able to do this in an exhaustive fashion, but to recite what God has done in our own life can be a source of inspiration and will contribute greatly to bring praise spontaneously and willingly.

We should be aware, however, that there are dangers in being egocentric about this. One’s personal experiences can be highly subjective. It is safe to keep on coming back to the objective facts of salvation and also to observe God’s miracles in the lives of others.

Once David has placed himself on the foundation of praise, he starts the crescendo. Joy is a byproduct of our sense of reality, and rejoicing will follow in its footsteps. Rejoicing brings us a step further than joy. The Hebrew for rejoice is *alats*, which literally means “to jump for joy.” The person who rejoices surrenders himself to his joy. There is nothing wrong with this kind of surrender as long as we do it knowingly and we are certain that we are joyful for the right reasons.

When David says: “I will sing praise to your name, O Most High,” he is making the poetry of the hymnal which we know now as the Book of Psalms . He composed a poem to be sung with the accompaniment of the flute or the harp, a poem which addressed God. Poetry and music find their “raison d’être” in praise and worship. The apostle Paul advises us to “sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”¹⁵² It is quite legitimate to use existing forms to praise God. The suggestion that we should always be original in our expression of gratitude comes from the Evil One, who is never original himself, least of all in this domain.

¹⁴⁹ Acts 16:25

¹⁵⁰ See the book *The Hiding Place*

¹⁵¹ Deut. 6:5

¹⁵² Col. 3:16

The subject of David's praise is the Name of God, which is His character. Praise will flow naturally when we concentrate on who God is and on the infinity and eternity of His attributes. It is the essence of His holiness and the radiance of His glory which will awaken the ecstasy in the heart of each man who seeks Him. How it is possible that a finite creature, such as man is, has the ability to grasp so much of the eternal and holy God that he comes to praise and exultation is a mystery that is hard to fathom.

We have to remember, again in the context of this psalm, that David's enemies are not, in the first place, human beings but demons. The word that is translated "to perish" is the Hebrew word *'abad*, which has the connotation of "to wander away" or "to lose oneself." Men who were out to get David's life would not have had enough spiritual insight to draw back like that in the presence of God. There is, however, no doubt about it that the demons involved human agents in their attacks upon David's life. The Bible also teaches clearly that Satan tries to accuse us before God. The prophet Zechariah says: "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him."¹⁵³ And in the book of Revelation John hears an angel say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down."¹⁵⁴

David sees himself in the dock, but he also knows that God is his lawyer and defender. He cannot have known the truth about the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus calls the *Paraclete*: that is, the advocate or legal advisor. But God must have revealed to him the principle of justification, because David hears from God's own mouth that he was pronounced "not guilty." This is, no doubt, one of the events that is classified as "all your wonders" in vs. 1, which brings him to praise God.

Then David projects this personal experience on the level of the international. That seems the logical thing to do for one who is a political figure, the king of Israel. What Satan does to the individual, he also does to the nations. Israel is not mentioned by name, but vs. 5 indicates that there had been international pressure put upon the nation of Israel. We read: "You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name for ever and ever." In this way, David identifies himself with the nation of which he is a part. He knew that God had chosen him, not only as an individual, but collectively as part of the people. This vision is apparent in the story in which he kills Goliath. He says there: "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"¹⁵⁵

It is impossible for us, who live in a secular society, to see things in this perspective. But David realizes that, just as the enemy, who accused him personally before God and who stumbled and had to fall back, so do the nations who attack Israel. They run into the wall of God's justification of Israel. David's prophecy will be fulfilled in the end time, as we read in Revelation about the battle of Armageddon.¹⁵⁶

We are not told what the political circumstances were which made David write about the defeat of Israel's foes. It could be one of the military action to cleanse the land of some pockets of Canaanites, or one of many campaigns against the Philistines. For us, the Holy Spirit draws here a line from the experience David had personally and Israel had as a whole, to the last battle this planet will know and then back again to the life of each individual believer in our day. Because the comfort this psalm gives to us, today, is that world history proves, over and over again, that God sits on the throne of the universe. We may say with the same confidence that father Abraham had: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"¹⁵⁷ What God does to the nations of this world should be a comfort and assurance to every persecuted individual. In the face of all the injustice that rules the world, we may appeal to the Supreme Court. True, one needs to see the world situation in the right perspective and discern the great lines of world history in order to understand this. Often we are too close to contemporary conditions and we come to the wrong conclusion believing that God does not judge the world righteously. We can only come to the right conclusion if we have our eyes upon the future and judge the past and the present in that light. Evil is a temporary phenomenon, but God's righteousness is eternal. Here David evokes the image that later will be painted in fuller detail by the apostle John in Revelation, where he says: "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them."¹⁵⁸ That is earth and sky in its fallen

¹⁵³ Zech. 3:1

¹⁵⁴ Rev. 12:10

¹⁵⁵ I Sam. 17:26

¹⁵⁶ See Rev. 16:13-16

¹⁵⁷ Gen. 18:25

¹⁵⁸ Rev. 20:11

condition. For the believers Jesus says: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”¹⁵⁹

The picture of God sitting on the throne demonstrates at the same time the contract between sin and righteousness, as the temporal character of evil and the eternal quality of justice. This does not always lessen the need of the present, but it changes our perspective. It gives us the assurance that we are perfectly safe in times of need. God is our refuge and our stronghold. In order to have this confidence, we have to know His Name. Listen to David’s confidence: “Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.” We have to know who God is and what it means that He is who He is. What A. W. Tozer calls *The Knowledge of the Holy*, is the basis of our confidence in God: this, with the historical fact that God has never forsaken those who seek Him. Often, though, the opposite seems to be the case. The Jews taunted Jesus when He was dying on the cross and insinuated that His faith in God had been in vain. “He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’ ” But His resurrection set the mocker straight. During World War II I knew an old lady, Miss Hofman, who shared an apartment with Miss Baars. During an air raid Miss Baars was afraid, so Miss Hofman prayed with her. But after prayer Miss Hofman was of the opinion that, since they had committed themselves to the Lord there was no longer any reason not to go back to bed and sleep through the night. Poor Miss Baars kept on sitting on her chair till the “all clear” signal was given.

When David says that God is enthroned in Zion he does not demonstrate chauvinistic patriotism, but he recognizes God’s revelation of Himself in this world. We read in the book of Second Samuel how the ark had been brought to Jerusalem.¹⁶⁰ God had said He was present above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony.¹⁶¹ For David, the bringing over of the ark to Jerusalem had been the greatest event in world history. It was Jeroboam’s greatest sin that he ignored the Lord’s revelation of Himself. The sin of Jeroboam was the cause of the annihilation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. David lived with the reality of God’s presence, and that is why it was natural for him to praise the Lord. We can praise God because He revealed Himself to us, not only in Zion, but in Jesus Christ. For us, the Lamb is standing on Mount Zion and we praise Him there.¹⁶²

The second part of vs. 11 clearly states why the Lord lives in Zion: so that the Israelites would be so full of Him, that they would begin to burn with missionary zeal and demonstrate to other nations what God had done for them. Chauvinism and isolationism are not present here. God’s presence at Zion makes the people a kingdom of priests. This verse also shows that the essence of the message we are to proclaim should be our personal testimony, the account of what God has done for us.

We live in a world of murderers, who are like their father the devil, who is the “murderer from the beginning.”¹⁶³ Mankind, as a whole, is subservient to him. That is why we find his victims all over, both among the Israelites as well as among other nations. That is why God reveals Himself as the avenger of blood. No murderer will be left unpunished by God. This is an important feature in the testimony about God who dwells in Zion. Justice is an important facet of the comfort of the Gospel.

The tone in the vs. 13 and 14 is quite different from the preceding part of the psalm. They almost seem to stand in contrast to the rest. Yet, the two parts fit together. In vs. 12 David speaks about the spiritual reality he sees; in vs. 13 and 14 he looks at the circumstances in which he finds himself: he is surrounded by hatred and threats to his life. We are not given any details concerning what is actually going on, but we see David stretch out his hands to God who can save him from this personal affliction. Victory over sin, sickness and suffering does not come to us through ignoring the facts, but by acknowledging them before the presence of God. When he says: “Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death,” he is, obviously, sick in bed and he sees himself dying. He asks God to pull him back into life, with the intent that his healing would be a testimony for others. This thought is also found in the opening verse of the psalm. David asks that God would confirm his victory over the evil one by granting him physical healing as a testimony.

The “Gates of the Daughter of Zion” is the place of God’s revelation of Himself. It is a picture of the cross of Calvary. We have dulled the edge of the term “at the foot of the cross” by using it too often, but

¹⁵⁹ Matt. 5:6

¹⁶⁰ II Sam. 6:1-19

¹⁶¹ Ex. 25:22

¹⁶² See Rev. 14:1

¹⁶³ John 8:44

it does remain the best place for man to take his stand to praise God. Where else was love demonstrated in all its abundance and perfection? The cross is the Gate of Zion, the Gate of Heaven.

In verses 15-20 David's thoughts switch back and forth between the nations and the wicked, between the masses and the individual. In Psalm 7:15 he uses the same image that is used in vs. 15 here. There it was probably applied to Saul, here to the nations. The wicked endeavors to catch and kill his neighbor. Murder is, probably, the most wicked thing man can do to another. No murderer will go unpunished. This sin, more than any other, works like a boomerang. A man who destroys the image of God in his fellow man, destroys, first of all, himself. God's justice is revealed in the fact that man is measured with his own yardstick. Therefore says Jesus: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."¹⁶⁴

Death plays an important part in David's thoughts in these last verses. One gets the impression that death is the end; as if there is no life after death. The stress falls upon man's mortality. We are reminded that the essence of death is separation. It is not only the end of man's life on earth, but the separation of man's body and soul from his human spirit and from God.

Man's penchant to forget of God reveals itself in the neglect of the needy and in the oppression of the afflicted. On the other hand, the love we have for God is demonstrated in love to our neighbor. Man keeps the right perspective only if he sees himself as mortal. God gives us this life on loan, and we will have to give it back to Him at the end. If we keep this in mind we will lead a balanced life.

¹⁶⁴ Matt. 7:12

PSALM TEN

- 1** *Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*
- 2** *In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises.*
- 3** *He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD.*
- 4** *In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.*
- 5** *His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at all his enemies.*
- 6** *He says to himself, "Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble."*
- 7** *His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue.*
- 8** *He lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent, watching in secret for his victims.*
- 9** *He lies in wait like a lion in cover; he lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.*
- 10** *His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength.*
- 11** *He says to himself, "God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees."*
- 12** *Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless.*
- 13** *Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, "He won't call me to account"?*
- 14** *But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.*
- 15** *Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.*
- 16** *The LORD is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land.*
- 17** *You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,*
- 18** *defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.*

A footnote in the NIV says: "Psalms 9 and 10 may have been originally a single acrostic poem, the stanzas of which begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In the Septuagint they constitute one psalm." The content of Psalm 10 is clearly a continuation of the theme of the latter part of the ninth. David asks a question which is as old as the existence of evil in the world: "Why does God not do anything against it? Why does He hide Himself before the needy? Is it true that God is far away?" The animistic tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, remember that man used to live in fellowship with God, but that this fellowship was broken and God withdrew from this earth. Now man sees himself surrounded by demons.

The impression we may sometimes have—as if God is far away—is, of course, an optical illusion. Two factors play a role in this: the feeling of estrangement which is the result of sin, and the limitation of our vision. Sin is spiritual death, and without a spirit that is alive man cannot have fellowship with God. It is man who has hidden and removed himself from the presence of God, not the other way around. In Christ Jesus God is with us: Immanuel. Also, our vision is limited to a few years, which is less than a fraction of eternity. If God waits four hundred years before He brings judgment upon His people, we think that He does not do anything. In our opinion, help that is not given immediately is no help at all. Man is ephemeral, a dayfly. Both good and evil men suffer from this illusion.

Vs. 13 captures the essence of the philosophy of evil men: "He won't call me to account." The illusion that man will not be called upon to give account, makes him act irresponsibly and diminishes his human dignity. Dr. Mengele, the war criminal, the murderer of Auschwitz, clung to this till the end of his life: "No judgment!" The fact that man has to keep on repeating these words to himself proves that he knows better in his heart. Man does not say: "There is no God" out of an inner conviction; it is a conclusion to which he has brought himself purposely; it is a mantra he uses to hypnotize himself. An atheist is not a realist. The man who knows God feels frustrated when he observes this, because of the human tendency to look at men, rather than at God. If we would evaluate our neighbor in the light of God, we would pity him and have compassion. God loves even proud men. The phrase: "In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak," could also be rendered as "the arrogance of the wicked inflames the weak." The word "hunt down," or "hotly pursue" as the NAS translates it, comes from the Hebrew *dalaq*, which means "burning, chase, inflame, kindle, persecute (-or), pursue hotly." None of the English translations give the interpretation of the righteous being indignant, but the original text would justify this.

The person who does not know God has also broken with his fellowmen. Without God, man does not only rule over his fellowmen, but he tries to exploit him. Without God, man will, ultimately, lose his humanity. This thought seems to be the theme of verses 2-11. The context seems to justify the English rendering, more than the Dutch. We do find the thought of indignation at other places in the Book of Psalms, however: "Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you."¹⁶⁵ And: "He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he has made. The trouble he causes recoils on himself; his violence comes down on his own head."¹⁶⁶

The freedom God gives to the wicked is, in itself, a kind of judgment. The wicked will run against the wall and thus will declare judgment on himself. On the day of judgment everyone will condemn himself.

The boasting and the blessing in vs. 3 can be either hypocritical or atheistic. In both cases the wicked borrows the language of religion. The word order in the phrase "he blesses the greedy" can be reversed, so that it reads: "the greedy blesses." The Hebrew from "greedy" is *Uwbotseea*, which comes from *batsa*, meaning, according to *Strong's Definitions*: "to break off, i.e. (usually) plunder; figuratively, to finish." The idea is of a loan shark, who goes around blessing people. There are various ways of plundering people. Dishonest gain or profit that is too high are contrary to the Christian way of life. The Christian way, in ethics and business alike, is to maintain a sober life style, and to make up a budget, and if the Lord gives us profit over and above this, to deposit this on the account of the Kingdom of Heaven. Our financial dealings, more than anything else, demonstrate whether we believe in God or not.

Two characteristics David mentions about the wicked is their arrogance and the feeling of false security. The wicked makes himself believe that he will not have to give account of his life and he experiences this as liberating. Our bodies often express our emotions. An example of this is found in vs. 4 where the NIV says: "The wicked in his pride does not seek him [God]," the KJV renders this: "The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God." The Hebrew, literally, says: "The wicked, through the height of his nose ..." God has given man the ability to express his inmost emotions in a physical way. This gift can be used in a good and wholesome way as well as in a depraved fashion. The wicked bases his security upon a very small foundation. He bases his conclusion upon the experience of a few years in which he was not shaken. This shortsightedness is also the ground for his supposition that there is no God and there will be no judgment. We always express our inner convictions accurately and consistently in the way we act. When the wicked man robs his neighbor he is expressing his philosophy of life. Hitler acted on the basis of his conviction that the conqueror was always right. In the same way, one's love for his neighbor demonstrates his love for God. Verses 8-10 paint a picture of a man whose moral conscience has become like that of an animal.

In vs. 12 we read again the expression: "Arise, LORD!" which is found in other psalms also.¹⁶⁷ David believes that God will intervene. These anthropomorphist expressions about God tell us more about David than about the Almighty. Thoughts that God would be far away, or that He would hide Himself, or that He might forget are figments of David's mind. By using them, David calls himself back to reality. We are never fully convinced that things are not what they seem to be. Our spiritual insight, which tells us that the eternal God must always be omnipresent, and that nothing can be hidden from His omniscience, is almost always defeated by the noisy propaganda of the devil, who bombards us with the "hard facts of life." The time factor plays an important role in this misconception. Every evil that is not punished immediately, seems to go unpunished. We cannot understand that God has no reason for hurry. Our limited understanding is the reason for our asking "why?"

David's sense of reality break through in vs. 14, where he sees that God starts to act. The interesting, and for us, incomprehensible feature in this is that our prayers and the dawning of our spiritual understanding are not redundant and fruitless, because it is in response to our prayer that God arises. How this all fits together, I do not know. It appears that the helpless victim and the fatherless have a deeper insight into God's character than anybody else. It seems ironic, but they find themselves in a privileged position. This is perhaps what the apostle Paul means when he says: "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Ps. 5:10

¹⁶⁶ Ps. 7:15,16

¹⁶⁷ See Ps. 3:7; 7:6

¹⁶⁸ II Cor. 12:10

The last verses of this psalm deal with the expectation of a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness, which Peter mentions.¹⁶⁹ God sits upon the throne of the universe; heaven and earth which were soiled by sin have fled before Him, and God has justified and vindicated the victim of sin. David projects this vision of the future upon the present and thus he strengthens the hearts of men. In New Testament terms this is: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ II Pet. 3:13

¹⁷⁰ Col. 1:27

PSALM ELEVEN

For the director of music. Of David.

- 1** *In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain.*
2 *For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.*
3 *When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"*
4 *The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them.*
5 *The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.*
6 *On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot.*
7 *For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.*

Adam Clarke places this psalm against the background of Saul's persecution of David and the murder of the priests of Nob. There is no direct mention of the occasion for which the psalm was composed, but the text allows for such a historical situation.

The psalm is dedicated to the chief musician. The Hebrew word is *nâtsach*, which is derived from a word that means to glitter from afar. *Strong* defines it as "superintendent of Temple services and its music."

This psalm is a dialog between David and a friend who advises him to flee. *George Knight* suggests in his book *Commentary on the Psalms* that the advice of the friends ends with the words: "what can the righteous do?" This interpretation seems plausible.

The question remains: "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" The advice is "flee!" David's answer is: "No!" This does not mean that David never fled in his life. He spent several years as a fugitive, hiding from Saul, and he fled when Absalom was out to kill him. The question, therefore, is not whether the just should flee before the wicked, but what should a righteous man do when the foundations are destroyed? Should he give up? Personal safety ought to be of secondary consideration. In case fleeing is one of the options, the just should ask the Lord for clear guidance. When Vietnam fell to the communists several church leaders chose to stay in the country. Many Jews, however, decided to flee Germany during the Nazi regime, and rightfully so. When the foundations are destroyed the righteous should flee toward the Lord, and from that hiding place decide what God wants him to do and where to go. But the righteous should never surrender.

David had taken refuge in the Lord; as an Old Testament believer he had taken up his position, which was the equivalent of our being "in Christ." David and the New Testament believer are both positioned in God's victory. The question is: "When can we say that the foundations are destroyed?" In a sense this happened when man fell into sin, when Adam decided that the Word of God was no longer the guideline of his life. In the context of this psalm it must mean that those who were in power, at that time, did not base their authority upon the Word of God. A man like Saul did not consider himself to be a ruler by the grace of God. Under his rule, the relationship between his subjects was not governed by the moral law, as it is expressed in the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and your mother, ... You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor, You shall not covet ..." ¹⁷¹ The fact, however, that individuals or communities no longer base their lives upon "the foundations" does not mean that those foundations are no longer in existence. When a man breaks the law, it does not mean that the law itself breaks; what is broken is obedience to the law.

In verses 7-11 David answers his friend's advice. He had already rejected the suggestion to flee in his repetition of the words: "Flee like a bird to your mountain," and his answer was: "In the LORD I take refuge." In this second part of the psalm David reflects on who the Lord is in whom he takes refuge. This kind of meditation is the best exercise a man can do for his peace mind and the stability of his life. Once we have fled life's pressures and taken our refuge in the Lord, it is good to quiet ourselves and concentrate on where we are. Those who are under the Lord's protection find themselves in His holy temple, which is the safest place in the universe. Being in God's presence and under His cover means being in Christ in the heavenlies. This discovery may make us dizzy. We are covered by Him who sits on the throne. The writer

¹⁷¹ Ex. 20:12-17

to the Hebrews puts it this way: “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”¹⁷² The Hebrew word translated “temple” is *heykal*, which literally means a large public building, such as a palace or temple, according to *Strong’s*. So it would be appropriate to translate: “The Lord is in His holy palace.” This is where God sits on the throne. The throne of God is the emblem of omnipotence. Since there is no greater power than omnipotence, there is also no greater security than the protection God gives.

It may be hard for us to imagine how someone can be on earth with a physical body and be in heaven in the spirit, but this is the perspective David opens here for us. David’s vision comes from his ability to draw a line from his position on earth to the throne of God, by which he makes the light of eternity fall upon a moment in time and space. Man cannot go his way upon earth unnoticed. If he thinks that God does not see him or does not know him, he lives in an imaginary world. In drawing a line to the throne, David shows himself to be a realist, who sees men for what they are. This connection between God being on the throne and the transparency of the acts of men is an important thought in this verse. Now, what relationship is there between David’s reluctance to flee from the wicked and God’s seeing through the motives of men? It is, obviously, that David can look at men as God sees them. He sees both the righteous and the wicked from a heavenly perspective.

Before God, not only are all man’s acts transparent, but also man’s motives. God knows not only what we do but also why we do it. If we can see what motivates people to act the way they do, we are delivered from the fear of men, even the fear of those who love violence. This is not a question of, what the French proverb calls: “To understand all means to pardon all,”¹⁷³ for God does not forgive the wicked who love violence. This does not seem to agree with the thought that God hates sin but loves the sinner. David says: “the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.” God harbors a deep hatred for sadists and for people who enjoy wickedness. God’s love only becomes active at the conversion and repentance of a person. God hates the devil and the man who has sold himself to the enemy. If we realize that this enemy is vanquished, we will share in God’s vision, and this sharing will mean victory over fear for ourselves.

David can see God’s judgment descending upon the wicked man, as it descended upon Sodom and Gomorra in the days of Lot, and he keeps his distance from the ones who will be hit by this judgment. Lot had lost this perspective and, consequently, he barely escaped this judgment himself. The fact that David sees fire and brimstone already descending upon the wicked proves that he has insight in God’s character and that he is also able to see through the appearance of sin with all its threatening behavior.

Vs. 7 stands out as a pearl in this psalm. “For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.” God’s character is righteousness. Acting righteously is the natural result of His being. God’s righteousness demonstrates itself in His acts. Righteousness is an absolute which is a part of God’s attributes. When David says: “He loves justice,” he does not mean to imply that God loves Himself, but that He loves this absolute value in the person who has fellowship with Him. The words “upright men will see his face” prove those wrong who say that there was no hope of life after death in the Old Testament.

Seeing God’s face is the fulfillment of our humanity. It is the final goal and the beginning of real life for us. John says in Revelation: “His servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”¹⁷⁴

The rendering of the KJV: “his countenance doth behold the upright,” seems to turn the meaning of the words around and is, probably, less correct.

Seeing God’s face is the end of the long growing process that started with hiding with God. Moses’ experience of seeing God’s glory began with his hiding in the cleft of the rock.¹⁷⁵ He had one of the greatest experiences any mortal being ever had. We observe God’s glory in the face of Christ. As the apostle Paul puts it: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” When we see Jesus, we see the Father. This will be the case in the eternal heavenly glory, as it was when Christ was on earth. The ability to see God is the result of an inner transformation which starts in us when we begin to flee to God and hide in Him. It is as we are being “transformed into the same image from glory to glory,”¹⁷⁶ that our vision on God’s glory is sharpened.

¹⁷² Heb. 13:6

¹⁷³ Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner!

¹⁷⁴ Rev. 22:3,4

¹⁷⁵ See Ex. 33:18-34

¹⁷⁶ II Cor. 3:18 (ASV)

PSALM TWELVE

For the director of music. According to *shemminith*.¹⁷⁷ A psalm of David.

- 1 Help, LORD, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men.**
2 Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception.
3 May the LORD cut off all flattering lips and every boastful tongue
4 that says, "We will triumph with our tongues; we own our lips-- who is our master?"
5 "Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise," says the LORD. "I will protect them from those who malign them."
6 And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.
7 O LORD, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever.
8 The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men.

George Knight in his *Commentary on The Psalms* says the following about this twelfth psalm: "The basic mark of human disloyalty to the covenant is not so much the way in which people respond to God as how they behave to their neighbor." The truth could not have been formulated more correctly! Superficially, it sounds as if it does not matter what our relationship with God is like, as long as we treat our neighbor decently. But unless we love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength, we cannot possibly love our neighbor as ourselves. It is easy to deceive ourselves in our relationship with God. John says: " If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."¹⁷⁸

So much in way of introduction to this psalm in which David commences with the complaint: "The godly are no more." The Hebrew word for "godly" is *hasid*, which means a member of the covenant people. Godly people are always rare; the crowd always follows evil. This becomes obvious in the deterioration of human relations. God lives where there is love among brethren.

By uttering this complaint, David places himself with the godly. His complaint is also an indication of his feeling of loneliness. Being a social creature, man needs the company of his fellowmen. Fellowship with God is, of course, the most important and fundamental thing in life. But, even if a man has intimate fellowship with God, he needs intercourse with other people in order to live a healthy and well balanced life. God intends it to be so that we are reached by God's love through the lives of other people and that others learn to experience His love through us. David suffers from the fact that he is alone. The devil, also, knows that loneliness is not good for our mental health. Solitary confinement in a prison is one of the most severe and cruel punishments that can be meted out to a person.

We cannot say for sure how much David's feeling of loneliness is an illusion, or whether he was really the only godly one left. When Elijah thought that he was the only prophet left, God said to him: "I reserve seven thousand in Israel-- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."¹⁷⁹ But, even if David suffered from an illusion, it was no easier for him to bear than if it were reality. The most healthful atmosphere for a person to live in is a fellowship of people who love one another.

The faithful are the ones who are part of God's covenant with men. The term "covenant" may have become discredited because of its use in Calvinistic circles, where it is sometimes used to cover a multitude of sins, when the point is stressed that the covenant is hereditary. But this does not take away anything from the fact that God and man can enter into a covenant that is more binding than human marriage vows. William of Orange I declared that he had made a covenant with "the Potentate of potentates." It is good and healthy for a man to have this kind of relationship with God and to keep the terms of the contract.

The people in David's psalm, either never entered into this covenant relation with God, or they did not keep the terms of it. They were, probably, Israelites to whom the Word of God had come, but who did not consider themselves to be bound by it. This is evident from their relationship with their fellowmen.

David mentions the tongue, or the lips, as the main vehicle of their sin. "Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception." TLB says: "Everyone deceives and flatters and lies.

¹⁷⁷ Probably a musical term, according to a footnote in the NIV.

¹⁷⁸ I John 4:20

¹⁷⁹ I Kings 19:18

There is no sincerity left." Other translations use the expression "a double heart." The meaning of the image is that these people misuse the word. They do not say what they mean. Their words do not express what is in their hearts. In contrast with the Word of God, their word cannot be relied on. If man's words are no longer in tandem to the Word of God, they have become corrupted. One of the characteristics of the German Nazi regime was the corruption of the word, both in the promises that were given as in its use as a demagogic weapon. Chamberlain thought that Hitler was a man of his word. To this misconception we owe the beginning of the Second World War. In a sense, though, the spoken word translates exactly what lives in man's heart. An insincere heart utters falsehood, and an honest man speaks honest words. It is up to the hearer to discern the difference.

The words David uses to describe the godless are lying, flattering, and boastful. The KJV translates them with "vanity," "flattering," and "a double heart." Vanity is used here in the sense of emptiness. The words these people speak have no content. The flag does not cover the cargo of the ship. A double heart is a divided heart; it describes a man who has no allegiance. The Bible teaches that we should love the Lord with all our heart and soul and strength. God's command to Israel was: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."¹⁸⁰ Double heartedness is the condition of a man who has never made a choice and who wants to continue to live in this condition. Flattering describes the technique of deceit. These people are smooth talkers who have developed their ability to perfection to use words that have no meaning. There is a process of decomposition when man detaches himself from God who is the content and meaning of his life, and so the Word that has meaning detaches itself from man. When man's heart is empty, his words are empty also. Empty people are dangerous people because they are not connected to the source and they cause destruction. Since man is the bearer of God's image, his word ought to bear the character of the Word of God.

Not only has man's word become meaningless, it has become a weapon in his rebellion against God. They say: "We will triumph with our tongues; we own our lips-- who is our master?" This is a revolutionary slogan which man uses to make himself god. David recognizes the danger of the situation. That is why he asks for help and prays that God will rise up and mete out punishment.

If we turn the negatives of this psalm around, there appears before our eyes the image of the godly. The man who observes the terms of the covenant God made with him is reliable in his speaking. His strength is in God, not in his own words. One of the characteristics of the Antichrist will be his demagoguery. Describing the Antichrist, John says: "The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months."¹⁸¹ In sharp contrast to eloquent oratory one hears the reality of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy. Without the love of God there is no social justice. During World War II the Nazis organized a program of "Help in Winter"¹⁸² which cost the lives of more than six million Jews and of members of other races.

In this psalm God promises His protection to those who are maligned. The Bible gives us this assurance over and over again. David testifies: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread."¹⁸³ And Jesus says so beautifully in the Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." The writer to the Hebrews admonishes us: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I

¹⁸⁰ Deut. 6:5

¹⁸¹ Rev. 13:5

¹⁸² Winterhilfe

¹⁸³ Ps. 37:25

forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’¹⁸⁴

Worry about our sustenance is a sin that chokes the Word of God in our hearts. God knows that we need some form of security in order to be able to lead a balanced life. Both “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth,” which Jesus mentions in the parable of the sower,¹⁸⁵ can be traced back to a lack of security in life. Our only real security, however, is in God. God offers Himself to us in this psalm as such a security. It is a sad and discouraging thing when our health suffers from the fact that we worry about our finances.

Although financial security, or the lack of it, is one of the most visible elements, it is a symptom of a deeper emotional and spiritual insecurity. As the above verse quoted from Hebrews suggests, it is our relationship to God that gives us the sense of security in the depth of our heart which we all need so badly. The devil leaves man in a condition of uncertainty. Adam and Eve discovered immediately that the protection provided by the fig leaf was inadequate; therefore God offered Himself to them as their security. The guarantee for this security for us is the Word of God. The contrast between the unreliable word of man and the reliability of the Word of God is the main theme of this psalm. God’s Word is more to be relied on than any Social Security check. David compares it to refined silver that is flawless, without any foreign elements. I am not familiar with the process of refining silver, but I presume that the image of “silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times,” in vs. 6 is symbolically meant to express the perfect purity of the Word of God. God’s promises are free of ulterior motives. The KJV renders vs. 6 as: “The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.” George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, interprets the word “tried” as God’s promises being tried by man. Such trying, of course, has no effect upon the purity of the Word of God, but it does purify the heart of the person who does the trying.

The fact that God’s Word is compared here to silver and not to gold, as in other psalms,¹⁸⁶ must be due to the fact that silver was used as a means of payment and gold was not. We read that, when Abraham bought a burial plot for his wife, he paid for it in silver. “Abraham agreed to Ephron’s terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.”¹⁸⁷ Silver was weighed in payments before the time that money was coined. So God’s Word is compared here to cash, as a stable currency that is not subject to fluctuations of exchange. This reinforces the idea that man’s inner security is connected to his financial status. As we saw before, the writer of the Hebrew epistle draws this connecting line when he says: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’¹⁸⁸ God is our financial security in the deepest sense of the word. “The Bank of Heaven ain’t broke!” We have the unshakable assurance that those, who give priority to the Kingdom of Heaven and its righteousness, will not suffer any material need.

The protection the Word of God offers us, however, is not only against material want, but, most of all, against the evil man can do to us. Oppression comes always from the top down. The poor has no defense against the exploitation by the rich, except for the Word of God.

The KJV renders vs. 8 with: “The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted.” The NIV, with most other translations, uses the words “strut about.” The Dutch says “run around,” which suggests a restless activity. Strutting gives the picture of arrogance and pride, like a rooster or a peacock. The Berkley Version translates the last part of the sentence with: “as baseness is given a high rating”

The psalm opens with the statement that “the godly are no more,” and its conclusion is that the wrong people form the upper crust of society, and moral values have turned topsy-turvy. Oppression and deceit are given “high rating.” In his book *Peace Child*, Don Richardson tells the story of the Sawi tribe in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, who, when they heard the Gospel, gave high marks to Judas for betraying Jesus.

¹⁸⁴ Heb. 13:5,6

¹⁸⁵ Matt. 13:22

¹⁸⁶ See ps. 19:10

¹⁸⁷ Gen. 23:16

¹⁸⁸ Heb. 13:5,6

We are given a picture in this psalm, as in Psalm 11, of a society in which the foundations have been destroyed. There David asked the question what the righteous should do; here he says what God does under such circumstances. So, actually, both psalms treat the same subject.

PSALM THIRTEEN

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?**
2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?
3 Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
4 my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
5 But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
6 I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.

This psalm expresses the feelings of a man who is at the edge of depression, and it shows the way out. There is a ray of hope in the query: "How long, O LORD?" We could actually place an exclamation mark at the place of the question mark. Only people who live within the limitations of time and space, and who are aware of it, can emit such a distress call. The solution is found in the awareness of the tension between time and eternity. If the caller realizes why he calls, he finds the answer at the same time. The very fact a man who lives within the boundaries of time and space calls upon the eternal God puts everything in its right perspective.

One of the characteristics of time is the fact that it passes on. Conditions may last a longer time or a shorter time, but there always comes a time when they change or end; nothing on earth is lasting. It may be difficult, however, for man to look over the edge of his existence and gaze into God's eternity. Time has a tendency to dull our sense of eternity, and thus we lose our touch with reality.

This seems to be the condition in which David finds himself at the writing of this psalm; but, at the same time, we hear in the cry "How long, O Lord?" the conviction that the condition is not a lasting one.

We are not told what has happened, but for some reason, David had lost the sense of God's presence which he normally possessed, and he, incorrectly, blamed God for this. It is, of course, impossible that the omniscient God would forget, or that the omnipresent One would hide Himself. The cause for David's negative experience, therefore, is to be traced to David and not to God. This does not, necessarily, mean that there are specific sins in David's life which caused the crisis, but it would also not have been possible to go through such experiences, if it were not for the fact that he was part of a fallen creation. Also, a person's emotions are never constant; we all have our ups and downs, even in our relationship with God. These are, however, our ups and downs and not God's.

David ascribes to God certain conditions that are normal for sinful man, but that are an impossibility for a holy God. God cannot forget anything, nor can He hide Himself. What David does is projecting his the frustration of his own soul upon the character of God. In a sense, this is a healthy exercise; it expresses the essence of the work of redemption Jesus accomplished for us. He took our sins upon Himself. God made Him to be sin for us. He took upon Himself the blame that we should have borne. This is what we mean when we say that we lay our sins on Jesus. It sounds impossible, but if we reproach God, unjustly, that He forgets us and that He hides Himself from us, God accepts this reproach, and thus, takes away our sins. However impossible this may sound to us, but David expresses with these words the essence of our salvation. He, himself, may not have understood this clearly, but the Holy Spirit uses these words to give a clear picture of the reality of our redemption. David's, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" is a shadow of Jesus' cry on the cross: " 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'-- which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"¹⁸⁹ The question is too deep for us to be able to give the answer! So, David's "How long, O LORD?" actually accentuates what God does, and this turns out to be the salvation of humanity.

The second "how long" pertains to David himself. The NIV's rendering: "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" is less clear than the paraphrase of TLB: "How long must I be hiding daily anguish in my heart?" It deals with a tension that is building up and that cannot find an escape valve. When a person is unable to express his anxieties he often falls into a depression. He finds things in himself which he does not understand and cannot digest. David feels himself thrown back upon himself, and since the sense of God's presence is gone, he cannot talk things over with

¹⁸⁹ Matt. 27:46

the Lord. The secret of a spiritual and emotional equilibrium is to acknowledge the Lord in all our ways. As Solomon says in the book of Proverbs: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”¹⁹⁰ If we cannot do this our lives will start to evolve around ourselves; we start going around in a circle and finally we are sinking. David again realizes that the experience he is going through is also a passing episode. A person who asks the question “how long?” knows that the situation is not lasting.

David’s thoughts pertain to his thinking, and the sorrow affects his emotions. It is especially this sorrow in his heart of which he cannot rid himself. The complaint in itself is the answer. In addressing his complaint to God, he casts his trouble upon Him.

The third “how long?” relates to the enemy. We assume that the enemy here is not, in the first place, a human foe but a demonic power. The devil uses human relations to put pressure on people, but the actual struggle is not with “flesh and blood.” Again, the “how long?” expresses the conviction that the condition is not normal, or lasting. The Evil One is our enemy; he is “a murderer from the beginning,” and “the father of lies.”¹⁹¹ He is even the enemy of those who are on his side. In the first prophecy of the Bible God says to Satan: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.”¹⁹² In the order of creation, God placed man above the angels, both the good and the bad ones. If a demon tries to place himself above man, he creates an abnormal situation. From a psychological viewpoint, we should reverse the order of the three “how longs,” for God does not cause our depressions.

In vs. 3 David asks for three things: that God would look on him, answer him and give light to his eyes. The first request still belongs to the questions David had in the opening verses of this psalm; it is a projection of David’s feelings of depression upon God. There never was any question as to whether God would look on him or not. God’s omniscience and His omnipresence are a guarantee that nothing escapes His eye. The prophet Hanani said to Asa, king of Judah: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”¹⁹³ That is the answer to David’s request. On the basis of His Word, we may expect with certainty that God will answer us if we obey, fulfilling the condition that our heart is fully committed to Him. This brings the ball back into our court and makes God’s answer conditional upon our attitude.

With the request that God give light to his eyes, David returns to reality. This sense of reality seems to be the first answer to his prayer. The danger of passing through an extended period of oppression is that we fall asleep in the spiritual sense of the word, and that we begin to see the break of our fellowship with God, with all its disastrous results, as a normal condition. The light should never go out of our spiritual eyes. We should keep our eyes on God’s reality, lest we lose our grip on life. In C. S. Lewis’ book *The Silver Chair*, the author describes a scene where the green witch attacks the sense of reality of two children, a marshwiggles and a prince, by putting some incense on the fire that dulled their senses and by softly plucking the strings of her guitar. Jesus emphasizes the need for watchfulness. To fall asleep assures a speedy spiritual death. The devil succeeded in neutralizing the influence the disciples could have had on Jesus’ suffering in Gethsemane by inducing sleep.

The question is: “how do we fall asleep and how do we stay awake?” Since David uses the analogy of sleep as in this psalm, the answer to our question has to be found in an analogy also. Most of the time sleep is not a condition we can manipulate according to our own desire. It is sometimes possible to stay awake by an act of the will, but more often than not, sleep is stronger than we are. If we learn to relax, we will fall asleep more easily. In the spiritual realm things work in the same way; we can let ourselves go to the point of falling asleep, but our determination not to fall asleep will have little or no effect, unless God gives light to our eyes. That is why the Bible links watching to prayer. It is the tactic of the enemy to lull us to sleep. This realization ought to be enough to jolt us awake, but it, usually, is not.

The Bible gives us examples of people who fell asleep but who were aroused in time, such as Lot. The secret is in our eyes: as long as our eyes are fixed upon Jesus and we keep on seeing His reality, we will not be overwhelmed by sleep. Moses kept his eyes on “Him who is invisible” and this saved him from being drugged by the atmosphere of the Egyptian court. The writer to the Hebrews says: “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace

¹⁹⁰ Prov. 3:5,6

¹⁹¹ John 8:44

¹⁹² Gen. 3:15

¹⁹³ II Chr. 16:9

for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible."¹⁹⁴

Sleep brings forgetfulness; we cease to remember where we came from, where we are at present, and where we are headed. As long as we keep on asking ourselves these questions, we will keep alert. They are the key to our walk through life. If Christ's light shines upon us, our acts and motives will remain pure, because we walk in the light. Paul writes to the Ephesians: "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: 'Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.' Be very careful, then, how you live-- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil."¹⁹⁵ And to the Christians in Rome he writes: "And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."¹⁹⁶ We walk in God's daylight.

David establishes a clear connection between his falling asleep and the presence of the enemy. The devil makes people blind, but the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the reality of life. In the last verses of this psalm David demonstrates that his eyes are open, because he is conscious of God's unfailing love and salvation, which are guaranteed to him by God's Word. That is why he breaks out in a song: "I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me." He does not tell us if there has been any change in his circumstances, but inwardly something happened to him. God opened his eyes for a reality that was there all the time, but which had been hidden from his eyes. When Hagar found herself in the desert and she thought that her son, Ishmael was dying with thirst, God did not make a well for her, but we read: "Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water."¹⁹⁷ The blessing consisted in waking up to God's reality, in seeing what was already there. All we often need is to have our eyes opened, to come to the place where we can praise God. Only realists have praise in their hearts.

¹⁹⁴ Heb. 11:24-27

¹⁹⁵ Eph. 5:11-16

¹⁹⁶ Rom. 13:11-14

¹⁹⁷ Gen. 21:19

PSALM FOURTEEN

For the director of music. Of David.

- 1** *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.*
- 2** *The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.*
- 3** *All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.*
- 4** *Will evildoers never learn-- those who devour my people as men eat bread and who do not call on the LORD?*
- 5** *There they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous.*
- 6** *You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.*
- 7** *Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!*

Adam Clarke's Commentary says about the title "Of David," the following: "There is nothing particular in the title; only it is probable that the word לִבְדָּאָוִד, of David, is improperly prefixed, as it is sufficiently evident, from the construction of the Psalm, that it speaks of the Babylonish captivity. The author, whoever he was, (some say Haggai, others Daniel, etc.,) probably lived beyond the Euphrates. He describes here, in fervid colors the iniquity of the Chaldeans. He predicts their terror and destruction, he consoles himself with the prospect of a speedy return from his exile; and hopes soon to witness the reunion of the tribes of Israel and Judah. It may be applied to unbelievers in general."

Since the content of this psalm "may be applied to unbelievers in general," there does not seem to be sufficient reason, however, to presume that it was not written by David, but that it would belong to the period of the Babylonian captivity or thereafter. There were fools in David's days. The Hebrew word for "fool" is *nabal*, and some people in David's lifetime were called Nabal.¹⁹⁸ *Strong's Dictionary* defines *nabal* as "stupid; wicked (especially impious)."

The evangelist D. L. Moody was once handed a slip of paper just before he entered the pulpit. The note had only the word "fool" written on it. Moody read the note aloud and then commented: "I have heard of anonymous letters, in which people send a message without signing their names, but this is the first time in my life that I receive an anonymous letter without the message and only the signature." He then opened his Bible and started to preach from the text: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

The "fool" does not state a fact, but he rather expresses the content of his heart. What this man is actually saying is: "No God! No God!" *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* says: "The word is not to be taken in the strict sense in which we use the term atheist, that is one who denies the being of a God, or confounds him with matter. ... There are others, and they are very numerous, who, while they profess to acknowledge both, deny them in their heart, and live as if they were persuaded there was no God either to punish or reward."

So, the fool David speaks about is a man whose life demonstrates, by his immoral conduct, that he has no personal relationship with God. The fool makes no theological statement, but a moral one, not openly, but in his heart. He is not an honest doubter who cannot bring himself to believe in God because he does not see any proof his reason can accept, but he is someone who resists the consequences and restrictions which a recognition of God's sovereignty would entail for his personal life. He demonstrates the same attitude as the kings of the earth who took their stand and the rulers in Psalm Two, who gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One and said: "Let us break their chains, and throw off their fetters."¹⁹⁹ The man who says in his heart: "No God!" tries to convince himself in order to find a legal basis for his illegal acts. The implication of his statement is that the existence of God puts man, who is created by God, under the moral obligation to live in accordance with God's will. It also implies that a recognition of this situation is a reasonable and a logical one. A person who sees reality and acts accordingly is wise and reasonable. Those who try to deny reality are fools; and if a man is a fool concerning the things that are basic to his existence, he is foolish in other respects also.

¹⁹⁸ See I Sam. 25:3

¹⁹⁹ Ps. 2:2,3

What gives this psalm such a moving character is the compassion and pity God demonstrates in His search for man who seeks Him. We read in vs. 2: "The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God." In a literal sense, of course, the omniscient and omnipresent God does not have to look for people or things; seeking implies things hidden, and for God there are no blank spots on the map of the earth. In wrongly attributing acts to God that are non-existent, David expresses God's love for man and His longing for fellowship with him. For a holy God, however, it is impossible to have fellowship with man who is sinful.

Among the whole population of this world everyone is carried away by the current of evil; there is not one individual who swims upstream. Ironically, the psalm begins with the picture of an individual who makes a statement, but this individual is sucked up immediately in the masses of those who are lost. Man who wants to maintain his individuality outside of God loses himself in the multitude. Looking down from heaven, God does not find one single exception among men. "All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one."

It strikes us as strange, therefore, that immediately following those words, God speaks about some people as "My people," since that group, obviously was also included in the mass of those who had become corrupt; nobody being excepted. That is, probably, why Adam Clarke assumes that the poet is speaking about the people of Israel in Babylonian captivity. Measured with the standard of God's goodness, not even the righteous measures up. This thought is the strength of Paul's argument in Romans, when he quotes this psalm, saying: "As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'"²⁰⁰ Paul's conclusion is: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."²⁰¹

A person becomes a member of God's people, not because he is good or because he seeks after God, but because his sins are forgiven. The second half of this psalm, therefore, beginning with vs. 4, deals with the relationship between those whose sins are forgiven and those who have not received forgiveness, nor want to receive it. The fool in vs. 1 is not only a man who keeps God out of his life, but also one who devours his fellowmen. The Bible never draws a line between loving God and loving one's neighbor. Injustice in inter-human relations can always be traced to a break with God. That is why David speaks in the same breath about "those who devour my people as men eat bread and who do not call on the LORD." The fool does not understand that God identifies Himself with "the company of the righteous." He who abuses the image of God, attacks God Himself. Imagine the horror and astonishment of the wicked who thinks he can destroy his fellowman, when he realizes that the object of his sadism stands under the protection of the Almighty!

Vs. 6 sounds unclear in most translations. The NIV renders it with: "You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge." The RSV says: "You would confound the plans of the poor, but the LORD is his refuge," and in the KJV we read: "Ye have shamed the counsel of the poor, because the LORD is his refuge." The question is who are the persons addressed? TLB circumvents the question by saying: "He is the refuge of the poor and humble when evildoers are oppressing them," which links the verse with the previous one in a more logical way. *The Interlinear Bible* says: "The counsel of the poor You have shamed for Jehovah (is) his refuge." We would rather expect that the plans of the evildoers are frustrated, since the poor can always take their refuge in God. If the phrase can be turned around in this way, the word "shamed" would be a fitting translation. From the KJV we would deduct that the counsel of the poor would not be in accordance with the will of God, which, of course, is a possibility. A twin brother of this psalm is Psalm 53, in which we find most of the text of this psalm with only a few slight variations. The parallel verse to vs. 6 here reads there: "There they were, overwhelmed with dread, where there was nothing to dread. God scattered the bones of those who attacked you; you put them to shame, for God despised them."²⁰² This puts the shame on the evildoers.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary throws an interesting light upon the last verse. He says that a literal translations reads: "Who will gave from Zion salvation to Israel?" The question then is whom God will use as His instrument to save His people. In this way, the psalm becomes an expression of longing for

²⁰⁰ Rom. 3:10-12

²⁰¹ Rom. 3:22^b,23

²⁰² Ps. 53:5

the coming of the Messiah. Zion is the place where the ark was situated, the place God had chosen as the seat of His revelation on earth.

The KJV uses the word “captivity.” We read: “Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! when the LORD bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad.” On the basis of this verse some commentators mean that this psalm was written during the Babylonian exile. The NIV, as well as the RSV, read: “When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!” The Hebrew word for “fortunes” or “captivity” is. We hold to it that the phrase “Of David” literally means that David wrote this poem.

PSALM FIFTEEN

A psalm of David

**1 LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?
 2 He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart
 3 and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his
 fellowman,
 4 who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the LORD, who keeps his oath even when it hurts,
 5 who lends his money without usury and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does
 these things will never be shaken.**

The KJV translates the opening verse with: "LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?" George Knight, in his book *Commentary on the Psalms*, sees in the mention of the tabernacle a reference to the pilgrimage of Israel through the desert, when God traveled with them to the promised land. The "holy hill" refers then to the temple in Jerusalem, as an image of God's real abode in heaven. This would mean that the psalm was written after the construction of the temple, although this is not, necessarily, the case. We could see in the parallel phrase of vs. 1 a statement which says that the pilgrimage continues, even after the people of Israel entered Canaan.

The fact that God lived in a tent means that He identified Himself with us. The image of the tent means: "God with us." That is why John says: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."²⁰³ Jesus pitched His tent among us.

With the question "Who may dwell in your sanctuary?" the psalmist reverses the roles. God came to us, so that we would come to Him! The question actually asks: "Who can have fellowship with God?" We ought never get used to this miracle.

There is a danger that we read this psalm in a wrong way. Jesus makes the point in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, when He says: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."²⁰⁴ If we see fellowship with God as an effort man makes to climb up to where God is, we misunderstand what is being written here. The psalm begins with God who lives in a tabernacle; that is God came down to us, we are not climbing up to Him.

This psalm stands in great contrast with the preceding one, but at the same time it forms a sequence to it. Psalm fourteen began by showing us a world in which no one was good and concluded with the longing for salvation to come from Zion. In this psalm we find ourselves in Zion, where salvation appeared.

The Ten Commandments, which are given in vs. 2-5, are not conditions to be met in order to obtain salvation, but they are the fruits of salvation; they are the result of the fact that God dwells with men; they form the basis for a lasting communion with God.

We notice that these "Commandments" pertain to inter-human relations. He who does not love his neighbor as himself cannot have constant fellowship with God. God does not only identify Himself with us, but especially with our neighbor. Whatever we do for our fellowmen, we do for Him. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus lets the king say: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."²⁰⁵ And to Saul, on the road to Damascus, Jesus says: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."²⁰⁶ These "Commandments" are double-edged. Doing what is righteous, and speaking the truth from the heart are things we do to God as well as to men.

²⁰³ John 1:14

²⁰⁴ Luke 18:10-14

²⁰⁵ Matt. 25:40,45

²⁰⁶ Acts 9:5

The first commandment in vs. 2 is to be blameless. The only way to be perfect is to be clothed with the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. We can only be blameless if blamelessness is imputed to us. Paul defines this perfectly when he says: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing."²⁰⁷ In other words: If Christ dominates our relationship to God, He will also dominate our relationship to our fellowmen. This means that we will do what is righteous.

The third result of our fellowship with God is that we will speak the truth from our hearts; that is we will be honest to ourselves. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius says to his son, Leartes: "This above all, -- to thine own self be true; and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man." Becoming true to ourselves is a difficult and long process. Jacob went through this crisis in high midnight struggle with himself at the river Jabbok. When he triumphed, he triumphed over himself.²⁰⁸ Speaking the truth from our hearts is the result of a victory over ourselves. We hinder our fellowship with God if we rationalize our behavior. Deceit begins in the heart. A man who speaks the truth to himself cannot lie to another.

Vs. 3 deals with our speaking about our neighbor, primarily with our talking behind someone's back. There is no truth in slander, nor is there any love in it. What the apostle Paul says about love is exactly the opposite of the slander, the wrong and the slur about which this psalm speaks. In his poem about love in I Corinthians he says: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."²⁰⁹

Vs. 3 describes human relations as we find them in daily life, where love ought to be present, but is not. These are not big crimes, but the small things in life that hurt people's feelings and place others in an unfavorable light. If we know it to be true that Jesus identifies Himself with our neighbor, we ought to treat our neighbor with the same respect we treat Him. This pertains, in the first place, to people who are fellow Christians, people with whom we fellowship in Christ. Those are, what the psalm calls, our "fellowmen." This becomes clear when we see the contrast between those people and the "vile man" in the following verse. There the difference between those that are despicable and those that fear the Lord becomes even clearer. David does not advocate a "holier than thou" attitude, but he wants us to have fellowship with those who have fellowship with God, and to avoid intimacy with those who lead immoral lives. Paul defines this kind of relationship when he says: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. Expel the wicked man from among you."²¹⁰ We see that this does not mean avoidance of all social contacts, but a choosing of friends and partners. We are not allowed to adapt our values to those of the world around us, and we may not compromise our fellowship with God. Jesus warns us: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs."²¹¹ Our testimony is at stake. When Jesus rubbed shoulders with publicans and sinners, He did not condone their conduct.

The last two verses speak about our financial integrity. Swearing can, of course, be applied in a broader way than to finances only, but since the rest of the psalm deals with finances, it seems logical to interpret the phrase in that light also. Breaking one's promise to our fellowmen affects our fellowship with God. It is better to lose money than our testimony. A Christian ought to have the reputation of being completely reliable in his financial dealings and in every other respect. Our main concern should not be whether we gain or lose money, but our reputation as a Christian. God forbade the Israelites to charge interest to a brother. We read in the law of Moses: "Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a brother Israelite, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess."²¹² The word "usury" signifies an interest that is too high. TLB renders vs. 5 with: "and

²⁰⁷ II Cor. 2:15

²⁰⁸ See Gen. 32:24-31

²⁰⁹ I Cor. 13:4-6

²¹⁰ I Cor. 5:9-13

²¹¹ Matt. 7:6

²¹² Deut. 23:19,20

does not crush his debtors with high interest rates.” If we interpret this verse in the light of Deut. 23, where it is said that interest could be charged to foreigners, we find a hidden reference to Israel as a kingdom of priests. They were called to be mediators between God and the world. It is impossible to have fellowship with God without having a vision for missions.

The last warning in this psalm is against corruption. It paints the picture of a judge who does not judge according to justice but according to the bribe he receives. The principle has a broader application. The basis of our relationship with our fellowmen has to be the absolute values which are derived from the character of God. That which A. W. Tozer calls *The Knowledge of the Holy* ought to be the object of our constant meditation. What counts is that the love to our neighbor is based on the fact that we “love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind.”²¹³ “He who does these things will never be shaken.”

Our fellowship with God will determine our walk in life, and our walk in life will strengthen our fellowship with God. This is not a circle but rather a spiral, because there is an ascending line in it. Jude calls God: “Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy”²¹⁴

²¹³ Matt. 22:37

²¹⁴ Jude vs. 24

PSALM SIXTEEN

A miklam of David.

- 1** *Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge.*
2 *I said to the LORD, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."*
3 *As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.*
4 *The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods. I will not pour out their libations of blood or take up their names on my lips.*
5 *LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure.*
6 *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.*
7 *I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.*
8 *I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*
9 *Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,*
10 *because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.*
11 *You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

A footnote in the NIV says about the title miktam: "Probably a literary or musical term," thus avoiding taking position as to the meaning of the word. Strong's Concordance defines miktâm as "an engraving, i.e. ... a poem."

Adam Clarke's Commentary says about the title: "The title of this Psalm in the Hebrew is Miktaam 1^a-Daawid; which the Chaldee translates, 'A straight sculpture of David.' The Septuagint, Stelographia to Dauid, 'The inscription on a pillar to David;' as if the Psalm had been inscribed on a pillar, to keep it in remembrance. As kaatham signifies to engrave or stamp, this has given rise to the above inscription. Miktaam also means pure or stamped gold; and hence, it has been supposed that this title was given to it on account of its excellence: a golden Psalm, or a Psalm worthy to be written in letters of gold, as some of the verses of Pythagoras were called the golden verses, because of their excellence. Gold being the most excellent and precious of all metals, it has been used to express metaphorically excellence and perfection of every kind. Thus a golden tongue or mouth, the most excellent eloquence; so Chrysostom means, this eminent man having had his name from his eloquence;-- a golden book, one of the choicest and most valuable of its kind, etc." Clarke concludes by saying: "But I have already sufficiently expressed my doubts concerning the meanings given to these titles." *The Amplified Bible* renders this title as: "A poem by David intended to record memorable thoughts." Evidently the word is difficult to translate, and, throughout the ages, a large variety of interpretations has been given in commentaries. A Dutch translation uses a word²¹⁵ which can be translated as "a precious object, such as a diamond, pearl; body ornament; something precious; something of great value."

Running ahead of ourselves, we may say that the above translation of the title is, undoubtedly, fitting, since the psalm contains a prophecy regarding the resurrection of Christ. There are two places in the book of Acts where this psalm is quoted: One by Peter: ("David said about him: 'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence,' ")²¹⁶ and one by Paul: ("So it is stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your Holy One see decay' ").²¹⁷

The opening verse contains a suggestion of a struggle between the realization of faith and the spiritual reality which is the object of this faith. If it is true that we take refuge by God, it is almost a foregone conclusion that God would keep us safe. The contradiction of the two parts of this phrase are indicative of the tension which is common to our faith. Only our Lord Jesus Christ had a faith that knew no doubt. Yet, it was the Holy Spirit who put these words in David's mouth.

The opening words of this psalm are the opposite of those of Psalm 12, which begins with: "Help, LORD, for the godly are no more." Here David concentrates upon the positive aspect of God's protection,

²¹⁵ kleinood

²¹⁶ Acts 2:25-28

²¹⁷ Acts 13:35

which is the intimacy of fellowship with God as a person. This fellowship begins with taking refuge in God. As we have seen before, fleeing to God is a reaction of the soul upon the realization of the dangers that surround us in this hostile world. When we flee to God and take refuge in Him, we give up our right to protect and defend ourselves. Fleeing to God means surrender to Him.

According to the second verse, it also means a confession: "I said to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.'" In English the word Lord may be written in two different ways, but it sounds the same. The Hebrew says: "I said to Yahweh: 'you are my Adonai.'" In the use of these words David expresses God's right to rule the life of men. YHWH, that is the I AM WHO I AM, is the Lord, the Master. This confession is the foundation of the joy of fellowship, which is the theme of this psalm. This confession is not forced out of David, it is voluntary. God does not impose His will upon us; but if we give ourselves to God so that He can do with us what He wants, He will give Himself to us in return.

"You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing," is one of the most delightful statements in the Bible. It speaks, first of all of possession; "I have" expresses possession. The miracle is that a man, who gives all to God, discovers that he possesses all. This is satisfaction to the highest degree. Elsewhere in the psalms the poet says: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you."²¹⁸

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us several times that it is only by God's grace that we enjoy things on earth. "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?"²¹⁹ There is no real enjoyment for men on earth, if God is not the essence of his enjoyment.

The phrase: "apart from you I have no good thing," also speaks of a decision David made. This is what he wants. He has decided not to take pleasure in anything, or enjoy anything, unless God is at the center of it. This decision is at the basis of the psalm; it is the rock upon which he stands. This limits the number of things he can enjoy, but at the same time it opens up some wide perspectives; for he finds himself immediately among a large group of people with whom he can have a fellowship of faith. We would conclude this from the following statement: "As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight." It seems, however, that this section is rather unclear in Hebrew and very hard to translate. The KJV is especially vague at this point with its rendering: "O my soul, thou hast said unto the LORD, Thou art my Lord: my goodness extendeth not to thee; But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight." According to a footnote in the RSV the translation is based upon Jerome. TLB says: "I want the company of the godly men and women in the land; they are the true nobility." The *Word Biblical Commentary* translates the phrase with: "(You have said) to the holy ones who are in the land: 'They are my mighty ones! All my pleasure is in them.'" The *Commentary* explains: "The psalmist recalls the words of an acquaintance (or a typical fellow citizen of his time), which in one sense represent temptation and in another sense represent something abhorrent to the psalmist. The acquaintance is a syncretist, wanting the best of two worlds: he vocalizes the appropriate words to God—'You are my master!'—but his faith has an elastic quality, so that he can also trip off his tongue the appropriate words to the foreign deities (the 'holy ones')—'they are the mighty ones!' The acquaintance represents temptation, for he appears to have double protection in a time of crisis; he represents something to be abhorred, for his words are clearly in contravention of the first commandment."

Sin brought about a separation between man and God, as well as between men and men. When fellowship with God is restored, brotherly love is also reactivated. This love will increase as love for God will become more intense. When the Holy Spirit came upon the Christians at Pentecost, the hearts of men were fused together in deep brotherly love. We see again that the love for God is closely linked to love for our fellowmen. If we have no good thing apart from the Lord, all our delight will also be in the saints who are in the land, that is in our brothers and sisters in Christ.

David does not only call the believers "saints" but he also sees them, with prophetic eyes, as people who possess divine glory. This indicates that David sees men as God sees them. This is not the usual way in which one man looks at another. C. S. Lewis once remarked in a sermon, that if we could see our neighbor as he would be one hundred years hence, we would either see them radiate with the glory of God, or we would draw back in horror before the image of God that disintegrated completely before our eyes. The key to the love of our neighbor is the recognition of the image of God in him and the forward projection of what that image will look like in glory.

²¹⁸ Ps. 73:25

²¹⁹ Eccl. 2:24-25. See also 5:18; 8:15; 9:7-9; 11:9

Spurgeon bases a rather lengthy commentary upon vs. 2 and 3 in the KJV (“O my soul, thou hast said unto the LORD, Thou art my Lord: my goodness extendeth not to thee; But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight”) which, in my opinion, gives a wrong rendering of the text: he places the words in the mouth of Christ, and he says that His death and resurrection do, in no way, affect the being of God, and are only meant for the believers and their salvation. Besides the fact that the basis for this interpretation is not too solid, this application seems to be far-fetched. The NIV has a footnote on vs. 3 that says: “As for the pagan priests who are in the land, and the nobles in whom all delight, I said: ...” this is given as an alternate translation. Evidently, the Hebrew text we have available to us makes it hard for any commentator to come up with a sound rendering. I hold on to “the saints who are in the land....”

On the basis of vs. 4 some commentators believe that David was abroad, as when he fled from Saul and found safety in the land of the Philistines; and that from this position he condemned the idolatry that was being committed in his homeland. When we read vs. 5, however, we get the impression that David was in the promised land and that he expressed gratitude for the land God had given to his ancestors.

The difference between the worship of idols and the service of YHWH is in one’s motives. A man worships God because of His love, salvation, and redemption. An idol is something to be feared and appeased. Idolatry is a form of self-defense. Paul even denies the reality of idols, as we know them. He says: “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.”²²⁰ Inasmuch as idols reveal themselves to men, they are demons in disguise. Serving an idol is a form of defense against fear of the devil. It is hard to appease Satan. He is a liar and murderer of men, and his bloodthirstiness knows no bounds. When David says: “I will not pour out their libations of blood,” he probably speaks of human sacrifices that are brought to those idols. We do not know what kind of sacrifices were brought during the reign of Saul. David must have been aware, however, of the practices of the Canaanites and he pledges never to get involved with such practices. The Jews had imposed upon themselves the practice never to pronounce the Name of YHWH, for fear of trespassing against the Third Commandment: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”²²¹ David makes the same pledge as far as the names of other gods is concerned, with this difference that God’s Name was too holy to be taken upon man’s tongue, and the names of idols were too vile.

In vs. 5 David calls God: “The portion of my inheritance.” TLB translates it with: “The Lord himself is my inheritance, my prize.” The NIV says: “LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup.” The Lord has not only given him his inheritance, He is David’s inheritance. This is the same as what is said in vs. 2 “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.” The portion of David’s inheritance is the part of the promised land which was assigned to each Israelite. David expresses the truth that, although the Israelites were in the habit of speaking of God’s blessing in terms of material prosperity, the two were not identical. The essence of every blessing is God Himself. The land of Canaan was an symbol, for the Jew also, of the real possession that awaited him in the future. It is said of Abraham in his wanderings: “He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”²²²

The term “my cup” is found several times in the Old Testament. TLB paraphrases the verse with: “He is my food and drink, my highest joy!” The image is, of course, a cup of wine. “God is my glass of wine,” would be an acceptable translation, but it would raise some eyebrows among Evangelical Christians. In a world of teetotalers, in which we move, the image has lost its meaning. If one has strong objections against the use of wine, the picture of a glass of wine that provides joy and gladness, as an expression of the joy of fellowship with God, cannot be used in certain circles. Yet the Bible speaks unabashedly about “wine that gladdens the heart of man.”²²³ This constitutes, in my opinion, no plea for the use of alcohol, but it may indicate that the average Jew was able to control himself better than the twentieth century man. It is also true that the New Testament does not forbid the use of wine, but warns against drunkenness. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the

²²⁰ I Cor 8:4-6

²²¹ Ex. 20:7

²²² Heb. 11:10

²²³ Ps. 104:15

Spirit.”²²⁴ Real joy is in the Holy Spirit, all else is substitution, “ersatz.” Jesus says the same thing to His disciples in His last words before His death: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”²²⁵ And David says, earlier in the psalms: “You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.”²²⁶

David, himself, had not been present at the dividing up of the land of Canaan; he was born five hundred years too late for that. He demonstrates a deep spiritual insight in that he understands the meaning of the history of his country so clearly. The fact that he was born and reared in the land God had promised to His ancestors had never become common to him. This, again, shows how intimate his fellowship with God was.

He also demonstrates the awareness that earthly possession is only an image of a heavenly reality. It is David who introduced the name Zion in the Bible as a picture of heaven itself. He looks around and lets his gaze linger over the hills, the trees, and the fields and he says to himself: “This is the way I will enjoy heaven, and I will be satisfied.” As New Testament Christians we do well to look forward to our “inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for us.”²²⁷ We lose something of the enjoyment of the good things in life, however, if we cannot see things around us as images of life in heaven.

In vs. 7 the psalm changes from a prayer to a testimony. Here, David no longer addresses God personally, but he speaks to others about God. In retrospect, this testimony turns out to be a prophecy about the Lord Jesus Christ and His resurrection. This is clear from some quotations of this psalm in the book of Acts. Peter says at the day of Pentecost: “David said about him: ‘I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’”²²⁸ And Paul, speaking in the synagogue of Antioch in Asia Minor, quotes the psalm as a proof of Christ's resurrection. He says: “So it is stated elsewhere: ‘You will not let your Holy One see decay.’”²²⁹

David begins with praise; from there he moves on to fellowship, and via the resurrection from the dead, to everlasting glory. The praise is based on God's guidance in his life, not by outward circumstances, but by an inner voice. He says: “even at night my heart instructs me.” The KJV gives the literal translation: “my reins also instruct me in the night seasons.” The “reins” or kidneys were considered to be the seat of emotions by the Old Testament Jew. There is no point in arguing, of course, which of our bodily organs harbors our emotions. The brain is the most likely candidate, but Europeans speak affectionately about the heart and Asians about the liver. More important is the fact that God counsels David on a twenty-four hour basis. “Even at night my heart instructs me.” Even when consciousness fades away, the Lord keeps on speaking and guiding.

It is generally understood that the main difference between believers of the Old Testament and the New lies in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, which was intermittent and temporal in the Old Testament and is permanent in the New. David speaks here prophetically over a New Testament condition in which the Holy Spirit takes control of man's life in a permanent way. In the same way as Peter, rather humorously, could say: “Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day,”²³⁰ so can we say, without hesitation, that there were episodes in David's life during which he did not experience God's presence in a real way. David's words, here, go far beyond his personal

²²⁴ Eph. 5:18

²²⁵ John 15:1-8

²²⁶ Ps. 4:7

²²⁷ I Pet. 1:4

²²⁸ Acts 2:25-28

²²⁹ Acts 13:35

²³⁰ Acts 2:29

experience. Like his prophecy about the resurrection of our Lord, so are his words here, first of all, applicable to our Lord Jesus Christ, and, consequently, to those who are in Christ Jesus.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in a person is both a conscious as well as an unconscious experience. There is this nocturnal activity of the Spirit over which we have no control; and there is the purposely “setting the Lord before us,” which is focusing, and training our eyes upon Him in order to see Him more clearly. This fellowship between the Holy Spirit and the believer will protect us from being shaken.

In Peter’s quotation of the psalm we read: “I saw the Lord always before me.” Peter, probably, quotes from the Septuagint. The Hebrew puts more human activity into the experience by saying: “I have set the LORD always before me.” It is true, of course, that God is always present, whether we see Him or not. The point David makes in this verse is not the omnipresence of God, but our realization of God’s presence. David draws two conclusions from his awareness of God’s presence: one for his spiritual well-being, and one for his physical health. The main stress, however, is upon the physical aspect. This corresponds to the testimony of Peter and Paul, who emphasize that these words apply to the resurrection of the body: Christ’s body in the first place, and ours also.

David, then, is overcome by ecstatic joy; the joy of the Holy Spirit about the redemption of creation culminates in the resurrection of the body. We ought to take more time to rejoice in this prospect, our present daily joy of living would then increase also.

David cannot have known the full implication of his prophecy. Peter’s words regarding the searching of the Old Testament prophets for the content of the truths they proclaimed, apply to David also: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”²³¹ From this quote it is clear that the essence of the grace David prophesied about is meant for the New Testament Christians. All the Old Testament prophets received was a foretaste of the joy to come. For us who know the fact of Christ’s resurrection reality has come already. If David, with the little he knew, could say: “Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices,” how much more can we experience this joy.

“My body also will rest secure,” or, as the KJV renders it: “My flesh also shall rest in hope,” pertains both to the future and the present. The Holy Spirit, who raised Jesus from the dead, will raise us also after we die. Paul says in his epistle to the Romans: “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”²³² Nothing can go wrong with our bodies; and if something seems to go wrong with us physically, it is only temporal. We have been guaranteed a glorified body for all eternity.

Two different words are used for, what is translated by the NIV as “grave,” and “decay.” The RSV gives us the following translation: “For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit.” TLB says: “For you will not leave me among the dead; you will not allow your beloved one to rot in the grave,” and the KJV translates the verse with: “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” The Hebrew words are *sh^eól*, which is left untranslated in the English text, and *shachath*, which is derived from the word *shûwach*, meaning to sink, and which is defined by Strong’s as “a pit, fig. destruction, corruption, etc.” In Peter’s quote of the verse, using the Septuagint, we read: “Because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay,” which corresponds to the rendering of the NIV. The grave, or “Sheol,” probably, contains a reference to the power of death over the human soul, and the “pit” about the decomposition of the body. Jesus uses the picture of “worm” and “fire” in His description of hell. He calls it the place “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”²³³ The fires of hell have the power to torture man, because his soul is corrupted by “their worm.” When Jesus entered the kingdom of death, His soul was untainted by sin; there was no “worm” in Him, and, consequently, the fire did not touch Him. Jesus conquered death, because the devil had no foothold in His soul. Our body will rise in the end because the Holy Spirit indwells us.

If this prophecy was fulfilled for Jesus in a literal sense, it meant that no decomposition even started in His body during the approximately thirty-six hours in which He lay in the grave. That is a miracle in itself; but in the light of the miracle of the resurrection, this is only a small detail.

²³¹ I Pet 1:10,11

²³² Rom. 8:11

²³³ Mark 9:48

The phrase: "You have made known to me the path of life," says more than only that Jesus would rise from the dead and that a resurrection exists. The point is that the resurrection from the dead has consequences, not only for our body, but also our life. If death is not the end of life, but there is a resurrection, then this fact will influence also life before death. Death alone robs life of its meaning; resurrection imparts life with content and quality. That is "the path of life" which leads to resurrection and glory. "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."²³⁴

God's presence and His right hand, which are mentioned in the last verse, are not only realities we will see when we arrive in heaven, but they are also the means by which God guides us through life while we are still on the way. When David says: "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand," he indicates that the trade mark of our life on earth ought to be joy. In our fellowship with God on earth "fullness of joy" will not only be the music of the future but also of the present. God has an eternal balance of joy stored up for us in heaven and we are allowed to borrow from this as much as we need while still on earth; the balance will never diminish.

There is, of course, a difference between the more or less limited kind of fellowship we experience with God while we are here on earth, living in a mortal body, and the boundless fellowship we will have with Him in our resurrection body; but it is not a difference of principle. The God we will see then is the same one who reveals Himself to us now. We will change, but He changes not. There is, therefore, no reason that we would not get a good foretaste, while still on earth, of the joy and eternal pleasures of which we will drink with full draughts in eternity. The least we can do is rejoice in the hope; that is realistic.

The "eternal pleasures" are the pleasures of love, as part of a fellowship with God. The psalmist says: "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!" The word lovely is related to love and so is pleasure. Love creates an atmosphere and it adds a glow to its surrounding. That is the atmosphere of the resurrection.

²³⁴ Prov. 4:18

PSALM SEVENTEEN

A prayer of David

- 1 Hear, O LORD, my righteous plea; listen to my cry. Give ear to my prayer-- it does not rise from deceitful lips.*
- 2 May my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right.*
- 3 Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing; I have resolved that my mouth will not sin.*
- 4 As for the deeds of men-- by the word of your lips I have kept myself from the ways of the violent.*
- 5 My steps have held to your paths; my feet have not slipped.*
- 6 I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer.*
- 7 Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes.*
- 8 Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings*
- 9 from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.*
- 10 They close up their callous hearts, and their mouths speak with arrogance.*
- 11 They have tracked me down, they now surround me, with eyes alert, to throw me to the ground.*
- 12 They are like a lion hungry for prey, like a great lion crouching in cover.*
- 13 Rise up, O LORD, confront them, bring them down; rescue me from the wicked by your sword.*
- 14 O LORD, by your hand save me from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life. You still the hunger of those you cherish; their sons have plenty, and they store up wealth for their children.*
- 15 And I- in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.*

In the sub-script of one Dutch translation this psalm is called: "The prayer of an innocent man."²³⁵ No details are given as to the historical background of the psalm. There is, however, a strong suggestion that it dates from the period before David's ascent to the throne, that is during the time Saul pursued him.

The theme of the psalm more or less parallels that of Psalm seven. In vs. 1-5 David appeals to his innocence; in vs. 6-12 he prays for protection against his enemies, and in vs. 13-15 he makes a comparison between his persecutors and himself. This comparison puts the theme of the psalm in the right perspective.

In making his "righteous plea," David does not appeal to a righteousness outside himself, as he did in Psalm Four. This does not mean, however, that he, necessarily, boasts concerning his own righteousness. Our right relationship with God will give us, eventually, an integrity that will become self-evident and that does not have to be analyzed daily.

In the first two verses David pleads a righteous cause at which he looks from a distance. He does not state exactly what the problem is. Evidently, he was being accused of things that he had not done, and because he is convinced of his innocence, he feels completely free to address himself to God in prayer. There is always a close connection between our conduct and our prayers. Prayer can be hindered by what we do. Peter warns husbands that their prayers can be hindered if their relationship with their wives is not what it should be. We read: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."²³⁶ The apostle John also speaks about conditions in which "our hearts do not condemn us." He says: "This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him."²³⁷ These New Testament quotes are, probably, the best illustration of what David is saying here.

There is some value in what is professionally called, "psychological feelings of guilt," because they may be the means by which we are drawn to God. What John says is that there comes a point at which we have to cast our burdens upon God, regardless of what our heart says. But David does not speak of guilt

²³⁵ NBG

²³⁶ I Pet. 3:7

²³⁷ I John 3:19-22

feeling, but rather about concrete acts. The rendering of TLB is therefore quite appropriate: “Publicly acquit me, Lord, for you are always fair.”

It is an overwhelming experience to be cleared of all guilt by God Himself; it is awful when a man thinks himself to be innocent and he does not realize what his position before God actually is. There is in the background of David’s argument the assurance that there is for him “no condemnation in Jesus Christ.”²³⁸ There is no other basis for David’s conviction, even though nothing more is being said about it here. The legal side of David’s case is closely connected with his inner sanctification. That is the theme of vs. 2 and 3. There is no consciousness of sin in David’s heart; he has no bad conscience, and he feels himself clean. We read in the epistle to the Hebrews: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”²³⁹ David must have had some insight in the real meaning of justification, as expounded in the above quote from Hebrews, although he only knew the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament.

It is interesting to see that David invites God to probe his heart and examine him at night, because that is the time when man is most vulnerable, and his defenses are weakest. It is the time when our subconscious comes to the surface in strange dreams and fantasies. The Holy Spirit penetrates so deeply in our lives that God finds nothing objectionable in us, even at night.

The more we ponder this point, the more it becomes obvious that we are looking at a prophecy about the man, Jesus Christ. This portion of Scripture, together with many others must have helped and encouraged our Lord in His youth; they must have given Him a growing awareness of His call to be the Messiah. We can only apply these verses to ourselves, as we understand that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”²⁴⁰ If we understand what is said here, we cannot but be amazed at the miracle of grace God performs in our lives. On the basis of a righteousness that comes to us from the outside our prayers come before God and are heard by Him. Our consciences are cleansed from acts that lead to death, and the Word of God keeps us from a misuse of power, which is a trap for many people who have power.

The sanctification of our daily walk, which is the application of Christ’s righteousness in our lives, is not only the ministry of the Holy Spirit within us, but it is also a matter of our obedience to the Word of God. There is always a danger of subjectivity if we lean exclusively upon the leading of the Holy Spirit. Our heart is capable of deceiving us, but the objectivity of the written Word of God keeps us in balance. It is through the Word and the Spirit that we keep our lives on the right track. We hardly understand sufficiently how much we need such a balance in this dark world in which we live.

In vs. 7-13 we see how the pressure on David’s life increases, and how he becomes more and more conscious of the need to take refuge in God in order to stand against the foe. It becomes again obvious that the only possibility of victory over the Evil One lies in our standing upon the righteousness of Christ. We can only resist the devil if he finds no foothold on the inside of our heart and mind. It is clear from vs. 12 that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”²⁴¹ David’s words, “They are like a lion hungry for prey, like a great lion crouching in cover,” are an Old Testament parallel to what Peter says in his first Epistle: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”²⁴²

The confidence in God which David demonstrates in vs. 6-8 is touching. We often lose our balance when difficulties arise because we forget who God really is. David goes back over his previous answers to prayer, which strengthens his faith. “I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to

²³⁸ See Rom. 8:1

²³⁹ Heb. 10:1-4; 9:13,14

²⁴⁰ II Cor. 5:21

²⁴¹ Eph. 6:12

²⁴² I Pet. 5:8

me and hear my prayer” is not only an expression of faith in the future but, in the first place, a remembering of things past. How good it is for a man to keep on remembering what God has done. Previous experiences with God serve us to continue to believe in Him for the present.

David expects a miracle on the basis of God’s great love. If we find ourselves in circumstances in which we need a miracle in order to pull us through, our situation is not rosy. In such situations, however, God often shows Himself closest to us. David calls God by the name of “Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at thy right hand.”²⁴³ What a glorious title! The names given to God in the Old Testament are a rich topic of study; they are the colors of God’s infinitely beautiful character. One of God’s characteristics is that He saves people who seek refuge at His right hand! David could only come up with such a name because he knew God intimately and had obtained insight into God’s character.

The expression “apple of your eye” occurs several times in the Old Testament. We read: “He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye.”²⁴⁴ “Whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye.”²⁴⁵ In those verses the phrase is used for the nation of Israel. In Old English there is a word “mannikin” which describes two people who are so close together that they can see themselves in the retina of the other person. The Hebrew word is *iyshown* which literally means “the little man of the eye.” In any language the apple of the eye is one of the most precious parts of the human body. Damage to the apple of the eye can cause blindness, that is why we protect our eyes more than any other part of our body, which is the point of the comparison of vs. 8; God protects us as we protect our eyes, as a bird protects her young ones by covering them with her wings.

The enemy against whom we need to be protected is pictured in vivid colors. David superimposes two pictures in his projection of the enemy: one is of men who have hostile intentions, and the other one is of Satan himself. Satan is the lion that attacks. This suggests a group of people who are under demonic influence. We see the portrait by an artist who draws a scene of hostile human activity against the background of a roaring lion with open jaws, which covers the whole of the canvas. It shows that every murder humans commit is inspired by the great murderer from the beginning.²⁴⁶ In verses 9-12 David proves that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”²⁴⁷ We are surrounded by people who surrendered to those evil forces. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but the devil uses flesh and blood to put pressure upon our lives. A classic example is Jesus’ rebuke of Peter when He said: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”²⁴⁸ Jesus recognized the reality of the attack upon Him by Satan, who used Peter. Very few people are able to see through the tactics of the enemy when he attacks their lives. Even David had a hard time recognizing the real enemy behind his human foes, although in vs. 12 we find an indication that there is one single power which waits in the background, but which manipulates human beings. People whose hearts have become callous, and whose hearts are closed to the influence of the Holy Spirit become instruments of the devil. The devil uses prosperity to dull people’s spiritual sensitivity. The false security which abundance of material things provides can make a person immune to the desire for real riches. Affluence is a heavy burden to carry, and few people are able to stand the lure of it. Abundance and arrogance often go together. The devil uses tasty baits.

In the NIV vs. 13 and 14 do not sound as revengeful as in some other versions. We read: “Rise up, O LORD, confront them, bring them down; rescue me from the wicked by your sword. O LORD, by your hand save me from such men, from men of this world whose reward is in this life. You still the hunger of those you cherish; their sons have plenty, and they store up wealth for their children,” but the RSV reads: “Arise, O LORD! confront them, overthrow them! Deliver my life from the wicked by thy sword, from men by thy hand, O LORD, from men whose portion in life is of the world. May their belly be filled with what thou hast stored up for them; may their children have more than enough; may they leave something over to their babes.” And even TLB makes the wicked the brunt of God’s wrath, by saying: “Lord, arise and stand against them. Push them back! Come and save me from these men of the world whose only concern is earthly gain-- these men whom you have filled with your treasures so that their children and

²⁴³ RSV

²⁴⁴ Deut. 32:10

²⁴⁵ Zech. 2:8

²⁴⁶ See John 8:44

²⁴⁷ Eph. 6:12

²⁴⁸ Matt. 16:23

grandchildren are rich and prosperous.” Evidently the Hebrew is open for different interpretations. In those renderings where the wicked are filled with something that destroys both them and their children it seems as if David wants to take revenge upon innocent babes. But a closer look reveals that David has a spiritual issue in mind. The sword he calls upon for intervention is the sword of the Lord, not a human weapon of slaughter. The writer to the Hebrews uses the image of a sword for the Word of God. “For the word of God is living 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. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”²⁴⁹ And when John describes his vision of the risen Christ, he says: “Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword.”²⁵⁰ In the story of Gideon’s victory over the Midianites, the sword of the Lord turns out to consist of trumpets, jars and torches.²⁵¹ The Midianites were conquered because of the utter confusion in their own ranks through which they killed off one another. The sword of the Lord is the instrument by which God judges people’s moral and spiritual behavior. For some people the outcome of this judgment is salvation, if they confess their sins and receive pardon. For others it means perishing because no confession of sin is made. By calling upon the sword in the hand of YHWH David chooses the most pacifistic defense possible. David asks the Lord to save him, by causing the conversion of his enemies. After all, the purpose of God’s judgment, of His analysis-in-depth of people’s acts and motives, is the revelation of His forgiveness and His saving grace. In the tenth century the inhabitants of the Netherlands were saved from the invasions of the Nordics in that the Norwegians were converted to Christianity.

In vs. 13 and 14, again, we see how the image of a single enemy, Satan, overlaps the plural one of the human foes, who are his instruments. The sword of the Lord has, of course, no value for the salvation of Satan himself, but it can mean salvation for those who are in his power.

What the NIV calls “their callous hearts” in vs. 10 is rendered by the KJV as: “They are inclosed in their own fat.” We conclude from this that affluence is unhealthy for man’s spiritual well-being. This thought is further elaborated upon in vs. 14. The people who are out after David’s life have no spiritual interests. Their reward is in this life; they are only interested in material wealth and their punishment consists in the fact that God gives them what they want. Their children are born in rich families and they begin their lives with a large heritage. In his book *Fairy Tales*, the Scottish writer George MacDonald says that God can punish people by making them rich. This is the point David illustrates here; the affluence a man seeks becomes his undoing. That which God has “stored up” for those people is, in David’s eyes, garbage and dirt. In reality, it is a life of ease and enjoyment which those people seek for themselves in this life, and which makes them immune to the grace of God that could save them for all eternity.

Over against this attitude towards life, David makes the statement of his own faith in beautifully moving words: “And I- in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.” When his life on earth ends, he expects to be clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ and to behold the face of God; seeing God’s face is an experience no one on earth would be able to survive. For us, New Testament Christians, this being clothed with Jesus’ righteousness is an experience in the present, which is the equivalent of the beholding of God’s face, and which will lead to the metamorphosis of our mortal bodies; this is our hope for the future. David expects an awakening and the complete fulfillment of his life in fellowship with Jesus Christ, who is the image of God.

The contrast between David and his adversaries was not the gap between rich and poor; David was rather affluent himself. When we read what he contributed to the building of the temple²⁵², we get an idea of his considerable wealth. The difference is in their philosophy of life. Their portion was in this life; David lived in the expectation of “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for [him].”²⁵³

²⁴⁹ Heb. 4:12,13

²⁵⁰ Rev. 1:16

²⁵¹ Judg. 7:20

²⁵² See I Chr. 29:3-5

²⁵³ I Pet. 1:4

PSALM EIGHTEEN

For the director of music. Of David the servant of the LORD. He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said:

- 1 I love you, O LORD, my strength.*
- 2 The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*
- 3 I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.*
- 4 The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.*
- 5 The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me.*
- 6 In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.*
- 7 The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry.*
- 8 Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it.*
- 9 He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet.*
- 10 He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind.*
- 11 He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him-- the dark rain clouds of the sky.*
- 12 Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning.*
- 13 The LORD thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded.*
- 14 He shot his arrows and scattered, great bolts of lightning and routed them.*
- 15 The valleys of the sea were exposed and the foundations of the earth laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of breath from your nostrils.*
- 16 He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters.*
- 17 He rescued me from my powerful enemy, from my foes, who were too strong for me.*
- 18 They confronted me in the day of my disaster, but the LORD was my support.*
- 19 He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me.*
- 20 The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me.*
- 21 For I have kept the ways of the LORD; I have not done evil by turning from my God.*
- 22 All his laws are before me; I have not turned away from his decrees.*
- 23 I have been blameless before him and have kept myself from sin.*
- 24 The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.*
- 25 To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless,*
- 26 to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd.*
- 27 You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.*
- 28 You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light.*
- 29 With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall.*
- 30 As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.*
- 31 For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?*
- 32 It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.*
- 33 He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights.*
- 34 He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze.*
- 35 You give me your shield of victory, and your right hand sustains me; you stoop down to make me great.*
- 36 You broaden the path beneath me, so that my ankles do not turn.*
- 37 I pursued my enemies and overtook them; I did not turn back till they were destroyed.*
- 38 I crushed them so that they could not rise; they fell beneath my feet.*
- 39 You armed me with strength for battle; you made my adversaries bow at my feet.*
- 40 You made my enemies turn their backs in flight, and I destroyed my foes.*
- 41 They cried for help, but there was no one to save them-- to the LORD, but he did not answer.*
- 42 I beat them as fine as dust borne on the wind; I poured them out like mud in the streets.*

43 You have delivered me from the attacks of the people; you have made me the head of nations; people I did not know are subject to me.

44 As soon as they hear me, they obey me; foreigners cringe before me.

45 They all lose heart; they come trembling from their strongholds.

46 The LORD lives! Praise be to my Rock! Exalted be God my Savior!

47 He is the God who avenges me, who subdues nations under me,

48 who saves me from my enemies. You exalted me above my foes; from violent men you rescued me.

49 Therefore I will praise you among the nations, O LORD; I will sing praises to your name.

50 He gives his king great victories; he shows unfailing kindness to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever.

This psalm is one of the longer poems in the Book of Psalms . It is a monumental and impressive song. We find the same poem, word for word, recorded in II Samuel, immediately preceding David's last words.²⁵⁴ We could draw the conclusion that David wrote the psalm at the end of his life. The words in the subscript "when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul," point to a later date in David's life when his kingdom was well established. Yet, the character of the psalm is not the words of an old man; it sparkles with vitality and energy.

In the list of "all his enemies," only Saul is mentioned by name. Saul had been, of course, David's most fearsome enemy because Saul was the king and David was a refugee. And, more than anyone else, Saul was out to kill David.

The psalm, therefore, is a hymn of praise to God for the salvation of David's life. One has to have had a close brush with death in order to appreciate life to the full. David had come to the point where he could say to his bosom friend Jonathan: "Yet as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death."²⁵⁵ Little do men realize that there always is only one step between life and death! The person who thinks differently has put his head in the sand like an ostrich. If our safety is not in God and in our fellowship with Him, we are always vulnerable and our lives are in constant danger. David's life had always been in danger, whether Saul wanted to kill him or not, but the anointing oil Samuel had poured upon his head to indicate that God had set him apart to be a king had made him invincible. David only began to discern this when he passed through those dramatic events that marked his life. The psalm, therefore, is an expression of David's discovery of the truth the apostle Paul enunciated before the philosophers of Athens: "In him we live and move and have our being."²⁵⁶

We have to keep in mind that the real significance of this psalm far surpasses the events of David's life, however dramatic those events may have been. The message of the psalm is a prophecy about the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, which gives depth to David's experiences.

David says to YHWH: "I love you, O LORD, my strength." The appellation "my strength" could be interpreted as a name given to God, or it could be taken to mean "with all my strength." In the latter case, David would refer to the great commandment: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."²⁵⁷ Most translation do not use the words "my strength" to indicate the intensity of David's love for God, but rather to make God the source of David's strength. TLB says: "Lord, how I love you!" and the Berkley Version translates the declaration: "Fervently do I love Thee."

In saying this, David obeys the great commandment on which all the Law and the Prophets hang. Among all the religions of the world, the love for God is a unique feature of Judeo-Christianity. George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalms* tells the story of a Greek who, with his background of mythology and philosophy exclaimed, when hearing the words of the great commandment: "Imagine that someone could really love his God!" We have a tendency to look at other religions in the light of Christianity, and thus we lose sight of the uniqueness of our religion. No other religion in the world is based upon a relationship of love between God and man; all others are founded upon fear and are practiced to serve and pacify the deity.

David affirms that the security God provides for him in this world of uncertainty is based upon love. God protects David because He loves him. Our love of God is a response to His love for us.

²⁵⁴ II Sam. 22:1-51; 23:1-7

²⁵⁵ I Sam. 20:3

²⁵⁶ Acts 17:28

²⁵⁷ Deut. 6:5

David makes a chain of nine pearls with the names he gives to God in the opening verses of this psalm. He calls God: “my strength, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my rock, my shield, horn of my salvation, my stronghold, my God.”

First: “my strength.” Jesus says: “Apart from me you can do nothing,”²⁵⁸ and the apostle Paul testifies: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”²⁵⁹ The vital issue of David’s testimony is that if anything of any lasting value is achieved in this world it is due to the strength that God provides.

David uses the word “my rock” twice. The first word in Hebrew is *sela*, which means a split rock, a place of shelter for men and animals. *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* says: “The Lord is my rock. I stand on him as my foundation, and derive every good from him who is the source of good. The word *cel^aiy* signifies those craggy precipices which afford shelter to men and wild animals where the bees often made their nests, and whence honey was collected in great abundance. ‘He made him to suck honey out of the rock,’ <Deut. 32:13>.” The second word means a rock that serves as a foundation, a place upon which man can build. The cleft rock, which is a shelter and a source of drinking water, represents the beginning of our life in Christ. He is the “Rock of Ages cleft for me; let me hide myself in Thee.” Jesus was the rock at Horeb, which Moses had to strike so water would come out and the people could drink.²⁶⁰ He also is the place where Moses was hiding when the glory of God passed by him,²⁶¹ and He also was the rock to which Moses had to speak to produce water, but where he sinned against God by striking the rock instead.²⁶²

Our spiritual life begins when we take refuge in the cleft rock, and then that same rock becomes the foundation upon which our life is built.

The rock and the fortress are also a pair that belong together. Fortresses are often built upon protruding rocks. They are defense posts that guarantee the safety of the land. There is no reason that we would become the prey of satanic power or of sin, since God is our fortress. Rock, as the foundation of our lives, fortress, as the defense of our lives and deliverer, as the one who pulls us out of the power of the enemy, all are pearls of the same string. The Hebrew word which is translated with “my God” in vs. 2 is *Eli*, which means, according to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, “my strong God.” The Hebrew word translated as “my rock” is *tsuri* in Hebrew. The KJV translates this with “my strength.” It is unfortunate that these different shades of meaning are not coming through clearly in English. TLB achieves some better nuances with its paraphrase: “The Lord is my fort where I can enter and be safe; no one can follow me in and slay me. He is a rugged mountain where I hide; he is my Savior, a rock where none can reach me, and a tower of safety. He is my shield.” The intent is that God is the source, not only of my existence, but of “every good and perfect gift.”²⁶³ Every word used in these opening verses speaks of safety, security and protection. If we look at the broader pictures of these verses, and we see the words love, protection, safety, impregnability, security, etc., we see the image of a marriage in which the husband provides these things for his wife.

David uses the word “shield” several times in his psalms. Elsewhere he says: “But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head.”²⁶⁴ There, David sees God as the shield that covers him to seal his pardon. In this psalm, David sees how God, so to speak, protects him with His own body against a gang of murderous enemies. God does this for those He loves and who respond to His love. Everything in this world is uncertain. People try to compensate for this uncertainty in various ways, some by carrying a gun, others by beefing up a savings account. All security outside God, however, is uncertainty. The writer of the Hebrew epistle shows us where the real safety in life is to be found. He says: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”²⁶⁵

The expression “the horn of my salvation” probably refers to the horns of the burnt offering altar, as is suggested by George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalms*. Strangely enough, nowhere in the Pentateuch do we find any mention of the function of the horns of the altar in reference to the protection of

²⁵⁸ John 15:5

²⁵⁹ Phil. 4:13

²⁶⁰ Ex. 17:6

²⁶¹ Ex. 33:21,22

²⁶² Num. 20:7-11

²⁶³ James 1:17

²⁶⁴ Ps. 3:3

²⁶⁵ Heb. 13:5,6

a person accused of a crime. The first reported instance of someone grabbing the horns of the altar is Joab, who was condemned to death by king Solomon.²⁶⁶ We do not know whether the idea that one would be saved by holding on to the horns of the altar was a matter of divine revelation or of superstition. This means that we cannot be sure that David had the horns of the altar in mind, when he called God “the horn of my salvation.” All the names for God David uses in vs. 2 to indicate the safety of his position can be summarized in the New Testament expression “in Christ.”

Verse 3 sounds like a spontaneous shout of victory: “I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.” The statement “the LORD, who is worthy of praise, [for] I am saved from my enemies” could have been written above this psalm as its title. This is an echo of the shout of victory we hear from the mouth of our risen Lord Jesus, when He said to John: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”²⁶⁷ This joy of our deliverance produces constant awe and reverence.

The words of vs. 5 and 6 reminds us of what David expresses in another psalm: “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, save me!’ ”²⁶⁸ Although Psalm 116 from which those words are quoted does not bear David’s name, it is obvious that both psalms are from David’s hand, or the author of that psalm quoted David. He realized that his life was in danger, and that death was about to catch up with him, and he was afraid. Any moment could be his last. The fear of death is a stronger cord than the feeling most people have at the actual moment of death would warrant. The devil manipulates this fear to the utmost. David uses words like “the cords of death,” “the torrents of destruction,” “the cords of the grave,” and “the snares of death.” The use of these words, especially “snares,” prove that man was, originally, not created for death. Death is our enemy, because it is against our nature to die. In this context, David does not speak as a man who is terminally ill, but as one who is afraid to be killed by one of his fellowmen. This, too, makes David an image of our Lord Jesus Christ. We could see in these verses a prophecy of our Lord’s agony in Gethsemane. Verse 6 fits into this picture; in Gethsemane Jesus called to the Lord God for help in his distress, and the Father heard His voice.

Verses 7-15 give an awesome description of the phenomena that accompany God’s intervention in answer to David’s prayer: there are “acts of God,” or natural disasters that occur. George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, believes that David quotes and adapts here an old Canaanite poem, which attributes mythological powers to a heavy thunderstorm. David’s adaptation of the poem would then consist of his exchanging the name of local deities with YHWH and Elohim. Archeological finds have confirmed the existence of such poetry. It is, of course, quite possible that David borrowed from other poets, but the possibility also exists that the pagan version of the poem is derived from the “Christian” original.

The question is: What does David mean with these words? Did such natural disasters literally take place in answer to David’s prayer, or did David give a description of God’s awesome power in terms of physical phenomena? We read nowhere that a great natural catastrophe took place in David’s days, such as the earthquake during the reign of King Uzziah,²⁶⁹ which was still remembered 200 years later in the prophecies of Zechariah.²⁷⁰ The absence of a record, however, proves very little. During the exodus of Israel from Egypt and the subsequent conquest of Canaan natural phenomena of tremendous proportions must have taken place that resulted in the drying up of the Red Sea, and the Jordan River, as well as the meteorite rain and the standing still of the sun. Veliskowski, in his book *Worlds in Collision*, has an interesting hypothesis which ascribes these happenings to the entrance of the planet Venus into our solar system. The fact that there is little or no documentation to support this thesis could mean that the facts were so well known in early history that no need was felt to write down the facts. If similar events took place during David’s life, they would have occurred on a smaller scale.

There are two possible explanations for David’s use of language: 1- David escaped death because of God’s intervention in nature at the precise moment when he prayed. 2- David draws a parallel between his own redemption and the redemption of the people of Israel in the days of Moses and Joshua, by speaking about God in terms of natural catastrophes. The latter would be a poetical scheme that is quite plausible.

²⁶⁶ I Kings 2:28-31

²⁶⁷ Rev. 1:18

²⁶⁸ Ps. 116:3,4

²⁶⁹ Amos 1:1

²⁷⁰ See Zech. 14:5

The latter would also be a tremendous experience, especially if the thunder storm burst loose immediately after David's prayer. David sensed that the wrath of God, as expressed in the earthquake of vs. 7, and the volcanic eruption in vs. 8, and the eclipse of the sun in vs. 9, the thunderstorm with severe lightning in vs. 13 and 14. The hurricane and flood in vs. 15 and 16, were not directed against him personally, but against his adversaries. Imagine the picture of someone who calls to God for help, and the whole of nature around him bursts loose, while he himself remains standing, "quietly among the raging waves."

In vs. 10 David describes God as mounted on the cherubim. In the midst of the awesome storm of all the elements of nature, David is aware of the presence of the Lord. In this he differs from Elijah, who did not recognize the presence of God in the earthquake and the fire. We read: "The LORD said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"²⁷¹ God, evidently does not reveal Himself in the same way to every one of His creatures. The character of His revelation may also depend upon the measure of our faith. Jesus speaks of faith that moves mountains. He says to His disciples: "You have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."²⁷²

God mounted on the cherubim is a representation of His revelation, as expressed in the cover of the ark. Initially, I think of spiritual mountains to be moved, like the one the prophet Zechariah addresses, the evil power that tries to obstruct the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The Lord addresses Satan through him, saying: "What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground."²⁷³ But Jesus may have thought of God's intervention in nature, such as when the sun stood still at the prayer of Joshua.²⁷⁴ But where do we find people who have this kind of faith? Did David have this kind of faith? Even if we take the vs. 7-15 literally, which I am very much inclined to do, we still have to interpret the "deep water" in vs. 16 as a picture of a human enemy, or at least as a human who is used by Satan. David speaks of his "powerful enemy" in the singular, which can mean that he spoke of Saul, or of Satan. After all, Saul was demon possessed. The essence of David's words is that he faced enemies that were stronger than he was; they were superior in strength, but God kept and protected him against them in a supernatural way. This throws a new light on the opening verses of the psalm in which God is pictured as a hiding place, a stronghold, and a fortress. If we take the poetry of this psalm literally, we end up with the strange paradox that supernatural assistance came to David by natural means. Skeptics would call this a coincidence. But coincidences often make the greatest miracles!

Had David only looked at his circumstances, he would have been completely stunned and bewildered. People hated him and tried to cut off every human way of escape. There was no hope for David on the horizontal level. But God reached down from on high and saved him vertically. When David finds himself in a spacious place, he experiences salvation both horizontally and vertically. Space is three-dimensional. The depth dimension is not God's supernatural intervention, but His love for David. "He rescued me because he delighted in me." Yet, David's experience, with all its awesome manifestations of God's might, is nothing in comparison with our salvation. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him."²⁷⁵ Christ's birth in Bethlehem was more earth shocking than all of the mighty phenomena of nature in this psalm.

The vs. 20-29 demand a New Testament interpretation. Superficially taken, it sounds as if David speaks about his own righteousness, and that he thinks he has a claim upon God's goodness on the basis of his own achievements. This would be in complete contrast, however, with the tone of amazement which sounds through the whole psalm. In the first place, we have to keep our eyes on to the fact that there is a strong prophetic vein that runs through the psalm. The subject is not, in the first place, David, but our Lord Jesus Christ. If David considers himself to be righteous and pure, it is because of the righteousness of Jesus

²⁷¹ I King 19:11-13

²⁷² Matt. 17:20

²⁷³ Zech. 4:7

²⁷⁴ See Josh. 10:12-14

²⁷⁵ I John 4:9

Christ which is in him. Nobody can say of David that he was perfectly pure and beyond reproach. Even David himself admits this. If a man comes to the point that his heart does not condemn him, it is because God is greater than his heart.²⁷⁶ The greater wonder is that God redeems us from ourselves, rather than that He saves us from our enemies. The poison within us is much more deadly than all the outward opposition combined. The fact that God justifies us is our greatest source of joy. It is also the basis of all other deliverances and victories. There is no victory over the powers of darkness and no answer to prayer if there is un-confessed sin in our heart.

The distinction we tend to make, between justification and the practice of holy living, is completely unknown in the Bible. David uses the terms righteousness and cleanness of hands as synonymous. We act what we are and we are what we act. The fact that God deals with us according to the righteousness and cleanness which He has bestowed upon us Himself is a miracle which we will, probably, never fully comprehend. It sounds so simple: "he has rewarded me," but if we pause and think about this, we come to the conclusion that what David says is an absolute impossibility, unless he speaks in terms of a punishment for certain sins committed. The opposite, however, is intended here. The fact that David repeats the phrase in vs. 24 suggests that he himself is amazed about this. God's righteousness is the basis; cleanness in David's life is the result; and the key to it all is obedience. This is brought out in the verses 21-23. Obedience to God's law, however, does not result in righteousness, as the Jews mistakenly thought; but the law leads us on the path of righteousness and keeps us from unrighteousness, once we possess the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Obedience is of the utmost importance in our fellowship with God. This is the more true since righteousness makes us partakers of the divine nature.²⁷⁷ He who disobeys God goes against the expression of God's character in his own heart, and he consequently hurts himself. Disobedience is unnatural. The law of God is written in our hearts.

It is clear from vs. 24 that David is not speaking about a supposed righteousness, since he uses the phrase: "in his sight." Paul states: "for we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing."²⁷⁸ Something must have happened in us inwardly if this is true.

Vs. 25 and 26 are also open to a wrong interpretation. God does not turn His back to us when we turn ours to Him. He is always faithful and blameless. Our wrong attitude towards Him does not bring about any change in His attributes. But if a man tunes in to God's wave length, and begins demonstrating signs of faithfulness and blamelessness, he will start to recognize those characteristics in God. It is therefore necessary that we become pure in heart, so that we may see God, as Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel.²⁷⁹ And the writer to the Hebrews admonishes us: "to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."²⁸⁰ The opposite, therefore, as we learn from verse 26, is not that God becomes impure and unfaithful, but "shrewd." The Hebrew word used for "shrewd" is *titpatata*, derived from *pathal*, which *Strong's Definitions* renders as to twine, i.e. (literally) to struggle or (figuratively) be (morally) tortuous. The KJV uses the word "froward" which could be rendered as "defiant." The gist of the statement is, obviously, that crooked people will find God to be their opponent.

The suggestion of vs. 27 through 29 is not that David was originally pure, and that he possessed righteousness, but that he was miserable and lived in darkness. By the grace of God he was changed from an ordinary man into a conqueror. "With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall," are the words of a man who is "high" on God. Such reckless boldness is caused by the fullness of the Holy Spirit, which causes him to believe that, with God, nothing is impossible. There is no record in the Bible which shows that David performed such acts of super-heroism. His confrontation with Goliath may have come close. He writes these words at the end of his life, when his own physical condition would have made such efforts impossible. The intent is to say, what Jesus says to His disciples on the subject of faith: "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."²⁸¹

In vs. 28 David says: "You, O LORD, keep my lamp burning." The KJV uses the more intimate terminology: "For thou wilt light my candle." The Hebrew word *niyr* is derived from *niyr* which simple means to shine. So the words candle, lamp, light are all appropriate translations, but the KJV evokes a more

²⁷⁶ I John 3:19-22

²⁷⁷ See II Peter 1:4

²⁷⁸ II Cor. 2:15

²⁷⁹ Matt. 5:8

²⁸⁰ Heb. 12:14

²⁸¹ Matt. 17:20

intimate and fragile atmosphere. Solomon uses the image of a golden bowl or a lamp, although the Hebrew word is different, describing the death of a man. “Remember him-- before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well.”²⁸² When man fell into sin, he was hurled into spiritual darkness and his fellowship with God was broken. God lit the candle again, and the Holy Spirit enables us to see again. Being reestablished in fellowship with God, we receive insight that delivers us from darkness. We are being freed from the grip the devil had upon our thinking. It is interesting to see that David uses the names Yahweh and Elohim in this connection, and even *Elohay*, which means “my God.” God is light. The fact that knowing he is connected to the eternal, almighty source of light, the one from which all light is derived, places him in an ocean of light. The best illustration of this phenomenon is, probably, the experience of the shepherds in Ephrathah. We read: “An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”²⁸³ No wonder David feels, all of a sudden, that he could advance against a troop and scale a wall; he had seen the light of God’s glory! How different is the biblical definition of “God’s candle” from that of Rationalism, which uses the same expression to indicate human reason, but which rejects God’s revelation in the Bible. This proves that the enlightenment of our lives has no value if we do not surrender our whole intellect and our whole heart to the love of God. This was the secret of David’s burst of energy.

Verse 31 opens a new stanza in which we find a digest of the pattern of David’s life. The conclusion is the personal testimony that God’s way is perfect, and the word of the LORD is flawless. In Hebrew poetry the two clauses are arranged as a parallel, making the one a synonym of the other. We only find God’s perfect way via God’s flawless Word. The Word is our guide on the way. David let himself be guided in his life by God, and looking back over his life, he realizes that what God has done in his life is perfect. This does not mean that there were no missteps or sins in his life, but those are to be put on the account of David’s disobedience, not on God’s guidance.

The verse is not only David’s testimony, it is also our challenge. It has a message for “all who take refuge in Him.” To come under God’s protection requires of us an act of personal surrender. In C. S. Lewis’ book *That Hideous Strength*, there is a Scot, a certain McPherson, who, according the Fisher King, had never put himself under the protection of Elaldil.²⁸⁴ In contrast, we find that giving up our independence is not too high a price for the protection and safety God gives us. God’s way, God’s Word, and God’s shield belong together like one trio in our lives. God’s way brings us to our destination, God’s Word shows us how to get there, and God’s shield keeps the enemy out and keeps us in fellowship with the Lord. As in a marriage, there is not only protection against dangers from the outside, and God’s shielding us from negative influences, but also we are sheltered in the intimacy of God’s love.

In vs. 31 David asks the question whether there is an alternative to God. “Who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?” This reminds us of Peter’s answer to Jesus. When Jesus asked the twelve disciples: “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”²⁸⁵ There is no alternative for those who have chosen. There is no Elohim besides YHWH! Elohim here is the name for the almighty Creator of heaven and earth, the source of all that lives and has existence. YHWH is the One who comes to man to seek him, to save him, and to bring him back to Himself. If we receive His revelation, we see the unity between the Creator and the Father. Again, David calls God the Rock. The Hebrew word for rock here is *tsuwr*, which is the place of refuge. David hides in the cleft of the rock which is also the foundation of his life. This rock is Christ, the Rock of Ages, cleft for us. The image suggests both reconciliation and rehabilitation. Remembering this, we have to ask the question anew: “Who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God?” Is there another God who was beaten and crushed in order to atone for the sins of the ones He had created? Which God ever became man in order to save men? The foundation of our lives is the cross of Christ. It is wonderful to see that David says so much more than he himself understood.

In verses 32-36 David says in other words what he had said earlier. The images express what God had done for David as a result of his fellowship with Him. Each of the images is a worthy topic for study. We have to remark, first of all, that nobody is more amazed about what has happened than David himself. He never considers it to be a matter of course that he had come to such a high position in this world. He recognized always that the power that had brought him there was God’s, not his. This is the secret of true

²⁸² Eccl. 12:6

²⁸³ Luke 2:9

²⁸⁴ The Name Lewis uses for God.

²⁸⁵ John 6:67,68

humility. It seems that David had less trouble understanding this principle than did the apostle Paul, to whom God had to give a thorn in the flesh in order that he might learn God's lesson.²⁸⁶

Vs. 32 reads: "It is God who arms me with strength." The KJV renders it, more correctly, with: "It is God that girdeth me with strength." The Hebrew word is *'azar*, which means literally "to belt." The picture is of a soldier who straps his arms around him. Paul uses the image in his letter to the Ephesians, when he says: "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist,"²⁸⁷ and David speaks of the belt of the strength of God. Both pictures remind us of the fact that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."²⁸⁸ This makes the miracle of our exaltation so much greater. A Christian does not only stand out above his fellowmen, but also above the spiritual forces that surround him.

When David says that God makes his way perfect, he does not mean that there are no bumps or hindrances. A perfect way is, not necessarily, a smooth way, but it is a way of life in which God gives the victory over the obstacles. During the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, after the Babylonian Captivity, Zechariah pictures the obstacles which the devil puts in the way to hinder completion of the project as a high mountain. He says: "What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of 'God bless it! God bless it!'"²⁸⁹ The Holy Spirit levels mountains that stand in the way to reach God's goal. The leveling of mountains is also a way of expressing the revelation of God's salvation and of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah speaks of "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'"²⁹⁰ In the preaching of John the Baptist those words are used for repentance of men, and the renewal of their lives. We read: "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.'"²⁹¹

David sees himself, in the power of the Lord, as a deer that is sure-footed, agile, and able to go where there is no path and to reach heights that are out of reach. The Holy Spirit endows men with gifts which enable them to do things which are above their natural ability. There is an irreconcilable contrast between the perfect, level way of the previous verse and the high rugged mountain paths in this one. Yet both images are one; they are both expressions of the same victory. Not every mountain becomes a valley. We have to cast the mountains of the devil into the sea, but God's mountains are there to be climbed.

There is a paradox in the phrase: "He enables me to stand on the heights." The Hebrew says literally "upon my heights." This suggests that David scaled those heights himself, but, obviously, he would never have reached them without the help of God. The plural "heights" also indicates that David had this experience more than once. This means that, after reaching the top, David had to descend again; yet the stress is not upon the valleys, but upon the summits, upon the panorama, the thin mountain air, the blue sky, and the exhilaration of reaching the goal. David knew the heights of victory, as well as the battle in the low places. Years later the Arameans found out that the God of Israel is the Lord of the hills and the Lord of the plains. When King Ben-Hadad of Aram lost the battle against Israel, we read: "The officials of the king of Aram advised him, 'Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they.'" Then a prophet told the king of Israel: "This is what the LORD says: 'Because the Arameans think the LORD is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the LORD.'"²⁹²

²⁸⁶ II Cor. 12:7-9

²⁸⁷ Eph. 6:14

²⁸⁸ See Eph. 6:12

²⁸⁹ Zech. 4:7

²⁹⁰ Isa. 40:3-5

²⁹¹ Luke 3:3-6

²⁹² I Kings 20:23,28

The “bronze bow” of vs. 34 is a hyperbole for an effort that requires enormous strength. Here too God gives strength, not only for the unusual experiences, but also for the routines of daily life. The bending of a bow is something to be learned by daily exercise. The power, here, is not a current of magical force, but the building up of muscle through regular use. Such is the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Supernatural strength and natural exercise are combined in the man who puts his faith in God.

Immediately following these demonstrations of power, David proceeds to confess his weakness. God’s shield of victory, and His sustaining right hand speak of a fragile life that needs support. A human being, also a man of God, is a bundle of contradictions. God’s victory is our shield. The fact that we are saved gives us the right to be protected from the Evil One.

When David says: “You stoop down to make me great,” he utters more than he understands himself. The Hebrew reads *w^anwataka tarbeeniy*. The word *’anvah*, from which *w^anwataka* is formed, is derived from *’anayv*, which the KJV translates “humble, lowly, meek.” So there is condescension, also in the rendering of the KJV, “thy gentleness hath made me great.” The fact that David speaks about things that go beyond his own understanding is typical for words that are written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. David could not have known how deeply God would stoop down, not only to make him great, but also to rehabilitate every human being who confesses his sin before Him. David could not have had any inkling about the humiliation of our Lord Jesus Christ at the cross of Golgotha. From our side, we ought to get more insight in the results for our lives of Jesus’ condescension, as expressed in His own words: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.”²⁹³ David realized that God had made him great, but he did not understand how; we, on the other hand, know how God did it, but we do not pause often enough to grasp the implications.

There is a difference between the broadening of the path in vs. 36 and the spacious place of vs. 19. In both cases a form of the Hebrew word *rachab* is used, meaning “an open space,” or, figuratively, “liberty.” In vs. 19 the context suggest a deliverance from defeat, and in vs. 36 it means victory. The roles have been reversed. From a man who was persecuted, David became one who chased his enemies.

If we interpret the verses 37-42 as a picture of the revenge one man takes upon another, the content becomes rather revolting to us. Christians often have problems when reading passages like these in the Book of Psalms . In reading through David’s biography in the Bible, however, we come to the conclusion that there are no episodes to be found that fit this description. Even the people who sought to kill David, among whom Saul was the most important figure, did not come to an end by David’s hand. To the contrary in both incidences in which it was in David’s power to kill Saul, he saved his life!²⁹⁴ In this way David inflicted upon Saul a more crushing defeat than if he had killed him. Saying these things, we repeat the assumption that, in these verses also, David does not refer to enemies of flesh and blood, but to the evil powers that manipulate man. The fact that, at certain times, David himself was the victim of satanic manipulation, does in no way diminish the reality of the victories he speaks about here.

There is a beautiful illustration of the principle that is evinced in David’s revenge upon Saul, in Tolkien’s book *Lord of the Rings*. At the end of the story the evil Sariman is sent away with a letter of pardon. Sariman confesses that it was much harder for him to accept this pardon than if he had received a severe punishment. Hell will be the place where man cannot bring himself to forgive himself. David inflicted the most crushing defeat to his enemies by heaping burning coals on their heads.²⁹⁵

The mention in vs. 41 that the Lord did not answer David’s enemies when they called is probably a reference to the last days of Saul’s life. At the last battle Saul fought, we read: “When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the LORD, but the LORD did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets.”²⁹⁶ If Saul, or anyone else of David’s enemies, had called upon the Lord with a sincere heart, they would have received a pardon; this would have meant a victory for David also. David would have lost all his enemies by making them his friends! Receiving God’s salvation is man’s ultimate defeat. A man who refuses God’s pardon destroys himself. In this victory David represents a clear image of his great Son: Jesus Christ.

The verses 43-45 describe another kind of victory: “the attacks of the people.” The Hebrew word used is *riyb*, which *Strong* defines as “to toss, i.e. grapple; mostly figuratively, to wrangle.” The KJV translates it “to strive.” *Brown-Driver-Briggs* gives the definitions: “1) to strive a) physically b) with

²⁹³ John 12:26

²⁹⁴ See I Sam. 24:2-21; 26:1-25.

²⁹⁵ See Prov. 25:21,22; Rom. 12:20

²⁹⁶ I Sam. 28:5,6

words; 2) to conduct a case or a legal suit, to sue; 3) to make complaint; 4) to quarrel.” The Good News Bible translate the phrase with: “You saved me from a rebellious people.” The idea of intrigue, or political manipulation cannot be excluded. David knew about court intrigue ever since the time he was king over Judah and Abner had made Ish-Boseth king over the other tribes of Israel. Even before that time, he himself had not been free from the tendency of manipulating people. Hoping this would sway people, David “sent some of the plunder to the elders of Judah, who were his friends, saying, ‘Here is a present for you from the plunder of the LORD’s enemies.’”²⁹⁷ But there came a point in his life where he rose above machinations. We conclude this from an incident that took place during his flight from his son, Absalom, when the priest Zadok came with the ark to accompany David on his flight. We read: “Then the king said to Zadok, ‘Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the LORD’s eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, ‘I am not pleased with you,’ then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him.’”²⁹⁸ God gave David the right perspective in regard to his kingship, so that he did not have to try to cling to it.

This principle is valid, not only in cases where we try to hang on to power, but for the whole complex of inter-human relationships, in which we tend to place the honor men give us to place above the honor that comes from God. In a prophetic sense, David’s word may be seen as pointing to Jesus’ confession before Pilate, when He said: “My kingdom is not of this world...” By saying this, Jesus Himself was delivered from “the strivings of the people,” and thus He became King of kings, and Lord of lords. In this deliverance, David recognized the secret of God’s way to reach genuine power and authority. He saw the trap into which most people fall, unless God helps them to escape. Strangely enough, most people recognize intuitively the difference between real greatness, which is derived from God, and the surrogate that comes from political intrigue and manipulation.

In the heart of each person there is a deep hunger for the real thing. David is the most amazed of all people, realizing that “people I did not know are subject to me. As soon as they hear me, they obey me; foreigners cringe before me. They all lose heart; they come trembling from their strongholds.” Who said: “If you build the perfect mousetrap the world will beat a path to your door?” This was the secret of John the Baptist, who drew the masses to the desert. And Jesus Himself says about His death on the cross: “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”²⁹⁹ Men do recognize true power when they see it; then men may be described: “they all lose heart; they come trembling from their strongholds.” If we, like David, become what God wants us to be, then our lives will have a positive and healing effect upon people around us; and we will never know how far our influence reaches.

In vs. 46-50 the psalmist ends as he began, with praise. “The LORD lives!” is a unique exclamation in the Old Testament. The expression serves here, in the first place, to indicate the contrast between God and idols, as Isaiah does so magnificently when he hears God say: “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.”³⁰⁰ Jeremiah also says: “But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King.”³⁰¹

David could not have known this, but the Holy Spirit probably used the exclamation “The LORD lives!” to point to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the source of all life, and it is highly ironic that the devil succeeded in adding a touch of deadness and dreariness to the concept of God which most people have. In comparison with God most people merely vegetate.

The words “The LORD lives!” also contain a thought of fellowship; He and we have this life in common.

Again, David praises God as his rock. This Hebrew word *tsuwr* is used several times in this psalm.³⁰² God is David’s refuge, but also the foundation and the high point of his life. All three elements are present in this image; they form the thread that runs through this psalm.

How can such a God be exalted? What can man add to the Most High? Strictly speaking, this is impossible; yet exalting God is a real possibility. Since we have been created to the glory of God, it is not senseless to add our glory to His. Adoration contains a paradox which we will probably never be able to solve. The fact that we are able to exalt God adds a special meaning and beauty to our lives. We have to

²⁹⁷ I Sam. 30:26

²⁹⁸ II Sam. 15:25,26

²⁹⁹ John 12:32

³⁰⁰ Isa 40:12-31

³⁰¹ See Jer. 10:1-16

³⁰² See vs. 2, 31 and 46

remember that sin did not leave God untouched. The fall of man did not diminish His glory, or stain His holiness, but it cost God everything to save man and creation by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Would our adoration, then, add nothing to God's glory and joy? David exalts God because He saved him and because God is David's salvation. The NIV says: "Exalted be God my Savior!" but other translations say: "Let the God of my salvation be exalted." The experience of salvation is the strongest stimulant to praise.

The word "avenge" opens up the text again to wrong interpretations. In the light of the preceding verses, we have to remind ourselves as to how David avenged himself upon Saul. The Old Testament, also, evinces the principle of heaping burning coals on an enemy's head. There is no difference between the New Testament principle of revenge and the one in the Old Testament. When the apostle Paul writes to the Romans: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good,"³⁰³ he quotes from the book of Proverbs. There we read: "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you."³⁰⁴ Both quotes affirm the fact that only God can wreak revenge. When David says in vs. 47: "He is the God who avenges me," he says the same as the writer to the Hebrews: "We know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.'"³⁰⁵ David's way of vengeance is best illustrated by his words to Abishai, when both were standing next to Saul who was asleep in the army camp: "Who can lay a hand on the LORD's anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the LORD lives, ... the LORD himself will strike him; either his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the LORD forbid that I should lay a hand on the LORD's anointed."³⁰⁶

Jesus took revenge upon His enemies by praying for them: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."³⁰⁷ We hear in David's words a note of abhorrence of violence. God did not save David from violent men to make him violent himself. His dislike for this kind of person is apparent in the psalm he wrote about Doeg, the Edomite, who massacred the priests of Nob.³⁰⁸ He wrote: "Why do you boast of evil, you mighty man? Why do you boast all day long, you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God? Your tongue plots destruction; it is like a sharpened razor, you who practice deceit. You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth. Selah."³⁰⁹ The salvation, revenge, and vindication he received did not come about because he met strong weapons with stronger weapons; actually, the opposite was true. He triumphed over Goliath with the most primitive weapon that could be found: a slingshot. Here the word could be applied that was given to the small group of Jews who saw themselves facing the overwhelming power of the Persian empire: " 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."³¹⁰

The fact that David testifies here to the power of the Holy Spirit does not mean that he never used human force. There is, however, a difference between the use of force and reliance upon force alone. It is the same difference as using money and putting one's trust in money. It is a strange paradox that David's reign was drenched in blood, but this does not diminish the fact that David himself was a man of peace.

Here also, the subject is not David in the first place, but David's son: Jesus Christ. Jesus' attitude towards violence is clear in His words to Peter in the garden of Gethsemane: "Put your sword back in its place, 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?"³¹¹ The Scriptures were fulfilled in the way Jesus accepted His suffering, the way He died and rose from the dead; it is the way these verses of Scripture from the hand of David were fulfilled also. Of course, David did not know this, but in the last two verses of this psalm he celebrates the resurrection from the dead. That which he experienced in his own life, which was an image of the reality, aroused in him the same joy that we sense through the resurrection of Christ. The essence of all praise is expressed in the hymn: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor

³⁰³ Rom. 12:20,21

³⁰⁴ Prov. 25:21,22

³⁰⁵ Heb. 10:30

³⁰⁶ I Sam. 26:9-1^a

³⁰⁷ Luke 23:34

³⁰⁸ See I Sam. 22:18

³⁰⁹ Ps. 52:1-3

³¹⁰ Zech. 4:6

³¹¹ Matt. 26:52-54

and glory and power, for ever and ever!”³¹² God’s glory reveals itself in the Lamb, that is in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is what David experienced by proxy in all the adventures and occurrences to which he testifies in this psalm. The subject is not only David’s personal experiences, but it is the Gospel which he preaches to all nations. What else can we read in vs. 49 than a prophecy regarding the evangelization of the whole world? “Therefore I will praise you among the nations, O LORD; I will sing praises to your name.” The goal of the preaching of the Gospel can be defined as: “Praise God among the nations.” The main purpose of evangelizing is not the salvation of souls, but the glory of God. Salvation of human souls is, in a sense, a by-product. That is why we ought to put the full stress in our preaching upon singing praises to the Name of God. This is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Romans: “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.’ Again, it says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.’”³¹³

The life of David and his experience with God can be summed up in the statement: “He gives his king great victories.” This is his personal testimony. Personal testimonies, however, have only meaning in as much as they reflect the facts of salvation as they are demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ. “His king,” “his anointed,” and “David” are all names given to our Lord Jesus Christ, and we are “his descendants.” David was aware of the fact that he was not the actual king of Israel, but that he reigned by the grace of God. In another psalm he states clearly that the Messiah would be the actual king. “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”³¹⁴

More than the fact that God had saved him personally from all dangers, the realization that he had played a role in the great events of his life, the meaning of which far surpassed the boundaries of his own existence and circumstances, must have been a source of great joy and satisfaction for him. The real meaning of our lives also lies in the fact that what we are and do is related to the person of God. We sing: “Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.” In David’s case this reality was so true, that centuries later, the prophet Ezekiel could say: “I [God] will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.”³¹⁵

³¹² Rev. 5:13

³¹³ Rom. 15:8-11

³¹⁴ Ps. 110:1

³¹⁵ Ezek. 34:23

PSALM NINETEEN

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*
- 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.*
- 3 There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.*
- 4 Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,*
- 5 which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.*
- 6 It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.*
- 7 The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.*
- 8 The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.*
- 9 The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.*
- 10 They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.*
- 11 By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*
- 12 Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.*
- 13 Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.*
- 14 May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.*

This psalm is one of the classics in the Book of Psalms . The first theme is that creation is one of God's means of revealing Himself. Together with the Psalms 8, 29, 33, and 104, this Psalm is an ode to nature. In Psalm 8 the poet looks up into the night sky. Psalm 29 draws a lesson from a thunderstorm. Psalm 33 recounts the process of creation, and Psalm 104 shows how God created and sustains His creation. In contrast with Psalm 8, we find ourselves in Psalm 19 in broad daylight. We can say that in Psalm 8 the light was turned off so that we would become aware of the universe in which we live. David took measurement of the relationships of all creation in order to demonstrate the smallness and the greatness of man. In this psalm we stand in the sunlight to be a witness to the marriage of the sun and the earth. The sun is the bridegroom and the earth is the bride.

The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote a beautiful short poem about the sun and its Creator. The free translation in English reads like this:

O, golden head of the happy sun,
Glorious, and every joyful source of life and energy;
Who projected and traced the path for your feet
in the blue expanse?

O noble sun, o mighty being,
visible envoy of Him who rules over all;
what am I, or what are you, beautiful one,
but a coat of arms on the Lord's shield?

Thus one recognizes the knights by their coats of arm
One sees his court, his house, his servants,
his glorious castle;
Thus one can divine in your jewelry,
o sun, who is your noble knight:
His name is - God!

But we are running ahead; the sun does not come up until vs. 4. In the preceding verses we are told what the message is that creation conveys to us. David does not have a primitive concept of the world. His universe does not have a square and flat earth with the sun walking around it. David sings an ode to the heavens and to space. He may not have known how huge the dimensions of space are, but our ideas of infinity are not much greater than his. We may become dizzy because we can see farther, but the fact that David wrote this psalm from the place where he stood on earth, and looked up from the perspective that was given to him, does not place him in a position of disadvantage. He looks into space from this earth, but what else can man do? Our greater knowledge of its expanse only increases the depth of this psalm.

“The heavens declare the glory of God.” The Hebrew word *Hashamayim* is, according to *Strong's Definition* a “dual of an unused singular *shameh*... meaning to be lofty; the sky (as aloft; the dual perhaps alluding to the visible arch in which the clouds move, as well as to the higher ether where the celestial bodies revolve).” Could it be that David knew there were many solar systems? He knew, evidently, that there were more starry skies than could be seen with the naked eye. He also knew where this all originated. He does not “talk rot,” as some modern scientists do, about the origin of space, as if this infinity had always existed. Some act as if the fact that heavenly bodies move away from each other with awesome speed would not leave any place for God in the universe. A man who cannot see the hand of God in the universe is too stupid to bear the name of man. He, who looks intelligently into space, does not only stand in awe when he understands that inert matter separates and joins together with incredible energy, but he recognizes the hand of the living God who made this. Isaiah says so beautifully: “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. ‘Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.’³¹⁶ Only one who is spiritually blind, and deaf, and dumb does not see the glory of God in the heavens. The words: “The heavens declare the glory of God,” answer the question whether God ought to have created or not created. God is glorified in what man can see of the universe.

The skies, or as the KJV translates it “the firmament,” is the visible arch of the sky, according to *Strong*. The medieval believers expressed this concept in the vaulted roofs of their cathedrals. The word firmament can be used as a primitive expression as for a roof above the world, or for the blanket of oxygen that surrounds the globe. Since Hebrew poetry uses parallels, the heavens and the firmament can either represent the same or each other's opposite. David may have meant the far away heavens and the heaven close by. The same Hebrew word *raqiya* is also used in the Genesis account of creation, where we read: “And God said, ‘Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water.’”³¹⁷

It is impossible for us to know how much knowledge David had of the universe, but we have to acknowledge that there is nothing incorrect in his description. Without firmament, that is without the protective layer of atmosphere that covers the earth, no life on our planet would be possible. The air we breathe, the blue of the sky, the clouds in their endless combinations of light, color, and shape, all speak a clear language and testify to God's handiwork. No thinking human being has an excuse; we cannot maintain that the universe is a haphazard and accidental combination of factors, and at the same time, proclaim ourselves to be rational human beings. We would have no reason to be proud to be human.

The testimony to God's honor by His creation leaves nothing unclear. “Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.” One day tells the story to the next in an endless stream of words, and the night preaches endless sermons to the following. The problem is more the abundance of information than the lack of it. Our sensitivity can be dulled by the sheer volume of testimony. The use of the words “speech” and “knowledge” indicate that there is a transmission of intelligent, understandable data. The fact that emphasis is put on wordless communication supposes that man may have an artistic appreciation of the content. The appeal to man's intelligence and to his emotions leaves us without excuse as far as the knowledge that God exists is concerned. That is why Paul can say: “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 men are without excuse.”³¹⁸ That is why some primitive tribes, like the mountain tribes in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, who lived in isolation for centuries, were able to preserve the knowledge of a Creator. It is only in the last two centuries of human history that something has gone wrong in man's concept of epistemology and all that is related to this; so

³¹⁶ Isa. 40:25-26

³¹⁷ Gen. 1:6

³¹⁸ Rom. 1:20

that some have come to the conclusion that nature has nothing to convey to us, and that the order of the universe has no meaning. I have to confess, however, that although I have always believed in God as Creator, I have only come to understand some of His glory in creation after I met Him in Jesus Christ, and received forgiveness of sin.

David chooses one example out of the multitude of proofs that the heavens declare the glory of God: "In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun." "He has pitched a tent ..." is probably an idiom, meaning the fixation of a place. God determined a certain place for the sun in its relationship to the earth. David does not describe this relationship in scientific terms; but we also speak about the rising and setting of the sun without being accused of being scientifically incorrect.

In poetical terms the sun is represented as a bridegroom who takes his bride. The soft sexual connotation of this image gives to this poem a tone of intense pleasure. The NIV renders the phrase with: "which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion." TLB paraphrases it beautifully with: "and moves out across the skies as radiant as a bridegroom going to his wedding." The KJV says: "Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber." The latter seems to be the closer to the Hebrew. The word for pavilion in Hebrew is *chuppah* which is derived from *chaphah*, meaning "to cover; by implication, to veil, to encase, to protect." It is translated variously as "chamber, closet, or defense." The implication seems to be that the sun is like a bridegroom after his wedding night. The context of the poem, however, suggests that the rising of the sun is like the entering of the bridegroom into the bride's chamber. The rising of the sun and the radiance of its light upon the earth is compared to the embrace of a bridegroom and bride and the intimacy of a wedding. There is exuberance, joy, power, and energy in the image of the bridegroom, and the champion running the race.

When we compare these words with the description of the same phenomenon by the writer of Ecclesiastes, we see that all the joy seems to be gone. King Solomon writes: "The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises," and "All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing."³¹⁹ In Ecclesiastes all the joy of the sunrise is gone, not because the sun had lost its splendor and majesty, but because the man who is out of fellowship with God, has also lost the gift to appreciate beauty, and to maintain the freshness of his appreciation. The sunrise has become "d  ja vu." For Solomon, who had a thousand wives, the image of the bridegroom who embraces his bride had lost its delight. Those who no longer wait upon the Lord and renew their strength, also lose the freshness of all other relationships. That is why so many marriages do not last.

The relationship between the sun and the earth is set forth in three points: 1. There is freshness and joy, as between the bridegroom and the bride. 2. There is an outburst of energy, as of the champion running the race. 3. There is absolute dominion: "nothing is hidden from its heat." The earth and all that lives on it owes its life to the sun. The image of the champion also speaks of victory. The Hebrew word used is *gibbowr*, which is derived from *gabar*, meaning "to be strong," or "to prevail." Most translations render it with "a strong man." TLB translates it with "an athlete." The joy of the sun is a song of victory: he captured the bride's heart, and he earned the golden medal.

Almost unnoticeably, David has drawn us away from the impersonal greatness of nature to the level of human experience of tenderness, love, competition, victory and joy. The orbit of the sun has been presented to us in images of various human relations; this makes the next step less enormous than it seems to be at first sight. To the casual reader, the transition from nature to the law seems to be a complete change from one subject to another, which are quite unrelated to each other. David demonstrates that people who believe this suffer from an optical illusion, and he shows that the law of the Lord is a logical next step on the same path the sun is traveling. Paul uses the same kind of language as David, when he says: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."³²⁰ The light is not the same, but God who makes it shine is the same God. As we said before, it is much easier to recognize God in creation, once we have met Him personally in Christ. Without this personal encounter, the recognition of God as Creator lacks depth and meaning. This personal relationship to the Creator expresses itself in our understanding of the law of God, and our obedience to it.

David uses six synonyms for the law: the law, the statutes, the precepts, the commands, the fear, the ordinances. All these synonyms are expression of the character of God. When we hear the word "law," we often think of a limitation. The law is a prohibition which makes us refrain from doing what we would

³¹⁹ Eccl 1:5, 8

³²⁰ II Cor. 4:6

like to do. It is a limitation of our freedom. We are spiritually poor people if we cannot come up with more than this negative definition. In the context of this psalm, the law of the Lord embraces also the whole complex of the laws of nature, as is apparent from the description of the orbit of the sun. It is true that some laws of nature put limitations on our freedom. The law of gravity is one example. But life on earth would be impossible without such laws. Man has no input into this kind of law; we cannot break them or change them, or prefer one above the other. The laws that are behind the verses 1-6 are the laws that govern creation; but the law which is the subject of the verses 7-10 is the law that governs human behavior. Man has the choice to obey or to disobey the moral law.

The word law is in the singular and comprises all the categories of rules and regulations. David says about this law, the one that governs the course of the universe, as well as the one that shows the way for man to lead a healthy, normal moral life, and helps him to act in an ethical way: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul." The first insight David gives us is that the law is an expression of God's character. God does Himself what He commands, and what the law forbids is also what God Himself does not do. God wants our acts to be a reflection of His being. He wants us to be holy because He is holy. The law is meant for man. David does not define law. As we have seen already, there are laws of nature to which the whole of creation is subjected, from the farthest star to the smallest atom. Man obeys those laws also. There is that part of the law, the moral law, which is limited to man alone, and which governs man's ethical behavior. This is mainly the part of the law that comes to mind when we speak about the law. It is the part that appeals to the image of God inside us. If, for instance, one human being eats another human being, he is no longer human in the full sense of the word. There are acts which are performed by humans which we call inhuman. Some acts are permitted for animals but prohibited to man.

Then there is that part of the law which we call ceremonial. Quantitatively, this is probably the larger part of the book of law. In most of its details, this law was meant for Israel alone, although in its essence the ceremonial law has a universal application. The purpose of the ceremonial law is to restore the fellowship between God and man which was broken by sin. From our perspective the ceremonial law precedes the moral law. As the Apostle John says: "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world."³²¹ The moral law, however, as an expression of God's character, is eternal. This is the law that revives the soul. In saying this, David admits that our soul needs revival, which, in turn, points to an unsatisfactory condition, which is the result of sin. The soul of the man who is aware of the abnormal condition in which he lives is revived by the confrontation with the life and character of God. The law of the Lord is to man what water is to a fish: it is the element in which he can live.

What can be confusing for us, New Testament Christians, when we hear the word "law" is that we think of Paul's dissertations about the subject in, especially, his epistle to the Romans and to the Galatians. We have to remember, however, that Paul reacted to the attitude of certain people who based their security upon a superficial keeping of the law instead of accepting the sacrifice of Christ for their sins. This diminishes in no way the fact that, for those who have found righteousness in Christ, the law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul. This is what Paul emphasizes in Romans, when he says: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."³²²

We should also remember that the word "law" is often used for the whole of the written Word of God. The Jews used the phrase "the law and the prophets" for the whole Old Testament. "The law of the Lord" for us, New Testament Christians, can mean the whole Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation. The study of the Word of God produces great revival of the soul. The psalmist says: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night."³²³ The Word of the Lord is the means "par excellence" to have fellowship with God.

The word "statutes," or as the KJV translates it "testimony," is the translation of the Hebrew word *eduwth*. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says about this word: "'Eeduwth, from `ad, beyond, forward. The various types and appointments of the law refer to something beyond themselves, and point forward to the

³²¹ Rev. 13:8^b

³²² Rom. 8:1-4

³²³ Ps. 1:1-2

Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Some understand, the doctrinal parts of the law.” The statutes are not a series of rules and regulations but, like the two Stone Tablets, a pointing to something that goes above the actual significance of the object. The Stone Tablets pointed to the glory of God, who gave them. The statutes are like a road sign, showing the direction a simple man should go in order to become wise. These signs are trustworthy. In the light of the “battle for the Bible” as it has raged in the last two centuries, the assurance David gives us here regarding the trustworthiness of the written Word, is a strong argument. A person who is dragged along by the suggestions of “Higher Criticism” is much less intelligent than he thinks. And he who “commits intellectual suicide,” as the saying goes, is smarter than it seems on the surface.

Vs. 8 says further: “The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.” Other renderings are: “The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (KJV). The Hebrew word translated with “radiant,” or “pure” is *baaraah*, which is a form of *bar*. The literal meaning of this, according to *Strong’s Definitions* is “beloved, also pure, empty.” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* takes the word as a verb, or as a predicate, and says: “[Is pure] From *baaraah*, to clear, cleanse, purify. All God’s commandments lead to purity, enjoin purity, and point out that sacrificial offering by which cleansing and purification are acquired. This is ITS character.” The idea seems to be that God’s commands are unadulterated; they are “the real thing”; they are the truth. We rarely make a connection between commandments and truth. Commands are given to be obeyed. The New Testament speaks about obeying the truth. Peter says in his first epistle: “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.”³²⁴ By disobeying we move into the realm of the lie, and we move away from reality. That is why obedience is the key to joy. A man who understands reality in fellowship with God will also share in the joy of the Lord. There is no such thing as blind obedience in the Bible. In the early stages of our spiritual life, it may seem to us that God demands obedience “because He says so.” But we will discover that, the more we obey unconditionally, the more God will show us the “why” of His commands. “The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.”

Commands and precepts are, of course, synonyms. The Hebrew word for command, *mitsvah*, is in the singular, as if obedience would be a matter of one thing only, instead of obeying a whole complex of commandments. The singular form accentuates the purity of the law. There are no foreign elements mixed in it. The whole content of the law and the prophets can be reduced to one simple truth, as expressed in Jesus’ words: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”³²⁵ And to Mary’s sister, Martha, Jesus said: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”³²⁶ God simplifies our life by reducing His demands to only one thing, that is to love Him. Every aspect of our lives can be measured with this requirement. True wisdom demonstrates itself in the ability to reduce a complex problem to its simplest expression. That is why seeing the will of God will enlighten the eyes. We increase in wisdom if we can focus on the essential in every situation of our lives.

The phrase “the fear of the Lord” seems to be out of tone with the rest of this list of synonyms of the law. We can hardly say that “the fear of the Lord” is an expression of God’s character. It describes more the reaction of man in a confrontation with God’s character. According to *Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, the Hebrew word *Yir’at* comes from *yaare’* “to fear, to venerate; often put for the whole of divine worship. The reverence we owe to the Supreme Being.” We could read, therefore, “the worship of Yahweh is pure, enduring forever.” This does not mean to say that the motives of those who worship God are always pure, but the worship as such, in the objective sense of the word, not what man experiences subjectively, is pure. We read in Revelation about the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders who render pure worship to God. We read: The living creatures “never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for

³²⁴ I Pet. 1:22

³²⁵ Matt. 22:37-40

³²⁶ Luke 10:41-42

you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’³²⁷ We should model our worship on this worship in heaven. In this sense, we can see that the fear of the Lord would be an expression of God’s character, because it is a manifestation of His glory. We find the last of the synonyms for the law in vs. 9^b: “The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.” “Righteous” here is, of course, a parallel to “right” in vs. 8. There, however, the precepts were placed against the subjective background of our human experience; here the subject is the absolute measure of God’s righteousness. Everything that is not in accordance with the character of God is unrighteous. This absolute feature is expressed in the law of the Lord. Every human being has enough sense of righteousness to be able to determine whether something is righteous or not.

What is said in vs. 10: “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb,” can be said about the whole complex of the law as an expression of God’s character. The law is written in a human language, and, as such, it is not perfect. God is perfect. The written law approaches this perfection. David says about this imperfect perfection that it surpasses everything that stands for riches and wealth in this world. God’s law is “more precious than gold than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.” Gold represents possession and honey enjoyment. He who knows the law of God and applies it to his life is richer than a millionaire and enjoys life to the full. The Apostle John says: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”³²⁸ Some people believe that obeying God’s Word prevents a person from enjoying himself in life; David demonstrates here that this philosophy is nonsense. The opposite is true: real joy of living is only found in fellowship with God, and the key to this fellowship is obedience in love, and the proof of love is obedience.

David bows before the Word of God and subjects himself to it. The touchstone of our fellowship with God is in what we do with His Word. Jesus says: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”³²⁹ And elsewhere He says: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”³³⁰ We need the admonition and warning of the Word of God, because our tendency to sin is never far away. Only obedience to the revealed will of God will keep us on the right track. We need to have this minimal amount of self knowledge to realize that, without the Word of God, we would not make it.

The great reward of obedience is the experience of God Himself in Christ. Paul says: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.”³³¹ God says to us what He said to Aaron: “You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.”³³² We are His and He is ours. This “great reward” surpasses our wildest imagination. The psalmist says: “You are my portion, O LORD; I have promised to obey your words.”³³³ And Jeremiah writes: “I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’”³³⁴ Peter adds to this: “Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”³³⁵

Vs. 12 is difficult to understand: “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.” *The Hebrew Interlinear Bible* says literally: “Errors who can understand? Cleanse thou me from secret.” TLB paraphrases the verse well by saying: “But how can I ever know what sins are lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults.” The intent is, obviously, that man is blind to his own faults. We do not know our own hearts. We are so clever in hiding our motives, even to ourselves, that we can be caught in our own nets. Our own heart deceives us. Jeremiah says: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Because of the self deception to which we fall prey, it is imperative that we are confronted with the law of God on a daily basis. David invites the Holy Spirit to penetrate into the recesses of his heart and to clean them out.

³²⁷ Rev. 4:8-11

³²⁸ I John 2:17

³²⁹ Luke 6:46

³³⁰ Matt 7:21

³³¹ Col 2:9,10

³³² Num 18:20

³³³ Ps. 119:57

³³⁴ Lam. 3:24

³³⁵ II Pet. 1:4

Part of the problem is arrogance. Vs. 13 says: “Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me.” The words “willful sins” are the translation of the Hebrew *mizeediym*, which has as root the word *zed*, which in turn is derived from *zuwd*. *Strong’s Definitions* render it with “arrogant,” or “to be insolent.” The word “sins” is not in the original. The KJV translates the verse with: “Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins.” So we could take the phrase to mean: “Keep your servant from arrogance, or from presumption.” The root of the problem, as David realizes correctly, is the human will. Presumption, arrogance, or willful sins all speak of more than human weakness or giving in to temptation; there is resistance and rebellion in man’s heart that has to be dealt with. David confesses that there are sins in his life that he is not willing to give up, but he asks the Lord to change his will.

We are not even the master of our own will. Rebellion against God’s authority over our lives presupposes human freedom. A man who does not recognize God’s rule, however, becomes the slave of his own rebellion. Jesus says this clearly in John’s Gospel: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. . . . So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”³³⁶

In the previous psalm David had said: “The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD; I have not done evil by turning from my God. All his laws are before me; I have not turned away from his decrees. I have been blameless before him and have kept myself from sin. The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight. To the faithful you show yourself faithful, to the blameless you show yourself blameless.”³³⁷ There is no contradiction between “my righteousness” there and David’s confession of “hidden faults” here. The righteousness that saves our souls comes from outside us, and reaches us via the Word of God. James says this in his epistle: “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”³³⁸ Arrogance is the result of a lack of self knowledge. David demonstrated this kind of arrogance in his sin with Bathsheba. He had reached a point in his life where he thought that he was above the law of moral conduct that governed the behavior of other people. The power of his royal position had blurred his vision and corrupted his moral awareness. We are in grave danger if we think that we are immune to certain temptations. The illusion that our status in life and our own character are enough to protect us against sin is a certain guarantee of our downfall. We will only keep the right track if we put our trust on “Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.”³³⁹ David’s prayer in vs. 13 is very relevant for our time and day.

We do not know if David prayed this prayer before his sin with Bathsheba or after. These may be the words of a man who had deep scars of sin in his soul.

The last verse of this psalm is almost opposite to the previous one. In vs. 13 David spoke of a moral crisis, of willful sin. Daily life usually does not consist of a string of gross misbehavior, but of small inconsistencies. The Song of Solomon says: “Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.” Our walk with God is determined by the small things in life. David penetrates to the core of man’s problem when he says: “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Man may be able to tame his tongue up to a certain point, although this is hard enough, according to James. But in the meditations of our hearts, those thoughts that others cannot see or hear, we betray our true self.

David establishes a direct link between the meditations of his heart and the words of his mouth by using them as poetical parallels. He knows that his words will be pleasing in the Lord’s sight only if his heart has been cleansed by God. Jesus restates that truth when He says: “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”³⁴⁰ Our motives and meditations are not naturally pure. Only if our lives are filled with the Holy Spirit can we come to the point where God can be genuinely pleased by

³³⁶ John 8:34, 36

³³⁷ Ps. 18:20-25

³³⁸ James 1:21

³³⁹ Jude 1:24

³⁴⁰ Matt. 12:34-37

what we think and feel in the innermost parts of our hearts. The means God uses for this cleansing and filling is His Word in our hearts.

Thus the link is established between this outpouring of David's secrets and the rest of this psalm. If we occupy ourselves with God's revelation of Himself in both creation and in the law, our lives will be purified. If we know ourselves, it is hard for us to imagine that God could really be pleased with what is hidden deeply within our hearts. That is the reason that David sends up this prayer; for without help from the outside, we will not be able to gain the victory over ourselves. Being pure in heart is an answer to prayer.

Is the last line of this psalm out of line with the rest of the psalm? The God who created heaven and earth, and who revealed Himself to man in His Word, becomes the foundation of our lives. Creation, with man at its center, is fallen and needs redemption. It is easy to miss this point, for David almost casually says: "O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer." But that is the theme of this psalm. Man and creation are fallen, and God redeems both.

PSALM TWENTY

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1** *May the LORD answer you when you are in distress; may the name of the God of Jacob protect you.*
2 *May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion.*
3 *May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. Selah*
4 *May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed.*
5 *We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the LORD grant all your requests.*
6 *Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed; he answers him from his holy heaven with the saving power of his right hand.*
7 *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.*
8 *They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.*
9 *O LORD, save the king! Answer us when we call!*

This psalm has the subscript: "A psalm of David." It is quite possible that David wrote this psalm himself, but we get the impression that it was written for David. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* gives us a whole mise-en-scène, in which all who are participants in the psalm are in the court of the tabernacle. In his commentary we read: "It is most likely that this Psalm was penned on the occasion of David's going to war; and most probably with the Ammonites and Syrians, who came with great numbers of horses and chariots to fight with him. See <2 Sam. 10:6-8; 1 Chr. 19:7>. It is one of the Dialogue Psalms, and appears to be thus divided: Previously to his undertaking the war, David comes to the tabernacle to offer sacrifice. This being done, the people, in the king's behalf offer up their prayers; these are included in the three first verses: the fourth was probably spoken by the high priest; the fifth, by David and his attendants, the last clause, by the high priest; the sixth, by the high priest, after the victim was consumed; the seventh and eighth, by David and his men; and the ninth, as a chorus by all the congregation." From a New Testament perspective we may see this psalm applied foremost to Jesus Christ.

In the psalms of David it is not unusual that David speaks about another person, as if he is separated from himself, and yet he speaks about himself. We see this, for instance, in Psalm 110. David must have been aware that he spoke about matters that were beyond him, and about persons who were higher than he was, but with whom he was closely connected.

It is also possible that this song was composed for David's son, Solomon, at the moment of his ascension to the throne, but there is no internal evidence of this. The psalm is general in tone. "The day of trouble," (the NIV says: "when you are in distress"), is not a day that has already arrived; it is somewhere in the future.

Days of trouble appear in everybody's life. This psalm, therefore, has a wide application. We can pray this psalm as a prayer for many of our loved ones. The text suggests strongly that there is love for the person who is addressed. The one who prays wants his son to learn the secret of prayer, so that he will know where to turn in "the day of trouble." We can teach our children all kinds of things, except intimacy with God; they will have to learn that by themselves. This psalm is a prayer that I have prayed this for my own sons. If we really love our children, their spiritual life and their relationship with God will be our greatest concern in our intercession for them. We cannot leave them a better present than the example of our own constant, intimate fellowship with the Lord. If we ask in prayer for our children what we do not possess ourselves, our prayers are, of course, without much value. God guarantees that He will hear this kind of prayer. By the mouth of Asaph He says: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."³⁴¹ That is one of the reasons that God permits days of trouble to appear in our lives.

"The name of the God of Jacob" stands both for the character of God, as well as for our own miserable condition. Intentionally, God is not called "the God of Israel" here, that is the God of him who wrestled with God and who was victorious. God identifies himself with the one who grabs people's heel to trip them, the one who cheated others, and himself most of all. Jacob was the man who begged for God's grace, and so he conquered himself.³⁴² God is the God who forgives our deceit, and who adds His Name to ours. The Apostle Paul says: "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we

³⁴¹ Ps. 50:15

³⁴² See Hosea 12:4

might become the righteousness of God.”³⁴³ Through forgiveness of our sins we become partakers of the Name of God, that is of His character; that is what makes us impregnable. The NIV says: “May the name of the God of Jacob protect you.” The KJV reads: “The name of the God of Jacob defend thee.” The Hebrew word translated with “protect” is *sagab*, which is defined by *Strongs* as “to be (causatively, make) lofty, especially inaccessible; by implication, safe, strong; used literally and figuratively.” *The Brown Driver Brigg’s Definition* gives: “to be high, to be inaccessibly high.” We will be impregnable in the day of trouble because the Name of the Lord has been given to us as a protection. Ultimately this Name will be ours. John says in Revelation about the servants of God: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”³⁴⁴ Thus we will be completely identified with the Person and character of God, because He will be “all in all.”³⁴⁵ When the character of God will become visible in us, the Evil One will have lost his grip on us completely, as he had no hold on the man Jesus Christ. Jesus said to His disciples: “The prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me.”³⁴⁶

In vs. 2 the poetical parallel is interesting: “May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion.” David had built his house on Mount Zion. Ever since that time Zion has become symbolic for heaven itself. Zion represents the miracle of God’s revelation on earth. As far as David was concerned, God lived in his home and sat on the throne of the universe in his house.

The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary says about Zion: “Originally the rock escarpment on the ridge between the Kidron and the Tyropeoean valleys of Jerusalem. Subsequently the term was widened to include the entire western ridge of early Jerusalem. Centuries later the term was applied to the entire city <Ps. 126:1; Isa. 1:26-27>. By the fourth century the name of Zion was adapted to the southern portion of the western hill.” In this psalm Zion is identical to the sanctuary. The fascinating feature of this psalm is that David mixes everyday life on earth with the supernatural in the use of the name Zion and the sanctuary. This suggest that the ordinary life of God’s children is supernatural by nature.

In vs. 3 the Hebrew uses two different words for sacrifices and burnt offerings. The first is *minchah*, which *Strong’s* defines as “a donation; euphemistically, tribute; specifically a sacrificial offering (usually bloodless and voluntary);” the second is *olah* which literally means something ascending, like a flight of stairs, or something going up in smoke, “usually a holocaust.” The word *minchah* is used in Leviticus for a grain offering. *Olah* is mainly used for a bloody sacrifice, which had to be consumed completely by the fire on the altar.

The Adam Clarke Commentary says about the *Olah*: “OLAH and OWLAH, BURNT-offering, from *aalah*, “to ascend,” because this offering, as being wholly consumed, ascended as it were to God in smoke and vapor. It was a very expressive type of the sacrifice of Christ as nothing less than his complete and full sacrifice could make atonement for the sin of the world. In most other offerings the priest, and often the offerer, had a share, but, with the whole burnt-offering, all was given to God.” Neither of these sacrifices was directly connected with the issue of sin, although Adam Clarke mentions the atonement for the sin of the world in the above quote. The grain offering was a symbol of man’s surrender of his life as the bearer of God’s image to his Creator; the burnt offering was the expression of divine love, as is demonstrated in the surrender of the Son to the Father. We should therefore see this psalm, in the first place, as a prophecy about the offering of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, made of Himself to the Father, as the First Person. In that sense, this psalm is an intercessory prayer by David for his Son, in the deepest meaning of the word.

We do not know what David felt as he wrote this poetry. We do not even know if he wrote these words for the benefit of his son Solomon; but he must have felt a special kind of excitement, caused by the Holy Spirit, because he surely must have sensed intuitively that what he wrote went far beyond his own comprehension. Every love a father experiences for his son is, in a way, an expression of God’s love for Jesus. How much deeper must David have felt this love, since Jesus was, in fact, his own Son.

We could say that this psalm of David was a first edition of this kind of poetry, to which we can relate also. What more can we pray for our children than that they will learn to understand the secret of surrender to God, and the fulfillment of their beings in the love of the Father?

The fact that the grain offering and the burnt offering, which are sacrifices that are not directly linked to sin, are specifically mentioned is an indication that, at this point, the problem of sin has been

³⁴³ II Cor. 5:21

³⁴⁴ Rev. 22:4

³⁴⁵ See I Cor. 15:28

³⁴⁶ John 14:30

taken care of. The son, who is the object of this intercessory prayer, has already taken the first steps on the road of salvation. The father does not pray for his son's salvation, but for the completion of his relationship with God through the surrender of his body to the Lord, and the denial of self because of his love for the Father. Blessed is the father who desires such things for his son!

We always tend to think of the worst when we realize that surrender to God means giving up our own ambitions. God had said to Moses: "The burnt offering is to remain on the altar hearth throughout the night, till morning, and the fire must be kept burning on the altar."³⁴⁷ But ambitions that are surrendered to God have a tendency to rise from the dead. Otherwise David could not have said: "May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed." It is only after we have decided that our desires and our plans have to be surrendered to the Lord, that He can trust us sufficiently to give us the desires of our hearts and make our plans succeed. Jesus' words: "ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you," would endanger our very lives if our desires and plans were not sanctified. That is why the Lord said: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."³⁴⁸ This sanitizing of our desires and plans is the immediate result of our bringing of the grain offering and the burnt offering. If we really love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength,³⁴⁹ our desires and plans will be motivated by this love. God will make our plans succeed because they are His plans. The first psalm says about the man who loves God, who delights in the law of the LORD, and meditates on his law day and night: "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."³⁵⁰ Both verses say basically the same thing. Also the words "desire of your heart," the "plans" in vs. 4 and "request" in vs. 5 carry the same meaning. There is also the mention of a victory in this last verse, but it is not specified on whom victory is gained. In the light of the preceding thoughts, where, as we saw, there is a psychological struggle about the desires, plans, and requests, we could say that the victory is, in the first place, a victory over self. It seems suicidal to put our ambitions on the altar, but God does not deal in dead souls; He wants the surrender of our will, our mind, and our emotions so He can trust us. We will discover that, once we have put our all on the altar, we will have more initiative and will become more creative than we were before.

But victory does, of course, not apply to victory over self alone. We may be our own worst enemy; we are not the only one. Our most powerful opponent is the devil, who tries to manipulate our ego. He tries to blackmail us. Once we have put ourselves on God's altar, the devil will have lost most of the ground needed for this blackmail. When Paul says: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,"³⁵¹ he puts "flesh and blood" on the second place in our struggle; he acknowledges their existence.

Where the NIV says: "We will shout for joy when you are victorious," the KJV translates: "We will rejoice in thy salvation." The Hebrew word is *yeshuv`ah*, which *Strong's* defines as: "something saved, i.e. (abstractly) deliverance; hence, aid, victory, prosperity." Salvation is also a kind of victory, but the word suggest that the person was attacked by someone else and that the attacker was defeated. The intercessor rejoices in the answer to his prayer.

In the statement "We will shout for joy when you are victorious," the intercessor is put in the plural. It may be that David uses the *pluralis majestatis* of his royal status. But it is also true that one never prays alone. In the first place, there is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us and through us. Paul says in Romans: "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will."³⁵² Also, God wants us to function as members of His body as we pray and intercede for others. Thus, the joy of answered prayer is a shared joy. Jesus says that the outcome of prayer is joy. "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."³⁵³ In this psalm joy demonstrates itself in the form of a victory parade, a march with banners to the glory of God.

³⁴⁷ Lev. 6:9

³⁴⁸ John 15:7

³⁴⁹ See Deut. 6:5

³⁵⁰ Ps. 1:3

³⁵¹ Eph. 6:12

³⁵² Rom. 8:26-27

³⁵³ John 16:24

A banner symbolizes honor and glory; it exemplifies participation in the war; it stands for the identity of the army. The capture of a banner by the enemy means a moral defeat for the whole battalion. The victory, or salvation, of the one who is the object of the intercessory prayer is a great stimulus for the intercessors. They experience great joy when they see their prayers answered; so they break out in shouts of joy, and lift up their own banners in the Name of God.

Just as we are not alone in our praying, so we are not alone in our warfare either. The battle in which the son is victorious is also the battle in which the father participates. We may not carry the same banners, but we face the same enemy. The banners may be different, but they are all lifted up in the Name of the same God. After all, the battle is His, not ours. The victory of the one is the encouragement of the other. This keeps the battle going and it secures the victory.

It seems as if “the desires” of vs. 4 and “your request” in vs. 5 are identical, but a closer look reveals that there is a difference between the victory and what follows. There is a suggestion in “May the LORD grant all your requests,” that the desires of one’s heart are only met in the Person of God Himself. Our deepest desires are never satisfied with objects, but only by the Lord Himself.

Vs. 6 opens with: “Now I know that the LORD saves his anointed.” Our intercession for others will evoke an unshakable assurance in our own hearts. There is nothing more edifying to our faith than to see our prayers for others answered. Faith is not a leap in the dark. Not only are the facts of salvation reliable, but there are also personal experiences of answered prayer upon which we can fall back; our experience proves to us that God does not leave or forsake us.

Vs. 6 is still part of the prayer, which is the topic of the first section of this psalm; but there is a breakthrough of joy and praise in this verse as a proof of the presence of faith that grasps the promise, as if the request had already been granted. This is the attitude Jesus advises us to take when He says: “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”³⁵⁴

In vs. 6 the request has, in fact, been granted; God has answered and He has acted. The phrase: “Now I know ... does not speak of a vague hope but of certainty. David knows for a fact that God saves and gives the victory. Again the KJV translates the word *howshiya`* with “to save.” TLB renders the phrase with: “ ‘God save the king’-- I know he does!” God has given salvation to the son, at the request of his father. In vs. 1 David had prayed for his son: “May the LORD answer you when you are in distress,” in vs. 6 he concludes that God has already answered his prayer. The implication is that the son has learned to pray himself, and that he has seen his prayers answered. Intercession has brought about life!

The answers come from the sanctuary, from Zion. Like the father before, now the son too, has entered into a personal relationship with the living God. It started when he saw his father pray and receive answers. This example stimulated him, and he learned to ask and to receive from God. Being a praying parent is the greatest gift a parent can give his child.

The Hebrew says literally “with the strength of saving,” or, as the KJV translates it “the saving strength.” The word is pregnant with meaning. Other versions, such as the RSV, render it, “mighty victories,” or TLB, “great victories.” These “acts of salvation” are closely related to the facts of salvation, which are events in the life of Jesus upon which our salvation is based. If we see this psalm as a prophecy, as prayer by David for the Son of David, it would be very appropriate to draw this line. God’s great acts of salvation are particularly the resurrection and the ascension of our Lord. Upon those facts are founded our salvation and our sanctification. It is only natural that we would want to shout for joy and lift up our banners in connection with those facts.

As he looks up, David sees what the people who threaten him put their trust in. Horses and chariots have taken various forms throughout the centuries. During World War II Churchill and Stalin conferred together about strategies to counter the attack of Nazi Germany. Churchill mentioned the influence of the Pope in the affairs of the world, to which Stalin retorted: “The Pope, how many divisions does he have?” The words God spoke through the prophet Zechariah have never lost their power: “ ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”³⁵⁵ A man, who trusts in chariots and horses, or in nuclear arms, ultimately puts trust in himself alone. Books could be filled about the psychology of trusting in chariots and horses. World history is filled with samples of this mentality, and so it is in our own time. But there are also examples of people who put their trust in the Name of the Lord their God. Prince William of Orange, the founder of the house of Orange, the father of the Netherlands, stated that he had made a covenant with the Potentate of all potentates. It is to this covenant that the

³⁵⁴ Mark 11:24

³⁵⁵ Zech. 4:6

Netherlands owes its existence as a nation. David, as a young man, evinced this attitude, and put it into practice when he said to Goliath: “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.”³⁵⁶ According to Paul’s words to the Corinthians, boasting in the Lord means to be in Christ Jesus, “who has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’”³⁵⁷

Trusting or boasting in the Name of the Lord God means confessing His attributes. It also implies that we are partakers of the divine nature. Boasting in the Name of Yahweh Elohim makes a man invincible, and it protects him, as David says in vs. 1. In practice it means the difference between being brought to our knees and falling, or rising up and standing firm. The word “rise up” implies that the man of God is not immune against stumbling. The difference between a believer and an unbeliever is not in the sustaining of injuries, but in the falling or rising. The Flemish poet, Guido Gezelle wrote: “One stumbles, and is wounded often and seriously....” The way of the man without God leads downward. David uses the words “brought to their knees and fall.” The way of the man of God leads upwards: “rise up and stand firm.” To stand firm means to maintain the position in the conquered territory. Jesus Christ gave us the victory. It is not required of us that we bring down the devil, but God wants us to maintain what was given to us. Victory is God’s gift to us; it is not our achievement. God gives victory to the king.

We assume that the king here is the son of David for whom this prayer was prayed. “Answer us when we call!” can be interpreted in two different ways. The KJV says: “Save, LORD: let the king hear us when we call.” People who receive answers to their prayers from God ought to answer the prayers of others also. Those who receive a blessing should become a blessing.

³⁵⁶ I Sam. 17:45

³⁵⁷ I Cor. 1:30,31

PSALM TWENTY-ONE

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1 O LORD, the king rejoices in your strength. How great is his joy in the victories you give!**
2 You have granted him the desire of his heart and have not withheld the request of his lips. Selah
3 You welcomed him with rich blessings and placed a crown of pure gold on his head.
4 He asked you for life, and you gave it to him-- length of days, for ever and ever.
5 Through the victories you gave, his glory is great; you have bestowed on him splendor and majesty.
6 Surely you have granted him eternal blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence.
7 For the king trusts in the LORD; through the unfailing love of the Most High he will not be shaken.
8 Your hand will lay hold on all your enemies; your right hand will seize your foes.
9 At the time of your appearing you will make them like a fiery furnace. In his wrath the LORD will swallow them up, and his fire will consume them.
10 You will destroy their descendants from the earth, their posterity from mankind.
11 Though they plot evil against you and devise wicked schemes, they cannot succeed;
12 for you will make them turn their backs when you aim at them with drawn bow.
13 Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength; we will sing and praise your might.

God is addressed in this psalm. The question is, who addresses Him? “The king” who speaks is referred to in the third person, as if someone else speaks about him. In some Asian cultures it is not uncommon that someone uses the third person singular when speaking about himself. The use of the word “I” is deemed improper. It is, therefore, quite possible that David speaks here about himself. In a sense, though, he also speaks about God, because God, and what God has done for him is the subject of this psalm. Yet, at the same time David reveals some very interesting features about himself. We read just as much about God as about David in this psalm.

The use of the third person singular gives to this psalm the character of importance and royal dignity. The person speaking knows himself to be subjected to the authority of God, but he speaks as someone who has honor and dignity, and as one possessing royal power. Those features are inherent to his relationship with God. This is what makes this psalm so closely related to the previous one. In Psalm Twenty the subject of the psalm learned how to enter into fellowship with God; here this fellowship has become a daily reality, which has elevated the psalmist to royal dignity. The Apostle John reveals this in his doxology in Revelation, when he says: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-- to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”³⁵⁸ In the final analysis, this psalm is, of course, a prophecy about our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. This explains the fact that David speaks, simultaneously, about himself and about someone else.

A sinful man rejoices about power, as if it is something that originates from within himself. A person, who loves God, rejoices in God’s power, and he acknowledges and recognizes that that which he possesses has its origin in a source outside himself, in the power of God. It ought to be a cause of endless rejoicing for us that Jesus said: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”³⁵⁹ The power of Jesus is a power unto Himself as well as unto our salvation; that is reason enough for us to say: “O LORD, the king rejoices in your strength.”

We may rejoice and shout ecstatically before God at the discovery of who He is. David has made this discovery by the gifts God has bestowed upon him, and, in this psalm, he makes an inventory of those gifts. God has granted him the desire of his heart and has not withheld the request of his lips. God heard his prayers. Our heart often knows better what we need than what we are aware of ourselves. Every human heart longs for God, but not every human being knows this, or acknowledges this. God gave to David that which he needed most. The fact that he was able to express his deepest needs in words is an indication of the greatness of his character. As we said, the desire of our heart and the request of our lips are not always the same. The fact that God not only fulfills David’s heart desires, but also gives him the request of his lips, and answers his prayers indicates how far David had advanced in his fellowship with God. This is what

³⁵⁸ Rev. 1:5-6

³⁵⁹ Matt. 28:18 (KJV)

Jesus meant when He said: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”³⁶⁰ When God begins to answer our prayers in this way, He wants us to know that He trusts us, and it is up to us not to misuse this trust.

At this point David interrupts himself with a “Selah.” The use of this word has thrown Bible scholars for a loop. Most of them agree that they do not know for certain what the meaning of the word is. New *The Unger’s Bible Dictionary* says: “Probably a musical notation indicating an intended pause.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* adds: “The term celah, a word that occurs 71 times in the Psalms. It is rendered in the Septuagint by diapsalmos, which either means louder playing, forte, or, more probably, an instrumental interlude.” And *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* comments: “Selah-- This word occurs 71 times in the Book of Psalms (also <Hab. 3:3,9, 13>). Scholars agree that the term is a musical direction of some sort, but they are not agreed on what the direction is. It may mean: (1) an interlude-- a pause in the singing while the orchestra continues; (2) the equivalent of today’s ‘Amen’; as such it would separate psalms or sections of psalms which have different liturgical purposes; and (3) an acrostic which means ‘a change of voices’ or ‘repeat.’ ”

David continues by saying: “You welcomed him with rich blessings and placed a crown of pure gold on his head.” God comes to us with rich blessings. Typical of God’s revelation is not that we approach God, but that He comes to us. This point is nowhere brought home so forcefully as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the father runs toward his son when the son is still far off. In Jesus’ own words: “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”³⁶¹ In the context of the parable the boy repented of his sin. We may project this attitude upon this psalm also. If we turn from our disastrous ways and turn to God, He will pour His richest blessings out upon us. But pardon of sin is only the beginning of a stream of endless benefits that God has in store for us. We begin by realizing that our guilt is gone, and this is followed by a sensation of well-being, and the knowledge of being loved and honored. We only know what it means to be human in the exercise of fellowship with God, where we learn that God loves us personally. As Christ’s followers we realize very seldom that we are pretenders to the throne. The enthronement David speaks about here, and which he had known in his own life on earth, is an image of the real enthronement that awaits us in our Father’s house. The honor we receive in this life for the sake of Christ is an installment on what is reserved for us in eternity. The crown jewels are kept in store for us. A man who still wrestles with the question as to whether he should repent of his sin and turn to the Lord has no idea about these things. Even those who are in heaven have difficulties grasping this truth. We gather this from the fact that the elders who surround God’s throne cast their crowns before the throne. We read in Revelation: “The twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne.”³⁶² This gesture becomes even more meaningful when we presume that these elders wore their crowns rightfully. The fact that God places a crown of pure gold on our heads ought to fill us with awe and amazement. David’s words illustrate the depth of Paul’s quote from Isaiah, when he says: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”³⁶³ Even if we understand David’s words to be a prophecy about the coronation of Jesus Christ, the fact remains that we will share in His glory.

The phrase: “He asked you for life, and you gave it to him-- length of days, for ever and ever,” is particularly interesting. David was alive when he prayed this prayer. He knew, however, that the life he possessed was a borrowed life, it was not his own, and it was hemmed in by death. He knew there was more than the life he lived at that moment, and so he asked God for eternal life. Before death caught up with him, he knew that God had heard his prayer. The Holy Spirit uses these words particularly in connection with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And the life we receive from God is also the resurrection life of our Lord Jesus Christ. This “length of days, for ever and ever,” is for us also.

We are honorable because of salvation in Jesus; because of the redemption of our sins, we are honored both by God and men. A redeemed man is an honorable man. This is the main theme of this psalm, as we have seen already.

But David explains here that this honor is part of the forgiveness of our sins. We could almost say that it is inevitable that the fatted calf is killed, when we return to the Father and confess our sins. Both for

³⁶⁰ John 15:7

³⁶¹ Luke 15:20

³⁶² Rev. 4:10 (NKJ).

³⁶³ I Cor. 2:9; see Isaiah 64:4

Christ and for us, the cross and the crown are inseparable. We hardly ever realize from what we are excluded by sin, and how great the riches are which we inherit through our redemption. The inventory of blessing David enumerates for us is very impressive: a crown of pure gold, eternal life, great glory, splendor and majesty, gladness, and the joy of God's presence. The list is so overwhelming that we have difficulties imagining ourselves in that position. That is why it is so important that we "live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received," as the Apostle Paul urges us.³⁶⁴

With the words: "The king trusts in the LORD; through the unfailing love of the Most High he will not be shaken," David returns to earth. He sees himself again surrounded by enemies, darkness and obstacles, that could make him fall. Actually, his feet never left the ground; he always looked at the crown of pure gold, eternal life, the great glory, splendor and majesty, gladness, and the joy of God's presence, from an earthly perspective. In Peter's words: the "inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade [is] kept in heaven for [us]."³⁶⁵ But God wants us to realize on earth what we possess in heaven. That is the exercise of faith David speaks about here. When we look around we do not see the glory that is ours, but a fallen world. The temptation to lose our courage is always present. We will only be kept from stumbling if we trust God and keep before us the truth that what God promised is true.

Israel accused God of bringing them into the desert to die out of the sight of witnesses.³⁶⁶ Either God is perfectly good, or totally evil. A mixture of good and evil, such as we see in humans, would be impossible for God. That is why our trust in God is based on logical grounds. The Hebrew word translated with "unfailing love" is *checed*, which is defined by *Strongs* as "kindness." The KJV translates it with "mercy," the RSV with "steadfast love," NAS with "lovingkindness." It is God's covenant love, which is the word used by the Berkeley Version. God's character that He has revealed to man in His covenant is our guarantee that we will be able to stand and not be shaken in the confusion of this life.

The last section of this psalm, from the verses 8-12, is different in tone from the rest. It sounds strange to us that God's enemies would, in fact, be a threat to Him. We should remember that God's foes are not primarily human beings. His foremost opponents are the devil and his demons. Neither man nor demon is a threat to God's existence, but they are to His holiness. If God would let the rebellion of sin go on endlessly, He would no longer be perfect in holiness. We should read these verses against this background. We should also remember how God's wrath, which is depicted so dramatically here, and which may seem repulsive to us, is expressed in reality. The NIV reads: "You will make them turn their backs when you aim at them with drawn bow." The NKJ says: "Therefore You will make them turn their back; you will make ready Your arrows on Your string toward their faces." The Hebrew word *paniyim* does mean "face." What is this arrow that God aims at His enemies' faces? It is nothing more or less than the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at Golgotha. God does not conquer evil with evil. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."³⁶⁷ As it turns out "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."³⁶⁸

This does not mean that God is foolish and weak. We worship Him from whose presence the earth and sky will flee.³⁶⁹ Be exalted, O LORD, in your strength; we will sing and praise your might!

³⁶⁴ Eph. 4:1

³⁶⁵ I Pet. 1:4

³⁶⁶ See Ex. 14:11; 17:3 and other

³⁶⁷ I Cor. 1:23

³⁶⁸ I Cor. 1:25

³⁶⁹ See Rev. 20:11

PSALM TWENTY-TWO

For the director of music. To the tune of "The Doe of the Morning."

A psalm of David.

- 1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?*
- 2 O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.*
- 3 Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.*
- 4 In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.*
- 5 They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.*
- 6 But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.*
- 7 All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads:*
- 8 "He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."*
- 9 Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast.*
- 10 From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.*
- 11 Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.*
- 12 Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.*
- 13 Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me.*
- 14 I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me.*
- 15 My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.*
- 16 Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.*
- 17 I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me.*
- 18 They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.*
- 19 But you, O LORD, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me.*
- 20 Deliver my life from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs.*
- 21 Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen.*
- 22 I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you.*
- 23 You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!*
- 24 For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.*
- 25 From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you will I fulfill my vows.*
- 26 The poor will eat and be satisfied; they who seek the LORD will praise him-- may your hearts live forever!*
- 27 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him,*
- 28 for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.*
- 29 All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him-- those who cannot keep themselves alive.*
- 30 Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord.*
- 31 They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn-- for he has done it.*

We cannot look at this psalm without connecting it to the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. In both the Gospel of Matthew and Mark, we read Jesus' quotation of the opening words of this psalm: "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'-- which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"³⁷⁰ It is generally believed that Jesus quoted the whole psalm to Himself.

There are, as we will see, at least three prophecies in the first part of this psalm which were literally fulfilled during the crucifixion. The verses 7 and 8 read: "All who see me mock me; they hurl

³⁷⁰ Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34

insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him,' " correspond to Matthew's account: "Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!' In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ' 'I am the Son of God.' " ³⁷¹ The piercing of the hands and feet, mentioned in vs. 16, was literally fulfilled in the crucifixion, and what we read in vs. 18: "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing," is mentioned by John, who specifically mentions the fulfillment of the prophecy: "When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.' This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, 'They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.' So this is what the soldiers did." ³⁷²

We know nothing about the circumstances under which David wrote this psalm. It is obvious, however, that the text of his poem far surpasses anything that David could ever have experienced personally. This psalm is one of the clearest illustrations of what Peter says about the Old Testament prophets and their writing. We read in his first epistle: "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow." ³⁷³

For David, the cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is the expression of a feeling of being forsaken, not the stating of an objective fact. This depressive exclamation indicates that David has lost contact with the reality of God's omnipresence, at least temporarily. He knew the words God had addressed to Joshua: "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ³⁷⁴ If he felt that God had forsaken him because of a sin he had committed, he would have known why he felt that way. But his heartrending cry indicates that he is not conscious of any sin at this point.

Some commentators try to draw lessons from the subscript "The Doe of the Morning," but that seems to be futile to us. Most likely the intent is to indicate that the psalm should be song to an existing tune, as was suggested in the subscript of Psalm Nine. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* has a lengthy paragraph on this subject, from which we copy the following: "The title of this Psalm, To the chief Musician upon *Aijeleth Shachar*, A Psalm of David, has given rise to many conjectures. The words '*Ayeleth ha-Shachar*' are translated in the margin, 'the hind of the morning;' but what was this? Was it the name of a musical instrument! or of a tune? or of a band of music! Calmet argues for the last, and translates 'A Psalm of David, addressed to the Musicmaster who presides over the Band called the Morning Hind.' This is more likely than any of the other conjectures I have seen. But *aiyeleth hashshachar* may be the name of the Psalm itself, for it was customary among the Asiatic to give names to their poetic compositions which often bore no relation to the subject itself. Mr. Harmer and others have collected a few instances from D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*. I could add many more from MSS. in my own collection:-- thus, Saady calls a famous miscellaneous work of his Gulistan, 'The Country of Roses,' or, 'The Rose Garden;' and yet there is nothing relative to such a country, nor concerning roses nor rose gardens, in the book ... Such titles are of very little importance in themselves, and of no further use to us than as they serve to distinguish the different books, poems, or Psalms, to which they are prefixed. To me, many seem to have spent their time uselessly in the investigation of such subjects."

As we mentioned, there is no indication of any particular event in David's life to which the psalm is related. The Holy Spirit wants us, evidently, to concentrate specifically on the suffering of Christ, when reading this psalm. *Spurgeon* says: "He who sees Jesus will probably neither see, nor care to see David." ³⁷⁵ That which, for David, was the expression, maybe to a point of exaggeration, of a difficult situation, was the ultimate reality for our Lord Jesus Christ.

³⁷¹ Matt. 27:39-43

³⁷² John 19:23-24

³⁷³ I Pet. 1:10-11

³⁷⁴ Josh. 1:5

³⁷⁵ *The Treasury of David*, by C. H. Spurgeon

The whole crucifixion takes place between verses 1 and 21. Where the NIV translates verse 21: “save me from the horns of the wild oxen,” The KJV renders it with: “for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.” Both the NIV and RSV omit the clause that implies God’s answer. The Hebrew word *ʾanah* has a rather wide connotation. *Strong’s Definition* defines it: “to eye or (generally) to heed, i.e. pay attention; by implication, to respond; ... to begin to speak; specifically to sing, shout, testify, announce.” *Spurgeon* sees in the Hebrew text the equivalent of the New Testament “It is finished!”³⁷⁶

Behind the opening words of this psalm stands the depth of man’s fall into sin. But God has never forsaken man. When Adam sinned, we read: “But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”³⁷⁷ because man had forsaken God.

The physical and psychological condition of Jesus, hanging on the cross, undoubtedly, contributed to His feeling of being forsaken by God; but Jesus also knew, on a legal basis, that He was cursed because He was hanged on a cross. The Apostle Paul quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, where we read: “If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.”³⁷⁸ In his epistle to the Galatians he writes: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”³⁷⁹ On the basis of the Word of God, Jesus knew for sure that He had been forsaken by God. His was not merely a subjective feeling, as in David’s case, but an objective fact. This makes the “why” of the question so heartrending. The question does not suggest that what God does makes sense, but it accentuates the fact that sin makes no sense. What Adam did was senseless, and the full weight of this folly bears down upon our Lord Jesus as He dies, carrying the sin of the world.

The cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” contains a double paradox. If God really forsook Jesus, why is the possessive pronoun “my” used here? “My God” supposes communion.

The second paradox is seen when Jesus uses the written Word of God’s revelation to give expression to the fact that God had forsaken Him. This paradox is typical for the essence of man’s sin. When Adam sinned he did not cease to be the bearer of God’s image. He did not become a devil in whom nothing redeemable remained. He became a man torn in himself, in whom a separation took place between his spirit, his soul, and his body. This being torn inwardly is at the core of the experience of sin. When Jesus died, the unity between His spirit and His soul was broken, and thus the awareness of God’s presence disappeared. We ought to be able to understand this condition because we have grown up and we live under it. On the other hand, we do not understand it at all, exactly because we have grown accustomed to it on earth. We are unable to understand how a sinless soul must have felt to be smirched by sin, let alone what it meant to bear the full weight of all the sin in the world. Jesus’ suffering is unfathomable for us. We can only be dumbfounded by it. Even the beautiful chorus with which Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion* opens does not even get close enough to it. God’s abhorrence of sin is as great as His eternal love.

The crucifixion itself demonstrates the depth of sin. Human beings took a man who had been become one bloody mess because of the flogging, and without a trace of pity they drove nails through His wrists and feet, and they hung Him. Others stood by and mocked. What was done to the bearer of God’s image was inhuman. My God, my God, why have you forsaken us!

Jesus also used the written Word of God to give expression to this descent into hell, because He was, at this point, probably incapable of formulating His own thoughts and feelings. Burning with fever, He hung in the burning sun suffering unbearable pain; but also He felt incapable of trusting His own human insight. Even in this depth, especially in this depth, He threw Himself completely upon the Word of God. The Spirit Himself interceded for Him with groans that words could not express.³⁸⁰ He always does this for people who are unable to pray themselves.

Ten centuries before this crucifixion, the Holy Spirit gave expression to the depth of the suffering that would come to the Son of God! Jesus knew the Scriptures, and He knew what awaited Him. These Scriptures became, in the deepest of all needs, the key to salvation. We owe our salvation to the fact that Jesus quoted, specifically, these words. The whole drama is played out between the phrase “you do not

³⁷⁶ John 19:30

³⁷⁷ Gen. 3:9

³⁷⁸ Deut. 21:22,23

³⁷⁹ Gal. 3:13

³⁸⁰ See Rom. 8:26

answer,” in vs. 2 and “You have answered Me,” (NKJ), in vs. 21. The NIV’s rendering “save me from the horns of the wild oxen” does not bring out this dramatic change of tone. Evidently, the Hebrew leaves a lot of liberty at this point for various translations. Most of the modern translations follow the lead of the NIV. The Hebrew word *`anah* is defined by Strong’s as “to eye or (generally) to heed, i.e. pay attention; by implication, to respond.” In the translation of the *Word Biblical Commentary* the rendering “You have answered Me” is maintained. But the *Commentary* admits that “the overall sense of the Masorite Text is unclear.” Jesus must have realized that in quoting this psalm He had received the answer. Actually, He had given it Himself.

Because of the presence of sin, God gave no answer, just as He gave no answer to King Saul, and as Jesus Himself would not answer Pilate and Herod. Here it is because of the presence of sin, but without the presence of personal guilt.

David says: “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.” The little word “yet” forms the bridge between the present situation and the eternal reality. David appeals to history and to the character of God. God is the Holy One, but the visible facts seem to contradict God’s holiness. The prophet Habakkuk wrestled with this same problem. He said to God: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”³⁸¹ How can God, who is too holy to tolerate sin, allow sin to play a part in His plan? So here: God is holy, and the crucifixion is the most abominable demonstration of degradation one can imagine. Sin is that which deviates from God’s character, that which goes against the essence of God’s character. God’s holiness is the sum of all God’s eternal and perfect attributes, and the crucifixion of the Lord of glory is the depth of horror, of cruelty, and of moral decay. Realizing this paradox, we know that it is only natural that one would cry out: “why?” How can sin exist next to the absolute holiness of God?

Yet, the question is an illogical one, however logical it may sound, because the cross is, at the same time, the victory over sin, and the solution of the problem of sin. The decisive factor is the love of Him who gave Himself willingly to take upon Himself the sin of others. But because of the intensity of His suffering, because He was so close to it when He went through it, He was, for a moment, unable to see the perspective. Because He was in the midst of this suffering, He could not see the answer, for otherwise He would have known that He Himself was the answer.

David says some beautiful things about Israel’s relationship to God. Israel’s history can be looked at from two different angles. On the one hand there is the thread of disobedience, rebellion, and hardening of heart; on the other hand, there are the facts of the exodus, the miracles of the journey through the desert, and the conquest of Canaan. God is enthroned as the Holy One; He is the praise of Israel, but He also “came to that which was His own, but his own did not receive Him.”³⁸² The crucifixion was the ultimate demonstration of this rejection. Yet, in spite of the dark pages in Israel’s history, we can say that it is the history of salvation. God revealed His glory to them, and the sacrifices and praise of Israel went up to Him as a pleasing odor. The RSV renders this verse with: “Yet thou art holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.” The throne of God rests upon Israel’s praise. David says the same in another psalm: “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise.”³⁸³ Israel’s praise may not always have sounded clear and pure, but God identifies His eternal omnipotence with their feeble efforts. He places His throne upon their poor performances.

It is true that there was a lot of unbelief in Israel, yet, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down, and the sun obeyed Joshua’s command to stand still.³⁸⁴ Frail human beings called to God and He answered them. The faith of one man avails more than can be undone by the unbelief of many. The tiny kingdom of the Netherlands owes its independence to the faith of William of Orange I, and of a handful of Reformed Christians. He who puts his trust in the Lord will not be put to shame. This trust is at the basis of the cry: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The verses 1-5 are a complaint and a rearward look. Past history is an important factor in the building up of our faith. The verses 6-21 depict and analyze the conditions of the crucifixion, of which David sees himself as the subject. When David says: “But I am a worm and not a man,” he does not deny his humanity, but he states that what happens to him is incongruent with the dignity of man. Jesus was

³⁸¹ Hab. 1:13

³⁸² John 1:11

³⁸³ Ps. 8:2

³⁸⁴ Josh. 10:12-14

treated as the least of all animals. If there were truth in the theory of evolution, we could find some interesting applications here. Man who has reached the highest stage of development is treated as an animal on the lowest echelon. There is a clear analogy between these verses and Isaiah's prophecy: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."³⁸⁵ He appeared like the most despicable of outcasts, as the lowest of the lower, and, yet, He was the Lord of glory, whose face is like the sun shining in all its brilliance.³⁸⁶ Nobody recognized Him as such. His shame was not His, but ours. Pilate said: "Behold the Man!"³⁸⁷ after the soldiers had scourged Him and played their games with Him. Those moments of sadistic pleasure, during which those people enjoyed in toying with their Lord, were, probably, a more severe condemnation of the lunacy of the world in which we live than even the crucifixion itself. This deep hatred and disdain of one human being for another, this complete loss of vision for all proportions in human relationships is the ultimate rebellion against God. What will those sadists have to answer at the Day of Judgment? The victims were so vulnerable. The guards in the Nazi concentration camps forced the Jewish prisoners to call themselves "stinking Jews." This brought some of them to the point that they began to believe that this is what they were. This kind of sadistic psychology is demonic and perverse. It brings man to the point of forgetting who he is, and where he goes. A human being who is born in sin has already problems to know his own identity and destination. It is easy to believe that one has no intrinsic worth. Torture itself is not the goal; the devil's foremost aim is to destroy the image of God in us. The devil achieved nothing of this kind in subjecting Jesus to this treatment. He prayed the Father to forgive His executioners, and to the murderer who asked for pardon, He opened the gates of paradise.³⁸⁸ In all of this Jesus remained "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."³⁸⁹

The mockery of those who came to witness the crucifixion is foretold in verses 7 and 8. Matthew gives the clearest account as to how this prophecy was fulfilled literally. "In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"³⁹⁰ This quotation may have prompted Jesus to start quoting the whole psalm to Himself; we know it culminated in the anguished cry of His soul of verse 1: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If this is true, Jesus quoted the psalm backwards, or in fragmentary form, jumping from one verse to another.

Ever since man fell into sin, he has had the animal urge to fall upon to fall upon that which is defenseless. Under the influence of the Gospel this tendency has weakened somewhat. There have been movements of non-violent resistance. Mahatma Gandhi learned the principle from Jesus Christ, although he never became his disciple. Jesus has set an example for all. The terrible depravity in the mockery of the priests and scribes is in the fact that they mocked Jesus in His relationship with God. Of all people to do so! Their deeds show how corrupted Israel had become.

The humanity of Christ could not have been better described than with the words of vs. 9: "Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast." This is a reference to Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit. It was the work of God that Jesus came into this world out of His mother's womb. The Word of God became flesh and blood, of the same flesh and blood as we are. He learned trust at His mother's breast. It is at the breast of a mother that every human being receives the first lesson in faith. The warmth of this life giving nursing remains with each of us the rest of our lives. A person who misses this experience grows up maimed emotionally. Jesus learned this trust the same way we all do. After this He was circumcised and dedicated to the Lord. This is expressed in the verse: "From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God." Jesus falls back upon these facts during His crucifixion. The incident when Simeon had taken Him in his arms³⁹¹ was not seen as His being torn away from the intimate relationship with His mother, but as a fulfillment of this relationship. God was His God because He was a man.

³⁸⁵ Isa. 53:3

³⁸⁶ Rev. 1:16

³⁸⁷ John 19:5 (NKJ)

³⁸⁸ Luke 23:34,40-43

³⁸⁹ Heb. 1:3

³⁹⁰ Matt. 27:41-43

³⁹¹ See Luke 2:25-35

This incident flashes back to Jesus as He is treated as less than human: a worm, not a man. Every human being is born into a hostile world. Mother love and the cherishing effect this has upon us makes the shock of birth and of having to live more bearable. During the crucifixion, however, hostility reached its peak. All the hatred, cruelty, animosity, and brute force of the powers of darkness, which the average person gets by the teaspoon, was poured out upon our Lord en masse. Jesus Himself said to His enemies: "This is your hour-- when darkness reigns."³⁹² Jesus falls into the hands of demons and men, and there is nobody to help. The strong bulls of Bashan are symbols of brutish strength. Bulls that want to crush Him encircle the Lamb of God. In every century we find men who willingly let themselves be used by Satan to inflict pain on others. Every war brings this characteristic out in some people. The roaring of the lions, mentioned in vs. 13, indicates that Satan is present here.

Verses 14 and 15 describe the physical effect this encirclement has upon our Lord: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death." He feels completely exhausted. The pouring out of water was an image of death for the Israelites. The woman from Tekoa said to David: "Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die."³⁹³ Jesus feels life being drained out of Him. His reserves of energy are dried up. Crucifixion does, in fact, bring the bones out of joint in a very painful way. The weight of the body pulls the arms out of the shoulder sockets. All emotions lose their meaning. The heart feels like wax. Like a stranded traveler in a desert, the body becomes completely dehydrated for lack of fluid. Jesus had refused to drink at His crucifixion because the wine, mixed with gall, would have had a narcotic effect upon Him.³⁹⁴ Jesus' ministry as the Messiah began with the great hunger as a result of His forty-day fast, and it ends with His great thirst at the cross.

But this physical suffering was only part of the whole complex of pain. Hardest to bear was the spiritual and emotional aspect, as described in verses 1-3 and 7-13.

The phrase "the dust of death" in vs. 15 makes us think of God's evaluation of Adam after he broke fellowship with God and sinned: "you [will] return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."³⁹⁵ Before that moment we read: "man became a living soul."³⁹⁶ The phrase in this psalm, therefore, may be considered as a reference to the curse upon sin.

Verses 16-18 give us a view of what went on around the cross. This time the crucified One does not look down upon His own people who reviled Him, as in verses 6-8, or at the demons that taunt Him, as in verses 12 and 13, but at the pagan Roman soldiers, who are here called "dogs." The soldiers who crucified Jesus were a rough bunch of cruel sadists. This is obvious from their mockery of Jesus after they had scourged Him. Our text says that they gloated over the suffering of the Lord during His crucifixion. It was especially for those people that Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."³⁹⁷ These people knew nothing of God's revelation. They had no idea that Jesus was the Lord of glory. They despised the Jews they had subjected brutally. This disdain they felt for the Jews was, undoubtedly, a factor in their sadistic amusement, but it does not excuse their behavior. They identify Jesus with the Jewish nation, not realizing that His people had rejected Him. For a brief moment they had found a common base with the Jews in their reveling about Christ's suffering. They could have known, however, that their sadistic pleasure was sinful. They must have suppressed the voice of their conscience. We could make allowance for them in that they followed orders when they scourged and crucified Jesus. But the fact that they take pleasure in what they do condemns them. They did not know what they did, and why they did it. The fact that a man does things without knowing why he does them debases him. That is why the Holy Spirit calls them "evil men."

We find in these verses two prophecies about the crucifixion: "They have pierced my hands and my feet," and "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." Execution by crucifixion was unknown in Israel. A person who was condemned to die was killed by stoning to death. David may have known about this cruel punishment through outside influences. From *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* we take the following paragraph: "This form of punishment was in use among the Egyptians

³⁹² Luke 22:53

³⁹³ II Sam. 14:14

³⁹⁴ See Matt. 27:34

³⁹⁵ Gen. 3:19

³⁹⁶ Gen. 2:7 (KJV)

³⁹⁷ Luke 23:34

<Gen. 40:19>, the Carthaginians, the Persians <Esther 7:10>, the Assyrians, Scythians, Indians, Germans, and from earliest times among the Greeks and Romans.” The two Bible references given in this quotation are of dubious value, however, since the punishment referred to there may have been simple hanging or impaling. In what century crucifixion became a mode of execution is unknown. There is no reason why David would see himself as being crucified. He must have been aware that the Holy Spirit prompted him to describe a condition that went far beyond his own experience. In the Roman Empire only slaves were executed by crucifixion. Roman citizens could never be crucified. The combination of scourging, followed by crucifixion, is the most horrible cruelty ever invented by men to be inflicted upon a fellow human being. Jesus died the most horrible death one can imagine.

Pain is nature’s warning mechanism for our body, to notify us of danger, or of something has gone wrong in the system. God built this alarm system into our bodies to protect us. The devil has managed to detach the alarm system from the whole of our bodily functions, and to use it as a goal in itself. The hour of the Lord’s crucifixion was indeed the hour of darkness.

The dividing of Jesus’ garments proves that Jesus was robbed of the most fundamental protection and dignity that we have as human beings. He hung on the cross naked. In the sinful world in which we live, public nakedness is the ultimate shame. A good deal of the mockery that was heaped upon Jesus must have been concentrated on this facet of His suffering. We can understand why artists do not portray the Lord’s crucifixion in this realistic way; but realizing what the actual condition of Jesus’ body was when He suffered and died does bring home to us the horror of it. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote: “All rights denied, naked Christ died.” Naked He came from His mother’s womb, naked He left this world.

Each of the Synoptic Gospels mention briefly the dividing of Jesus’ garments by casting lots, but only the Gospel of John adds in some detail that this was done in fulfillment of a prophecy. “When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. ‘Let’s not tear it,’ they said to one another. ‘Let’s decide by lot who will get it.’ This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, ‘They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.’ So this is what the soldiers did.”³⁹⁸ The four soldiers tore up Jesus’ clothing in four parts and cast lots about his undergarment.

It is not clear where this incident would have fitted in David’s life. It could be that David used those words by way of metaphor to indicate that people considered him to be as good as dead. A person’s clothing is usually not given away while the person is still alive. But, obviously, David’s words here encompass more than he may have experienced personally.

In this condition of being as good as dead, David cries anew to the Lord. For the third time he uses the word “far.” In vs. 1: “so far from the words of my groaning;” in vs. 11: “Do not be far from me,” and in vs. 19: “But you, O LORD, be not far off.” He also calls God “my Strength.” In the light of the incongruity of the whole situation, this cry is an act of faith. We may call this the ultimate confession of faith. A man who is at the point of death and who calls God “my Strength” has learned the last lesson there is to learn. Paul came to this conclusion when he said to the church in Corinth: “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.”³⁹⁹ And also, when he says: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great Revelation, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”⁴⁰⁰ The deepest lesson a human being who has to die can learn is that “Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death.”⁴⁰¹

The NIV uses the term “my precious life” in vs. 20. Some older translations say “my darling,” which is the rendering of the Hebrew *yachiyd*, which *Strongs Definitions* describes as; “sole; by implication, beloved; also lonely; (feminine) the life (as not to be replaced)” The RSV says in a footnote that the literal meaning of the word is “my only one.” A possible translation would be “my irreplaceable

³⁹⁸ John 19:23,24

³⁹⁹ II Cor. 1:8,9

⁴⁰⁰ II Cor. 12:7-9

⁴⁰¹ Ps. 68:20

life,” “my unique one,” or “my lonely soul.” Nobody was ever as lonely as Jesus when He prayed in Gethsemane. He pleaded with His disciples to provide fellowship, but in His deepest depression no one stood beside Him; they were all fast asleep, and when He was arrested they all fled; one even denied knowing Him. Now, in this psalm, the deepest fellowship with the Father is denied Him. This happened, to quote the “Heidelberg Catechism,” “that we would never again be forsaken by God.” His utter loneliness assures to us our everlasting, uninterrupted fellowship with God. The sword that would pierce His mother’s heart, pierced His first. A sword can kill the body, but it can do even greater damage to the soul.

“The power of the dogs” is, undoubtedly, an image of the Roman Empire and its power. Jesus knew that Pilate had power over Him, because it had been given to him from above,⁴⁰² but this fact did not make the falling into their hand less traumatic. The glory and glitter of the Roman Empire is here represented under the image of a pack of wild animals, of dogs that feast on offal. “Power ... given from above” can be interpreted in two ways: We can see it as if God authorized Pilate to act, or as if Satan gave that power to him. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, we read: “Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’”⁴⁰³ Jesus never denied the validity of the devil’s statement. As a result of this refusal, Jesus becomes the prey of the dogs at this moment. But not long after this hour, He could declare: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”⁴⁰⁴ This authority encompassed also the power of the Roman Empire. In the verses 20 and 21 we find all three opponents in a row: the dogs, the lions, and the oxen; that is the Romans, the devil, and the Jews. What an alliance!

As we have seen, Spurgeon believes that the phrase: “thou hast heard me,” which the NIV renders with “save me from...,” can be translated with “It is finished,” the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *tetelestai*, which we find in the Gospel of John.⁴⁰⁵ Jesus Himself was the answer to His prayer. God gave Him the grace to persevere till the end. The answer was not in the being delivered from suffering, but in the holding on till the end. The devil tempted Jesus with the suggestion that He would come down from the cross.⁴⁰⁶ If Christ had done that, He would have saved neither Himself, nor anybody else. Deliverance consisted in the fact that He emptied the cup to the last drop. The Father answered Jesus in the same way, as He would answer the Apostle Paul later: “My grace is sufficient for you.”⁴⁰⁷ His perseverance would ultimately lead to His resurrection from the dead. Superficially considered, it seemed as if no answer was given; in reality God gave the greatest answer that could be given to sin. From that moment on purification for sins was provided for.⁴⁰⁸

The second part of the psalm differs as much from the first as light differs from darkness. Up to vs. 21 the subject is suffering; beginning with vs. 22, it is resurrection. Death has been conquered, and the psalmist testifies to this fact.

The resurrection itself is never mentioned, but the poet leaves an empty space between the verses 21 and 22, which has a deep impact upon the reader. Not only has this silence a dramatic effect, but it leaves a space open for a personal experience of the reader. God does not use clichés, He does not answer everyone in the same way, but all God’s answers are based upon the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. When God speaks to us, He addresses us personally, and in a way we can understand, a way which fits the circumstances in which we live. We all commit more or less the same kinds of sins, and we all receive the same kind of pardon, but no two testimonies of salvation are the same.

In the epistle to the Hebrews, the author quotes vs. 22 to prove the humanity of Jesus. “He [Jesus] says, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.’”⁴⁰⁹ The point the writer to the Hebrews wants to make is that “both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.”⁴¹⁰ The words that provide the proof are “my brothers,” and “the congregation.” It was by means of Jesus’ suffering, His death, His resurrection, and His ascension that the Holy Spirit could come down upon men, and that the church was born. Because of what happened to

⁴⁰² See John 19:11

⁴⁰³ Matt. 4:8,9

⁴⁰⁴ Matt. 28:18

⁴⁰⁵ John 19:30

⁴⁰⁶ Matt. 27:39-44; Mark 15:29-32

⁴⁰⁷ II Cor. 12:9

⁴⁰⁸ See Heb. 1:3

⁴⁰⁹ Heb. 2:12

⁴¹⁰ Heb. 2:11

Jesus Christ, men have been pardoned for their sins and given eternal life through regeneration. Those are the people whom David addresses prophetically as “my brothers.”

Because Jesus left His divine glory behind and came to this demon-filled earth, sharing our hunger, shame, and misery, and became victorious in those circumstances, we now become partakers of His divine nature. This process of glorification is expressed in a unique way in Jesus’ prayer for His disciples in the Gospel of John. He said: “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world,” and “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”⁴¹¹ Jesus’ revelation of the Name of the Father, and the praise of the congregation is the immediate result of the resurrection. This reveals the essence of the congregation; it is the fellowship of men where Jesus reveals the Name, that is the character of the Father, through the Holy Spirit, and where the Son glorifies the Father. The psalm opened with the question: “Why?” God’s profound answer to this question is the birth of the church. This is what Jesus meant when He said to Peter: “Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”⁴¹²

When David wrote these words, he probably meant that he wanted to tell others how God had saved him. This is also a prophetic statement: every time the church gathers for worship, Jesus declares the facts of salvation: what God did for Him in His life, His suffering and death, and in His resurrection. His personal testimony becomes the basic facts of the preaching of the Gospel. That is why those facts are recorded in the Bible in several places, lest we should forget. Look at the contrast between “the brothers” and “the dogs,” “the lions,” and “the oxen” in the preceding verses!

In the following verse, vs. 23 the Lord turns to us and says: “You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!” It is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who takes up the hymn of praise, and invites us to follow Him. The fear of the Lord is the respect we have for Him because we understand who He is. The greatest problem most people have is that they “are ignorant of God,” as Paul expresses it in his First Corinthian epistle.⁴¹³ People think they can live their own lives without causing any serious damage to themselves and their souls. But the man who knows God is overwhelmed by a sense of His awesome holiness, and he will not think lightly of the consequences of his sins. Our Lord urges people who are realists to glorify and praise God. Praise is rare in the life of most people. We have to learn to praise Him; praise takes practice. Jesus sets the example so that we would follow Him in His praise of God; He invites us to do it together with Him. The Holy Spirit teaches us praise in fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is important to note that the phrases the “descendants of Jacob” and the “descendants of Israel” are put next to each other as poetical parallels. It refers to the transformation from Jacob into Israel, from the man who was a deceiver to the one who triumphed because he confessed his sin and received pardon from God. There are two sets of parallels in these verses: “You who fear the LORD,” with “you descendants of Jacob,” and “honor him,” and “revere him,” with “all you descendants of Israel.”

The subject of the hymn of praise is what God did for Christ and what He does for us. “For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” The Bible always connects the praise of God with certain facts. There is always a reason given for praise. There are no “Hallelujahs” that stand on their own. There is a tendency in modern worship to shout Hallelujah just in order to create a certain atmosphere. This is never done in the Bible. Our praise is founded on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. This fact is the great answer God gives to all our “whys?” God ultimately answers all our questions. Our “why?” is the result of the existence of sin in this world. The question will melt away when our sins are forgiven and we are born again. The better we learn to know God, the fewer the questions. Men despise men, but God honors us. Resurrection always implies rehabilitation. That is why we honor God, not as despicable, downtrodden creatures, but as bearers of His image, as His sons or daughters.

Vs. 25 says: “From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly.” This could be read in various ways. We could understand that David sees God as the source of his praise. He does not work himself up to a state of mind of praise, but the ecstasy of his joy wells up from God Himself. We could also read it, as the KJV does: “My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation,” which could mean that David experiences that God praises him. The context rather suggests the former. God does not only inspire our praise, He adds to our sacrifice of praise that rises up to Him as a fragrant odor. The fulfilling of the

⁴¹¹ John 17:6, 3

⁴¹² Matt. 16:18 (KJV)

⁴¹³ See I Cor. 15:34

vows could be a reference of this kind of sacrifice, but it could also mean that David promises to accomplish a certain task that God has given him. Praise is not only given with the lips but also with deeds of obedience. That this kind of obedience is not merely a personal matter is indicated by the fact that David fulfills his vows before the great assembly, before those who fear God. The Hebrew word for "I will pay" is *`ashaleem*, which is a form of *shalam*. *Strong's Definition* of this word is: "to be safe (in mind, body or estate); figuratively, to be (causatively, make) completed; by implication, to be friendly; by extension, to reciprocate (in various applications)." The KJV translates this: "make amends, ... end, finish, full, give again, make good, repay, ... (make) prosperous, recompense, render, requite, make restitution, restore, reward." The fulfilling of a vow in the Old Testament context was something that involved expense. The sacrifice had to be paid for, and the promise had to be carried out. David does not merely speak about a personal commitment, since the fulfillment of the vow takes place in the presence of the congregation. Our service to the Lord is carried out in the context of the fellowship of the saints.

In drawing a line from his personal commitment to a larger audience, David indicates the results of his promise to the Lord. The NIV renders vs. 26 with: "The poor will eat and be satisfied." Other translations are: "The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied" (NAS), or "The meek shall eat and be satisfied" (KJV). The Hebrew word *`anav* is derived from *`anayv*, which means depressed ... in mind ... or circumstances." (*Strong's Definitions*). The resurrection of Christ has results in the social, as well as in the spiritual realms. Both those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, as the physically undernourished, will be satisfied. The seeking of God will always result in the satisfaction of our deepest needs, because He allows Himself to be found by those who seek with all their hearts. Thomas found it so in spite of his apparent skepticism, in Jesus his Lord and his God.⁴¹⁴ Every person who seeks after God will receive much more than he anticipates. We are all "Surprised by Joy."⁴¹⁵

The phrase "May your hearts live forever!" seems out of context. Maybe the paraphrase of TLB: "Their hearts shall rejoice with everlasting joy," is preferable here. The context seems to suggest, however, that the intent is eternal life, and not a continuous encouragement only. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead has been the source of eternal life for millions of people all over the world. It is because of the resurrection that "all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD."

Is it not marvelous that David, as king of Israel, had this worldwide vision three thousand years before the Gospel was preached to the ends of the earth? The Bible guarantees that there will be "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."⁴¹⁶ This is another answer to the question "Why" of verse 1.

After the fall, the devil refused to surrender his authority over the earth which God had initially entrusted to him. But, in spite of his insurrection, he never became completely independent from God. God always kept the final right over His creation, and He will always have the last word. The great rebellion had not changed anything in this respect. The Kingdom still belongs rightfully to God, not only the kingdom of Israel, but all power in Heaven and on earth. The Father gave this authority to the Son, so that the Son would restore God's rule over everything that had fallen away from Him. This is the unspoken theme of this psalm. That is why our Lord had to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. That is the final, the greatest answer to the "why" of this psalm.

Man will justify God in the end. This is brought out several times in the book of Revelation, where the whole of creation recognizes God's right to the throne of the universe.⁴¹⁷

Vs. 29 is one of those verses in the Hebrew Bible that are hard to translate. *The Interlinear Hebrew Bible* says literally: "shall eat and worship All {they that be} fat upon earth. Before him shall bow they that go down to the dust, and his own soul none can keep alive." The Amplified Bible renders this: "All the mighty ones upon earth shall eat [in thanksgiving] and worship; all they that go down to the dust shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive." Some other samples of translation are: "All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him-- those who cannot keep themselves alive" (NIV). "Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and he who cannot keep himself alive (RSV). "Both proud and humble together, all who are mortal-- born to die-- shall worship him" (TLB). "All they that be fat upon earth shall eat and worship: all they that go down to the dust shall bow before him: and none can keep alive

⁴¹⁴ John 20:28

⁴¹⁵ Title of a book by C. S. Lewis

⁴¹⁶ Rev. 7:9

⁴¹⁷ e.g. Rev. 4:11

his own soul" (KJV). The combination of eating and worship in the same phrase does not sound logical. The intent seems to be that those people who stood up in pride before God shall be brought down to their knees. We are not told whether they shall do this willingly, or whether they will be forced, against their will, to bow. It could be that, when confronted with the facts, and realizing that he cannot keep himself alive without God, that these people finally surrender.

The psalm ends with a view of the distant future. Posterity, future generations, and the unborn appear in David's field of vision. In other words, what David has to say has historical significance; it determines world history till the end of time. Again, it is clear that David's words transcend mere personal experiences. "He [God] has done it." What "it" stands for is not explained. The same hiatus as between the verses 21 and 22 is left open here. "It" is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is, as yet, kept a secret here, but it is the main theme of the whole psalm. God has surrendered His beloved Son into death in order to raise Him up from the dead and to clothe Him with all honor and glory. It is this resurrection which is the great answer to the "why" question of this psalm. The first result of this answer is the birth of the church in which God is glorified. The second part of the answer is our own rehabilitation; the third part is the evangelization of the world, and the final part is the coming of the Kingdom of God, in which God will be all in all.

PSALM TWENTY-THREE

A psalm of David

- 1** *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*
2 *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,*
3 *he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*
4 *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*
5 *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*
6 *Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

The twenty-third psalm is one of the most famous poems in world literature. Even after years of using this psalm as a subject in the homiletics class I taught, I do not feel that I have exhausted its content, or that the beauty of it has faded because of familiarity.

The psalm is obviously from the hand of David, who was a shepherd boy, keeping his father's sheep when he was called to appear before Samuel.⁴¹⁸ In this psalm David sublimates this personal experience, and he sees that the role he played is a projection of the work of God. He must have loved his sheep and tended them conscientiously and faithfully; otherwise, he would not have been able to paint this picture so sublimely. Spurgeon calls this psalm "David's Pastoral Symphony." The smell of nature, the greenness of the grass and the stillness of the water give great charm to this psalm. David gives to us in this poem the rest and restoration we need so sorely as hunted human beings.

The calm of this psalm has, however, a deceptive character. What David describes is not the harmony of Paradise. David lived in a world that was torn by human sin. Need and want lie in wait; there are crooked paths of unrighteousness, and there is the stillness and darkness of death. His world is full of evil and of enemies who are after his life. The fact that those negative factors are put in a positive frame does not change their character. God does not take away these evil things for David, but the presence of the Shepherd compensates for them and eventual leads to victory. Evil, however, is not only a reality that surrounds David, it is also the inner corruption of his soul. We do not read this in so many words in this psalm, but it is implied.

We often hear some romantic nonsense about the twenty-third psalm, in terms of being little sheep of the Good Shepherd. It is true that Jesus Himself says some great things about His being the Good Shepherd of His flock,⁴¹⁹ but this does not take away anything of the truth that a sheep is one of the dumbest creatures in God's creation. The best description of a sheep's nature is given by the prophet Isaiah: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."⁴²⁰ The Bible compares men to sheep, because they are lost. A sheep is one of the few animal that does not know the way to its own home. The comparison is, therefore, rather appropriate. God says to Isaiah: "The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."⁴²¹

David says nowhere specifically in this psalm that he considers himself to be a sheep, but what other conclusion can we draw when we read the words: "The LORD is my shepherd?" Jesus' words in John chapter ten are, undoubtedly, based on this psalm. But the image originates with Moses who said about Israel: "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."⁴²²

In the first place, we should see in the image of the sheep a confession of sin and weakness, and accept our own position as sheep before the Lord in this way. We should also realize that in doing this we are far removed from the human dignity to which God originally called us. The first thing this psalm says about us, as human beings, is that, without God we would be in want in a hard and hostile world, which is

⁴¹⁸ See I Sam. 16:11,12

⁴¹⁹ See John 10:1-18

⁴²⁰ Isa. 53:6

⁴²¹ Isa. 1:3

⁴²² Num. 27:16,17

full of unrest and injustice. The presence of YHWH and our relationship with Him makes all the difference between destitution and sufficiency. A sheep may be stupid, but he knows the voice of his master. Jesus said: "The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."⁴²³

Very rarely does a person discover that he has no want, or, as TLB puts it: "I have everything I need!" The greed of our hearts will usually try to convince us that we are not satisfied. When asked by a reporter, how much a person needed to be content, J. D. Rockefeller answered: "Just a little bit more!" The experience of satisfaction has little to do with the size of one's possessions, but with our spiritual condition. Our hearts will only cease to want when we find satisfaction in God. Augustine's words confirm this eternal truth: "Thou hast made us for Thyself... and our hearts are restless until they repose in Thee!"⁴²⁴

"The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want" is, therefore, a complete confession of the soul. The two part of the phrase are equal: The Lord being my shepherd means complete satisfaction. It speaks of lostness, but also of salvation and fulfillment.

The second verse expresses this fulfillment beautifully with its images of "green pastures" and "quiet waters." The color green has a quieting effect upon the human mind. The Hebrew word for "green" is *deshe'*, which comes from *dasha'*, meaning "to sprout." It conveys the idea of young tender grass. A sheep that lies down has had enough to eat. The picture speaks of complete satisfaction. Man has reached his goal; he has entered into the rest that God prepared for him. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews says this so beautifully: "There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."⁴²⁵ The "quiet waters" convey the same idea.

Something is lost in all translations of this psalm. David uses allegories by giving names to the places, much the same as Bunyan does in *Pilgrim's Progress*. The name of the water is "still," the path is called "righteousness," and the valley is called "shadow of death." The stress falls upon the physical aspect of the experience, although this cannot be separated from the mental, emotional, and spiritual in man. Man is a unity, and although our physical needs may not be the most important ones, they have to be satisfied first. A person who is starving and in weakened condition is an easy prey to spiritual foes. The remarkable implication of David's words is though, that the acknowledgment of the spiritual relationship: "the Lord is my shepherd" an immediate effect has upon the physical needs of man. God is interested in our physical well-being because He loves us. And it is amazing what green grass and quiet water can do to a person's emotions. Our soul needs trees! Few exercises are so relaxing as a walk through the forest. God uses natural means to restore our soul; we should make use of them. If we let the Lord have His way in our lives, we will cultivated also and intimate relationship with nature around us.

But this is not all; a person does not become morally good because he does a lot of walking. This can be of help only after we have become morally good. Real health is brought about through righteousness. That is what the path, or track stands for. In Hebrew poetry, which operates on the principle of parallels, "he restores my soul" is equated with "He guides me in paths of righteousness." The daily practice of righteousness means restoration of the soul.

Righteousness is a morally loaded word. It means acting in accordance with the character of God. If the Lord is our shepherd, there will be a moral change that takes place in our lives. He makes us partakers of His Name; which means that we will start to resemble Him in the way we live and act. "For His Name's sake" also implies that it is God who sanctifies us. He does this, first of all, not for our sakes, but for His own sake. God saves us, not because we are worth much in our present condition, but because of His Name. We are valuable for God, even in our fallen state, because we are the bearers of His image. The Name of God represents His love and holiness, which are the pillars of our salvation. The Name of God is both the beginning and the end of our salvation. We read in Revelation about the people who serve God in the New Jerusalem: "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."⁴²⁶ This same Name guides us on the way that leads to the fullness of glory.

As we said above, we live in a hostile world in which want and unrighteousness lie in wait to destroy us. The presence of the Lord does not take us out of this world; even the bad circumstances do not

⁴²³ John 10:2-4

⁴²⁴ Saint Augustine: *Confessions*

⁴²⁵ Heb. 4:9,10

⁴²⁶ Rev. 22: 4

always change, but the presence of God changes us. This becomes particularly clear in vs. 4. God does not save us from “the valley of the shadow of death.” Several commentators see in this image a picture of our dying. For a man who lives without God, death is the end of all things; it is the only factor that makes life devoid of all meaning. For the man who walks with God death is a valley through which we pass. David could not have known that God Himself would literally walk through the valley of death in the person of Jesus Christ. If God will be with us during this most extreme of all experiences, we may assume that He will also be with us in places where the darkness is less.

The rod and staff are the means the shepherd uses to keep his sheep together and to keep them from getting lost. They are not necessarily tools that symbolize kind treatment. Rods are used for spankings and beatings, and a shepherd can use the end of his staff to pick up a lump of dirt and hurl it at his sheep. This action makes the sheep jump up and brings him back to the fold. It sounds strange that David draws comfort from the fact that his Shepherd has these tools of discipline. But a closer look reveals David’s deep insight into the Lord’s intentions when He chastens. David is comforted by the fact that the tools for the discipline of his life are in the hands of God and not in his own. If he surrenders in obedience to the Lord, He will watch over him and keep him from going astray. If we have any insight into our own character, this truth will be a comfort to us also. The person who thinks that he has himself completely in hand is a fool. The fact that God is willing to discipline us is an indication of the respect He has for us, and that He treats us as men. The discipline implies that we are ultimately responsible for our own conduct. It is at this point that the comparison between men and sheep ends.

The great surprise in this psalm is found in vs. 5: “You prepare a table before me . . .” The Hebrew word for “table” is *shulchan*, which *Strongs Definitions* says implies a meal. The intent is that God invites David as His guest, and asks him to sit at His table in order to honor him. We will probably never fully comprehend the fact that the Almighty desires to honor us. One of the most amazing pronouncements of our Lord Jesus Christ is: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.”⁴²⁷ God invites the person who receives His grace to be His guest of honor. The food that is served is of secondary importance; the main thing is the fellowship. We find the same thought in Revelation, where Jesus says to the church in Laodicea: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”⁴²⁸

This invitation can also be seen as a guarantee of protection. The table is prepared “in the presence of my enemies.” While being surrounded by fierce foes, David sits down quietly at God’s table to eat and drink and have fellowship. The presence of the Lord is the most perfect protection against all who are after David’s life. It is hard to maintain here that David is still using the image of a shepherd and his sheep. There is an infinite distance between men and beasts. Man may treat an animal well, but there cannot never be a human relationship as is indicated here. God’s invitation to David implies that there is a certain equality between God and man. The Spirit of God and the spirit of man share, so to speak, the same substance. Some people in the Bible were called “God’s friend.” We read this about Abraham: “O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?”⁴²⁹ In Isaiah we read that God says: “But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend.”⁴³⁰ Of some we read that they walked with God. “Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters.”⁴³¹ And the Bible says of Noah: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God.”⁴³² And God testifies about Moses: “He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.”⁴³³ For those who are in Jesus Christ this intimacy with God is a daily option. It is this fellowship with the Lord that protects us against the enemy. When Jesus prayed for His disciples, He said: “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them

⁴²⁷ John 12:26^b

⁴²⁸ Rev. 3:20

⁴²⁹ II Chr. 20:7

⁴³⁰ Isa. 41:8

⁴³¹ Gen. 5:22

⁴³² Gen. 6:9

⁴³³ Num. 12:7,8

from the evil one.”⁴³⁴ However strange this may seem, in this demon-possessed world we can sit at God’s table and celebrate with Him.

Man has to eat in order to live, but there is a difference between eating and eating. The fact that the table of the Lord is necessary to keep us alive is quite different from the way many people scrape together the morsels that they need to keep them alive. What a difference between God’s abundance and the hunger suffered by the majority of mankind! The topic here is, of course, not daily bread. Moses said to the people of Israel: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”⁴³⁵ What David eats at the Lord’s table is that food the feeds our human nature. This is also the topic of Jesus’ profound discourse in the Gospel of John.⁴³⁶ In the respect most people starve to death. Only Jesus Christ can give us the real food.

Anointing in the Old Testament had a special meaning as preparation for a specific task. Aaron was the first person we read about being anointed. Saul and David were anointed, but also people who had been cured from leprosy. We read in Leviticus where the rite of purification from leprosy is described: “The priest is to put some of the oil remaining in his palm on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot, on top of the blood of the guilt offering. The rest of the oil in his palm the priest shall put on the head of the one to be cleansed and make atonement for him before the LORD.”⁴³⁷ From Jesus’ words in Luke’s Gospel we would deduct that anointing in the New Testament was practiced to honor a guest. He said to Simon, who had invited Him into his house: “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.”⁴³⁸ Evidently, the custom was that the lord of the house anointed the guest of honor in his house. In this psalm David referred probably not to his anointing as king of Israel, but to the fact that God bestows upon him the greatest honor a host can bestow upon his guest.

The abundance of wine also points in the direction of a show of honor. It may seem strange to us that a cup should overflow in order to prove this point, but we can understand that God does not want us to taste only teaspoons full of His joy. Both the oil and the wine are symbols of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. This fullness is the essence of this feast.

Our Lord Jesus uses the term “cup” a few times in a quite different way as a symbol of His carrying away the sin of this world. In Matthew He says to the disciples who want to sit at His side on the throne in Heaven: “ ‘You don’t know what you are asking, ... can you drink the cup I am going to drink?’ ‘We can,’ they answered. Jesus said to them, ‘You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.’ ”⁴³⁹ During the Last Supper, we read: “Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’ ”⁴⁴⁰ And in Gethsemane He prayed: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”⁴⁴¹ On the basis of Jesus’ drinking the cup of bitterness and suffering, we may enjoy the other cup of fullness of joy.

One of the results of intense and intimate fellowship with God is that we leave a trail of blessing behind us. “Goodness and love will follow” in our footsteps. The implication is that those blessing are not meant for us but for others, otherwise, they would not follow us in our path, but they would walk beside us. We receive God’s goodness and love while sitting at His table; the surplus of our joy and fulfillment overflow to the ones who come after us. This same principle is touched upon in the psalms from the sons of Korah, where we read about those who dwell in the house of the Lord: “As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.”⁴⁴²

⁴³⁴ John 17:15

⁴³⁵ Deut. 8:3

⁴³⁶ See John 6:26-59

⁴³⁷ Lev. 14:17,18

⁴³⁸ Luke 7:44-46

⁴³⁹ Matt. 20:22,23

⁴⁴⁰ Matt. 26:27,28

⁴⁴¹ Matt. 26:39

⁴⁴² Ps. 84: 6

“Goodness and love” are variously rendered in different translations as, “goodness and mercy” (KJV), “goodness and lovingkindness” (NAS), “goodness and unfailing kindness” (TLB). The phrase expresses the impression we make upon others and the blessing we leave behind us. Our relationship with our fellowmen ought to be characterized by goodness and kindness. We should treat others as God treats us. The intent is that the lives of others are changed by our testimony, so that they will enter into the same relationship with God as we have. We read above about the people who passed through “the Valley of Baca” and who make it into a place of springs, because they dwell in the house of the Lord. Here the order is reversed: the trail of goodness and love leads to the house of the Lord. Both directions are correct and they are both needed. On the road to the house of the Lord the traffic goes two ways. The point is that goodness and love can never be separated from fellowship with God. It is not ours, but God’s goodness and love, which stream through us. The stream would run dry immediately if fellowship with God were interrupted.

Finally, only the priests dwell in the house of the LORD forever. That is why every Christian is a priest. Our task is to perform the duties of our priesthood. Fellowship with God is no vacation. We constantly carry the burdens of the world in which we live before God. On the basis of Christ’s sacrifice, we have to intercede without interruption for those with whom we come in contact. Aaron carried the names of the twelve tribes of Israel upon his shoulders and on his heart, and so he appeared before the Lord. We cannot have fellowship with God without a prayer list on which we write the names of those for whom we pray regularly. This is the secret of the goodness, love, and blessing that trails our lives.

Dwelling in the house of the Lord also involves living a life of praising God. As we read in the psalm already quoted above: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.”⁴⁴³ If we can really praise and worship God we have discovered the secret of a life of blessing, and we have opened the source of blessing for others.

⁴⁴³ Ps. 84:4

PSALM TWENTY-FOUR

Of David. A psalm.

- 1 The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;**
- 2 for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.**
- 3 Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?**
- 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.**
- 5 He will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Savior.**
- 6 Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob. Selah**
- 7 Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.**
- 8 Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.**
- 9 Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.**
- 10 Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty-- he is the King of glory. Selah**

According to the *Commentary On The Psalms* by George Knight, the Jews recite this psalm on the first day of every week, which is our Sunday; and Christians quote it on Ascension Day. He further supposes that the psalm was used when the ark was carried into the tabernacle and that this ceremony was repeated each year. There is, however, in the Old Testament no indication that such an annual ceremony existed. When the ark is brought to Jerusalem we read: "They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD."⁴⁴⁴ When Solomon finished the construction of the temple, we read: "And they brought up the ark of the LORD and the Tent of Meeting and all the sacred furnishings in it. The priests and Levites carried them up, and King Solomon and the entire assembly of Israel that had gathered about him were before the ark, sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted. The priests then brought the ark of the LORD's covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim."⁴⁴⁵

Adam Clarke's Commentary suggests that the psalm was composed for this occasion. It seems plausible that David originally wrote the psalm for the celebration of the first transportation of the ark, and that the psalm was used again at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem.

The whole psalm expresses the realization that the ark was only a symbol of the glory of God, and that this glory far surpassed our human comprehension. The paradoxical feelings of David's exuberant joy and awareness of his own unworthiness, such as was evinced when the ark was brought to Jerusalem the first time, parallel what is expressed in this psalm also. We are also reminded of Moses words as the ark moved about in the desert: "Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." And, whenever it came to rest, he said: "Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel."⁴⁴⁶

So when the ark entered its place of rest the choir sang: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." The Lord was acknowledged as the God of all the earth. In this confession Israel far surpassed any other nation on earth, because they did not see God as a national, local deity, but as the creator of Heaven and earth. The whole Old Testament is full of confessions like this. It seems there for strange that Jesus did not contradict the devil during the temptation in the desert, when he said to Him: "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to."⁴⁴⁷ But the devil spoke only a half truth. God had given him the government of the world before he fell in sin, that was true. When he rose up against God, however, he should have turned in his mandate. At present he exercises an illegal rule of that which belongs to God. Also, the "authority and splendor" Satan speaks about is not the same as the majestic manifesto of this psalm: "The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein."⁴⁴⁸ From what the angel Gabriel (that is who we suppose he was) told Daniel, we gather that the prince of darkness stands behind the

⁴⁴⁴ II Sam. 6:17

⁴⁴⁵ I Kings 8:4-6

⁴⁴⁶ Num. 10:35,36

⁴⁴⁷ Luke 4:6

⁴⁴⁸ (KJV)

powers of this world.⁴⁴⁹ It was that kind of power behind the screens that manipulates the heads of governments and the affairs of nations, that Satan offered to Christ, if he would fulfill certain conditions.

The glory of this psalm speaks about fullness and abundance, not only of “everything in all the world,” as TLB puts it. The fullness of the world is the result of the blessing of the Lord. The world as God created it contained an abundance of blessing for man and beast. Even after the fall and the subsequent curse that made the earth bring forth thorns and thistles for man, and make him eat his food by the sweat of his brow, we still live on a good earth. The psalmist recognizes that “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”⁴⁵⁰ God is Lord of the earth and Lord of all blessings. Not only the whole earth and all its blessings belong to the Lord, but also the whole world of men. The phrase: “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it,” has meaning for us only if we apply it to ourselves. It is only if we confess that we belong to the Lord, and that we are God’s property, that the collective picture of the earth and its fullness begin to have any meaning for us. A person, who understands and accepts that he belongs to God spirit, soul, and body, understands something of God’s claim upon the lives of others in this world. This psalm says in different worlds what Jesus says in one of His parables: “The field is the world.”⁴⁵¹ That phrase was one of John Wesley’s favorite slogans.

What the psalmist says is a phrase that has judicial value. Ever since the coming of sin, both the devil and fallen humanity have disputed this claim. It is our confession of faith that God’s right to the whole of creation will become a reality in the Kingdom of Heaven, and as we said above, such a confession has only merit inasmuch as we acknowledge God’s claim upon our own lives in an act of complete surrender.

The reasons for God’s claim to the earth and all that live in it are further states in the opening verses of this psalm. God created this world and that is the reason that He has a right to it.

The thought that God “founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters” sounds strange to us, as if water would be the basis for all the existing land masses, and that the continents would be floating islands upon the oceans. We rather see reality as opposite to this, since there is a bottom to every sea. TLB circumvents the problem with the rendering: “He is the one who pushed the oceans back to let dry land appear.” Our problem, however, is that we do not know what the condition of our world was before the Flood, and whether there were not, in fact, huge masses of water beneath the earth’s crust. In the description of the flood in Genesis we read: “On that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.”⁴⁵² Who knows but that the condition of the floating islands C. S. Lewis describes in his book *Perelandra* was actually the condition of our planet also in its original state.

It is with those words that the psalmist announces who the God is, whose throne was represented by the ark which was being carried to Jerusalem.

The verses 3-6 deal with the question of how those, upon whose life God has a claim, come to the point that they enter into a personal relation with God. The fact that God has the right to rule over us does not mean that we automatically have fellowship with Him. The experience of fellowship is represented under the image of the mountain that has to be climbed. As David asks the question: “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?” it sounds as if fellowship with God would demand the most strenuous effort on our part. The question is, however, not whether we are able to exert the effort to reach the top, but whether we are deemed worthy to even try the climb. He does not ask: “Who can ascend the hill of the LORD?” but “who may...?”

Before we enter into this question we should picture ourselves first as standing at the foot of the mountain and God living on the summit. Compared to this, the climbing of Mount Everest is easy! David suggests that standing in God’s holy place means triumphing over all the elements. In this ascent, as in all mountain climbing, everything is against us. Moses ascended Mount Sinai and spent forty days in the presence of the Lord, but the Bible itself testifies that nobody else ever had such an intimate relationship with God. Climbing the hill of the Lord is an exceptional feat.

Vs. 4 indicates that our climbing to the top depends on the way we live in the valley. “He who has clean hands and a pure heart who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false” speak about the goal for which we live, and how trustworthy we are in our speaking. These are the factors, which

⁴⁴⁹ See Dan. 10:12-21

⁴⁵⁰ James 1:17

⁴⁵¹ Matt. 13:38

⁴⁵² Gen. 7:11

determine whether God will have fellowship with us, or not. We would say that David reversed the roles, because purity of heart is a result of our knowing God, not a prerequisite. So, evidently, the point is not whether we reach the top, but whether we maintain the position in which God has placed us already. After all, the fact that the ark was being brought in, indicated that sin had been expiated and pardon received. None of the singers of this psalm doubted whether God was in their midst.

Ascending the hill of the Lord and standing in His holy place are poetical parallels, which means that we do not first climb up and then stand on the top, but both are images of the same act. The picture is dynamic, not static. Inner purity is both a condition and an effort on our part. God wants us to exercise holiness, not in order to be saved, but because we are saved. Our fellowship with the Lord is maintained in the purity of our deeds, in the singleness of our motives, in the goal we have set before us, and in the reliability of the way in which we live.

Having clean hands stands for our acts, and our acts are determined by the condition of our heart. Jesus said: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."⁴⁵³ If our heart is pure, our hands will be clean also. Without purity of heart there can be no fellowship with God. Jesus said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."⁴⁵⁴ And the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews says: "Without holiness no one will see the Lord."⁴⁵⁵

David's descriptive clause: "Who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false," as the NIV translates it, is rendered by the RSV as "Who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully." The idea is that the soul is not fixed upon God, but upon a lie. A false oath is evidence of the absence of truth in the heart. If God is the goal of our lives, we cannot lie. The original meaning of the word "sin" is "to miss the mark." When sin ripens in the heart of man, he does not only miss the mark but he hit the wrong target. He who does not have God as his goal reaches out to the devil. The tragedy of most people is that they do not realize they are doing this. Many people admit that they are not perfect and that their lives may be slightly off the right track, but very few understand that missing the right road means going in the opposite direction.

Swearing falsely means to call upon the Name of the Lord in order to give to our sins an air of legitimacy. If we lie under oath, we give proof of the fact that we have completely abandoned all ethical standards. To cheat, while using the Name of God, is one of the greatest sin one can commit. It means, "trying to make God pull our cart." No one who does this will ever escape the consequences.

Vs. 5 states that he who has his soul fixed upon God "will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God his Savior." This blessing cannot be separated from our fellowship with God. We cannot leave God and carry the blessing home with us. But there also is a passing on to others of the blessing. David said in the previous psalm: "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life."⁴⁵⁶ Our ascending the hill of the Lord and our standing in His holy place will have its influence upon the world that surrounds us. After all, having clean hands and a pure heart, and not swearing false oaths pertains to our relationship to our neighbors. Loving God and loving one's neighbor cannot be separated.

The fact that David calls God his Savior proves that his ascending the hill and standing in God's presence were not the result of his own purity but of the salvation God provided for him. Nobody would be able to stand before God on the basis of his own purity. God is the source of our salvation, which brings about in our hearts changes that lead to righteousness and purity, and provides blessings that can be passed on to others.

David does not speak about individual experiences only; he addresses a whole generation, which he calls "Jacob." It is obvious that the nation of Israel as a whole could not be called a nation that was clean of hands and pure of heart. The land was full of people who may have been ritually clean but who were ultimately only interested in their own gain. Joab, David's general, who committed some atrocious crimes, is a good example in case. The designation of God as the "God of Jacob," therefore, suggests Jacob's crisis experience at Peniel.⁴⁵⁷ Jacob wrestled with God at Peniel, and according to the commentary of the prophet Hosea, he overcame by asking for grace.⁴⁵⁸ "The generation of those who seek him, who seek [the] face [of the] God of Jacob" is the generation of those who are conscious of their sins and who ask for forgiveness.

⁴⁵³ Matt. 15:19

⁴⁵⁴ Matt. 5:8

⁴⁵⁵ Heb. 12:14^b

⁴⁵⁶ Ps. 23:6

⁴⁵⁷ See Gen. 32:22-32

⁴⁵⁸ Hos. 12:4

Those who ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in His holy place are those who have received forgiveness of their sins in Jesus Christ.

It is generally supposed that at vs. 7, the procession that is carrying the ark has reached the gates of Zion. We hear two choirs singing an antiphonal chorus, one on the inside of the fortress and one outside the gate. The fact that the gates are called “you ancient doors” suggests the eternal character of the city, and elevates the place on earth to an image of the heavenly reality. The Old Testament is full of this kind of picture. We sometimes get the impression that the Jews had a mentality that was earthly, because, for instance, they expressed spiritual blessings in terms of material abundance. Yet, they must have had a clear concept of what the image expressed. Just as they knew YHWH to be the God of all the earth, and that His presence was not limited to the atonement cover on the ark, so they realized that there were gates in Heaven, of which the gates on earth were a vague image. Only from our New Testament perspective, however, can the true meaning of the words here can only be understood to the full. The Old Testament Jew could not have know why the God who was enthroned in Heaven would find Himself outside the gate and ask to be let in. We know now that the Word became flesh, and that He had to return to his heavenly glory after His death and resurrection.

But what a magnificent image! The ark is the representation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who came to earth to live as man among men, and who after effectuating the cleaning of the sins of the world went back to Heaven. In the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”⁴⁵⁹

The gates are poetically personified, as if they are conscious of the fact that they open to let the Lord of glory in. Also the antiphonal singing, the question and answer suggest a certain consciousness, as if the gates are searching for the meaning of the events that take place. We see a parallel of this heavenly scene take place on earth when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem. Matthew reports: “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, ‘Who is this?’ The crowds answered, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.’”⁴⁶⁰ In the same context Jesus says to the Pharisees who wanted Jesus to rebuke His disciples: “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”⁴⁶¹ Here the gates of Zion cry out. Is this a rebuke to men because they keep quiet? The gates have to be opened by human hands to let the King of glory enter human lives. This psalm expresses anew how solemn and glorious the experience of our conversion actually is, and what eternal life will be forever after. The Apostle Paul calls this: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”⁴⁶²

The Hebrew words for “King of glory” are *Melek hakaabowd*, which is comes from the word *kabod*, defined by *Strongs* as “weight, but only figuratively in a good sense, splendor or copiousness: “glorious, glory, honor.” The word *kabod* is derived from *kabad*, which means “numerous, rich, honorable; causatively, to make weighty.” So the phrase “the King of glory” could be translated with “the King of honor,” or “the King who is to be honored.”

It is difficult for us to describe “glory.” We all recognize glory when we see it, but we cannot say what it is. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it as “**1** : renown **2** : honor and praise rendered in worship **3** : something that secures praise or renown **4** : a distinguishing quality or asset **5** : resplendence, magnificence **6** : heavenly bliss **7** : a height of prosperity or achievement,” but this definition tells us very little about the content of glory.

The prophet Isaiah equates glory with holiness. In describing his vision he records the song of the Seraphim: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”⁴⁶³ Glory, evidently, is the translation in earthly terms of God’s holiness.

Paul calls Jesus “the Lord of glory.” He writes to the Corinthians: “None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”⁴⁶⁴ “Lord of glory” is a divine title; it sums up all of His divine attributes and expresses the essence of His being. He is the Lord, the King, the Almighty. He has the right to rule over my life. I acknowledge this right in surrendering my rights to Him. I worship Him when I call Him “Lord of glory” or “King of honor.”

⁴⁵⁹ Heb. 1:3b

⁴⁶⁰ Matt. 21:10,11

⁴⁶¹ Luke 19: 40

⁴⁶² Col 1:27^b

⁴⁶³ Isa. 6:3

⁴⁶⁴ I Cor. 2:8

When the choir asks: “Who is this King of glory?” they express some of the mystery of human life. Man is born in this world with an emptiness in his life, which can only be filled by an encounter with the King. To discover the answer to the question: “Who is this King ...?” means achieving the goal of our lives.

What happens in the human heart on a small scale is an image of what happens on the cosmic level also. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains this so beautifully when he says: “When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.’ In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.”⁴⁶⁵ The entering of the ark on Mount Zion is the picture of an eternal event that is enacted both in the macro-cosmos, as well as in the micro-cosmos. Augustine’s confession was: “Restless is our heart within us, o God, till it finds rest in Thee!”

The answer of the choir to “Who is this King of glory?” is “The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.” This speaks of the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ at Golgotha. It is the triumph of the Lamb that was slain. This victory is greater than any other that was ever gained in battles on earth. In this battle the archenemy, the instigator of all animosity in heaven and on earth, was conquered.

When the choir repeats the phrase, “the LORD mighty in battle becomes the Lord Almighty,” they say that He is *Yahweh Ts^abaa’owt*, the LORD of hosts, the supreme commander. He possesses all power in Heaven and on earth. Jesus conquered death, which is the last enemy to be destroyed.⁴⁶⁶ These verses celebrate the death, as well as the resurrection and ascension of our Lord. The call: “Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up...” is just as much a call to worship was the one John heard in Revelation: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” and “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁵ Heb. 9:19-24

⁴⁶⁶ I Cor. 15:26

⁴⁶⁷ Rev. 5:12,13

PSALM TWENTY-FIVE

Of David.

- 1 *To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;*
- 2 *in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me.*
- 3 *No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse.*
- 4 *Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths;*
- 5 *guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.*
- 6 *Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.*
- 7 *Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD.*
- 8 *Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.*
- 9 *He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.*
- 10 *All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.*
- 11 *For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.*
- 12 *Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him.*
- 13 *He will spend his days in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land.*
- 14 *The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them.*
- 15 *My eyes are ever on the LORD, for only he will release my feet from the snare.*
- 16 *Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.*
- 17 *The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish.*
- 18 *Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins.*
- 19 *See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!*
- 20 *Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.*
- 21 *May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you.*
- 22 *Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles!*

A footnote in the NIV reads: "This psalm is an acrostic poem, the verses of which begin with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet." Adam Clarke's Commentary gives the following introduction to this psalm: "It is the first of those called acrostic Psalms, i. e., Psalms each line of which begins with a several letter of the Hebrew alphabet in their common order. Of acrostic Psalms there are seven, namely, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145. It is fashionable to be violent in encomiums⁴⁶⁸ on the Jews for the very faithful manner in which they have preserved the Hebrew Scriptures; but these encomiums are, in general, ill placed. Even this Psalm is a proof with what carelessness they have watched over the sacred deposit committed to their trust. The Hebrew letter waw (w) is lacking in the fifth verse, and the Hebrew letter koph (k) in the eighteenth; the Hebrew letter resh (r) being twice inserted, once instead of koph (k); and a whole line added at the end, entirely out of the alphabetical series."

This psalm differs widely from the preceding one. It is difficult to sound the rapidly changing emotions it expresses. David moved through a whole gamut of feelings, from guilt to uncertainty, to faith and intimacy with God, and back again to guilt feelings. The psalm gives us more a picture of David as an emotional person than as a spiritual man; he concentrates more on man and his experiences than on the facts of salvation. We find some objective observations that seem to rise out of the mist to be swallowed up again immediately. The psalm gives a typical image of man on earth, "at home in the body [and] away from the Lord," to quote the Apostle Paul.⁴⁶⁹ It gives a sharp picture of a man who walks by faith, and not by sight.

"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul" sounds as the lifting up of a wave offering. The priests had to lift some pieces of the sacrificial animal or of the grain offering and wave it before the Lord in order to indicate that it belonged to the Lord, and then put it down for human usage. This is what David does here with his intellect, his emotions, and his will. He shows his willingness to surrender it all into death, while at the same time life on earth goes on for him. He uses his mind, but from now on it belongs to God; he has his own emotions, and makes his own decisions, but something has changed drastically. Now, as he has

⁴⁶⁸ Glowing praises (Merriam Webster's)

⁴⁶⁹ II Cor. 5:6

acknowledged God's right upon his soul, and that his life is no longer his own, all kinds of things can happen to him. God can intervene in his life without any previous warning, and ask him to do things and go places he never anticipated. He promised to obey; he has lost his anchor and is taken up in the current of God's will, without control, without a rudder he can steer himself.

If this is the experience of our lives, we may sometimes ask ourselves the question of whether God knows what He is doing. Lifting up our soul to the Lord is an act of faith. We cannot see what the consequences will be, but we trust God. If God is who we believe He is, He is totally reliable, and this discovery is at the core of all our experiences with Him.

Lifting up our soul to the Lord seems like a reckless daring act, but the outward appearance of it is deceiving. It is a testimony; we testify to men and demons that we burned our bridges behind us and that we put our faith in God alone. The devil is our enemy, and some of our fellowmen are not too kindly inclined toward us. If we step out of the boat in order to walk on the water, and we begin to sink, they would take great pleasure in it and mock us for the rest of our lives. The person who is ashamed of what he does, and that would be the result of such mockery, feels the walls of his human dignity crumble around him. Such an experience can wound us deeply. It is salutary to feel shame because of our sin before God, who loves us, but to be put to shame in front of authorities and people who hate us is a terrible feeling. That causes the deepest of all emotional injuries. That is why the assurance, that those who trust Yahweh will not be put to shame, is such a monumental one. The Apostle Peter assures us that, "the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."⁴⁷⁰ God does not mock our weaknesses. I will never forget my own feelings at the time of my conversion. I felt deeply ashamed because of my sin. It may have been more a complex of guilt feelings than of regret for certain things I had done. But the feeling was strong enough that I decided not to ask the Lord to come into my life. I was afraid that He would publicly embarrass me. But the Lord made clear to me that He loved me, and that things of the past had been wiped out, and that He would never bring them up again. Every human being has something he is embarrassed about, but God does not expose us to make us look foolish; He covers us with His love. In this psalm David wrestles with this assurance. Not being put to shame does not only apply to our guilt feelings but also to the steps we take in faith. God guides our steps on the path of that which seems illogical and unreasonable, if we put our trust in Him and obey Him. A Christian does indeed walk on water.

David's enemies, here as elsewhere, are, first of all, demonic powers, but also men who do not know fellowship with God, and who hate David. Some translations do not say: "nor let my enemies triumph over me," as the NIV renders it, but "do not let my enemies exult over me."⁴⁷¹ The Hebrew word is *'alats*, which is defined by *Strongs* as: "to jump for joy, i.e. exult." Evidently, David admits the possibility of a defeat. We should, therefore, see this psalm in the first place as a prayer for victory. Being put to shame would then be the equivalent of being defeated. A person who is overpowered by sin is, in fact, defeated and has reason to feel ashamed.

The statement: "they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse" is a rather controversial one. KJV is closest to the Hebrew by saying: "Let them be ashamed which transgress without cause." TLB renders it with: "But all who harm the innocent shall be defeated." The Good News Bible reads: "Defeat does not come to those who trust in you, but to those who are quick to rebel against you."

Commentaries are not unanimous in their interpretation of "Transgress without cause." *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says: "Perhaps bowg'diym ... may here mean idolatrous persons. Let not them that wait upon and worship thee be ashamed: but they shall be ashamed who vainly worship, or trust in false gods. See <Mal. 2:11-16>. The Chaldeans have evil entreated us, and oppressed us: they trust in their idols, let them see the vanity of their idolatry." But the *Commentary of Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown* says: "[Which transgress without cause]-- namely, mine enemies <Ps. 25:2>. The Hebrew for 'transgress' (hahogedim) is to deal treacherously. The treacherous transgression meant is that against one's neighbor. All the Israelites were, as all professing Christians are now, joined together in the brotherly covenant. To be even wanting in the love to our neighbor which is enjoined, is a treacherous transgression. Compare <Ps. 41:9; Hos. 6:7>. 'Without cause' (reequ)-- literally, 'empty' <Ps. 69:4>, 'without provocation.' "

The verses 4-7 contain a moving prayer for guidance and insight. "Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths," suggests not only that we ought to obey God's command, but also that we would understand something of the "why" of God's guidance in our lives. David says elsewhere: "He made

⁴⁷⁰ I Pet. 2:6

⁴⁷¹ NAS, RSV

known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel,⁴⁷² making a distinction between what God revealed of Himself to Moses, and what was shown to the people of Israel. David asks here that God would allow him intimacy with Himself, and would give him insight into His secrets. In dealing with Abraham, God said to Himself: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?”⁴⁷³ David asks here to become God’s friend, for friends share in each other’s secrets. Jesus also gave this definition of friendship to His disciples, when He said: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”⁴⁷⁴

Knowing God’s paths entails consequences. Understanding God’s motives in guiding us is useless without obedience. When we know the truth we have to practice it. God will not take the trouble to reveal things to us if we do not surrender to His will first.

Jesus puts as a condition for understanding the truth and for experiencing freedom of sin that His Word abide in us. In John’s Gospel we read: “If you abide in My word, you are my disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”⁴⁷⁵ This means obedience to His Word. Elsewhere, Jesus says: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”⁴⁷⁶ What He meant was not an intellectual study, but a practicing and a following of His example. Sin and death were caused by following the devil’s lie. Understanding and practicing the truth will open the fountain of salvation for us.

Vs. 5, “Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long,” is quite paradoxical. If God guides us, He will go before us all the way. Yet, David says that he expects God to come to him, as if God would be far away. The NKJ renders this verse with: “Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; on You I wait all the day.” This is actually a reversal of roles. By knowing God’s truth we draw nigh to Him; He can hardly come closer to us than He is already. The attitude of waiting is important. We have to live as people who are expecting their Lord any moment.

When David says: “Remember, O LORD,” he projects his own limitations upon God. It would be quite redundant to remind God of His mercy and love. God knows Himself, and it is His Spirit who reminds us of God’s love and mercy. As a puny creature, living in time and space, David reminds God that He is eternal. The Almighty must have smiled at this, when David came up with these lines. Yet, there is something touching in it when a man says to God: “You are just like I am.” David may have been wrong in taking forgetfulness as the point of comparison between God and himself, as far as the principle of comparing goes, he was right: we are like God and He is like us. At the same time, any comparison between God and us will bring out the enormous difference; God is eternal and we are temporal.

God’s mercy and love are placed against the background of His eternity, and so the right perspective becomes evident. Love is one of God’s characteristics; His mercy is demonstrated in His acts. The words indicate what He is and what He does. The Hebrew word translated “love” is *racham* which is defined by *Strongs* as: “compassion (in the plural); by extension, the womb (as cherishing the fetus).” “Love” is the translation of the Hebrew word *checed*, which is the word that is always used in the context of the covenant God made with man. Compassion is stimulated by seeing human need. The classical example is that of the Good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable.⁴⁷⁷ Isn’t this amazing that our human need, which is after all a result of the fall, can evoke in God reactions of goodness and compassion? God looked down upon our world and was moved with compassion to the point that He came down to earth in Jesus Christ to take our sins upon Himself, and to carry sin and sickness away. We cannot give a richer content to the word “mercy” than this. God has demonstrated His love to us.

Yet, God’s compassion is not just a passing emotional response. David observes correctly that God’s character is eternal. How a divine eternal attribute can be stimulated by human need is beyond my understanding, but it is obviously so. David also must have felt this with a fine spiritual intuition, without being able to completely grasp this concept himself. He still feels the burden of guilt of his past weigh upon him, and he has no assurance of being forgiven. The writer of the Hebrew Epistle blames this on the fact that the Old Testament people lived with images of atonement, and not with the reality of it. He writes:

⁴⁷² Ps. 103:7

⁴⁷³ Gen. 18:17

⁴⁷⁴ John 15:15

⁴⁷⁵ John 8:31,32 (NKJ)

⁴⁷⁶ Matt. 11:29

⁴⁷⁷ See Luke 10:30-37

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”⁴⁷⁸ The Old Testament Jew knew no freedom from guilt feelings as a New Testament Christian knows. For us the miracle is true that God cannot remember “the sins of our youth” once they are washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. This fact makes it difficult for us, in the dispensation in which we live, to understand the internal struggle of the Jew who lived under the old covenant.

There are, of course, also Christians who keep on feeling guilty for sins that have been forgiven, but this is usually due to a lack of understanding of the New Testament reality. For many people it seems too good to be true that God does not remember our sins, once they are forgiven. In some cases people have psychological guilt feelings that have no relation with transgressions of God’s will. In other cases we are dishonest in that we ask to be forgiven, but what we want is to have the freedom to keep on sinning at the same time. None of those things, however, can be applied to David’s condition. He lived in a dispensation in which we cannot imagine ourselves.

The verses 8-13 deal with more, however, than with sins that have already been confessed in the past. The sinner in vs. 8 is a man who discovers in himself a root of sin that he is unable to eradicate. Man has a tendency to sin because he has a sinful nature. When he sins, he sins against his better knowledge, even after he has received forgiveness. God has a special way to help him. David calls this method “the way,” without further explaining what this means. The RSV renders vs. 8: “Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.” The term “the humble” indicates what he has in mind. The KJV uses the word “meekness.” The word “meek” point in the direction of the solution. Meekness can be defined as submitting oneself to the will of God. If we give our right to self-determination over to God, He will teach us His way and help us to walk in it. We learn to measure our deeds against the standard of God’s righteousness, and thus the root of evil within us begins to wither.

The double reference to God’s goodness not only refers to the fact that God shows us the way, but also to the standard with which He will judge our lives. God not only shows us the way, He is the way. This fact evokes several New Testament associations in us, among which is the fact that Jesus refers to Himself as “the way.” In John’s Gospel He says: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”⁴⁷⁹ In His conversation with the young rich ruler, He said: “No one is good—except God alone.”⁴⁸⁰ He pointed to God’s goodness as a reference, in order to evoke a sense of guilt in the heart of the young man. It is in this sense that the Lord shows us the way also. We begin to compare ourselves with Him, and we draw the conclusion that He is good, as an eternal, infinite being, and we are not. This discovery may awaken a desire in our hearts to obtain this goodness ourselves, which will bring us to meekness. So we will begin to walk in what is right, that is to say, we will become honest and righteous.

Vs. 10 has a special poetical beauty: “All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant.” The first clause shows a plural “all the ways of the Lord.” It is not only the way on which we walk, but also God’s plan, which He reveals to those who are eager to receive it. This presupposes an intimate relationship with God. The meaning of “all the ways of the Lord,” therefore, is a walking in fellowship with the Lord. The experience of those who walk in God’s ways is that God is loving and faithful. Love shows itself in practical ways; faithfulness is the confirmation that God will never forsake us. The writer to the Hebrews says: “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”⁴⁸¹

If we walk in God’s ways, these characteristics of love and faithfulness will communicate themselves to us also, and we will begin to do for others what God does for us. The key to the secrets is obedience. The covenant rests upon bilateral promises. Our salvation, of course, is based upon God’s unilateral commitment to us; but no experience of fellowship is possible without this Old Testament covenant of a reciprocal pledge. The NIV uses the phrase: “those who keep the demands of his covenant.” The RSV, as well as the KJV renders this: “those who keep his covenant and his testimonies,” which is closer to the Hebrew. The word “testimonies” is used as an equivalent for the Ten Commandments,

⁴⁷⁸ Heb. 9:13,14

⁴⁷⁹ John 14:6

⁴⁸⁰ See Luke 18:19-27

⁴⁸¹ Heb. 13:5

indicating that the law is an expression of God's character. It is man's duty to keep God's covenant and his testimonies. We have to hold on to God's revelation of Himself. In the darkness of the world in which we live, the reminder of God's light is necessary to pull us through; otherwise, the darkness would blind us. The tendency in this world is to forget who God is. If we keep what He has given us, He will never forsake us.

The repetition of the prayer for forgiveness in vs. 11 may point to this lingering consciousness of guilt of which we spoke above, but it can also be a growing sense of guilt. As we draw closer to God, our imperfections and impurities will become more defined. When Isaiah received his vision from the Lord, he cried out: "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."⁴⁸² But, as with Isaiah, we will also become more aware of the fact that our lips are touched by a coal from the altar and that "[our] guilt is taken away and our sin atoned for."⁴⁸³

Fearing the Lord, as is mentioned in vs. 12 is nothing more than a realization of the fact of who God is. A man who does not stand in awe before the Lord has no idea with whom he is dealing. Such a person is a fool who lives in a fantasy world. When one has any understanding about God, he will know at once which way he has to take. The NIV is the only version that gives the translation of vs. 12 as: "He will instruct him in the way chosen for him," all other versions make man the one who chooses. The RSV reads: "Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose." Although the NIV may be grammatically correct, the context warrants, obviously, a translation that brings out the human freedom to choose. God instructs us, but it is up to us to choose. There is no coercion; if we follow Him we do so voluntarily.

The decision to do that, which is good, brings about immediate blessing, sometimes in the material realm, but always in that which is spiritual. The man who fears the Lord leaves behind him a heritage for posterity. Children should be able to learn how to fellowship with the Lord by observing their parents, and thus "possess the land."

David wrote those words in Canaan long after the Israelites had entered it, so the meaning is, obviously, not merely living in Canaan, but entering into God's rest. The epistle to the Hebrews describes this truth in more detail.⁴⁸⁴ Reaching our goal in life and being what we ought to be cannot be separated from a realistic concept of who God is, and of experiencing an intimate fellowship with Him. The intent of this verse is not to say that salvation and faith are hereditary, but that parents can be an inspiring example to their children, so that following God will be the most natural thing for them to do.

Vs. 14 is the centerpiece of this psalm: "The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them." The KJV renders this: "The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him." Both convey a sense of deep intimacy and a love relationship. God knows, of course, all our secrets, but it is the sharing with Him of what lives deep inside us that will give depth and meaning to our intercourse with Him. From His side God will communicate to us His secrets in the measure in which we can receive them. Our capacity in this realm is limited, but it will grow with the measure of our love. Nobody ever had as intimate a relationship with the Father as our Lord Jesus Christ when He lived on earth. He had the key to the understanding of the Scriptures, and He knew that the Bible was written about Him, as David had said: "Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll.'⁴⁸⁵ For us, it is only possible to have intimate fellowship with the Father as we are in Christ. For a person who is born "at home in the body, and away from the Lord," to use Paul's words,⁴⁸⁶ it is always difficult to understand that such fellowship with God is possible, and that we can communicate with Him as a friend. The relationship in which God confides in us speaks of an intimacy that surpasses all other relationships on earth. A marriage relationship is only a vague shadow of this reality.

There is a sense in which the covenant of God is well known, since it is well documented in Scripture. When we read: "he makes his covenant known to them," it does not mean that there are secret clauses in God's covenant, but that one enters into the experience of the covenant. Jeremiah prophesied about this when he said: "'The time is coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant,

⁴⁸² Isa. 6:5

⁴⁸³ Isa. 6:7

⁴⁸⁴ See Heb. 4

⁴⁸⁵ Ps. 40:7

⁴⁸⁶ II Cor. 5:6

though I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD. 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' ' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'⁴⁸⁷ The Old Testament law becomes an inner reality in the person who is born again of the Holy Spirit.

But for the New Testament Christian knowing the Lord is not something that comes automatically. George Mueller, who saw hundreds of answers to prayer, could state at the end of his life: "I know the Lord." There are not many Christians who can repeat those words after him; it takes a consistent daily walk with the Lord. "He makes his covenant known to them," signifies "He puts His law in their minds and writes it on their hearts." When God writes His law on our hearts, He reveals Himself to us. His law is the expression of His being.

"My eyes are ever on the LORD," says the same as what David said elsewhere: "I have set the LORD always before me."⁴⁸⁸ To concentrate on the Lord in this way requires an act of the will. Peter began to sink when he did not keep his eyes on Jesus. We read in Matthew: "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"⁴⁸⁹ We turn things around if we say that the person who keeps his eyes on the Lord closes his eyes to the realities of life. Sin distorts our conception of reality. God's reality is in Jesus Christ. If we keep our eyes on our circumstances, we will be trapped in the contradictions of life. Our situation can only be judged objectively from God's perspective. The level on which we live in this world prevents us from seeing the right perspective, which is needed to make correct judgments. Small and insignificant events are blown up out of proportion, and this becomes a snare to man. David realized that he had to keep his eyes on the Lord in order not to become a prey of the devil. Fellowship with God will make us into normal, well-balanced human beings who can go through life with a well-defined goal before them. Intimacy with God is a very practical thing. It is not something mystical and out-of-this-world, but it keeps us from the Evil One.

This does not mean that David himself was consistent in his fellowship with God. As a human being, he was subject to changing moods. As we have seen already, there is a clear difference between the Old Testament believer and the New Testament one in their consciousness of forgiveness of sin. The Holy Spirit came upon some Old Testament people, but He did not indwell them as He indwells the New Testament Christian. It seems strange that, immediately after David's strong sounding testimony regarding life on the highest plane, he sees himself as "lonely and afflicted." It almost sounds as if someone else is speaking. *Adam Clarke* remarks concerning this: "'Turn thee unto me' Probably the prayer of the poor captives in Babylon, which is continued through this and the remaining verses." We prefer to take the subscript "Of David" literally, and we see no reason why those words could not be attributed to David himself.

It is clear, however, that the writer is depressed. He misses the stimulus of fellowship with other human beings. Our fellowship with God is the most important thing in life, but we also need contact with our fellowmen. On the night our Lord Jesus Christ had to drink the bitter cup alone in the garden of Gethsemane, He fervently longed for fellowship with His intimate friends.⁴⁹⁰ The fact that this fellowship was denied Him made His suffering so much the more severe. We can say, therefore, that David's experience is, first of all, prophetic. Often our deepest experiences with the Lord are meant to prepare us for a difficult confrontation with the enemy. The devil loves to manipulate our feeling, especially our self-pity. The late Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands wrote a book under the title *Lonely, but not Alone*.⁴⁹¹ This title could be placed above the text here. David knows that he is not alone in his loneliness and misery. He addresses himself to God, indicating that he knows God hears him and is close to him. The verse proves, however, that it is important for a man to have fellowship with others if he wants to function normally.

In verses 16-18 David makes a list of the inner troubles with which he is struggling: loneliness, affliction, troubles, anguish, distress, and sin. Sin is, obviously, the root of all the preceding problems. None of them would exist without the presence of sin. There is not always a direct link between a certain

⁴⁸⁷ Jer. 31:31-34

⁴⁸⁸ Ps. 16:8

⁴⁸⁹ Matt. 14:30

⁴⁹⁰ See Matt. 26:36-46

⁴⁹¹ *Eenzaam maar niet alleen.*

sin and certain troubles, but there is always the general connection. Pardon and the sense of being forgiven eliminate the basis for the troubles, but the symptoms do not always disappear immediately. David's complaint should make us realize the depth of our riches in Christ. The Apostle John puts it this way: "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."⁴⁹²

In vs. 19 David turns away from himself and his troubles, and when he looks around he sees himself surrounded by an enemy who hates him. Again, as elsewhere in the psalms, the enemy is, not in the first place, a human foe, although there are some of those in this picture, but he is "the murderer of men from the beginning," as Jesus calls him.⁴⁹³ The devil uses men to achieve his goal, but he himself is the power that pushes and inspires them to do evil. The human enemies, who have increased in number, are the same as the ones mentioned in vs. 2; they are manipulated by Satan.

David repeats his request: "Let me not be put to shame." This repetition gives unity to the form of this poem. David takes refuge in God, but he realizes also that, if he cultivates integrity and uprightness in his life, these will give him some protection also. In other words, if we really want to be under God's protection, there must be changes that are brought about in our lives. The word "integrity" is the translation of the Hebrew word *tom*, which, according to *Strongs Definitions*, means: "completeness; figuratively, prosperity; usually (morally) innocence." The TLB says beautifully: "Assign me Godliness and Integrity as my bodyguards." Real integrity will be an effective protection against the enemy of our souls; it is an indispensable basic ingredient in our defense. In Paul's armor, "the belt of truth" is the first part of the outfit of defense in the struggle against the Evil One.⁴⁹⁴

God is upright. The Apostle John says about God: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."⁴⁹⁵ Those words give probably the most complete definition of uprightness. If we cultivate integrity in our lives, and our lives are transparent before God, then we are well protected and the devil will not be successful in his blows against us.

David concludes with a desire for the Lord's return. When he says: "My hope is in you. Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles!" he is watching for the "Parousia." Expecting the second coming is a strong incentive to keep our integrity. Our greatest danger is to fall asleep spiritually. That is why Christ puts such a strong emphasis upon watchfulness. He says in Mark's Gospel: "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back-- whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'"⁴⁹⁶ The phrase "My hope is in you," as the NIV puts it, is the translation of a single Hebrew word *qiwiytiakaa*, which is a form of *qavah*. *Strongs Definition* says that this means: "to bind together (perhaps by twisting), i.e. collect; (figuratively) to expect." Most other versions render the word with "I wait for you." With those words David demonstrates that the present situation is neither normal nor lasting. The words suggest the danger of the illusion man lives with, that the present would, in fact, be normal and lasting. It also shows that our relationship with God is not yet complete, and that it is not based on what we observe around us, or upon a direct communication, but upon hope and promises. David confesses that the time will come when the situation will change drastically, and that this change is so close that it can happen at any moment.

Vs. 22 forms the climax of this psalm. Suddenly it becomes clear that David was not speaking for himself alone, but for the whole nation of Israel. The people as a whole went through the ups and downs he described. David was the personification of the nation. This surprising denouement, if we may call it that, shows the principle of substitution. This principle lay at the basis of the fall and its consequences, and at the death of Jesus for the whole nation. Caiphias was correct when he said, unwittingly: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." John adds to this his comment: "He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one."⁴⁹⁷ Paul elaborates on this subject in Romans, by saying: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all

⁴⁹² I John 1:7

⁴⁹³ John 8:44

⁴⁹⁴ Eph. 6:14

⁴⁹⁵ I John 1:5

⁴⁹⁶ Mark 13:35-37

⁴⁹⁷ John 11:50-52

men, because all sinned-- for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come."⁴⁹⁸ Both Adam and Christ were representatives of the whole human race, and their acts are considered as being committed by all. The Apostle Paul says in his second epistle to the Corinthians: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."⁴⁹⁹

David's relationship with God, his ups-and-downs, are the experience of the whole nation of Israel. There is a sense in which "None of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone," to use Paul's words.⁵⁰⁰ What we do or do not do, what we are or are not influences people around us. We will become more aware of this fact as we draw closer to the Lord. Nobody knew this as clearly as our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why He is the savior of the world.

⁴⁹⁸ Rom. 5:12-14

⁴⁹⁹ II Cor. 5:14

⁵⁰⁰ Rom. 14:7

PSALM TWENTY-SIX

Of David

- 1 Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.**
- 2 Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind;**
- 3 for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth.**
- 4 I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites;**
- 5 I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked.**
- 6 I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, O LORD,**
- 7 proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds.**
- 8 I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells.**
- 9 Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with bloodthirsty men,**
- 10 in whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full of bribes.**
- 11 But I lead a blameless life; redeem me and be merciful to me.**
- 12 My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD.**

This psalm appears to be in complete contrast with the preceding one. The theme of this poem is innocence. As we saw in psalm twenty-five, David wrestled with his ever-returning feelings of guilt, but in this Psalm he wants to be proved innocent. But wanting to prove innocence often masks a feeling of uncertainty, which is the same sentiment that was the foundation of the previous psalm. David brings up a whole series of proofs of innocence but, at the same time he wants God to confirm those. We have to be careful, however, not to approach this psalm from the wrong angle. David does not bask in his own righteousness. George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, remarks correctly that verses 6 and 7 form the core of this psalm. The washbasin and the altar do not speak of a sinless nature, but of the opposite. Blood and water are symbols of cleansing, and they imply that there is sin, which has to be atoned for because it prevents fellowship with God.

So David's innocence rests on the fact that another creature paid his debt by dying in his place. This thought places the psalm in a different light. On the basis of the sacrifice that was brought on the altar, David asks God to vindicate him.

The devil has dishonored men by causing sin to enter the world through a man; but God honors the person who has been redeemed by Jesus Christ. The tension in vs. 1 is caused by the fact that David lives in a world in which one human being dishonors another. He realizes that this situation is abnormal. He has not surrendered himself to sinful desires; his trust in God kept him from this. Now he asks God for a visible demonstration of that which he knows to be true in the invisible world. He asks for his crown.

In vs. 2 he takes another step forward. Justification is the outward demonstration of the result of Jesus' dying for us. Sanctification is the inner cleansing of our lives, presented here under the symbols of the examining of heart and mind. The point is, of course, not that God would have to examine us in order to come to the conclusion that we were already pure from ourselves, but that the Holy Spirit penetrates into the depths of our being and chases away all traces of darkness, so that we have no corner in which to hide.

TLB renders the verses 1 and 2, rather beautifully: "Dismiss all the charges against me, Lord, for I have tried to keep your laws and have trusted you without wavering. Cross-examine me, O Lord, and see that this is so; test my motives and affections too."

When David says: "Your love is ever before me," he does not mark this down as his own achievement. Again, TLB expresses the thought very well with: "I have taken your loving-kindness and your truth as my ideals." The implication is that man cannot make it on his own. God's character is the standard with which we will be measured, but it is also the means of our sanctification. Our lives are transformed by the fact that we become partakers of God's nature. Peter says: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."⁵⁰¹

Walking in God's truth is the practical result if we concentrate upon God's goodness.

⁵⁰¹ II Pet. 1:3,4

Verses 4 and 5 also contain a confession; David admits that he is not immune to pollution. If he would consort with immoral people, his own soul would be endangered, because the root of sin was still within him. This is what set our Lord Jesus Christ apart from all other human beings. Others could not contaminate him, because He had a sinless nature. He rubbed shoulders with tax collectors and sinners, and brought about their salvation. But we live under the conditions which were described by the prophet Haggai, when he said to the priests of his time: “ ‘If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?’ The priests answered, ‘No.’ Then Haggai said, ‘If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?’ ‘Yes,’ the priests replied, ‘it becomes defiled.’ Then Haggai said, ‘So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,’ declares the LORD. ‘Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.’”⁵⁰² Jesus is the exception to this rule; His presence sanctifies us.

These verses remind us of the opening verses of the first psalm, although the love for the Word of God is not mentioned specifically.

As we mentioned earlier, vs. 6 forms the core of this psalm. David finds himself in God’s presence on earth. He is at the tabernacle and stands at the altar with the washbasin, symbols of justification and sanctification. The fact that the washbasin is mentioned first would indicate that he considers himself righteous. Pilate spoiled the phrase “I wash my hands in innocence” by using those words to evade his responsibility in the crucifixion of Jesus, but the original meaning of the words is that a person is cleansed daily of his moral impurity by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Proclaiming aloud God’s praise and telling of all God’s wonderful deeds, while walking around the altar was not part of a prescribed ritual, but it expresses well what the Apostle Paul calls boasting in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁵⁰³

The use of the washbasin was, as far as we know, the privilege of the priests alone. So David would probably not have used the water of the basin in a literal sense, but rather he identified himself with the priests in this psalm. In his proclamation of God’s praise, we can see a personal testimony; also the telling of all God’s wonderful deeds may have been the facts of salvation: the story of the exodus of the people from Egypt and their conquest of the promised land. We are never redeemed alone; but we are always part of a larger group, either we belong to those who are lost, or we are part of the fellowship of those who are saved, the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Part of David’s struggle in this psalm seems to have been related to his efforts to identify with one or the other.

It seems strange that David mentioned the house of the Lord as the object of his love, instead of the person of God Himself. It must be clear, however, that the place only had significance because God dwelled there. We often associate certain places with certain experiences we had there. A return to the place of our conversion will, probably, always recall the joy of that moment. David loved God’s house because that was the place where he met the Lord, and because He loved God. The place may change and eventually disappear, but God remains eternally. It is a blessing that, while we are in our bodies on earth, far away from the Lord in Heaven, we do find those points of contact, even in shadows of the heavenly reality on earth which are transient, but which remind us of eternity.

In the mist in which we live upon earth, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish this reality. David sees himself surrounded by people who do not acknowledge God in their lives, who are murderers, and who lead a life of corruption. He knows that the soul of those people will end up on the garbage dump of eternity, the Gehenna. He does not have the assurance that God will discover him in this sea of humanity and will pull him out.

The NIV renders vs. 11 with: “But I lead a blameless life.” Other version, like the RSV, reads: “But as for me, I walk in my integrity.” This is an interesting expression. The meaning, of course, is that a person would live in such a way that he does not incur guilt upon himself. It means a life that is, not necessarily, free of trespasses, but that is lived in the light of fellowship with God, so that cleansing from sin is a daily experience. This is what the Apostle John means when he says: “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.”⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰² Hag. 2:12-14

⁵⁰³ See Gal. 6:14

⁵⁰⁴ I John 1:7

Without the key to understanding that the New Testament provides for us, we would wrongly interpret these Old Testament sayings. The Jews in Jesus' days fell into this trap. It should be clear, however, that a prayer for mercy is incongruent with a blameless life. Evidently, David's blamelessness was not the absence of guilt in the objective sense of the word, or a lack of guilt feelings, but a consciousness that he had been cleansed by factors outside himself, by the blood of the one who substituted for him.

The psalm ends with a second doxology: "My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD." The first note of praise was intoned at the altar, and the second is placed in the future. The "level ground" is the translation of the Hebrew word *b^amiyshowr*, or *miyshowr*, which *Strongs* defines as "a level, i.e. a plain (often used [with the article prefix] as a properly, name of certain districts); figuratively, concord; also straightness, i.e. (figuratively) justice." It point towards the goal, which is eternal glory in God's presence. The "assembly" is the *ekklesia* in Heaven. David fixes his eyes here upon the consummation in which he will partake. Probably, at the moment I write this, he is heavily involved in doing this.

PSALM TWENTY-SEVEN

Of David

- 1** *The LORD is my light and my salvation-- whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life-- of whom shall I be afraid?*
- 2** *When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall.*
- 3** *Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.*
- 4** *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.*
- 5** *For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.*
- 6** *Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.*
- 7** *Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me.*
- 8** *My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek.*
- 9** *Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior.*
- 10** *Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.*
- 11** *Teach me your way, O LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.*
- 12** *Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence.*
- 13** *I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.*
- 14** *Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.*

This psalm is one of my favorites in the book. Some of the verses like vs. 4 and vs. 14 I have used as "verse of the year" at certain times.

Very little has changed in David's circumstances, but the tone of this psalm is much more positive than that of the previous one. David still finds himself in a world of evil people, and enemies who are after his life. The contrast between the darkness that surrounds him, and the light that God made shine in his soul, gives to this psalm a delightful glow and beauty.

The Apostle John wrote "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."⁵⁰⁵ David makes this into a subjective experience when he says: "The LORD is my light and my salvation." In saying "The Lord is my salvation," he not only indicates that God saved him, but that salvation cannot be separated from the person of God, and can only be experienced in fellowship with Him. An illustration that remotely approaches this truth is the marriage of the British writer C. S. Lewis to an American lady. Lewis was a bachelor who had no intention of ever getting married, but married Joy Davidman in order to save her from being expelled from England. God saves us by entering into a vital relationship with us. The deep meaning of the opening statement of this psalm is light and salvation, which are used as synonyms. David is saved by God's light.

YHWH makes His light shine upon man. This means that without God, man lives in darkness. There is a strong suggestion of a parallel with the first day of creation. The Apostle Paul draws this parallel by saying: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."⁵⁰⁶ Man usually reacts to this light with an initial shock, because the light discovers our darkness. Light only becomes salvation if there is a confession of sin. In the prologue to his Gospel, the Apostle John connects life with light when he says: "In him [Christ] was life, and that life was the light of men."⁵⁰⁷ We see a greater perspective as David's words are placed against the background of darkness, more specifically, the powers of darkness. And David was, obviously, quite aware of the presence of demonic powers. Light and salvation, therefore, take on

⁵⁰⁵ I John 1:5

⁵⁰⁶ II Cor. 4:6

⁵⁰⁷ John 1:4

proportions of a power encounter. Over against the awful threat of the devil stands the power of the light and the salvation in Jesus Christ.

For David, this meant victory over fear. We ought not to underestimate the importance of David's reaction. A man, who overcomes his fear because he is aware of the fact that God's presence is greater than all the threats of Satan, is a man who experiences healing and rehabilitation. In New Testament terms, man has become "a new creation."⁵⁰⁸ So light and salvation are more than just elements of forgiveness of sin; they provide an impenetrable protection against everything that is out to destroy man.

"Light" and "salvation," therefore, are also parallel terms with "the stronghold of my life." At another place David expresses the same thought by saying: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble."⁵⁰⁹ Where the NIV says: "The LORD is the stronghold of my life," the KJV has: "The LORD is the strength of my life." "Stronghold of my life" sounds more defensive than the progressive "strength of my life." It is true that our standing means that we have to maintain the position that is given us in Christ, but the phrase "strength of my life" has a more joyful sound to me than "stronghold of my life." The Apostle Paul interprets the thought "The LORD is the strength of my life" with the words: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."⁵¹⁰

If God were not the stronghold and strength of our lives, we would have all reason to fear. We live in a demon-possessed world, but God is on our side. Fear is not only a complex of psychological phenomena that we can overcome; it is the reaction of our whole being, spirit, soul, and body, to real dangers and to powers that are bent on our destruction. Only in God's presence can those powers be identified and conquered. As in most places in the Book of Psalms, the struggle is not against flesh and blood, although demonic attacks often reach us via our fellowmen.

The important word in the opening verses of this psalm is "confidence." God's presence is not verifiable by any of the five senses. Faith makes light and salvation into a spiritual reality. We should not forget that light also has a judgmental quality in that it exposes sin. Light becomes salvation only through confession of sin, and thus the enemy is denied any foothold he may have had in our lives. Knowledge of salvation always comes through forgiveness of sin. A man whose sins are forgiven has no reason anymore to fear the devil.

When we enter into a new relationship with God, we are also freed of peer pressure. When we realize that we are no longer obliged to please men, the fear of men also disappears. Paul said: "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."⁵¹¹

In the second stanza, (vs. 4-6), David goes beyond salvation through fellowship with God, which is the theme of the first verses. He discovers that fellowship with God is not only important as a means to achieve a goal, but that it is desirable for its own sake. Even if the result were not deliverance and victory, it would be worth everything to know God. It is true, of course, that our relationship with God and our salvation can never be separated, but a bond of intimacy with God would be of the utmost importance, even if it meant our own defeat. In Jesus' life this was true in a sense; His fellowship with the Father led to His suffering and death on the cross. But, at the end, this became the greatest victory and deliverance of all.

We live in a complex world. Some people simplify their existence by ignoring life's complications. This may be the result of a lack of understanding or of intelligence. It is, however, a great victory and a depth of wisdom if we can reduce life's complexity to its basic factors, as David does here. He says: "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek..." The greatest discovery man can make in life is understanding what is basic. Jesus said to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."⁵¹² The merchant who was looking for fine pearls understood this; that is the reason he went away and sold everything he had and bought the pearl of great value.⁵¹³ Moses grasped this when he prayed God to show him His glory.⁵¹⁴ Seeking one thing means to be willing to give up everything else. Blessed is the man who stakes everything on one throw to gain this one thing. I admit that the expression is not

⁵⁰⁸ See II Cor. 5:17

⁵⁰⁹ Ps. 46:1

⁵¹⁰ Phil. 4:13

⁵¹¹ Gal. 1:10

⁵¹² Luke 10:41,42

⁵¹³ See Matt. 13:45,46

⁵¹⁴ See Ex. 33:18-23

biblical, and to compare David's excitement with a gamble is, probably, not proper, but there is something in the excitement of gambling that approaches David's passion.

The one thing David seeks is "to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord." The word "beauty" is surprising in this context. It is the translation of the Hebrew word *no`am*, which is defined by *Strong's* as: "agreeableness, i.e. delight, suitableness, splendor or grace." The condition necessary to satisfy David's longing is to "dwell in the house of the LORD," and "to seek him in his temple." This entails a lifelong fellowship with God and a systematic search of discovery. That is the essence of David's prayer. He realizes that human determination is not sufficient, but that God will grant this in answer to prayer. God makes it possible for us to live a life in His presence, if we ask Him for it, and if we make this our highest priority. Jesus must have had this verse in mind when He stayed behind in the temple as a twelve-year-old boy, because He "had to be in [His] Father's house."⁵¹⁵

If we want to live a life in God's presence, we must make prayer our priority. No one can do this in his own strength; it is the result of God's grace and human determination working together. It is a healthy thing if we can reduce our prayer life to the basic factors.

David wants to "gaze upon the beauty of the Lord." God is beautiful; He is the source of all beauty. The term "beauty" is nowhere given to God in the Bible, but it is understood. In his vision of God upon His throne, the Apostle John writes: "And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne."⁵¹⁶ Nothing more beautiful and colorful can be imagined. God's beauty is the expression of His holiness, His character. God has given man the capacity to appreciate glory and beauty, and also to understand why things are beautiful. We understand beauty if we see the relationship with what we observe in God's love and majesty.

We also have the privilege to observe, or, as David says, to gaze upon beauty. That is why God created light. God's beauty is fully expressed and demonstrated in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the New Testament presents Him to us, and also as we learn to know Him in our daily walk with Him. As long as we live on earth, we will not have perfect vision. Once we are in Heaven we will experience God's beauty in all its fullness, when we see His face, as John describes this in Revelation: "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

It is hard to grasp how David, who lived in a time when divine revelation was still veiled, could reach so far and bring those truths home. The Holy Spirit must have worked in his soul in a very deep way.

The experience of God's beauty was the result of David's search. The word which the NIV renders with "seek" is in Hebrew *uwlbaqeer*, which is a form of *baqar*, defined by *Strong's* as "to plough, or (generally) break forth, i.e. (figuratively) to inspect, admire, care for, consider." The KJV translates it variously as: "inquire, search, seek out." David's search involved a systematic occupation with God's attributes, which we could qualify as scientific. Science, however, is limited to that which is observable, and David's search was spiritual. The five senses surely played a role in this search, but they did not determine the outcome. Scientific research may be seen as an image of the spiritual search. God has called us as human beings to learn to know and understand Him. The essence of eternal life is the knowledge of God. Jesus said in His prayer: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."⁵¹⁷

The place of research is the place of God's revelation. We cannot find God just anywhere. For David this was "His temple," for us, as New Testament Christians it means knowing God in Jesus Christ. The beauty of God and the harmony of His attributes, the aesthetic greatness of His holiness are fully expressed in the Man Jesus Christ. It is this blinding glory that caused the Apostle John to fall at His feet as though dead.⁵¹⁸ The essence of this beauty was in Christ before and after His resurrection. It ought to be the passion of our lives to know as much as possible of this beauty; it should be basic to all our experiences.

The verses 5 and 6 prove that David does not flee from reality. David's fellowship with God takes place in a world that swarms with enemies. In this surrounding of cruelty and violence, he feels safe and secure in the presence of the Lord. God's throne is above the cherubim in palaces of glory, but for David the Almighty is like a shelter on a rock, a place of protection in the storm. God helps us where we need to

⁵¹⁵ See Luke 2:49

⁵¹⁶ Rev. 4:3

⁵¹⁷ John 17:3

⁵¹⁸ See Rev. 1:17^a

be helped, and in a way that fits our needs. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."⁵¹⁹ When God becomes our shelter, He has come down to our human level.

A shelter is often a temporary structure without too much comfort or ornamentation. God became like one of the poorest of all human beings in order to save us.

Evil is always nigh to us, but there are days that are called "days of trouble." Jesus said to the people who arrested Him in Gethsemane: "This is your hour-- when darkness reigns."⁵²⁰ God wants us to feel safe in fellowship with Him at those moments when we are put to the test. The KJV uses the phrase "the secret of his tabernacle," which suggests that there is intimacy in the way God's gives us shelter; it is a place where others cannot come. David probably had the Holy of Holies in mind, the place where the ark stood, and where common men could not enter. It is the place of God's glory. In the image of the shelter God identifies Himself with our misery, which signifies our salvation; in the image of the inner sanctuary He draws us into His glory. There is no better protection than to be covered with the glory of God.

"His dwelling," "the shelter of his tabernacle," and the place "high upon a rock" are three aspects of the same experience David has. They do not necessarily indicate a sequence. As we saw in previous psalms, David sometimes had the feeling of being lifted up above everything.⁵²¹ The fact that God has descended to our level, and that we become partakers of His glory, lifts us up far above our surroundings. We have to remember that the enemies in vs. 6 are, in the first place, demonic powers. The protection we enjoy because of God's presence with us gives us authority over the devil.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a German pastor, Johan Christoph Blumhardt, was confronted with a demon-possessed girl, named Gottlieb Dietus. Blumhardt was very reluctant to enter into this confrontation, but finally realized that God wanted him to. For about one-and-a-half year he prayed for her, assisted by elders of his church, until finally the demon left the girls, shouting: "Jesus is Victor." A stream of victory and revival followed in which many were saved and healed in the village of Möttlingen. Jesus is Victor through us, as John states in Revelation: "The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."⁵²²

It is this awareness of victory that causes David to burst out with shouts of joy, and makes him decide to make music to the Lord at the tabernacle. This probably means that the sacrifices he brings are accompanied by trumpet blasts.

Every sacrifice is an image of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. The sacrifices David mentions are, probably, the burnt offering, the grain offering and the fellowship offering. But this does in no way change the fact that our Lord had to suffer, and that His blood was shed, so that we could present our praise and gratitude to God. It sounds incongruent that one would sound the trumpet at such an occasion; yet, it remains true that at this deepest point of all human experiences, the greatest victory ever was won. We should never get used to the pain of the cross, and we may always glory in it also!

The tent at which David brings his sacrifices is almost a parody of the heavenly glory, and the sacrifice of the Lord of glory is the greatest foolishness man can see but this divine irony is our salvation and honor. David may shout for joy and sing and make music to the Lord, because in all this, the enemy who wanted to take our life is defeated; death is conquered, the night is passed and the light of day has broken upon us.

In vs. 7 David seems to take a step back. It seems as if the victory and assurance of the previous verses have slipped away from him. It certainly indicates a case of changing moods, which proves that it is common to man to be inconsistent in his feelings. But there is no sign of despair or even of doubt. We can say, though, that David's vision becomes less clear. He wanted to have the subjective experience that God answered him. But even a ship that is tied to an anchor is not immune to the waves. The victory our Lord Jesus Christ has won for us does not necessarily protect us against "ups-and-downs." We may be sure, however, that God answers, and His grace is not to be doubted. If we were conscious of the fact that we were perfect there would be no need for grace, and God's answer is an answer of grace; which means forgiveness of sin, healing, and restoration.

The seeking of God's face verse 8 speaks about is the experience of God's presence. The Holy Spirit inspires man's desire for God: "My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, LORD, I will

⁵¹⁹ John 1:14

⁵²⁰ Luke 22:53

⁵²¹ See Ps. 18:16-18, 29-36

⁵²² Rev. 12:10,11

seek.” The KJV renders the verse with: “When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, LORD, will I seek.” TLB puts it even more beautifully with: “My heart has heard you say, ‘Come and talk with me, O my people.’ And my heart responds, ‘Lord, I am coming.’ ” The command “Seek My face,” evidently, is in the plural. God makes a general appeal to the world to seek Him. David takes this personally. If our hearts are set upon pure fellowship with God, we hear as a personal call, that which God addresses to every one of His creatures. It is a wonderful fact that we can experience God’s love for the whole world, as if we were the only recipients and the only inhabitants of this planet. This also is part of God’s initiative; He pulls us up out of the mass of people in order for us to experience His massive love personally.

It seems quite inconsistent and impossible that God would, on the one hand, inspire us to seek His face, and on the other hand, hide His face from us. Yet, David does not imagine things when he says: “Turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior.” First of all, God wants to test us. It is easy to say: “One thing I ask of the LORD,” and, at the same time, busy ourselves with one hundred other things. Our determination has to be put to the test, and God, therefore, draws us out of ourselves by, purposely, denying us the experience of His presence. We should not try to analyze this feeling of rejection too much. There are guilt feelings, which will heal as we begin to live in fellowship with God. There are also guilt feelings that have to be awakened in us, to make us realize that we are responsible for our sinful acts. God’s anger plays a useful part in the lives of God’s children.

Then there is the fact that we live in a sinful world. Our natural relationships are often out of alignment. Parents can neglect their children, and this can cause a profound damage to a child’s concept of God. The natural way in which the experience of God’s love to a human being should come is via the love parents show to their children. When that channel is plugged, the image of God as a loving father can become a caricature to a child. When David says: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me,” he indicates that he had found inner healing in a sick world in which he lived.

The last verses of this psalm place us again among oppressors, foes, false witnesses, and violent men. Those terms describe the tactics of the devil quite well. In many cases the enemy hides himself. We do not notice him until we stumble over him. He has no power over us, as long as we are in the Lord’s will. That is the reason David prays: “Teach me your way, O LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.” Our obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit places us effectively under the protection of the Lord.

In the phrase: “Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,” we may see a prayer by David for protection against himself. There is always something of “the desire of [our] foes” in our own heart. There may be areas in our lives upon which the enemy rightfully can lay claim. It is hard for us to imagine the inner motives of the devil. He enjoys cruelty and finds sadistic pleasure in human misery. With some of us, those features may have been present before we came to know the love of the Lord. We sometimes become a prey of evil men because we cannot imagine that they would really commit a crime. Hitler succeeded in coming to power in Germany because nobody took his evil proclamations seriously. If “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,”⁵²³ how much worse it is to become the prey of evil men and demonic powers!

The verses contain, of course, a clear prophecy about the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. Especially the phrase “false witnesses rise up against me,” surely must have been in the Lord’s mind as He stood before the Sanhedrin, and was accused of things He never did.⁵²⁴ The Lord was very much aware of the presence of the powers of darkness at that moment. He had said to them: “This is your hour-- when darkness reigns.”⁵²⁵

As we said above, these verses show us the tactics of the devil. He takes on an air of justice and appeals to God’s holiness in order to play on our guilt feelings. That is why the Bible calls him “the accuser of our brothers.”⁵²⁶ We have seen disgusting performances in communist countries where the state would base its witch-hunts on the law, thus giving injustice a resemblance of justice. Justice, however, is one of God’s attributes, and if the devil begins to handle justice and to pervert it, he will hasten his own destruction. One illustration of the kind of “justice” we are talking about is the process Jezebel initiated against Naboth, in which she writes letters to the elders and nobles of the city in which Naboth lived,

⁵²³ Heb. 10:31

⁵²⁴ See Matt. 26:59-61

⁵²⁵ Luke 22:53^b

⁵²⁶ See Zech. 3:1; Rev. 12:10

saying: “Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.”⁵²⁷ But in God’s judgment, King Ahab was declared to be a murderer and a thief.⁵²⁸ Injustice under the cover of justice is more disgusting than open sin. This is, however, the world we live in. There are some periods in world history that are darker than others, but it is the same enemy who tries to influence every age. The climax will be when the Antichrist, who will push the parody of justice to its very limits appears.

It is against this background that we have to see David’s exclamation in vs. 13: “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” The KJV renders this with: “I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” Theologians have debated whether David meant Heaven, or the earth with the phrase “in the land of the living.” The context seems to require that he speaks about the world in which he lived. In the Dutch Psalter the lines read: “O, had I not believed that I in this life, my soul would enjoy God’s favor and help! My God, where would my hope and courage have gone...?” This diminishes in no way our hope of glory to come. We should, however, not leave this world in the hands of the devil without a strong voice of protest. God is the God of our today!

Waiting for the Lord, or waiting on the Lord, as the KJV puts it, is a way of life; it is an attitude of faith and confidence. When we wait for the Lord we express the conviction that the appearance of things visible is deceptive. God will change this visible world. The Apostle John wrote: “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’”⁵²⁹ This promise casts its shadow ahead upon our lives. Waiting for the Lord and being strong are synonymous. We tend to weaken and lose courage and we easily become depressed under the pressure the enemy puts upon us, if we lose sight of the fact that God has, so to speak, gone out, and will be back any moment.

One missionary in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, had taken his wife and young boy on a trek of several days in the jungle. For several days they had had no contact with the outside world, for they had no two-way radio they could take on the trail. The mission leadership was unaware of the fact that they were making this trip, and they became concerned when for several days there was no answer to the radio roll call. So a mission airplane was dispatched to see what had happened. When the missionary and his wife approached their mission station, their young boy ran ahead and was just in time to see the Mission plane land on the airstrip. The pilot asked the boy where his parents were. “They are in the jungle,” he said. “Are you here alone?” “Yes,” answered the boy. This started a rumor around the mission stations that this family had taken off to the jungle and left their little boy alone at home. Had the young boy understood the situation, he would have said that the parents were coming along on the trail and he had just run ahead. He should have said: “They are on the way; they will be right here!” The Lord is nigh, even if it does not look that way.

⁵²⁷ I Kings 21:7-14

⁵²⁸ See I Kings 21:19

⁵²⁹ Rev. 21:5

PSALM TWENTY-EIGHT

Of David

1 To you I call, O LORD my Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to me. For if you remain silent, I will be like those who have gone down to the pit.

2 Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place.

3 Do not drag me away with the wicked, with those who do evil, who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts.

4 Repay them for their deeds and for their evil work; repay them for what their hands have done and bring back upon them what they deserve.

5 Since they show no regard for the works of the LORD and what his hands have done, he will tear them down and never build them up again.

6 Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy.

7 The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.

8 The LORD is the strength of his people, a fortress of salvation for his anointed one.

9 Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.

There is in this psalm a treasure of hidden beauty that is not visible on the surface. The first striking thought is in the words “remain silent.” Moses taught the people of Israel “that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”⁵³⁰ David is right, therefore, when he says that it would be man’s spiritual and physical undoing if God would no longer speak. Solomon said: “Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint.”⁵³¹ Or, as the KJV puts it: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” God began to speak to man immediately after he had fallen in sin. He called man to Himself. We read in the Genesis’ account: “But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”⁵³² In those cases in which God no longer speaks to man, we see that man has hardened himself. David’s prayer, therefore, is a prayer of protection against the hardening of his heart.

There is a world of emotions in this prayer. Objectively considered, the fact that David calls upon God is a guarantee that God will keep on speaking to him. David’s impression that God had ceased to speak to him is an illusion based on the fact that David uses his feelings as a thermometer for his relationship with God. There is, of course, a difference between David’s relationship with God and ours. The writer to the Hebrews says: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”⁵³³ If, at some moment no prophetic message came through, people thought that God remained silent, but God’s revelation in Jesus Christ to us is constant and continuous.

The phrase: “Do not turn a deaf ear to me” is translated differently by various translations. The RSV and the Berkley Version render it: “Be not deaf to me,” the KJV with: “be not silent to me.” The idea that God could be deaf or would have difficulty hearing is, of course, ridiculous. The intent is that God would act as if He did not hear. God hears and speaks clearly. Those two characteristics determine His relationship with man.

George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, points out that God is the person addressed in this psalm. “To you I call, O LORD my Rock.” This phrase expresses the intensity of the cry for help. It is strange, however, that man would ascribe to God the isolation, which he brought upon himself by his sin, as if it were something for which God should be held responsible.

We do not know under what circumstances David wrote this psalm. He was, obviously, under great pressure, because the psalm sounds like a cry for help. In a sense it is unfair to try to analyze this kind of poetry. This is the prayer of a man whose life is in danger. Theological subtleties are of no consequence under such conditions. David sees himself going under together with all the godless, and he thinks that God ought to make an exception for him. The question is, is he right in such expectations? The answer is “Yes!” “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed

⁵³⁰ Deut. 8:3

⁵³¹ Prov. 29:18

⁵³² Gen. 3:9

⁵³³ Heb. 1:1,2

to him.”⁵³⁴ That is why he cries for mercy and lifts up his hands toward the Most Holy Place. He prays in the direction of the place where the Ark of the Covenant stood. There is no better picture of prayer than this prayer of David.

Apparently, David does not say anything about himself in the verses 3-5, but a closer look reveals that he draws a comparison between himself and “the wicked,” almost like the Pharisee and the tax collector in Jesus’ parable.⁵³⁵ Yet, the relationship here is different. In the parable, the Pharisee’s righteousness was presumptuous, and the tax collector was a sinner who wanted to repent of his sin. Here, the wicked are people who have no intention of leaving their sin filled lives, and David is a man who calls upon the Lord with an honest heart.

The essence of David’s frustration is probably best expressed in vs. 3 where he describes the wicked as people “who speak cordially with their neighbors but harbor malice in their hearts.” This duplicity puts him under great pressure. His neighbors, with whom he thinks to live in harmony, and who are outwardly kind to him, plot evil against him. “With friends like that, who needs enemies”? But David leaves revenge in God’s hands. In spite of the negative tone of vs. 5, there is yet a trace of hope in the words “since they show no regard for the works of the LORD and what his hands have done...” God would indeed build them up again if they showed regard for His works. But since they do not interpret God’s intervention in their lives as a punishment for their sins, there is no hope left for them. God “will tear them down and never build them up again.”

It is possible that between verses 5 and 6 a change has taken place in David’s circumstances, but it is more likely that, in answer to his prayers, God gave him insight in his circumstances rather than that he experienced a physical change. He has seen the enemy for what he is, and has realized that there is no longer any reason to fear.

The verses 6 and 7 are a personal testimony, upon which follows a general application in the verses 8 and 9 for all those who know the same fellowship with the Lord as he does. The praise is based upon the answer to his prayers, which is a good thing. Our experiences with God should keep the flame of our praise burning. The “cry for mercy” says more about the intensity in this situation of dire need than about the volume of the voice. In this prayer David gave it all he had, because he knew that it was a matter of perishing or surviving. God always answers such a prayer. It is under those conditions of extreme need that he acknowledges God as his strength and his shield.

We get to know the power of God only if we are weak in ourselves, and when our reserves are exhausted. That is the experience the Apostle Paul had, when he wrote: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great Revelation, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”⁵³⁶ When a man comes to the point where God is his strength, he is invincible.

The word shield is used 19 times in the Book of Psalms in connection with God.⁵³⁷ We find it in different contexts, and with several variations. It means that God is our perfect protection in the midst of the fight. David tried this out and found it to be true. The British atheist G. H. Wells mocked the concept of God being “our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”⁵³⁸ He had come to the conclusion that prayer did not make any difference in situations of trouble. He should know better now, being no longer alive on this planet! He who trusts the eternal God will be eternal himself. The Apostle John wrote: “The man who does the will of God lives forever.”⁵³⁹

David’s hymn of praise is based upon this truth. Praising God is always an act of faith, to which our experience of redemption and receiving answers to our prayers gives depth and beauty.

The last two verses of this psalm give a surprising turn to the whole poem. As with Psalm 25, so here it appears that the experience of one individual serves to express what God does for all His children.

⁵³⁴ II Chr. 16:9

⁵³⁵ Luke 18:10-14

⁵³⁶ II Cor. 12:7-10

⁵³⁷ That is in the NIV

⁵³⁸ Ps. 46:1 (KJV)

⁵³⁹ I John 2:17

Nobody lives for only himself, or goes through life, gaining experiences as a mere individual. The Biblical principle is that what happens to one goes for all. God is the strength of all of Israel as He is of the one man, David. David was the anointed one among his people. In New Testament terms, this means that he was the Christ, which means the anointed One. The blessings God poured out upon His Son Jesus Christ fall upon us likewise. It is in Him that we are being shepherded and carried forever.

PSALM TWENTY-NINE

A Psalm of David

- 1 *Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*
- 2 *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness.*
- 3 *The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.*
- 4 *The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic.*
- 5 *The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.*
- 6 *He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.*
- 7 *The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.*
- 8 *The voice of the LORD shakes the desert; the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.*
- 9 *The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, "Glory!"*
- 10 *The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever.*
- 11 *The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.*

Together with the psalms 8, 19, 33, and 104, this psalm is one of the "Psalms of Nature." A Dutch Bible translation has as caption above the psalm "God's majesty in a thunderstorm."⁵⁴⁰ George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalms* finds in this psalm a parallel with some old Canaanite poetry in which Baal is glorified. It is, however, obvious that thunder is not the only topic of this psalm.

The tension in this psalm is brought about by the fact that God is glorified because He disrupts the balance of nature. The psalm begins in Heaven: "In the splendor of his holiness." One would think that a psalm that describes a thunderstorm would be completely played out on earth. It seems, though, that the psalmist wanted to draw a line between earth and heaven in order to put things on earth in their right perspective. The "mighty ones" in vs. 1 are, undoubtedly, angels. The RSV translates the phrase with "heavenly beings," and TLB calls them "angels." It could be that he meant the four living creatures, which we encounter in the book of Revelation,⁵⁴¹ and also in Isaiah's and Ezekiel's visions.⁵⁴² Their task is to praise the Lord continuously. If this interpretation of the beings is correct, we see here the strange feat that a frail human being on earth encourages archangels to worship and praise the Lord in heaven! We, who live on this earth, have little notion about praise and adoration. What do we know about the heavenly glory? How could we stand before the throne of God, and worship Him, after all that happened on earth in the fall, after all the hurt and injury we caused our Creator with our sin? If we found ourselves standing before the throne of God, we would probably have the same reaction Isaiah had, about whom we read: "'Woe to me!' I cried. '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.'"⁵⁴³ There would be no hope for any of us without atonement. We do not know if David ever received a vision of God on His throne, such as the Apostle John had, and described in the book of Revelation.⁵⁴⁴ Maybe David only tried to imagine what "the splendor of His holiness" was like. We have a clearer vision, based on the revelation given to John, so that we may add to the adoration of the heavenly beings our own: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"⁵⁴⁵ This adoration we may add to the adoration, which the heavenly beings bring to God. The marvelous thing is that the angels and archangels respond to David's call for worship. David's intention in referring to this heavenly praise is, evidently, to prove that the God who is heard in the thunder is the God who is worshipped in heaven.

A thunderstorm is a majestic event on earth. Shafts of lightning and peals of thunder are part of God's glory in heaven, according to John's account in Revelation. Describing the vision of God's throne, he says: "From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."⁵⁴⁶ I wonder, though, if there would have been thunderstorms on earth if man had not fallen in sin. Probably, this kind of

⁵⁴⁰ NBG - Gods majesteit in het onweer

⁵⁴¹ See Rev. 4:6^b,7

⁵⁴² See Isa. 6:2; Ezek. 1:5-15

⁵⁴³ Isa. 6:5

⁵⁴⁴ See Rev. ch. 4

⁵⁴⁵ Rev. 5:13

⁵⁴⁶ Rev. 4:5

accumulation of electricity in the sky, and the brutal discharge of it, would not have taken place in a perfect or a well-balanced universe. So this kind of revelation of God's glory may be related to an imbalance in nature caused by human sin. This is a strange thought, especially if we realize that flashes of lightning and peals of thunder are an integral part of God's glory in heaven.

God's speaks to man in thunderstorms. A classic example is that of Martin Luther who, during a thunderstorm, made a promise to enter a monastery. Yet, the voice of thunder is not a well-articulated speech; it only supplements that which God communicates to us via our moral consciousness and the special Revelation in His Word. We could call a thunderstorm the orchestration of God's speaking, more than the content of His message. If thunderstorms were the only way God spoke to us, we would not know what He was saying. There would not be an understandable communication between God and man.

What God is saying to us in this psalm is that sin has not made it impossible for Him to reveal Himself to us via a creation that has rebelled against His sovereignty. This is the conclusion we draw from the mention of the thunderstorm and the flood (vs. 10). So we find in God's speaking elements of wrath. Ever since the fall, nature which ought to be subjected to our rule, has turned itself against us. The mystery consists in the fact that God communicates to us via those hostile elements.

The result of God's speaking appears to be, first of all, negative and destructive. He breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon, causes earthquakes in the desert, and panic in the animal world. Evidently, more is intended here than the appearance of merely natural phenomena. Elsewhere, the cedars of Lebanon symbolize pride and arrogance, and the desert is a symbol of the barrenness and destruction caused by sin. The KJV renders vs. 9 with: "The voice of the LORD maketh the hinds to calve and discovereth the forests: and in his temple doth every one speak of his glory." In the NIV we read: "The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!' " Even the calving of the deer is not natural, because the fawns are born prematurely. A deer stands for independence in nature, no longer under the dominion of man, because man has wrested himself from under the dominion of God. The majestic oak tree represents the same image, if we follow that reading. This rebellion, this declaration of independence appears unable to maintain itself in the presence of God.

The first result of the coming of the Word of God to us in the form of a thunderstorm is that our house of cards collapses. This demolition is necessary before anything constructive can take place. In all this the psalmist puts the emphasis on the glory of God. "The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic... And in his temple all cry, 'Glory!' " God's glory causes sinful man to perish in that it reveals that the essence of sin is a lack of glory. The Apostle Paul says: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁵⁴⁷ That which on earth seems to be destruction and demolition appears in heaven as the essence of glory. That is why man has a tendency to hold God responsible for the evil in the world, whilst actually, all God's glory does is to unmask the essence of evil.

The flood was the climax of God's judgment over the sin of the world. It seems to be a complete contradiction to say: "The LORD sits enthroned over the flood." In our thinking God's majesty and this judgment are irreconcilable. God's glory and rule bring about the ultimate judgment upon a world that opened itself for all kinds of demonic influences. In a sense the flood was the reaction of nature itself, as God had created it, upon the sin of man. The earth spewed out its inhabitants, as later Canaan would spew out its inhabitants that had broken their relationship with God. Nature has its own built-in defense, which makes it reject that which is foreign to her and which goes against her. Just as our bodies reject foreign bodies, so does nature. This defense mechanism is of divine origin. That is why we can say: "the LORD sits enthroned over the flood." For sinful men who drowned in the flood, God's presence above the flood increased its terror, but for Noah and his family this meant salvation. God sat enthroned over the flood upon which the ark floated. The rainbow that appeared subsequently confirmed this.

The actual theme of this psalm is that there is a two-fold reaction to the revelation of God's glory. There are those for whom God's glory is the aroma of Christ and the fragrance of life, but for those who are perishing it is the smell of death.⁵⁴⁸ The glory of God's voice means destruction and judgment for those who perish, but strength and peace for those who are saved. If this were not so, the conclusion of this psalm would be rather strange after the mention of the thunderstorm and the flood: "The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King forever. The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace." God's children know that the voice of God that thunders is a voice of

⁵⁴⁷ Rom. 3:23

⁵⁴⁸ See II Cor. 2:15,16

blessing and peace for them. However hostile nature may be to us, we see in those psalms, which have nature as their topic, that there is a harmony between Him who created all and that, which surrounds us. We should not forget this principle.

PSALM THIRTY

A psalm. A Song. For the dedication of the temple. Of David.

- 1** *I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me.*
2 *O LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.*
3 *O LORD, you brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down into the pit.*
4 *Sing to the LORD, you saints of his; praise his holy name.*
5 *For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*
6 *When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken."*
7 *O LORD, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.*
8 *To you, O LORD, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy:*
9 *What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?*
10 *Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me; O LORD, be my help."*
11 *You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,*
12 *that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever.*

David wrote this beautiful psalm for the dedication of the temple, as the heading indicates. David himself never lived to see this day, but he had lived for it all his life. And, at the end of his life, when he gave the actual task for the construction to his son Solomon, everything was ready. We read in First Chronicles how he did this, and in this psalm how God should be praised at the dedication.⁵⁴⁹ What the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews says about the heroes of faith can be applied to David here also: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."⁵⁵⁰

We may see in this psalm a prophecy about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our life in Him. David starts out by saying that God gave him victory over his enemies. The fact that his enemies did not gloat over him, speaks of this. He had come to the deepest point of his life, but God had lifted him out of it. He does the same for us.

The way in which David declares this is very original: "I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths." God's elevation of David out of the depth, and David's elevation of God are, of course, two different concepts, but they make for a beautiful play on words. God was not in the depths when David exalted Him; David's lifting up of God was simply the acknowledgment of a fact, not an act of salvation. It is the justification of God's character and deeds by a man who had experienced salvation from God.

We may see in everything God did for David an image of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This psalm is full of Christ's bitter suffering, and of His victory over His enemies, through His being raised from the dead by the Father. This makes this psalm very fitting to be sung at the dedication of the temple: the place of God's revelation of Himself, and of our fellowship with Him, the place of our praise. The basis of all we experience in our fellowship with God is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Yet, David speaks in this psalm about personal emotions. Although Christ is the actual subject of the psalm, it is not an impersonal prophecy about Christ. The prophecy in all its details is reflected in David's personal life.

The verses 1-4 are a hymn of praise because of answered prayers. What David experienced emotionally when God lifted him up out of the depth, Jeremiah felt physically when Ebed-Melech pulled him up out of the cistern.⁵⁵¹ If Jeremiah had remained in the cistern, or the dungeon, as the KJV renders it, he would have died, and his enemies would have gloated over him. But God pulled him up, and Jeremiah's

⁵⁴⁹ See I Chr. 22:1-19

⁵⁵⁰ Heb. 11:13,39,40

⁵⁵¹ See Jer. 38:7-14

enemies could see the man they had thought to be dead, walking through their city. Jeremiah's experience is a picture of what many people go through emotionally.

The Apostles in the book of Acts had a similar experience, when God delivered them supernaturally from their imprisonment.⁵⁵² God not only helps us when we are down emotionally, but He supports us supernaturally. Our being lifted up out of the depth is no mere stimulus to our feelings and nerves; it is resurrection from the dead. With this kind of song the dedication of the temple begins. Our life of service for the Lord begins with this victory over our enemies.

David mentions three things God did for him: He lifted him out of the depth, He healed him, and He brought him up from the grave. This brought three domains of his life as a human being under the authority of the Holy Spirit: his emotions, his body, and his spirit. When we say "emotions," we limit the concept to one part of the soul; actually the whole soul is involved in this, that is the intellect, the emotions, and the will. When we are raised spiritually by the resurrection power of our Lord Jesus Christ, our thought life, our emotional life and our will come under the rule of the Spirit of God, and we experience healing in our body. Thus the temple of our body is dedicated, and the enemy is denied his claim upon us.

The beauty of it all is that it is so personal. The dedication of a building would have little or no value if it did not lead to a personal experience with God. Only if we can worship privately, can we worship God in fellowship with others. And inasmuch as the temple is the place of God's revelation of Himself, we can say that it is not God's intention that His revelation would leave us unaffected. When God reveals Himself, He wants to reveal Himself in and through us.

Vs. 4 emphasizes our relationship with others in connection with communion with God. The others are "you saints of his." It sounds as if God might have favorites, as if He would not be impartial in the demonstration of His love. But it is good to experience God's love as if we are the only individual in the world who is the recipient.

"Sing" is the translation of the Hebrew noun *tehillim*, and the Greek *psalmoi*, which means the singing of a hymn under the accompaniment of stringed instruments. David offers us his own poetry to use for singing praises to the Lord. The Apostle Paul admonishes us to "sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in [y]our hearts to God."⁵⁵³ And the way to do this, he says, is to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." This means that our hearts and our heads should be filled with the Word of Christ. The written Word of God occupies an important place in the dedication and the use of the temple.

We can define the function of the temple in two ways: It is the place where God reveals Himself, and it is the place where we serve and worship Him. The One we worship and praise is the LORD, that is YHWH, the great I AM, who revealed Himself to Moses, to Israel, and in Christ Jesus, to us.

When we read: "praise His holy name," it presupposes some personal knowledge of God's character and of His attributes. The Name of God stands for His character. Without this knowledge, praise would be impossible, and without revelation there would be no knowledge at all. Our praise on earth is imperfect, because our knowledge is imperfect. In heaven praise will be perfect because we will have direct access to the person of God. If human personality is already so fascinating, how much more will it be when in heaven we will see, and understand God as He is.

It seems as if the mention of the wrath of God is out of place in this psalm. God's wrath is always revealed in connection with sin and unrighteousness. The Apostle Paul says: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."⁵⁵⁴ I believe, though, that in this context God's wrath is not directed towards us, but that it refers to what He did with the sin of men in Jesus Christ, and in the shadow of the Old Testament pictures, with the sin offering and guilt offering. When Jesus died on the cross, God's anger only lasted a moment. What is three hours in comparison with eternity? And what is the night of Jesus' suffering in comparison with the morning of His resurrection? How could the temple then be dedicated without weeping and rejoicing? Isn't it only natural that we would react with tears in the light of our sin, and with rejoicing in connection with our salvation?

The gist of verses 6 and 7 seems to be that David had fallen into a false sense of security. The NIV renders this with: "When I felt secure, I said, 'I will never be shaken.' O LORD, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed." TLB, probably, catches the meaning best with: "In my prosperity I said, 'This is forever; nothing can stop me now! The Lord has

⁵⁵² See Acts 5:17-25

⁵⁵³ Col. 3:16

⁵⁵⁴ Rom. 1:18

shown me his favor. He has made me steady as a mountain.' Then, Lord, you turned your face away from me and cut off your river of blessings. Suddenly my courage was gone; I was terrified and panic-stricken." The psalmist seems to have suffered from a lack of sense of reality. On the other hand, the image of the mountain, which was made to stand firm by God Himself, would speak of real invincibility. The real objective of the words is, probably, a prophetic utterance, which expresses Jesus' experience on the cross when He felt forsaken by God. At the critical moment God hid His face from Jesus, because He had taken upon Himself the sin of the world.

The thought is parallel to the one in the preceding verse: "For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning." The psalmist speaks here about the moment of God's anger and the night of weeping, which precedes the morning of the resurrection. The intent is to emphasize the contrast between the normal position of man under God's grace and favor, and the abnormal condition, which is brought about by sin. In the objective sense of the word, God never hides His face from us. If sometimes we have the feeling He does this, we can attribute it to an atmosphere of unreality which sin creates within us and around us. The only time God really hid His face was during the crucifixion, when the sun was eclipsed and darkness fell. We may, therefore, see in the verses 8-10 the prayer of Jesus when He hung on the cross. David's words are a commentary on: "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani."

The Son calls upon the Father; the man Jesus prays to YHWH. The NIV renders vs. 9 with: "What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit?" KJV is closer to the original by saying: "What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit?" This sentence acquires a deeper meaning in the light of the above. What profit is there in the blood of Jesus in which we are cleansed and sanctified? It is the blood of the eternal covenant.⁵⁵⁵ Woe to him who says: "What profit is there?"

God called David to express in his own life something of the greatest event that ever took place in the whole universe, but it is impossible that he could have understood the meaning of the role he played. Vs. 9 also demonstrates the limited vision David had upon death. With the question: "Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?" he shows that he does not see more in death than meets the eye. He sounds as if he believes that, at the death of his body, his relationship with God would cease to exist also. Yet, this same David says elsewhere: "If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!"⁵⁵⁶ So, evidently, David does not promote a naturalistic philosophy of life, as if man would cease to exist when he dies. The point is that death is the enemy, both of man and of God. God hates death even more than we do. Dying in itself does not glorify God; and yet man can glorify God with his death as the Apostle John indicates in his Gospel.⁵⁵⁷

David's groping for an answer in the midst of this enigma guides our thoughts to the greatest of all victories ever won: the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without this historical fact no temple service would be possible, and the dedication of a temple would be meaningless. Our relationship with God is based upon the resurrection life. David is right: without the resurrection no one can praise God or proclaim His faithfulness. The dust does not praise God.

God hears us, and is merciful to us, and He is our helper in a much more glorious way than David ever knew. The name of the Holy Spirit is *paracletos*, which means "helper." He stands beside us to take upon Himself our defense against the enemy and the accuser. "Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death."⁵⁵⁸

It is startling to see that, facing death, David speaks about dancing. Dancing is a spontaneous, ecstatic demonstration of joy, in fellowship with others. One does not dance alone. In his book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis lets Aslan dance after his resurrection from the death together with the two girls, and it is a rather wild dance. Only the joy of the resurrection from the dead can bind us together with others in this ecstasy. We may live in a world of sackcloth and ashes, and our physical eye may not be able to look beyond the grave; but we know that the resurrection of Jesus took place on our planet, in the midst of mourning and sackcloth. We believe that the hope that is within us is a reliable one.

David sees himself "clothed with joy." Older translations, such as the RSV and KJV use the phrase "girded ... with gladness." The verb "to gird" is always used in the sense of preparing oneself for action. The joy of the resurrection is the impetus for our actions. Sackcloth reduces a person to inactivity,

⁵⁵⁵ Heb. 13:20

⁵⁵⁶ Ps. 139:8 (RSV)

⁵⁵⁷ John 21:19

⁵⁵⁸ Ps. 68:20

but the belt of resurrection inspires us to work, not only here on earth but throughout eternity. God makes us taste the joy of resurrection here and now so that our hearts may sing and never be silent anymore, but give Him thanks forever. “The joy of [y]our master” into which we enter⁵⁵⁹ is the feast of resurrection. Jesus says to the Apostle John: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”⁵⁶⁰ In this way David sees in this dedication of the temple through the walls of the building and he beholds the eternal home, the real tabernacle, the true service of God, where we will serve Him, and love Him, and praise Him eternally, and where we will see His face.

⁵⁵⁹ Matt. 25:21(RSV)

⁵⁶⁰ Rev. 1:18

PSALM THIRTY-ONE

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1 In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness.*
- 2 Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me.*
- 3 Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me.*
- 4 Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge.*
- 5 Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.*
- 6 I hate those who cling to worthless idols; I trust in the LORD.*
- 7 I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul.*
- 8 You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place.*
- 9 Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief.*
- 10 My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.*
- 11 Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbors; I am a dread to my friends-- those who see me on the street flee from me.*
- 12 I am forgotten by them as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery.*
- 13 For I hear the slander of many; there is terror on every side; they conspire against me and plot to take my life.*
- 14 But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God."*
- 15 My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me.*
- 16 Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.*
- 17 Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave.*
- 18 Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous.*
- 19 How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you, which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you.*
- 20 In the shelter of your presence you hide them from the intrigues of men; in your dwelling you keep them safe from accusing tongues.*
- 21 Praise be to the LORD, for he showed his wonderful love to me when I was in a besieged city.*
- 22 In my alarm I said, "I am cut off from your sight!" Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help.*
- 23 Love the LORD, all his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful, but the proud he pays back in full.*
- 24 Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.*

From the middle section of this psalm, the verses 9-18, we conclude that this psalm was written when David was in great distress. Spiritually, emotionally, and physically he was in grave difficulties. There is no reason to suppose that this psalm is a collection of different poems; we do better to take the whole psalm, with its "ups and downs" as one poem. That is why the opening words are so impressive: "In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge." We do not know under what circumstances David wrote this psalm but there are no indications, which enable us to connect it to certain known historical facts. But there is no doubt about it that David's need was real. The psalm as a whole can be construed as a prophetic utterance about "The Man of Sorrows."

The psalm can be divided into four stanzas. Vs. 1-5, confidence; vs. 6-8, deliverance from hostility; vs. 9-18, physical weakness, and vs. 19-24, praise and confidence.

Several of the expressions used in this psalm are found in other psalms also: the concept of taking refuge and of not being put to shame are well-known expressions.⁵⁶¹ But as far as I know: "deliver me in your righteousness" is a new request. If David appeals to God's righteousness as a basis for his deliverance from trouble, this would indicate from which direction his difficulties had come. Most of our problems are caused by conditions of unrighteousness. Some problems are the immediate result of certain sins, but there is always the whole complex of unrighteousness in which we were born and grew up, and the pollution of

⁵⁶¹ See Ps. 11:1; 25:2

the atmosphere of moral decomposition in which we live. As the high priest Joshua, in Zechariah's vision, we are all dressed in filthy clothes.⁵⁶² Satan is always very fast in accusing us. It makes little difference how our clothes became filthy. The fact that iniquity can be found in us makes us vulnerable.

We could ask ourselves where David got the idea that God's righteousness could be of any help to him. The fact that David did not think that he would be condemned by God's righteousness indicates that he must have had some insight into the mystery of atonement. He could hardly have understood what Paul says, that: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."⁵⁶³ In a sense David did not know what he was saying.

Also, the fact that David appeals to God's righteousness indicates that there was demonic opposition. As with Joshua, so with us; Satan never ceases to accuse us. He ignores the fact that he himself is the author of evil. The only escape for us is through the blood of the Lamb; that is through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, through His resurrection life within us. God's righteousness is not a gift to us that can be received apart from the giver. Our escape from the devil's accusations is in our fellowship with Jesus Christ. That is why David says that God will be for him, what He already is. This kind of apparent contradiction is normal in the life of God's children. If David asks God to be his rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save him, and then immediately confesses: "you are my rock and my fortress," he obviously asks that God will give him the experience in his heart of that which his head knows to be true.

Isn't it strange that the experience plays such an important role in our spiritual lives? We are never fully satisfied as long as our faith is only an intellectual acceptance of the facts. We never rest until our emotions have been touched by what we know to be true.

David also confesses that God leads and guides him, for the sake of His name, that is, not for the sake of who, and what David is, but for the sake of who God is. It is not David's reputation but God's reputation that is at stake. This thought runs parallel to the righteousness of God; God saves us because His Name is Savior. The name Jesus, after all, means "YHWH saves." That is what He is; this is what He does because of His very nature. God never does anything else but saving. Those who are lost, are those who do not flee to Him to be saved. The Apostle Paul says: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Other Scripture portions confirm this. Paul, again, says: "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."⁵⁶⁴ And Peter writes: "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."⁵⁶⁵

The words: "Into your hands I commit my spirit" have become famous because Jesus quoted them when He hung on the cross. Luke reports: "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last."⁵⁶⁶ Jesus' last words before His death were a quote from God's written Word. In Jesus' mouth these words acquire greater proportions. In the context of this psalm, David does no more than express his confidence that God will protect him. David did not mean that his spirit would leave his body and take his abode with God, thus ending his earthly life. The opposite was true; he wanted to stay alive. The Greek word in Luke's Gospel is *paratithemi*, which means, in this context "to deposit as a trust or for protection." The Hebrew word used in the psalm is *apqiyd*, which is defined by *Strongs* as "appointed, i.e. a mandate (of God; plural only, collectively, for the Law)." It is derived from *piqud*, which is translated in the KJV with: "commandment, precept, statute." It is in this authoritative way that Jesus uses the word. He commanded His spirit to leave His body and to take its abode in the hands of the Father. The spirit obeys this command, which is the cause of His death. No mortal has this authority over his own life. Jesus did not die because of His crucifixion; death did not claim Him; He gave Himself into death voluntarily by sending His spirit home. Jesus predicted that He would do this. In John's Gospel we read that He said: "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-- only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."⁵⁶⁷ Frail human beings we are, we cannot understand such authority. David too, evidently, did not know what he said when he used those words, but Jesus interpreted correctly what the Holy Spirit intended to say. In this light, we

⁵⁶² See Zech. 3:1-3

⁵⁶³ II Cor. 5:21

⁵⁶⁴ I Tim. 2:3,4

⁵⁶⁵ II Pet. 3:9

⁵⁶⁶ Luke 23:46

⁵⁶⁷ John 10:17,18

have to conclude that the phrase: “redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth,” applies to nothing but the resurrection from the dead. God’s ultimate redemption is the resurrection of all flesh.

In vs. 6 David condemns idolatry. His hatred of “those who cling to worthless idols” is not as much directed to individuals as to the practice of idolatry, and the lifestyle of those who commit this sin. There is no greater contrast imaginable than between the images of idols and God who “gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.”⁵⁶⁸ The image of an idol is more dead than man who is dead in his sin. We have to think of the satire Isaiah and Jeremiah uttered regarding idols. “As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple. ... All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy. The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man’s fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, ‘Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.’ From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, ‘Save me; you are my god.’ They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand. No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, ‘Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?’ He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a lie.’”⁵⁶⁹

And: “Hear what the LORD says to you, O house of Israel. This is what the LORD says: ‘Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them. For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.’ No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you. They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols. Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. What the craftsman and goldsmith have made is then dressed in blue and purple-- all made by skilled workers. But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath. ‘Tell them this: ‘These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.’” But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses. Everyone is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgment comes, they will perish. He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like these, for he is the Maker of all things, including Israel, the tribe of his inheritance-- the LORD Almighty is his name.”⁵⁷⁰

Trust in the living God and the appeasement of idols are as far removed from each other as heaven and hell. A man who bows down before the image of an idol debases himself before a demon, above which God placed him in the order of creation. Man always bears the image of the God or the god he serves. David knows in whom he trusts, and this knowledge becomes a source of gladness and joy to him. God’s

⁵⁶⁸ Rom. 4:17 (NAS)

⁵⁶⁹ Isa. 40:19,20; 44:9-20

⁵⁷⁰ Jer. 10:1-16

goodness brings him to ecstasy, but idols and the demonic powers which are behind them are being manipulated and appeased by man. Man serves an idol out of fear. God does not need to be appeased or pacified for His wrath to cool. He is moved with our condition, and He became man in order to take upon Himself our suffering. The writer of the Hebrew epistle says: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-- yet was without sin."⁵⁷¹

David said more than he understood with the words: "you ... knew the anguish of my soul." There is no experience common to humans that Jesus Himself did not go through in soul and in body. No, God does not hand us over to the enemy! The mere thought that, if we flee to God for protection, He would give us over to the devil and his evil lusts should be inconceivable to us. Our whole being should rebel against such a supposition.

Over against the narrow place in which Satan tries to push us stands the spacious place in which God sets our feet. This "spacious place" is symbolic of the liberty we have in the Holy Spirit.

The verses 9-13 paint a picture that goes well beyond any of David's circumstances. It points to "the Man of Sorrow." On the positive print of the Shroud of Turin we see, what is supposedly the face of Jesus in His death, swollen and mutilated by the beatings that He suffered. Isaiah prophesied about Him: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."⁵⁷² David's suffering was, probably, stretched out over a longer period of time, and it was less intense than the eighteen hours of deep pain Jesus went through. David indicates some emotional and spiritual factors that caused his physical pain. He speaks of distress, sorrow, grief, anguish, groaning, and affliction. The KJV renders "affliction" with "iniquity." The Hebrew word used here is *'avon*, which *Strong's* defines as "perversity i.e. (moral) evil." There are several instances in David's life, which could be connected to the words of this psalm, but the psalm itself does not make any connection with specific occurrences. It appears though that David is aware of his guilt and that he understands why he undergoes this bodily decay. His surroundings agree with his analysis, and the people consider that David got what was due him; consequently they refrain from pity. They hold him in contempt, and they despise him for what he is. There is no trace in this psalm of forgiveness and healing which comes from a loving fellowship of fellowmen. Man needs the contact with his fellowmen to build him up and make him function normally. Nothing is more detrimental to our emotional well being than to be ignored by others. David was not only ostracized, but there were plans to kill him. This psalm states prophetically everything that was experienced by our Lord Jesus Christ when He took upon Himself, not His own iniquity, but ours. His intimate friends forsook Him and fled when people put Him on a cross to murder Him. We may look back upon this and receive a comfort and blessing from it that David did not receive.

Over against this suffering, David evinces a trust in the Lord which is moving to observe. He says: "But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, 'You are my Elohim.'" It is a miracle that man can place his own possessive pronoun in front of the Name of God. God is not the God of the Deists who created the universe, and then left it without paying any further attention to it. He maintains strong and intimate ties with His creation; so that a man, who considers himself to belong to God, can say: "My God." "My times are in your hands." David knows that he lives in time and space, and that he speaks to the eternal God. He confesses that God created him in such a way that he experiences life as a chain of minutes, hours, and years that follow each other. "My times," therefore, means "my life." At the same time he acknowledges his limitations. His life on earth has a beginning and an end. "My times are in your hands" is not a fatalistic acquiescence, but an act of willful surrender. God put time at our disposition so that we should live it. Within certain limits we can do with it as we please. David purposely surrenders here what God had given him. This assures him of God's guidance and protection.

Verse 16 is a reference to the priestly blessing from the book of Numbers: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."⁵⁷³ The making shine of God's face upon us is a referral to the Shekinah, as it was visible in the pillar of fire and the cloud when Israel crossed the desert.⁵⁷⁴ God's presence among

⁵⁷¹ Heb. 4:15

⁵⁷² Isa. 53:2,3

⁵⁷³ Num. 6:24-26

⁵⁷⁴ See Num. 9:15-23

Israel was much more than a means of calming man's emotions; it meant the practical, daily guidance for the people, which was to be obeyed. Peace was a byproduct of this obedience. The use of the word "servant" in vs. 16 reinforces this concept.

"Save me in your unfailing love" reads in the KJV as: "Save me for thy mercies' sake." The NAS renders it with: "Save me in Thy lovingkindness." The root word in Hebrew is *cheched*, which is the key word of the covenant God made with His people. "Save me in your unfailing love" is parallel to "deliver me in your righteousness" in vs. 1. There is no contradiction between righteousness and mercy; both are divine attributes. All God's attributes are in harmony with each other and influence each other. David confirms God's goodness, and he knows that God's goodness guarantees his salvation. Even as James knew, so David knows that "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."⁵⁷⁵

We find the same phrase "be put to shame" in vs. 17 as in vs. 1. The suggestion in vs. 1 is that David trusts God without any visible guarantee. Sometimes even the outward appearance is against us. But we do have the guarantee of God's written Word. Peter says: "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."⁵⁷⁶ There is a difference, of course, between the not being put to shame of the believer and David's wish "let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave." We could see this, not as a curse David pronounces upon those people, but as the mere mention of a fact. If God lets the wicked be put to shame, it means that He does nothing to prevent them. The wicked will feel ashamed in the face of God and before men on the day when their deeds and motives will be revealed before the throne of God. The wicked will not be able to answer, like the man who was invited to the wedding and had refused to wear the wedding clothes, about whom we read: "The man was speechless."⁵⁷⁷ Someone who cannot answer to God proves that his deeds were not based upon reasonable considerations. Such a person does not act like a man. We distinguish ourselves from the animal world in that we consider our acts and take responsibility for what we do and say. Deep in our hearts we do not want this to be changed. That is why a man is speechless before God when he is unable to give account of his life.

The remainder of this psalm is a paraphrase of the opening sentence of this last stanza: "How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you." This is the way all English translations render it, and also the German Luther translation and the French Version of Louis Segond. A Dutch translation renders this phrase: "How great is the good..."⁵⁷⁸ Actually, this makes more sense than the thought that God would store up His goodness, which is one of His attributes. God is not only good, but the inheritance, which is kept for us in heaven, surpasses our wildest imagination. Peter mentions this in his epistle, when he says: "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-- kept in heaven for you."⁵⁷⁹ This inheritance came to the Israelites symbolically in the possession of Canaan. But the real inheritance is a spiritual one. There may be material aspects connected with it, but they do not form an essential part of it. It is true, of course, that God's gift cannot be seen apart from His goodness. This "good thing," however, only takes effect in our lives if we take refuge in God. This taking of refuge becomes a form of testimony, since it is being done in full sight of all. We demonstrate openly that we put our trust in God if we take refuge in Him. This can lead to situations in which no other help is available and where we would perish but for God's help. If people cannot explain our way of life except for a supernatural intervention, then we give a ringing testimony in this world and we give proof of the existence of "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade," which is coming to us.

This may not result in the salvation of all who observe us. David's mention of "the intrigues of men" and the "accusing tongues" indicates that some people will maintain a hostile attitude. That is why God hides us "in the shelter of [His] presence." In an earlier psalm, we saw that this shelter is an image of God's identification with us in our trouble. David said: "For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock."⁵⁸⁰ God lives in the eternal palaces of glory; but we are hut-dwellers. The hiding "in the shelter of your presence," however,

⁵⁷⁵ James 1:17

⁵⁷⁶ I Pet. 2:6^b

⁵⁷⁷ Matt. 22:11,12

⁵⁷⁸ NBG Nieuwe Vertaling

⁵⁷⁹ I Pet. 1:3,4

⁵⁸⁰ Ps. 27:5

is a new concept. It speaks of a deeper intimacy, but also of a position, which is impenetrable for those who have no fellowship with God. God discloses His secrets to us and that makes us invincible. What can man do unto us? The Apostle Paul explains this in New Testament light when he says: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."⁵⁸¹ Through our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection we are now "hidden with Christ in God." This places the essence of our lives in heaven; it puts the return of Christ in a better perspective, and it reinforces our hope of the glory that awaits us.

Most English versions do not agree about what is meant by "a besieged city," as the NIV puts it, or "a strong city" as in the KJV. Did David feel surrounded by the enemy, or did he feel himself protected by God's love? In either case, it was an experience of God's protection. His intense suffering, like all human suffering, found its culmination in Christ's suffering on the cross. Part of this psalm can, therefore, be seen as a prophecy. He experienced by way of shadow the sufferings of Christ in certain situations in his own life. His suffering was significant in that it pointed to Christ's ultimate suffering, and that is the reason why God also gave him a foretaste of the resurrection. Christ's loud cry: "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani" was followed by *tetelestai*.⁵⁸²

The psalm ends with a call to love the Lord. In an earlier psalm David had given a personal testimony about his love for the Lord. "I love you, O LORD, my strength."⁵⁸³ Here he makes a general appeal to "all His saints." Loving the Lord is an act of the will, which we can exercise. As with all interpersonal relationships, we have to work at it. Nobody comes to love the Lord with all his heart, all his mind, and all his strength automatically, without making any effort. It is a growing process that is nourished by the experience of our fellowship with God. In an earlier psalm David had said: "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."⁵⁸⁴ It takes the same courage and strength to love the Lord with all that is within us.

The psalm ends with the words: "Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD." It is not an easy thing to hope in the LORD because all outward appearance is against us. But the love for God makes it easier to hope.

⁵⁸¹ Col. 3:1-4

⁵⁸² It is finished (John 19:30)

⁵⁸³ Ps. 18:1

⁵⁸⁴ Ps. 27:14

PSALM THIRTY-TWO

Of David. A *mashkil*.

- 1 Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.**
2 Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.
3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.
Selah
5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*
6 Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him.
7 You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. *Selah*
8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.
9 Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.
10 Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.
11 Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

We could call this psalm "The Psychology of Forgiveness." The Hebrew text uses the word *mashkil*. The NIV says in a footnote: "Title: Probably a literary or musical term." A Dutch version translates the word with "didactic poem."⁵⁸⁵ In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight says that the meaning of the word is uncertain, but that the root word refers to instruction. So we may assume that the intent of this poem is to teach. The first question to ask is: "Who teaches whom?" Does God speak to David, or does David present his own experience as an example for others? The latter seems to be the more logical conclusion. Our viewpoint will make a difference in the interpretation of verses 8 and 9. The thrust of the psalm seems to be that David uses his own testimony for the benefit of others.

The word with which the psalm begins, "blessed" reminds us of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁸⁶ The Septuagint uses here the same word *makarios* as in the New Testament. Some of the force of the words is lost in the translation: "Blessed is he..." The Hebrew is more emphatic: "O the blessedness of him..." It is a shout of joy. The Bible establishes a direct link between forgiveness and salvation. In his song of praise the priest Zechariah says: "to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."⁵⁸⁷ And Jeremiah writes: "'No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' ' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the LORD. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'"⁵⁸⁸ So forgiveness is the key to man's redemption and salvation. Confession of sin occupies an important place in this process, but we are wrong if we think that confession brings about forgiveness. Forgiveness of sin is only possible on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ at the cross of Golgotha. Confession opens up the source of forgiveness for us. For David forgiveness took the form of an animal sacrifice, the blood of which was poured out at the foot of the altar. It was, obviously, possible for a person in the Old Testament to go through the routine of identification with the sacrificial animal, without actually confessing his sin. Often the link between the bringing of a sacrifice and certain sinful conditions in man was not clearly understood. We read in the story of Isaiah's call, that a live coal taken from the altar touched Isaiah's lips. This suggests the fact that there was a sacrificial animal that was being burned on the altar at that moment was not sufficient for Isaiah to experience purification of his sins.⁵⁸⁹ When he entered the presence of the Lord he still felt guilty.

⁵⁸⁵ NBG Nieuwe Vertaling: Leerdicht.

⁵⁸⁶ See Matt. 5:1-12

⁵⁸⁷ Luke 1:77

⁵⁸⁸ Jer. 31:34

⁵⁸⁹ See Isa. 6:6,7

It is interesting to see that David uses the words “forgiven” and “covered” as synonyms. The blood of a sacrificial animal did not wipe out sin; it only covered it. The Epistle to the Hebrews confirms this by saying: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”⁵⁹⁰ The sins of the New Testament believer are washed away in the blood of Jesus. That is why John says concerning Jesus in the book of Revelation: “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood. ...”⁵⁹¹ The newer version use the word “freed” instead of “washed.” The result is the same; our sin is gone! This profound significance of forgiveness was not known in the Old Testament Hebrew word *kafar*. It is the same word that is used in the building of Noah’s ark. In the instructions God gave to Noah we read: “So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out.” Atonement in the Old Testament was a temporary measure. It was intended to be a pointer to the real sacrifice of the Lamb of God, of which all the animal sacrifices were a shadow. We may, therefore, say that this psalm is, in the first place, a prophecy of the blessedness that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It is a pointer to the true rehabilitation of man to which the Apostle Paul refers in his great argument about justification by faith in his epistle to the Romans, when he quotes from this psalm.⁵⁹² God accepts man, not because man betters his life, or because he adheres to the rules, but solely because he accepts the payment Jesus Christ made for his sin. This same principle is present in this psalm. David puts the stress on God’s forgiveness as the basis for his justification. His confession is never an account of his achievements; it is nothing more or less than an acknowledgment of God’s reality.

It is in connection with the above that we have to interpret the word “deceit.” Man does not have to be perfect in order to be saved. The first step on the road to rehabilitation is to admit one’s guile before God. It is one of the most difficult things in life to admit before God that he is unreliable. In the words of Jeremiah: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”⁵⁹³ When we place these facts before God, without trying to hide anything, healing can begin. The only ones for whom there is no hope are hypocrites and deceivers. There seems to be a conflict between the thought of deception and a confession of fraud. If someone says: “I always lie!” he may be telling the truth, but then his pronouncement itself becomes a lie. The same contradiction is implied in a confession of fraud. Man is full of contradiction! No one is completely righteous and no one is one hundred percent guilty of lying. Confession of fraud breaks the vicious circle.

Sin is bad for every man’s health, and even worse for a child of God. If we experience a certain measure of fellowship with God and then we sin without true conviction of sin, we will surely suffer with a tortured conscience. This must be the meaning of Peter’s words about Lot. He says: “If he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard).”⁵⁹⁴ The condition for experiencing forgiveness and justification is confession.

In his commentary *The Psalms*, George Knight indicates that there are four words to describe sin: 1. transgression, which actually means a revolt against God; rebellion, 2. sin, which means missing the mark; 3. iniquity, which is evidence of a perverted nature, a sinful character, and 4. deceit, which is laziness or corruption of the spirit. There are three words that describe what God does: 1. forgive; 2. cover, and 3. not impute. Forgiving refers to pronouncing “not guilty”; covering is atonement through substitution, and not imputing suggests eradication of proof of guilt. Forgiveness is related to our fellowship with God. Covering is a reminder of the cross of Christ, and of the love of God, which brought Him down to earth; not imputing speaks of judgment which passed us by. It is required of us that we admit what we are: deceivers, people who, if possible would mislead God.

David then describes his inner struggle when he tried to continue life without confessing his sins. We do not know if this psalm was actually written after David’s sin with Bathsheba, which is the opinion of *Adam Clarke*. It is quite possible that there were other periods in his life when David was shortsighted enough to think that everything would be all right, and that it was not necessary to clean up his act. This attitude, however, brought on psychosomatic symptoms. His body became ill because his spirit and soul

⁵⁹⁰ Heb. 10:4

⁵⁹¹ Rev. 1:5 (KJV)

⁵⁹² See Rom. 4:7,8

⁵⁹³ Jer. 17:9

⁵⁹⁴ II Pet. 2:6-8

lacked the intimacy with God, which they needed. He complained specifically about his bones. It is quite possible that he suffered from back pain or arthritis, and he believed the hand of God, which weighed heavily upon his body, caused this.

It is the image of God in man, which causes these problems. The tension is caused by the presence of certain sins in his life and, at the same time, the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our soul and our body have trouble digesting this kind of tension. We should not exclude the possibility, though, that David used poetical physical images to describe a spiritual condition. Even if this is the case, it does not diminish the fact that some sicknesses are caused by hindrances in our fellowship with God. For the same reason can a healthy relationship with the Lord can give us a feeling of physical well-being.

David's physical problems bring him to realization that he must confess his sins. There are four words in David's confession in vs. 5 that describe his sins: "my sin," "my iniquity," "my transgressions," and "the guilt." David confesses that he missed God's purpose for his life. He also admits that this is the result of his own sinful nature. He does not blame all kinds of demons for his behavior, as some Christians do. This does not excuse the demons, of course, but man must acknowledge his own responsibility in his sinful behavior, if he wants to receive cleansing and experience sanctification.

David calls his sins by name. Transgression is rebellion against God's authority. The original sin is disobedience and insubordination. David adds a new word to the list: guilt. This means that he took responsibility for his deeds, and, therefore, God freed him of his guilt in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. He could no longer be called to give account. The topic here is not the objective guilt, which had already been atoned for in the killing of the sacrificial animal, but it is the reality of being forgiven. Objective forgiveness is not dependent upon our confession of sin, but consciousness of forgiveness and the subjective experience of being freed from the burden of guilt are related to confession of sin. Here begins, what we called earlier, the psychology of forgiveness. A person who tries to cover up his sins will never be redeemed, but if God forgives our transgressions and covers our sins, we are blessed. The book of Proverbs says: "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."⁵⁹⁵

We find some remarkable paradoxes in vs. 6 that are worthy of our perusal. David calls people who have sinned and who ought to confess their sins, "godly." The second one is that he speaks about a time when God may be found. The call of the godly is, obviously, within the context of this psalm, the prayer of people confessing their sins to God. The fact that they are called "godly" indicates that they have already entered into some kind of relationship with God; their lives had already been based upon the atonement. The sins they confess had crept into their lives after they were converted. If there are certain times when God may be found, this does not mean that at some moments God would not "be at home."⁵⁹⁶ Isaiah uses the same expression: "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near."⁵⁹⁶ A person becomes aware of God's presence when he becomes honest. The psalmist says: "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."⁵⁹⁷ The presence of the Lord in this context is the experience of God's presence by man. In God's omnipresence there are no moments in which His presence would be less intense, but in our changing moods, we do not always sense the presence of the Lord in the same way. Without the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we would never become true and make a full confession of ourselves before God. This same principle is found behind Jesus' words: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."⁵⁹⁸ What influences the working of the Holy Spirit, and why He draws some people and not others, we do not know.

The reference to the rising of the mighty waters may be to Noah's flood, and the ark of salvation that kept mankind alive. Just as Noah and his family were safe in the ark when all hell broke loose on earth, so are those who confess their sins safe in Christ. The physical dangers that were brought about by Noah's flood are, undoubtedly, a picture of the emotional and spiritual threats that want to snuff out our lives. In the midst of all sorts of storms of life, we can be at rest under the protection of God's forgiveness. David assures us that God is our hiding place and our protection. The enemy is not a product of our imagination, nor is our protection illusory. We may, therefore, draw the conclusion that the prayers of the godly should not only be confession of sin, but also prayer for protection against the Evil One; the two go together. Our confession of sin deprives the devil of any ground to stand on in our lives, and it gives us the right for

⁵⁹⁵ Prov. 28:13

⁵⁹⁶ Isa. 55:6

⁵⁹⁷ Ps. 145:18

⁵⁹⁸ John 6:44

intimacy with God, who protects us. “Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on the His gentile breast...” as Fanny Crosby expressed that security. This is our real freedom, which will make us burst out in songs of deliverance. God loves music, and He will make sure that songs of praise will surround us. When David says: “You ...surround me with songs of deliverance,” he intimates that we will not be singing alone. Others will produce music as well; there are angels and redeemed humans, who share in our joy, both on earth as well as in heaven.

With the following verses arises the question who is speaking: God or David? Especially vs. 8: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you,” is often interpreted as one of God’s promises for guidance. The psalm is called a *mashkil*, which can be translated as a instructive poem. It would, therefore, be logical to assume that David presents his own experience as an example for others. As a person who has received forgiveness, he looks at other people and says: “You will have to follow the same way I went.” To take the verse as if God is speaking to man seems to violate the logic of the context, however tempting such an interpretation may be. Especially the rendering of the KJV: “I will guide thee with mine eye,” sounds like a picture of divine guidance. The NIV says more prosaically: “I will counsel you and watch over you.” The phrase could, however, simply be interpreted as David saying to his readers: “I am looking at you!”

Whatever the interpretation, the psalm demands a personal application; it was written for us. Our conclusion cannot be that someone else ought to confess his sins; David looks at us. David uses four words in connection with this application: “instruct,” “teach,” “counsel,” and “watch.” The following comparison with an animal is not very flattering. A horse or a mule is trained by man to render service. Such training would be dehumanizing for us. David’s intention is to emphasize voluntary surrender. A man who serves out of love augments his human dignity. A man who rebels against God lowers himself to the level of an animal. The question is not if we can stand against God or not. Such a supposition is ridiculous. A Dutch poet, writing a eulogy about another Dutchman, wrote that he was like a flame that seared the face of God, which is utter nonsense.⁵⁹⁹ Our sins make us less human, and unconfessed sin lowers us to the level of an animal. Confession enhances our human dignity, and fellowship with God makes us partakers of the divine nature and of His glory.

It is a strange phenomenon that man wants to turn away from God in order to enjoy life, and to be free to do what he want, but the result, invariably, turns out to be the opposite of what was anticipated. The word that is descriptive of life without God is “woes.” In the context of this psalm the word “wicked” should be taken as more than an immoral being, or an atheist. Someone who does not want to confess his sin is wicked for all practical purposes, regardless of his religious confession. It makes little difference what we say we are, if there is not some difference in our actions. The woes of the wicked are the symptoms David describes when he speaks about himself in the verses 3 and 4.

This psalm puts a heavy stress upon protection. Without confession of sin we are susceptible to the attacks of the Evil One, but in confessing we place ourselves under the immediate protection of the Almighty.

Vs. 10 establishes a direct link between confession and trust; the two go together and are inseparable. Without trust in God there would not be any occasion for confession. Our understanding of God’s love may, initially, be rather primitive and elementary, but if we would suspect that God was vicious and revengeful, we would never open our hearts to Him. Our unwillingness to clean up our actions comes from the influence of the enemy in our lives, who subjects us to his relentless propaganda. Trust in God’s goodness will make the balance tip for us. Even if we only open the door of our hearts only one tiny little crack, we will immediately be overwhelmed by God’s “unfailing love,” His *chesed*, the affectionate offer to enter into a covenant relationship with Him. This *chesed* is one of the essential attributes of God’s character. It contains His goodness, His patience, His compassion, His grace.

When David says in the last verse: “Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” he implies that confession of sin and forgiveness make a person righteous and upright in heart. A structural change takes place in the heart of the man who confesses his sin to the Lord. This is the reason Luther called this psalm “A Pauline Psalm.” The righteous should rejoice and be glad and sing. Unfortunately, we find such demonstrations too little in this world, yet they point the way to our heavenly glory. Even in the life of Jesus there were not very many spontaneous expressions of heavenly ecstasy. Luke reports at one point: “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned,

⁵⁹⁹ Herman Marsman, in his poem “Willem Kloos.”

and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.’⁶⁰⁰ We should, therefore, not conclude that, as Christian, we ought to go through life shouting and glorying uninterruptedly, but if there are no occasional moments of glory, something is wrong.

⁶⁰⁰ Luke 10:21

PSALM THIRTY-THREE

- 1 *Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.*
- 2 *Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.*
- 3 *Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.*
- 4 *For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.*
- 5 *The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.*
- 6 *By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.*
- 7 *He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses.*
- 8 *Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him.*
- 9 *For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.*
- 10 *The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.*
- 11 *But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.*
- 12 *Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people he chose for his inheritance.*
- 13 *From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind;*
- 14 *from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth--*
- 15 *he who forms the hearts of all, who considers everything they do.*
- 16 *No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength.*
- 17 *A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save.*
- 18 *But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,*
- 19 *to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.*
- 20 *We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.*
- 21 *In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.*
- 22 *May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.*

Two reasons are given in this beautiful psalm why a man should praise God: In the verses 4-9, because of His Word, and in the verses 10-19, because of His counsel. Both words have a deep and broad significance. The first three verses exhort us to praise. The righteous are admonished to sing joyfully, and to shout for joy, and to accompany this hymn under the accompaniment of various musical instruments, such as the harp and the ten-stringed lyre. The mention of the ten-stringed lyre suggests that the ancient Jews had a ten-tone system, as some primitive tribes do, from which the fa and ti are absent. The emphasis given is that the music should sound beautiful and that it be played skillfully. This pre-supposes preparation and rehearsal. It is naïve to suppose that, in spiritual things, only spontaneity is desired. It takes a lot of rehearsal and great skill to produce something that is worth listening to; yet, the final product has to sound as if it is produced spontaneously.

The joy and praise in these verses is very inspiring. The poem differs from other pieces of art in that it has to be “in the Lord.” Most pieces of art are the product of a human genius. In this respect the hymn of praise differs from other art forms. Not very many artists have put their talents on God’s altar. There are two prerequisites to produce a hymn of praise: one has to be righteous, that is the artist has to be clothed with God’s righteousness, and one has to sing “in the Lord.” The meaning of this admonition is, probably, best explained by the Apostle Paul, when he writes to the Corinthian church: “Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’”⁶⁰¹ Most translations render the NIV’s, “Sing joyfully” with “Rejoice.” TLB expresses best the emotions of the Hebrew with its paraphrase: “Let all the joys of the godly well up in praise to the Lord.” Praise belongs to the godly; joy and righteousness go hand in hand. Just as faith and good works cannot be separated, so do righteousness and praise go together.

The “new song” is spoken of several times in the Bible. It is mentioned for the first time in this psalm. We find it again in different places in the Book of Psalms.⁶⁰² The “new song” is a prophecy of our redemption and the new creation in Jesus Christ. As such it occurs in the book of Revelation: “And they [the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders] sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.’”⁶⁰³ In vs. 3 of this psalm the “new song” is sung in connection with the first creation, since in the first part of the psalm the poet deals with the creation of heaven and

⁶⁰¹ I Cor. 1:31

⁶⁰² Ps. 40:4; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9, and 149:1

⁶⁰³ Rev. 5:9. see also 14:3

earth by the Word of God. At the same time the Holy Spirit sees over the horizon of creation to the rehabilitation of man in Christ. Paul does the same when he says: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts ..." ⁶⁰⁴ The psalmist, (we read nowhere that this psalm was written by David), does not speak about two different subjects, old and new creation, but about one only. What God does in the realm of matter is the same as what He does in the spiritual domain. Just as we cannot separate Michelangelo's *Piëta* from the marble from which it is cut, so we cannot detach the creation of heaven and earth from salvation in Jesus Christ. After all, it is the upright who reach for their harps and ten-stringed lyres to sing praises to the Creator.

The reason that we should sing and shout for joy is, in the first place, the Word of God. This Word is mentioned twice in this psalm, in vs. 4 and 6. We find the terms "he spoke," and "he commanded" twice in vs. 9, which is synonymous with "the plan of the LORD," or, as the KJV puts it "the counsel of the LORD," in vs. 11. John discloses the secret meaning of all those expressions by identifying the Word of God with Jesus Christ. "The Word became flesh." ⁶⁰⁵ So in this psalm also we are not introduced merely to words that were spoken in a human tongue, but to a Person. God tells us literally who He is; His speaking is the purest expression of His being, and it becomes flesh and blood in a the person of the man Jesus. The psalmist himself cannot have known this. Even we, who know the facts, understand little of it.

The psalmist says four things about this Word, which he expresses beautifully; the Word is characterized as "right and true," "righteousness and justice." These two pairs are description of the same truth. He also uses the word "goodness," which is the translation of the covenant word *chesed*. Truth is expressed in the spoken Word. God is faithful in everything He does. Righteousness is the principle that rules God's behavior, and justice is the demonstration of that principle in practice. The fact that God loves those principles means, in the first place, that He never deviates from them, and also that He seeks those, and encourages them in others. God's goodness, this deep inner quality of God, is visible in creation as a whole. "The earth is full of his unfailing love."

These two verses contain enough material for four volumes; they deal with four attributes of God, which are evinced in their relationship to creation. God is, in the first place, the God of truth, that is, the God of reality. The opposite of truth is a lie, and the antonym of reality is fiction. The devil has tried to place God, in the minds of some people, in the realm of the subjective, that is, ultimately in the sphere of fiction. He even manipulates the meaning of words in order to achieve this goal. Lies and illusion are his vocabulary. Truth and reality belong to Christ. Only God is real.

Then we see that God's word is the truth, by the fact that God uses it to create. We will never be able to describe exhaustively the deep meaning of God's speaking. Our own ability to express our feeling, and thoughts in words is a vague shadow of God's revelation of His secrets. God's Word is the truth. He says exactly who He is; His Word proves to us that He is the truth.

According to the psalmist, God's faithfulness is demonstrated in His works. What is meant is probably God's sustaining of His creation. The writer to the Hebrews says that Christ is "sustaining all things by his powerful word." ⁶⁰⁶ The Word of God, therefore, is not only the source of the existence of all that is created, but also the power by which all things function. The Deists were wrong in believing that God had created all things, and that nature was like a clock that ran by itself without any outside interference. It is God's presence that sustains His creation. That is the content of God's faithfulness. The sun rises and sets at certain fixed times. Everything moves according to a predetermined velocity. There is always enough oxygen for man and beast, and the earth produces its fruit. This is evidence of the faithfulness of God. This is in sharp contrast with the "dèjà vu" attitude of the writer of Ecclesiastes, with his: " 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.' What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. ... All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun." ⁶⁰⁷ There is nothing meaningless and wearisome in the Word of God that sustains His creation. Even people who give no thought to God in their lives build upon this faithfulness of God. If, for example, a man promises to meet someone on Monday, at 7 o'clock under the clock of the bank building, he may not

⁶⁰⁴ II Cor. 4:6

⁶⁰⁵ John 1:14

⁶⁰⁶ Heb. 1:3

⁶⁰⁷ Eccl. 1:2-5,8,9

realize that, without the faithfulness of God there would be no Monday, nor the hour of seven, or even the clock.

“The LORD loves righteousness and justice.” This means, first of all, that God Himself is, in His own being, the standard of all ethics. There is no injustice in God. When He acts as a person in relationship to other persons, He acts rightly. Ethics govern only inter-personal relations. An animal has no moral consciousness. The psalmist not only says that God possesses ethical awareness, and that He does not violate His own moral standards, but that He loves righteousness and justice. The principles of righteousness and the practical application of those principles in justice are for God a positive source of joy. Sometimes we live under the illusion that we are more righteous than God. There is a trace of reproach and even distrust in Abraham’s intercession for Sodom, when he says to God: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”⁶⁰⁸ If man has a sense of righteousness and justice, this is derived from the image of God within him. Injustice is a deviation from God’s image. As we saw above, God’s love for righteousness and justice means that He appreciates those features in human behavior.

“The earth is full of his unfailing love.” Or, as the ASV renders it: “The earth is full of the lovingkindness of Jehovah.” Cynics react to this by saying: “Is that so?” When we look at cruelty and injustice, even in the realm of nature, it seems difficult to discover the unfailing love of God on earth. Many people feel that this statement is open for debate. But if we put a question mark behind the psalmist’s statement, we hold God responsible for the evil that exists on earth. The Bible clearly connects the presence of death, and all that is connected with it, with the fall of man. This puts the responsibility on the shoulders of man, not only for the cruelty man demonstrates to his fellowmen, but for the corruption of creation in general. Yet, we acknowledge at the same time that life is good and nature is breathtakingly beautiful. We love people and animals, and we cling to life. Only the emotionally sick consider suicide. Yet, in our blindness, we fail to see that the world is full of God’s lovingkindness. We drink in beauty without realizing what we do, and without being fully satisfied by it. Only if we know the Creator will we be able to see His lovingkindness around us. Isaiah hears the Seraph sing: “The whole earth is full of his glory.”⁶⁰⁹ Without the presence of our Lord, how gray and arid our world would be. The problem is not in our surrounding, but in our eyes. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote: “O wild and authentic the beauty of flowers alongside the canal.”⁶¹⁰ Why doesn’t everyone look at flowers that that? The earth is full of the lovingkindness of YHWH.

After this soft and sweet music, we hear the peals of thunder. The verses 6-9 express the awesomeness of God’s speaking. We find ourselves before the throne and the presence of Him from whom earth and sky flee.⁶¹¹ Infinite space with its millions of stars and planets, some of which are at a distance of millions of light-years away from us, came into being by the Word of God. I do not know if there really was a “big bang” or not. But at the beginning of all that exists stands the Word of God. John says this stammering and inimitably in the prologue of his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”⁶¹²

We understand that the phrase “the breath of his mouth” presents anthropomorphist images, but this does not make God’s speaking less impressive. On the one hand, we can understand quite well what speaking is, since we do it ourselves daily; on the other hand it is impossible for us to understand what God’s creative speaking means. Our speaking is, most of the time, superficial and without content. Even if our words translate faithfully what lives within us, they are not very effective. And even if our speaking achieves anything, it is never a creation in the real sense of the word. God created “ex nihilo.”⁶¹³ Composing music may be a vague image of what creating is. Because our speaking is akin to God’s speaking, and because we understand in some sense what it means, it surpasses our comprehension and fills us with awe.

The phrase: “For the word of the LORD is right and true,” (vs. 4) is parallel to “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (vs. 9). The creative power of the Word of God is proof of

⁶⁰⁸ Gen. 18:25

⁶⁰⁹ Isa. 6:3

⁶¹⁰ O, wilde en onvervalsde pracht van bloemen aan de watergracht...

⁶¹¹ Rev. 20:11

⁶¹² John 1:1-3

⁶¹³ Out of nothing.

its truth. When we realize this, we will fall down before our Creator and worship. Those who deny creation's story lose themselves in stupidity.

The second part of this psalm, beginning with vs. 10, depicts the condition in which man arrives when he severs his bond with the Word of God. The psalmist uses the words "plans" and "Word" as parallels. The Word of God not only creates, it also foils the plans of the nations; and it thwarts the purposes of the peoples. The fall of man is not mentioned specifically in this psalm, but it is understood in the space between the verses 9 and 10. A world of righteous and upright people is not a reality; the majority of men have turned their backs on God. The verses 10-17 deal with this rebellion. Vs. 10, especially, evokes images of the Second Psalm. Man lives under the illusion that he would be a match for God in a confrontation. There are two incidents in world history that are prominent above all the others, as examples of God's foiling the plans of the nations and thwarting the purposes of the peoples: the flood in Noah's days, and the confusion at the tower of Babel. Men who rise up against God are doomed to fail. This is the issue that determines the course of history. World history rushes toward Armageddon, where the Antichrist will be crushed by the overwhelming power of the Lamb of God. Man's counsel is temporal; God's counsel is eternal. The Word of God will never become outdated. It stands firm from generation to generation. The Gospel is eternal. The whole book of Revelation is a commentary on the theme that man's conspiracies cannot hold up against God's eternal counsel. Those who make plans for world hegemony will be put to shame. The plans men make outside God will be crushed against God's plans. This is the reason the Apostle Paul can say: "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."⁶¹⁴

The psalmist categorizes human beings as "nations" and "peoples," in connection with this rebellion. There is unity among humans in their conspiracy against God. But there is also the unity of the spiritual heritage. God is the God of Israel, and that nation is His heritage. The fact that this truth is presented in contrast to the rebellion implies that the heritage is not a matter that will come automatically and unconditionally. Those who participate in the rebellion have no part in the inheritance.

Vs. 12 pronounces a blessing upon Israel, which is put in the form of a double choice: Israel chose YHWH as its God, and God chose Israel as His inheritance. This is, of course, only half of the truth, but it is a truth nevertheless. God called Abraham, and He appeared to Jacob at Bethel, but Jacob did not accept God unconditionally. We read: "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.'"⁶¹⁵ Jacob showed a lack of reverence toward God, to say the least. But this takes away nothing from the fact that man is free to accept God as Lord over his life, or to rebel against Him. Over against the danger of being crushed in the rebellion stands the blessedness of the covenant. The purpose of God's election of Israel was not that they would enjoy a cozy and exclusive intimacy with God, but that they would become a kingdom of priests in this world, which would result in the putting down of the world's rebellion. This point is not specifically mentioned in the psalm, but it is an integral part of the inheritance.

We find again in the verses 13-15 a parallel with the second psalm: "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them."⁶¹⁶ It is true that here we do not find any trace of sarcasm or ridicule, but there is the same perspective. A conspiracy loses its strength when it is discovered. God not only knows all the secret plans man has made, but He invented the whole complex of thought and planning, which man tries to use against his Creator. Man himself does not understand the process of his own thinking. God comprehends completely all human thinking. The actual problem is that man, with his limited knowledge, thinks that he will be a match for the omniscient God. The fact, however, that our knowledge and understanding are limited, does not diminish the quality of that part of the truth that we can grasp. We may not know it all, but what we can know is real.

What we can say about human knowledge can also be said about human power. Man set his power over against God's omniscience. Human power and authority is derived from God's omnipotence. To think that we, as human beings, could in any way be a threat to the power of God is ludicrous. But this, again, does not mean that human authority is valueless. Man's power demonstrates itself mainly in the potential to destroy. The famous saying of Mao Dze Dung and Stalin are examples of what we mean. Mao said: "Power

⁶¹⁴ II Cor. 10:5

⁶¹⁵ Gen. 28:20-22

⁶¹⁶ Ps. 2:4

is in the barrel of a gun,” and when Churchill mentioned the Pope to Stalin during a conference, he answered: “The Pope, how many divisions does he have?” Armies are only effective when the enemy they fight is mortal. No conventional or nuclear arms will have any effect upon the Almighty God. God’s omnipotence cannot be expressed in horsepower, or being overcome with anything that is superior to His might. The psalmist says: “ A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save.” This may sound primitive to us, but the principle it expresses is as modern as ever. A running horse, or a supersonic airplane cannot catch him who invented the speed of light.

Amidst the tumult and lunacy of man’s rebellion against God stands the promise of the verses 18 and 19: “But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.” There is a world of difference between the statement in vs. 13: “From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind,” and “The eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,” in vs. 18. God, of course, does not cast any casual glances in a half-hearted way, but it is clear what the psalmist means to say. “The eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him” are the eyes of Him who loves us infinitely, and who wants to save the objects of His love. In this sense, God does not look at those who turn away from Him.

Although man’s rebellion is directed against God, those who are on the Lord’s side find themselves in the midst of the battle. That is the reason the psalmist speaks about both deliverance from death and being kept alive in famine. This does not mean that the Christian does not incur injuries. God’s children are wounded, and some are greatly afflicted, but God’s promise assures us that we will not perish in the battle. In the Old Testament setting this is represented as being protected from physical death. In the light of the New Testament this acquires a more profound meaning. There are worse things than dying, and God’s lovingkindness protects us against the worst. So, in these verses hope in God is contrasted with the mustering of a large army and fast horses. He who puts his trust in the Lord always comes out on top. Years ago the then president of the Philippines, Mrs. Corina Aquino, made the statement that she put her trust in the Almighty. TIME Magazine reported this with the addition of some disparaging remarks. At that point hope had returned for the Philippines.

The psalmist concludes with a word of testimony and a prayer. When he says: “We wait in hope for the LORD,” he indicates that he is in a situation where the presence of the Lord is not noticeable. The psalmist looks through his visible circumstance to the invisible presence of God. Our lives are always full of such circumstances. We need spiritual insight in order to be able to say with the Apostle Paul: “The Lord is near.”⁶¹⁷ This takes courage, for David says in the Psalms: “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”⁶¹⁸ We live, so to speak, in a foreign country, far from the presence of the Lord. We ought never to get used to this situation, and never get acclimatized. We should always draw a line from the present situation to the throne of God, so we can keep things in their right perspective. The words “our help and our shield” speak of our vulnerability. Without God’s protection we will never be able to make it. This insight into the fact that God is present, and he becomes conscious of His nearness always produces joy. Much of our human joy is anchored in our circumstances. When Jesus found Himself in adverse circumstances, He found His joy in the Holy Spirit. In Luke’s Gospel we read: “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.’”⁶¹⁹ This joy of the Holy Spirit is unrelated to our circumstances; it is often quite contrary to them. Paul and Silas could sing in the night, while they were chained in a Roman prison with bleeding backs.⁶²⁰ If we learn to rejoice in the Lord, there is very little Satan can do to harm us.

Our trust is in God’s holy name that is in His character. We know that God is good, otherwise, He could not be God. That is why we reach out towards Him, through our circumstances, with our hands and our hearts. The psalmist speaks of God’s holy name. It is impossible to give a definition of holiness. God’s holiness is the sum of all His attributes. In earthly terms this is translated with glory. The Seraphs in Isaiah’s vision sang to each other: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”⁶²¹ Even the fallen creation in which we live is still full of this glory. In this psalm we read: “the

⁶¹⁷ Phil. 4:5

⁶¹⁸ Ps. 27:14

⁶¹⁹ Luke 10:21

⁶²⁰ See Acts 16:19-25

⁶²¹ Isa. 6:3

earth is full of his unfailing love.”⁶²² At the end of this psalm the psalmist invokes this unfailing love of God upon himself. He says: “May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.” This established a new bond between man and creation, a bond which existed before, but which was broken by sin. This last verse is not completely free of tension, but it is a healthy tension, one that makes the sparks fly. The measure of our hope in God determines the intensity of our experiences of God’s unfailing love, His lovingkindness. Hope is a loaded word; it expresses the tension between that which is visible and the invisible reality. Our hope is the “Parousia.”

⁶²² vs. 5

PSALM THIRTY-FOUR

Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left.

- 1 *I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.*
- 2 *My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.*
- 3 *Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.*
- 4 *I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears.*
- 5 *Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.*
- 6 *This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.*
- 7 *The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*
- 8 *Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.*
- 9 *Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.*
- 10 *The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.*
- 11 *Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD.*
- 12 *Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days,*
- 13 *keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies.*
- 14 *Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.*
- 15 *The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry;*
- 16 *the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.*
- 17 *The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.*
- 18 *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*
- 19 *A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all;*
- 20 *he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.*
- 21 *Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned.*
- 22 *The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him.*

The thirty-fourth psalm is the second acrostic in the Book of Psalms. Each of the twenty-two verses begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The only irregularities are between the verses 5 and 6 where the letter *vau* is omitted, and at the last verse. For the latter *Adam Clarke's Commentary* has a satisfactory explanation. He believes that the word "redeems" should be read as "shall redeem," which begins with the last letter of the alphabet. George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, believes that the psalm was written for young people who were required to learn the psalm by heart. The alphabetization would be a help with this. He thinks that the historical reference in the heading of the psalm is an addition from the fourth century before Christ. He bases this supposition on the use of some "modern words" in the psalm, words which would not have been in use yet in David's days. It is not clear to me how such a supposition can be proved scientifically. I hold to the fact that this psalm was in fact written on the occasion of David's flight from Saul, which is recorded in I Samuel.⁶²³ The fact that in the account in I Samuel we read about Achish, and in the heading of this psalm about Abimelech, which means "The Father is King," should not be a problem, since Abimelech was, most likely, not the name of a person, but a title, like the Pharaoh in Egypt.

In I Samuel 21 David flees permanently from Saul. His life had been in danger before, but this time there would be no return; this threat was more serious than the first one. He had said to his friend Jonathan: "Yet as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death."⁶²⁴ David is in panic when he flees this time. He first goes to the priest Ahimelech in Nob to whom he tells a fictitious story of a secret mission which he supposedly had to accomplish for Saul. In doing this he endangers the lives of all the priests in Nob, and then he goes to Gath, the birthplace of Goliath to ask for asylum. Too late he realizes that he has entered the lions' den. He tries to save his life by acting like a lunatic.

David's conduct poses all kinds of ethical questions that are difficult to answer. He told outright lies, both to Ahimelech, the priest of Nob, and to King Achish. And Ahimelech was his friend. It is clear from this that David's relationship with God, at this point, was not what it should have been. He had no

⁶²³ I Sam. 21:10-15

⁶²⁴ I Sam. 20:3

tender conscience towards God. His eating of the consecrated bread had also been a dubious matter,⁶²⁵ although Jesus seems to defend David's conduct in this affair when He said: "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread-- which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests."⁶²⁶ We can say, though, that David certainly was not blameless when he wrote this psalm. When God saved him from the dangerous situation in which he found himself, it was not because he was innocent. God saved him because he was a sinner, not a saint. Nothing of what David had done could be classified as intentional sin. All of it was the result of the pressure of circumstances. This is the great difference between this psalm and Psalm 3. In this psalm David was dumb and inexperienced. He had not placed himself under God's protection, and that was the reason he found himself caught in the snares of the enemy. We cannot draw the lesson from this that it is not important to have a clear conscience, but we may conclude, and this is the important message of this psalm, that, if we fail morally, we have no reason to remain lying on the ground. We should never, *never*, give in to the devil's declaration that all is lost when we fall. Surrendering to Satan's deception ought to be inconceivable to us. This psalm has to be read against this background of forgiveness and rehabilitation. It gives a deeper meaning to the word grace. David certainly did not deserve to be saved.

Apart from the fact that I believe in the inspiration of Scripture, I do accept the title of this psalm as part of it, exactly because it is so surprising. In the situation in which David found himself, we would expect anything but this outburst of praise. David himself draws the line that places his present situation in the right perspective in connection with the rest of his life, by using the words: "at all times." This determines the mode of his existence on earth. He has come to the conclusion that, if God can save him from the kind of situations in which he finds himself, the praise of the Lord should be the main characteristic of his life. We do not know whether he was really able to maintain this level of praise consistently, but we find more notes of praise in the Bible from the pen of David, than from anybody else. With the resolve "I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips," David places himself, so to speak, in the heavenly places. He sounds like the "four living creatures," and the "twenty-four elders" in the book of Revelation.⁶²⁷ It is overwhelming to realize that God is able to create such a sublime situation out of the condition of a weak, fearful, and dubious reaction of a refugee; a situation, which was the result of his own failures.

Next to the phrase "at all times" the word "always" draws our attention. This does not leave any room for changing moods. It presupposes a constant flow of praise, which is not bound to circumstances. It is a proven fact that determined praising of God in difficult situations has a liberating effect upon us, and it often gives the key to spiritual victory. James' advice: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,"⁶²⁸ should set the tone for the way we live. Boasting in the Lord is a New Testament concept that has gained depth in Paul's writings: "Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'"⁶²⁹ It means, in the first place, that we do not take recourse of anything of ourselves to build a reputation for ourselves in this world. We will avoid projecting an "image" that would draw attention to ourselves and would give us a certain status among our peers. It is the essence of self denial, as Jesus taught His disciples: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."⁶³⁰ Positively it means that we lean on the Lord Jesus Christ for the projection of our image in this world. We say to God: "If I am to occupy a place of any importance in this life, and if I am to do anything that has importance, You will have to bring this about." Nobody can live without some kind of boasting. God has created us in such a way that we need to be honored and respected. He allows us to use His honor and respect for ourselves. The implications of this are hard for us to imagine.

David must have been deeply shocked by his experience in Achish' court. The phrase "let the afflicted hear and rejoice," is variously translated as "the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad (KJV), or "The meek shall hear thereof, and be glad" (ASV), or "Let all who are discouraged take heart" (TLB). The word Hebrew word *`anaawiyim* translated with "afflicted" has the opposite meaning of boasting. It is a form of *`anav*, which *Strong Definitions* describe as "depressed (figuratively), in mind (gentle) or circumstances (needy, especially saintly)." It has the same connotation as "the brokenhearted" in vs. 18. David does not

⁶²⁵ See I Sam. 21:3-6

⁶²⁶ Matt. 12:3,4

⁶²⁷ See Rev. 4:4;6^b-11

⁶²⁸ James 1:2

⁶²⁹ I Cor. 1:31

⁶³⁰ Matt. 16:24

speak about pious people, but about those who are irreparably wounded in their souls. David says, on the basis of his own experience, that there is hope for those whose spirit is crushed.

It is true that God does not crush His children spiritually. David had withdrawn from under the canopy of God's protection, and, consequently, he had started to slide and fall, and he ended up in a situation that looked hopeless. The devil was immediately on the spot to take advantage of this predicament. God's intervention, this resurrection from the dead, saved David from oppression. With the phrase: "let the afflicted hear and rejoice," David wants us to understand that our relationship with God should be strengthened by the reality of our experiences with Him. In this case it is the experience of others. Ultimately, our faith is based upon the experiences of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our own experiences with the Lord may strengthen our trust in Him, but they are not essential in the sense that they bring about our salvation. We are saved by the experiences Jesus had as a man in His relationship with the Father. This determines the healing of our crushed spirit. That brings the boasting into our lives. Thus David invites us into the fellowship of those who glorify the LORD, and let us exalt His name. His own great deliverance, and ours form the basis of this fellowship.

David prays to God while he fakes insanity. If I were God, I would have told David to first act normally. But God, evidently, answers David while he plays the crazy man. Achish' words: "Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?"⁶³¹ were, obviously, inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The group of people David addresses in vs. 5 is the same as in the verses 2 and 3: "the afflicted," that is the broken hearted ones. Their healing is brought about in that they who "look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame." The fact that they will not be covered with shame suggests faith in something that is invisible on earth. The Apostle Peter establishes the same connection between faith and the absence of shame when he writes: "For in Scripture it says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'"⁶³² We should take another look at the tremendous transition between the brokenness of heart of a person and the look of radiance on his face. One glance at the face of the Lord brings about this transformation. Paul speaks of "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ," when he writes to the Corinthians: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."⁶³³ That is what David is saying here also. It is "the knowledge of the glory of God" that makes us radiant, and brings about healing.

This radiance is a form of testimony to others. We have no control over this since we cannot radiate at will, as we would turn on a switch. It is in the measure that we see the Lord that our lives reflect some of His radiance.

David describes himself as "this poor man" when he flees for his life, away from Saul. It is hard for us to imagine how an outcast would feel. "Poor man" seems to be a mild expression. David had come out from under the protection of the law of the state of Israel to come under the protection of the Almighty. His act of lunacy in front of Achish was not a sly ruse, but an act of despair. Evidently, he acted convincingly, since they let him go. This, however, is not as normal as it seems. The Philistines were unscrupulous, and killing a lunatic would have caused no moral conflict for them, especially if this pertained to an Israelite. The fact that they let David go is an indication of God's intervention. David's fear of death was the cause of his oppression. The writer to the Hebrews puts his finger on this problem when he says: "that by [Christ's] death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."⁶³⁴ The devil uses our fear of death to hold us in slavery. God delivers us, first of all, from this fear.

Vs. 7 reads: "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them." We know very little about angels, who are ambassadors of the invisible world. David says more than that they are invisible creatures who keep watch over us. He uses the term "The angel of the LORD," which designates our Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. David cannot have understood the exact meaning of the words he used. He may have been aware of the fact that the Holy Spirit urged him to use an exceptional term. What he meant to say was that there was more involved than the presence of angels; how

⁶³¹ I Sam. 21:14,15

⁶³² I Pet. 2:6

⁶³³ II Cor. 4:6

⁶³⁴ Heb. 2:14,15

much more, he cannot have known. We ourselves, for whom the whole truth has been written down in Scripture, have little understanding of what it means: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."⁶³⁵ We should interpret David's words, in the first place, as a prophecy about the dispensation in which we live. God protects us with the resurrection life of His own Son. This means more than help in difficult circumstances.

With the phrase: "Taste and see that the LORD is good," David appeals to our senses. He says that God's goodness can be appreciated by our five senses. Neo Orthodoxy also teaches that God is good, but that we can only accept this fact in blind faith, because the facts of life do not substantiated this. But David tells us that God's goodness is noticeable by anyone. This does not make God's goodness into a mere subjective experience. We cannot say that all we eat is a matter of taste alone. Food is an objective substance, whether we like the taste of it or not. Subjectivity is not excluded, but it cannot exist without the objective substance; so it is with the tasting and in the seeing of the goodness of the Lord. "Taste" presupposes eating and enjoying, but also being fed, and staying alive, being nourished, and built up by what we eat. If we taste the goodness of the Lord, this goodness will become part of us. God is good. Jesus confirms this by saying to the rich young man: "No one is good-- except God alone."⁶³⁶ Goodness is God's exclusive attribute which no man possesses unless he is in fellowship with Him. We often tend to project our human malice and hostility upon God. David had a personal experience of God's goodness, and he invites us to experience this goodness in our own lives. Such an experience convinces us of God's goodness. It is the presence of evil in this world that will often make us lose the trail of God's goodness, and make us hold God responsible for the existence of evil. The French author Beaudelaire even came to the conclusion: "If there is a God, He is the devil!"⁶³⁷

The discovery of God's goodness makes our taking refuge in Him so glorious. It could be that David wrote these words while hiding in the cave of Adullam. We are told elsewhere "David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam."⁶³⁸ This cave is called "the stronghold."⁶³⁹ It was the place of refuge God had prepared for David. If indeed David wrote this psalm at that place, it means that he identified the cave with the protection of God Himself. But even outside the cave he would have been perfectly safe, because his security was anchored in heaven. The cave only accentuated God's goodness.

Fearing the Lord, that is standing in awe before God, or having deep reverence for Him is an important counterweight in our relationship with the Lord. The discovery of God's goodness leads to intimacy in our walk with Him, and intimacy without deep respect leads to vulgarity. God is good, but He is not a "goody-goody" God. If that is the concept we have of God, we are no longer in touch with reality. The psalmist says elsewhere: "You are awesome, O God, in your sanctuary."⁶⁴⁰ Unless we realize that, without the blood of Christ, we would all flee in panic from the presence of the Lord, like the whole earth will do one day, we have no idea with whom we are dealing. "The fear of the Lord" makes us realists. But if we do fear the Lord, and we place ourselves under His protection, our life will be secure. David said: "Those who fear him lack nothing." God promises specifically that we will be provided for. This does not mean, however, that we would not be required to miss a meal from time to time. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree proves this point.⁶⁴¹ Matthew tells us that Jesus was hungry, but the Father denied Him breakfast. The Lord will give us insight into this kind of dilemma, and we will not have to worry about what we will eat or drink. God has taken upon Himself the responsibility to care for us. Young lions that are dependent upon the care of their mother's prowess, are less likely to be filled than we are. Jesus told His disciples: "You are worth more than many sparrows."⁶⁴² David adds to this that we are worth more than lions. "God's Social Security ain't broke yet!"

In verses 11-14 David gives a definition of "the fear of the Lord." The Apostle Peter quotes those words in his first epistle as an example of the manifestation of eternal life we possess as Christians.⁶⁴³ This does not mean that we first have to comply with the conditions he mentions in order for God to give us

⁶³⁵ Col. 1:27^b

⁶³⁶ Luke 18:19

⁶³⁷ S'il y a un Dieu, il est le diable!

⁶³⁸ I Sam. 22:1

⁶³⁹ See I Sam. 22:4

⁶⁴⁰ Ps. 68:35

⁶⁴¹ See Matt. 21:18-22

⁶⁴² Matt. 10:31

⁶⁴³ See I Pet. 3:10-12

eternal life. At this point salvation lies behind us. Keeping our tongue from evil and our lips from speaking lies, turning from evil and doing good, seeking peace and pursuing it are the fruits of the new life.

It is interesting, to say the least, that David mentions those manifestations of honesty as a proof of the fear of the Lord. He had just deceived Achish with his show of insanity. He must have come to the realization that his act was a manifestation of his fear of men. Deceit and fear of men always go together. We deceive others and ourselves because we are afraid. The awe we have for God breaks through this vicious circle. He who is under God's protection no longer feels the need to deceive. If there had not been a dramatic change in David's life, this admonition would have amounted to presumptuous hypocrisy.

David describes one who fears the Lord: "Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days." This means enjoying the new life that God has given us. The key to this enjoyment is "the fear of the Lord," that is this combination of awe and intimacy.

The first demonstration of this "fear" is keeping our tongue in check, a subject James elaborates on in his epistle.⁶⁴⁴ The best way to restrain our tongue is to use it for the praise of God. If the Holy Spirit takes possession of our tongue there will no longer be any room for deceit. Deceit presents itself most often in what we say; although there are exceptions, as in David's comedy in Achish' court and the silence of Ananias and Sapphira.⁶⁴⁵ Turning from evil and doing good and seeking peace and pursuing it are examples of godly actions. Seeking peace and pursuing it pertains to our relationship with our fellowmen. Peace is something that does not come by itself; it has to be pursued actively. We have to take the initiative in bringing it about. Our enjoyment of life with God will depend on those the following: Turning from evil and doing good and seeking peace and pursuing it.

The last eight verses of this psalm (15-22) give us a general conclusion, based on David's personal experience. What happened to "this poor man" turns out to be a general rule for all righteous people. God keeps close track of what happens to all people. "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous" does not mean that God casts casual glances, but that He involves Himself intensely in the lives of His children. He takes our needs to heart. He sees and He hears; "His ears are attentive to their cry." In contrast to this, the man who commits evil will find that the Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, is his adversary. The evil men do stands in sharp contrast to the pursuit of peace and doing of good discussed in the preceding verses. If the memory of them who do evil is cut off from the earth, then there will be monuments built for the righteous. This, of course, is a picture of eternal life. The Apostle John writes: "The man who does the will of God lives forever."⁶⁴⁶

We looked at David's circumstances that formed the basis for the writing of this psalm. It is common for man to seek his own way out of his difficulties. This leads to broken hearts and crushed spirits. When David finally realized what he had done, first with the priests of Nob, and then at Achish' court, he saw the broken pieces, not only around him but in his own heart. We owe this psalm to the miracle God wrought for him in this condition. David tells us that God always does this kind of thing; he himself was no exception. God saves us from situations in which we landed by our own fault, from catastrophes of our own creation. The embarrassing part is that there are so many of them.

In the context of the psalm David says: "He protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken," assures us that we will escape without sustaining any physical harm, but in the context of the whole Bible this verse becomes a prophecy about Jesus' death on the cross. The Apostle John quotes this verse in his eye witness report of Jesus' death. We read in his Gospel: "But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: 'Not one of his bones will be broken.'⁶⁴⁷ It also means that Jesus is the actual Passover Lamb, for in connection with the celebration of that feast it is expressly stated: "Do not break any of the bones."⁶⁴⁸

We are again confronted with the remarkable phenomenon that the Holy Spirit says with the same words two things, which are opposite. David meant to say that the health of the righteous will be preserved, and at the same time, the prophecy pertained to the death of God's Son on the cross. The deep lesson is that

⁶⁴⁴ See James 3:1-12

⁶⁴⁵ Acts 5:1-10

⁶⁴⁶ I John 2:17

⁶⁴⁷ John 19:33-36

⁶⁴⁸ Ex. 12:46

Jesus died to save us from situations in which we ended up by our own fault, by our lack of trust in God. This throws a completely new light upon the character of our sins. It had never been David's intention to sacrifice the priests of Nob for his own safety, and his show of insanity at Achish' court was not meant to be a joke either. God saves him from his guilt by the death of Jesus. He died also for the sins we did not mean to commit.

When David says: "Evil will slay the wicked," he does not mean the evil deeds the wicked commits, but the evil that overtakes him. TLB renders it with: "Calamity will surely overtake the wicked." It is the same Hebrew word, *ra`*, that in vs. 19 is translated as "troubles" that overcome the righteous. In the background lies a suggestion as if certain events would overcome people by chance, as if God would have nothing to do with it, or would act arbitrarily. Such a suggestion brings its problems with it. Omnipotence presupposes that there are no matters that would not fall under God's control. We might think of so-called secondary causes, which take over under certain circumstances. When, for instance, the spirit leaves the body, decomposition begins automatically. In the same way, man will get into trouble when the line with God is severed. God will save the righteous under such conditions, but the person who has withdrawn himself from God's protection will experience the catastrophic results of his actions. Those who commit evil will come under evil's power. He, whose soul has been cleansed, escapes.

Evil demonstrates itself in human relationships. Hatred of one's neighbor can be man's undoing. The culmination of this hatred is the hatred of One Man: Jesus Christ. Love of God and love of one's neighbor cannot be separated. If our love for Jesus, which is the essence of all righteousness, controls us, we will not enter into God's judgment. "No one will be condemned who takes refuge in him." He took our condemnation upon Himself!

PSALM THIRTY-FIVE

Of David

- 1 *Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me.*
- 2 *Take up shield and buckler; arise and come to my aid.*
- 3 *Brandish spear and javelin against those who pursue me. Say to my soul, "I am your salvation."*
- 4 *May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame; may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay.*
- 5 *May they be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away;*
- 6 *may their path be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them.*
- 7 *Since they hid their net for me without cause and without cause dug a pit for me,*
- 8 *may ruin overtake them by surprise-- may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.*
- 9 *Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD and delight in his salvation.*
- 10 *My whole being will exclaim, "Who is like you, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them."*
- 11 *Ruthless witnesses come forward; they question me on things I know nothing about.*
- 12 *They repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn.*
- 13 *Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered,*
- 14 *I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother. I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother.*
- 15 *But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee; attackers gathered against me when I was unaware. They slandered me without ceasing.*
- 16 *Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked; they gnashed their teeth at me.*
- 17 *O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions.*
- 18 *I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you.*
- 19 *Let not those gloat over me who are my enemies without cause; let not those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye.*
- 20 *They do not speak peaceably, but devise false accusations against those who live quietly in the land.*
- 21 *They gape at me and say, "Aha! Aha! With our own eyes we have seen it."*
- 22 *O LORD, you have seen this; be not silent. Do not be far from me, O Lord.*
- 23 *Awake, and rise to my defense! Contend for me, my God and Lord.*
- 24 *Vindicate me in your righteousness, O LORD my God; do not let them gloat over me.*
- 25 *Do not let them think, "Aha, just what we wanted!" or say, "We have swallowed him up."*
- 26 *May all who gloat over my distress be put to shame and confusion; may all who exalt themselves over me be clothed with shame and disgrace.*
- 27 *May those who delight in my vindication shout for joy and gladness; may they always say, "The LORD be exalted, who delights in the well-being of his servant."*
- 28 *My tongue will speak of your righteousness and of your praises all day long.*

In this psalm David turns against his enemies in a spiritual way. He decides not to defend himself, but he appeals to God to defend him. That is the only revenge allowed to a Christian. Some commentators object to the "non-Christian" tone of this psalm. They see in this a spirit that is the opposite of the one demonstrated in the "Sermon on the Mount." Such conclusions are the result of a wrong reading of this psalm. David uses images of violence, but he does not use violence himself. He does what the Apostle Paul did when he wrote to the Corinthians: "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."⁶⁴⁹ The shield and buckler, the spear and javelin are no human weapon in David's hand, but the weapons God uses. They are symbols of the power of the Holy Spirit. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit."⁶⁵⁰ David does not intend violence; this is clear from his surrender of the matter into the hands of God. He sees God armed with the same weapons as

⁶⁴⁹ II Cor. 10:4

⁶⁵⁰ Zech. 4:6

his enemies, but the intent is quite opposite. The difference is as great as between the flesh and the spirit, as between earth and heaven. When David leaves his defense to God, he implies that he is not going to defend himself. That is an important decision, and it is difficult to stick to it. If a man who is accused of a criminal act constantly interrupts his lawyer during his court case, he will surely lose through his own fault.

If we leave our case in God's hand, we show that we do not underestimate our adversaries. Even if we are under attack by our fellowmen, we should never lose sight of the fact that our struggle is not against flesh and blood.

The word "contend" is interesting. The rendering in the KJV reads: "Plead my cause, O LORD, with them that strive with me." *The Adam Clarke Commentary* says: "Plead my cause, O Lord] Literally, Contend, Lord, with them that contend with me. The word is often used in a forensic or law sense." The Hebrew word is *riyb*, which *Strongs* defines as: "to toss, i.e. grapple; mostly figuratively, to wrangle, i.e. hold a controversy; (by implication) to defend." David's enemies are out to get his life, and David asks God to counterattack them. The expressions used are, in fact, appropriate in legal proceedings. In New Testament terms, we would say that David asks God to be his *Paraklete*, which is the name Christ uses for the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵¹ Satan accuses us and the Holy Spirit defends us. This determines the character of the battle with the shield and buckler, the spear and javelin. They are the weapons of God's victory, which far surpass any nuclear arsenal in effectiveness.

There is a shadow of fear in the words: "Say to my soul, 'I am your salvation.'" Evidently, David needs this kind of assurance. He lives in a world in which words like "justice and righteousness" are used as a cover-up for injustice, corruption, and tyranny. A shield and buckler are weapons of defense, but spears and javelins are used in an attack. David expects God to protect him, both juridically way and practically.

The concept of being put to shame occurs frequently in the Book of Psalms. The feeling of shame entered man's life when he broke the bond with God. Adam and Eve felt ashamed before God and before each other, after they committed their sin.⁶⁵² Shame defies definition. It is related to a loss of honor and dignity. In the context of this psalm, the notion of being put to shame is very suggestive. If a person tries to kill someone else, but fails in his efforts, a feeling of shame does not seem to be a fitting reaction. Shame presupposes a moral awareness that there are certain ethical norms, and that those were not adhered to. A depreciation of self-worth, which is what shame basically amounts to, may be the first step on the road to conversion. If David prays that his adversaries may be put to shame, he implies that he entertains hope for them. Shame will reach its climax for the human race when Jesus returns, and, in John's words: "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him."⁶⁵³ Shame will also be the predominant factor in man's suffering in hell.

The picture of the angel of the Lord pursuing the wicked and chasing them as the wind chases chaff reminds us of the scene in Revelation, where the population of the earth tries to hide from the wrath of the Lamb.⁶⁵⁴ If we take the shield, buckler, javelin, and spear to be spiritual weapons, we will have to take this image of the angel of the Lord chasing David's enemies in a spiritual sense also. The angel of the Lord is the Old Testament revelation of Christ. Seeing Jesus awakens in David's adversaries the voice of their conscience, which accuses them. Being chased like chaff and stumbling on dark and slippery paths are images of awareness of one's evil self. It is not true, of course, that those people were men who bore fruit for God, and who walked in the light, and that by means of David's prayer they became empty hulls of chaff, and ended up in darkness. Their circumstances did not change. If anything, they became aware of their own condition. In a sense, becoming conscious of one's sin is one of the worst experiences a person can have. David's prayer for his enemies sounds like a study in revenge, but in reality it is quite different from what a superficial glance would make us believe it to be. Vs. 8: "May ruin overtake them by surprise-- may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin," sounds particularly hateful. But if a man is condemned, it is more merciful when he is overtaken by sudden death, than to have to endure a prolonged period of anguish.

With the words "without cause" in vs. 7, David professes his innocence. David had done nothing to provoke this kind of hatred. The incident, which is not mentioned may be Saul's sudden and unprovoked attack upon David.

⁶⁵¹ See John 14:16

⁶⁵² See Gen. 3:7,10

⁶⁵³ Rev. 1:7

⁶⁵⁴ See Rev. 6:15-17

David's trust in God bursts open in the shout of joy in verses 9 and 10: "Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD and delight in his salvation. My whole being will exclaim, 'Who is like you, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them.'" A child of God should always base his life on this assumption of victory, even if it is not yet visible in time and space. At the moment he wrote this, David was still being persecuted, but this fact does not touch him any longer emotionally. The fact that God has taken over for him, and contends with those who contend with David, and fights against those who fight against him, is enough to make him inwardly joyful and jubilant. The first deliverance God grants is the deliverance from fear. Being freed of fear is a spiritual process. Victory over death is preceded by victory over the fear of death. This is the message the writer to the Hebrews conveys when he says: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."⁶⁵⁵ The resurrection of Jesus Christ has this immediate effect upon us, which frees us from slavery. Our own resurrection will follow later.

There may be a touch of humor in the phrase: "My whole being will exclaim..." The Hebrew says literally: "All my bones will exclaim..." which is the rendering most of the older version give. It may be an idiomatic expression of what we would call in modern slang "my gut feelings." Paul uses a more elevated language when he writes to the Romans: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁶⁵⁶

Satan is stronger than we are, and many people may be stronger than we are; but what is that in comparison with God's omnipotence? What matters is that we do not maintain our independence before God, but surrender to Him without any reservation.

At that time David knew nothing about the way in which God would deliver man; that is not by being stronger, but by being weaker. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."⁶⁵⁷ Jesus' victory demonstrates to us that, for us also, we should conquer our enemies, not by being stronger than they, but by being weaker. This is a hard lesson to learn. But we should remember that, in the end, the world will take to flight because of "the wrath of the Lamb."⁶⁵⁸ The Holy Spirit shows us in this psalm the way of Jesus' victory on the cross, with the mention of "ruthless witnesses," or as the KJV calls them "false witnesses." We see them appear in the report of Jesus' court case before the Sanhedrin.⁶⁵⁹ This travesty, which was played to maintain a resemblance of justice in the process makes the whole matter utterly disgusting. The devil borrows one of God's attributes, that is righteousness, in order to strengthen the kingdom of lies. In His suffering and death, Jesus repaid evil with good.

The NIV renders vs. 12 with: "They ... leave my soul forlorn." The Hebrew word used here is *shekowl*, which literally means bereavement, or "loss of children." Since the Bible does not record that David lost a child, other than the son who was born after his sin with Bathsheba, we take this to mean that he wanted to express a sense of deep grief. For the Old Testament Israelite the death of a child was more than a deep emotional shock. It meant the interruption of the family name, which was loss of eternal life. The verses 13 and 14 are, probably, also pictures of compassion and neighborly love, and should not be interpreted in a literal sense. The verses 15 and 16 may also be mere pictures of sadistic enjoyment by his enemies of David's misfortune. There rings a prophetic tone in these verses that points toward our Lord Jesus Christ, who "was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like

⁶⁵⁵ Heb. 2:14,15

⁶⁵⁶ Rom. 8:31-39

⁶⁵⁷ I Cor. 1:25

⁶⁵⁸ See Rev. 6:15-17

⁶⁵⁹ See Matt. 26:59-61; Mark 14:55-58

one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and ... [who] he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.... [and] was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.”⁶⁶⁰

The interrogative, which is translated with “how long?” is used at least twelve times in the Book of Psalms in connection with God. It is difficult to reconcile the presence of evil in this world with God’s holiness. Some people, however, do understand that God permits evil for a purpose. It is in conjunction with this insight that the cry escapes from the psalmist’s lips: “O Lord, how long will you look on?” It is a lament from a man, confined to time and space, to the eternal God. The impression he has, that God would look on for a certain time while the soul of man is being destroyed, is an optical illusion. John describes in chapter five of his Gospel, that Jesus on a Sabbath day announced: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”⁶⁶¹ Ever since the fall, God rests no longer, but He works with feverish haste at man’s redemption. The only time God looked away was at Jesus’ crucifixion, when He cried out: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? ... “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”⁶⁶²

The phrase: “Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions” is highly interesting as far as the use of words is concerned. “My life” and “my precious life” are two different words. The KJV reads: “Rescue my soul from their destructions, my darling from the lions.” “My soul” and “my darling” are used as parallels. The Hebrew word for the latter is *yachiyd*, which *Strongs* defines as: “united, i.e. sole; by implication, beloved; also lonely; (feminine) the life (as not to be replaced).” TLB paraphrases the phrase: “Act now and rescue me, for I have but one life and these young lions are out to get it.” David holds his life to be precious and wonderful, and the suggestion is that God considers it to be so also. “These lions” probably symbolize, as elsewhere, demonic elements in the hostility that humans demonstrate against David. We could, therefore, see this verse as a paraphrase of the prayer Jesus taught us: “Deliver us from evil.”⁶⁶³ The Holy Spirit follows in this psalm more or less the same pattern as in Psalm 22. The lament leads to hope and praise. Here we read: “O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions. I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you,” and in that psalm: “Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen. I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you.”⁶⁶⁴ This would be an indication that, in this psalm also, we find a prophecy about the suffering and resurrection of Christ. In this psalm there is a greater emphasis on the large size of the assembly in whose midst the praises are sung. In connection with the verses in Psalm 22, we remarked that the essence of all praise is the resurrection of Jesus. He is the One who praises the Father, and we follow Him therein. In this psalm it becomes evident how large the number is of those who can say this praise after Him. It is “the great assembly,” “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.”⁶⁶⁵ We could join others asking the question of where all these people came from. It seems as if there are only too few Christians in this world. How can there be so many all of a sudden?

After this climax, there is another descent in this psalm. David still sees his enemies standing before him; they gloat over him, devise false accusations, insinuate, mock, joy over his misery with great duplicity. The problem is that there are, in the life of each person, certain things that are kept secret. The accusations of the devil against God’s saints are not mere fantasies. In our day, when someone is running for a high office, the press and antagonists display the record his private life to be scrutinized and in most cases they find things that cannot stand publicity. When David writes that his enemies “gape at [him] and say, ‘Aha! Aha! With our own eyes we have seen it.’” he does not deny the truth of this accusation. Jesus’ words to the men of His time: “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her,”⁶⁶⁶ indicate that we are dealing with an age-old problem.

The question is not whether we have sinned or not, but if we have confessed our sins, and if we have been washed in the blood of Christ. David’s words: “O LORD, you have seen this,” point in the direction of a confession. God’s character, His omnipresence, and omniscience are guarantees that God is thoroughly acquainted with our sins. But David does not talk about that here. He had already confessed his sins to God. If this were not so, his case in court would have been lost to start with. The accuser of the

⁶⁶⁰ Isa. 53:3-5

⁶⁶¹ John 5:17

⁶⁶² Matt. 27:46

⁶⁶³ Matt. 6:13 (KJV)

⁶⁶⁴ Compare vs. 17, 18 with Ps. 22:21,22

⁶⁶⁵ Rev. 7:9

⁶⁶⁶ John 8:7

brethren is, first of all, defeated by the blood of the Lamb,⁶⁶⁷ meaning that the devil is conquered because of the forgiveness of our sins. The essence of the Gospel is not for sinless people. God has not only seen our sins, and has brought about our cleansing through Jesus Christ, but He has also seen the hypocrisy of Satan who, after causing the fall of man, tries to play off our sin against God's holiness. Unless we acquire insight in the meaning of the atonement, we will always be susceptible to the insinuations of the enemy. Our heart will always condemn us until the full depth of God's love for us penetrates our conscience, our entire being. Sometimes it seems as if the devil is the only one who is speaking and God remains silent. But God has already spoken to us in Jesus Christ.⁶⁶⁸ Our joy is based on the fact that the Lord is near us.⁶⁶⁹

David is right in using juridical terms to describe his relationship with God. The phrase: "Vindicate me in your righteousness," seems a contradiction-in-terms, but that is incorrect. God's righteousness in Jesus Christ is our vindication. Paul says this also to the Corinthian church: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."⁶⁷⁰ As in vs. 4, so here also, David asks God to put his enemies to shame. We already elaborated on this point. However strange as this may sound, the request implies hope. David does not ask that his enemies may be exterminated, but that the Lord will make them see what they have done. Shame is the result of a comparison between what we ought to be and what we are. Only one who has felt shame himself will be able to intercede this way for others.

Part of this kind of "intercession" is the sharing of joy with those who know the same kind of fellowship with God, and who consequently love David. The purpose of all our experiences is to exalt God. God makes us pass through difficult times, so we will come to the conclusion that He is great.

The essence of the Gospel is "a righteousness from God," as the Apostle Paul explains in his epistle to the Romans. We read there: "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'⁶⁷¹ Paul demonstrates in his epistle that God punished our sins in Jesus Christ, and that, through this act of righteousness, we have been redeemed, both from our guilt, as well as from the power of sin over us. God's righteousness ought to have been our undoing, but it became our salvation. We will always have to return to this marvel in our lives, and we will never get used to it. It is the focal point of all God's eternal attributes, the nature of which He imparts to us. Praise always begins at this point. When David says: "My tongue will speak of your righteousness and of your praises all day long," he does not mean, of course, that during his life on earth he literally praised God all day long. Mortal man cannot do that. In saying this he reached out beyond himself into eternity.

⁶⁶⁷ See Rev. 12:10,11

⁶⁶⁸ See Heb. 1:1

⁶⁶⁹ See Phil. 4:4,5

⁶⁷⁰ II Cor. 5:21

⁶⁷¹ Rom. 1:16,17

PSALM THIRTY-SIX

For the director of music. Of David the servant of the Lord.

- 1** *An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes.*
2 *For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin.*
3 *The words of his mouth are wicked and deceitful; he has ceased to be wise and to do good.*
4 *Even on his bed he plots evil; he commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong.*
5 *Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.*
6 *Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O LORD, you preserve both man and beast.*
7 *How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among men find refuge in the shadow of your wings.*
8 *They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.*
9 *For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.*
10 *Continue your love to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart.*
11 *May the foot of the proud not come against me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.*
12 *See how the evildoers lie fallen-- thrown down, not able to rise!*

This is an amazing psalm! At first glance it seems as if the topic is the contrast between the sinners and the righteous, but a closer look reveals that this is not correct. It would be more correct to call it an Analysis of a Conversion.

The verses 1-4 deal, not primarily, with the condition of a godless person as with that of a man who is conscious of his sinful nature. Such a discovery is only possible if one becomes aware of being in the presence of God. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin. The NIV renders vs. 2 with: "For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin." Other versions, such as the KJV, read: "For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful." The word "until" is not in the original. It is quite possible, however, that David speaks here about the discovery of his own unrighteousness.

Vs. 1, which the NIV renders with: "An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes," is rather complicated in Hebrew. It reads literally: "Saith the transgression of the wicked within my heart {that} there is no fear of God before his eyes." Sin speaks to a man deep in his heart; it has penetrated in the innermost parts of his being. The "speaking" of sin indicates that there is an influence that comes from the outside, but the residence of sin, inside the heart, speaks of a corrupted nature.

The root of sin is within us, and the poison is in our veins. It is a frightful condition, and, as long as we live on this earth, we will never completely escape the effects of evil. There is much more involved than the work of demons; corruption is within us. Every human being is wicked by nature. We all tend to live our lives outside fellowship with God, and make our plans without consulting our Creator. The wicked man does not want to face the fact that one day he will have to give account of his acts before the throne of Him from whose presence earth and sky will flee, and no place will be found for them.⁶⁷² Only if we fear the Lord, will we be wise. Our sinful nature will inflate our ego to the point that we think the world revolves around us, and that we are the center of the universe. David says that we flatter ourselves. We tell ourselves that we are intelligent and good, or even better than others. When we cannot see ourselves in relation to God, we have no point of reference and we lack objectivity.

A man will discover his unrighteousness only if he is confronted with God's holiness. This discovery has been made by millions of people throughout the ages, but it has nowhere been documented so clearly and dramatically as in the life of the prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah finds himself in the presence of the Lord, he cries: "Woe to me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people

⁶⁷² *Rev. 20:11*

of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”⁶⁷³ The Holy Spirit shows us sin’s real character, and He shares with us God’s hatred for the poison that kills man. The discovery of our iniquity and of God’s holiness is always a simultaneous process. When the devil draws our attention to our sins it is for the purpose of leading us into despair, and sometimes, into suicide. But it is a salutary experience, in the literal sense of the word, if God makes His light shine upon us, and we become scared of our own condition. It is my opinion that this is the way this psalm as a whole should be interpreted. If we see in these verses nothing but a judgment over others, instead of over ourselves, we miss the connection between verses 4 and 5, and we end up with two different psalms.

David demonstrates that sin has penetrated the three phases of our being, and reigns in the domains of our heart, our head, and our will. Jesus tells us that our mouths only utter that which is inside us. In Matthew’s Gospel we read: “But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”⁶⁷⁴ Our heart is full of evil and deceit; our intelligence is corrupted. Our acts are no longer determined by our mind, because we have disconnected our capacity for logical thought from our love of God. That is why we make the wrong choices. Even if we were able to place good and evil next to each other and judge objectively, as Adam must have been able to do when he was still in paradise, we tend to choose evil because of our sinful nature.

Some remarkable threads are woven into this pattern of which we should not lose sight when looking at the big picture. Many of our sins are passive, in the sense that they consist more in the omission of acts of wisdom and goodness than in the commission of evil. David says that our beds occupy an important place in the making of evil plots. When we are alone with ourselves, when it is dark and things from the outside no longer distract us, evil rears its ugly head within us. For those who love the Lord it is a precious experience to be alone with Him; for a man who lives in sin, solitude can be frightening.

Furthermore, sinning means following a certain way. The NIV renders vs. 4 with: “He commits himself to a sinful course and does not reject what is wrong.” Most other translations speak about “a way.” The NKJ, for instance, reads: “He sets himself in a way that is not good.” People who sin move away from God. In Psalm One, David uses the image for sin as a digression of walking “in the counsel of the wicked,” or standing “in the way of sinners,” or sitting “in the seat of mockers.”⁶⁷⁵ These images show an advancement of stagnation. Yet, time does not stand still; even while we sin, we keep on moving.

Finally, sin is something we ought to reject. The use of this word presupposes the possibility of resistance against evil. Without the help of the Holy Spirit we will not be able to be victorious, but even the unregenerate man should resist sin. Is that not the message God sent to Cain, when He said: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it!”⁶⁷⁶

There is an interesting variety of translations of this psalm. The NIV gives the first verse as: “An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before his eyes.” And the ASV, as well as the KJV, render it with: “The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, there is no fear of God before his eyes.” *The Adam Clarke Commentary* comments: “[The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart] It is difficult to make any sense of this line as it now stands. How can the transgression of the wicked speak within my heart! But instead of libiy..., MY heart, four of Kennicott’s MSS. and De Rossi’s MSS. have libow..., HIS heart.” The KJV reinforces the idea that David speaks about his own condition.

God’s lovingkindness, which brings about conviction of sin in the heart of man, is described in a grandiose way in the verses 5-9: “Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.” The Hebrew word translated with “love” is *chesed*, which is God’s covenant love. David expresses himself rather primitively by saying that God’s love reaches to the clouds.⁶⁷⁷ In our age of air and space travel, such a comparison does not amount to much. If we translate the principle of what David wanted to convey, we should say that God’s love fills the universe, outer space and beyond. As the horizon of our conception of reality is enlarged, so is the love of God.

⁶⁷³ Isa. 6:5

⁶⁷⁴ Matt. 15:18,19

⁶⁷⁵ Ps 1:1

⁶⁷⁶ Gen. 4:7

⁶⁷⁷ KJV

We have seen before that God's lovingkindness is a description of His character. It speaks of the goodness of His nature. David does not speak here about God's acts, but about His attributes. With words like "the clouds," "the mountains of God," "the great deep," as the RSV renders it, David wants to describe the eternal aspects of God's being. In a sense, the use of these rather primitive images conveys a better picture than if he had used extraterrestrial terms. There is in the St. Bavo Cathedral in the Belgian city of Ghent, a painting, an altar piece, by the fifteenth centuries artists, the brothers van Eyck, called *The Adoration of the Lamb*. The painting places this heavenly scene from the book of Revelation in the earthly surrounding of an altar in a Roman Catholic church of that time. The altar stands in a meadow with flowers that can be found all over Belgium. The heavenly reality is translated in images of every day life in a way that fills the world in which we live with the glory of God. If we cannot see the world in which we now live filled with heavenly glory, we will not be able to see heavenly glory either when we get to heaven.

David chooses three of God's attributes as the topic of his hymn of praise: God's love, His faithfulness, and His righteousness, or justice. All three are related to man who is saved by God's grace. "The great deep" in which man and beast are preserved may be a reference to the flood of Noah. The Hebrew word used here is *tehowm*, which *Strongs* defines as "an abyss (as a surging mass of water), especially the deep (the main sea or the subterranean water-supply)." The other side of the coin is that millions of people perished in that flood. But the emphasis David wants to make here is that some are saved from judgment, not that others are lost. The suggestion is that it is not God's fault when people are condemned. Yet, the judgment is pictured as God's initiative. Love, or lovingkindness, and faithfulness are seen as parallels; they belong to the whole complex of God's love for man. Righteousness and justice also go together; they are part of God's holiness. But holiness should be seen as the totality of God's attributes. We always have to grope for words if we want to say something about God's character. That was what the Apostle John did, when he said: "And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne."⁶⁷⁸

The Hebrew word translated in the NIV as "justice" is *mishpat*, which is defined by *Strongs* as: "a verdict (favorable or unfavorable) pronounced judicially, especially a sentence or formal decree (human or [participant's] divine law, individual or collective), including the act, the place, the suit, the crime, and the penalty; abstractly, justice, including a participant's right or privilege (statutory or customary)." The KJV renders it with "judgments." David sees this as one of God's attributes also. When any of God's creatures that appears before Him, typically he immediately compares and judges himself in His light. The result of this comparison is knowledge of sin. God's character is the measuring rod with which all our acts are measured and judged. If we judge ourselves, as Isaiah did,⁶⁷⁹ we are saved. If we refuse to evaluate ourselves in the light of God's character, we are lost.

The reference to the flood, in which Noah with his family, and representatives of the whole animal world were saved, becomes an image of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our ark of salvation. This makes this whole psalm an illustration of the fact that God gives to "His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."⁶⁸⁰ We usually look at the flood as that awful event in which the whole world was completely wiped out. David puts the full emphasis on the fact that God saved a whole family, with representatives of the animal world from this catastrophe. We cannot really exaggerate the horror of the flood. How then must God have wept about this mass destruction! But how did God's smile, and His warmth, His kindness, and His goodness rest upon the ark and Noah, and his family! Noah must have felt the sweetness of God's presence. He was the first one to dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and he rested in the shadow of the Almighty; he was covered with His feathers, and under His wings he found refuge.⁶⁸¹ Millions have shared this experience after him.

Noah's flood is comparable to an all-out nuclear war in modern times. If we can imagine ourselves and our family being spared in the midst of such a calamity, together with several hundred animals, we know how Noah must have felt. "The Lord is near"⁶⁸² is no empty phrase. Yet, there are worse things than the deluge of Noah's time, or even an atomic war. When the flood of demonic powers breaks loose over this world in the days of the Antichrist, as John describes in the book of Revelation⁶⁸³, God's children will

⁶⁷⁸ Rev. 4:3

⁶⁷⁹ See Isa. 6:5

⁶⁸⁰ Luke 1:77

⁶⁸¹ See Ps. 91:1,4

⁶⁸² Phil. 4:5

⁶⁸³ See Rev. ch. 9

be as safe as Noah was, “Safe in the arms of Jesus.” If this will be true during the worst period in all of this world’s history, it is certainly true in the ordinary days of our present life. We live in a hostile and dangerous world, in which we will perish if we do not learn to find refuge under God’s wings. This shelter is far more than a place that satisfies the minimum requirements for safety. It consists of feasting on the abundance of God’s house, and drinking from the river of His delights. For a Christian there will always be bread, and meat, and water in the desert; there is the cloud and the pillar of fire to lead us on. In the verses 8 and 9, David does not describe heaven towards which we are traveling, but the earth upon which we live, which had been covered by the flood.

God’s wings are mentioned several times in the Book of Psalms as a resting place for the soul.⁶⁸⁴ As a mother hen protects her chicks under her wings, so God offers us protection in fellowship with Him. Jesus used this same image when He said: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”⁶⁸⁵ This picture is a good illustration of what the Apostle Paul means when he says that we are “in Christ.”

The NIV renders vs. 8 with “They feast on the abundance of your house.” The word “abundance” is a translation of the Hebrew *deshen*, which, according to *Strong’s Definitions*, means: “the fat; abstractly fatness, i.e. (figuratively) abundance; specifically the (fatty) ashes of sacrifices,” and which the KJV translates with “fatness.” In our modern, cholesterol conscious society the image seems inappropriate to describe the abundance of God’s blessing, but for the Jews in the Old Testament, as is still the case with the Mountain tribes’ people of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, the fat was the choice part of a meat dish. Tastes may have changed, but that does not take away any of the depth of the picture David paints. God feeds us His delicacies. The Lord refreshes and restores us with a stream of love and loveliness. “You give them drink from your river of delights.” Lovingkindness and delights are both characteristics of God’s being. Love is one of the most misused words in our vocabulary. In relationship to God, it is the strong love, the lovingkindness of His covenant with man. God surrounds us with the abundance of His house, because He loves us with an eternal love. If we recognize God’s love for us in the abundance of His tender care for us, (which we do not always realize), we will experience this as the quenching of our thirst.

Describing Jesus’ reaction to the news of Lazarus’ sickness, John writes: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”⁶⁸⁶ This teaches us that postponement of help can also be a proof of God’s love. This, however, was not recognized as such by Lazarus’ sisters until after his resurrection.

David makes a connection, in vs. 9, between life and light, as John does when he says: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.”⁶⁸⁷ The little word “for” in vs. 9 links this verse with the preceding ones. God’s lovingkindness is a delight to us, and we find refuge in the shadow of His wings. We experience refreshing fellowship as a, because He is the fountain of life. What David says of God can be said of the life that is within us also, since our life is derived from Him. In Paul’s words: “For in him we live and move and have our being.”⁶⁸⁸ Life is good because it comes from God. It is a strange phenomenon that existentialists, who often deny the existence of God, often show more insight into the quality our life should have, than Christians do. Yet, we know this truth.

The fact that God is the source of our life makes us realize our dependence upon Him. We know how important it is that people who are on life-support remain plugged in. How much more important, then, is our fellowship with God! Life that is not lived consciously is not worth living. God is the fountain of our physical life, as well as of our emotional, mental, and spiritual life. Obviously, David puts the stress upon the spiritual aspect of this life; otherwise, he would not emphasize the loveliness of God’s relationship with us. Our spirit is the organ with which we can exercise fellowship with God.

“In your light we see light” is a profound statement. Light is the essence of God’s being. The Bible has a lot to say about light. John says: “God is light.”⁶⁸⁹ We all know from experience what light is, yet, we cannot define light. Science has never been able to come up with a formula that defines light. The light we know is natural light; God’s light is spiritual. That which we call “light” is, actually, an image of a

⁶⁸⁴ See Ps. 17:8;18:10;36:7;55:6;57:1;61:4;63:7;91:4

⁶⁸⁵ Matt. 23:37

⁶⁸⁶ John 11:5,6 (RSV)

⁶⁸⁷ John 1:4

⁶⁸⁸ Acts 17:28

⁶⁸⁹ John 1:5

spiritual reality. Our knowledge of light is mainly limited to sunlight. In the creation story in Genesis, the heavenly bodies make their appearance first on the fourth day. This means that God had already finished half of His creation before the sun is even mentioned. The light God created on the first day, therefore, was not the light of the sun. In the book of Revelation the sun is discharged of her duties, and God takes over her task. We read: "There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light."⁶⁹⁰

All this sounds rather strange to us, and it is hard to understand. The first lesson we learn is that the sun is not our only source of light, and not even the most important one. The real source of light is God Himself. That is why Jesus calls Himself "The Light of the World." And He says: "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."⁶⁹¹ David uses light and life as poetical parallels. Sin steeps us in darkness, because by it we are cut off from the source of all light. Fellowship with God places us in the light.

How do we interpret the phrase: "In your light we see light?" We owe our capacity to observe natural light to the fact that God is light, but that is merely a superficial implication of the statement. Our fellowship with God changes the whole perspective of our life. Natural light provides sight, spiritual light gives us insight. "In your light..." stands, therefore, for fellowship with God. TLB gives the paraphrase: "Our light is from your light." If we walk in the light, we will see the light, and we obtain insight into the spiritual reality of God. It has been suggested that light stands for the glory of God. It is also true that, if we live in fellowship with God, we will know where we are going in our everyday life. Walking in the light is a growing experience. The Book of Proverbs says: "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."⁶⁹²

David concludes this psalm with the prayer that God's love and righteousness may continue for those who live in fellowship with God, and whose lives have been cleansed by the Holy Spirit. God's love and righteousness are eternal attributes, which do not need any confirmation to continue. In a sense, therefore, David's prayer is redundant. If we take this to mean, however, as a request that we, as human beings, always may be open to receive and experience those divine gifts of grace, it is a very meaningful prayer.

The end of the psalm confirms this interpretation. There are powers, which can prevent man from having an intimate fellowship with God. David represents those as "the foot of the proud," and "the hand of the wicked." This can apply either to demonic powers or human opposition. What he says amounts to the prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."⁶⁹³

The psalm ends as it began, with the mention of sin. Vs. 1 depicts the beginning of sin in the heart of man; vs. 12 shows how sin has run its course and produced death. What the psalmist seems to say, is not that there are saints and sinners in this world, but that the dividing line between death and life runs through every human being. The contrast between the glory of God, who is the fountain of life, and the gruesome reality of sin, which produces death gives to this psalm a very dramatic character.

⁶⁹⁰ Rev. 22:5

⁶⁹¹ John 8:12

⁶⁹² Prov. 4:18

⁶⁹³ Matt. 6:13

PSALM THIRTY-SEVEN

Of David

- 1 Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong;*
- 2 for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.*
- 3 Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.*
- 4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.*
- 5 Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this:*
- 6 He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.*
- 7 Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.*
- 8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret-- it leads only to evil.*
- 9 For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.*
- 10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.*
- 11 But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.*
- 12 The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them;*
- 13 but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.*
- 14 The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright.*
- 15 But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken.*
- 16 Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked;*
- 17 for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous.*
- 18 The days of the blameless are known to the LORD, and their inheritance will endure forever.*
- 19 In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.*
- 20 But the wicked will perish: The LORD's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish-- vanish like smoke.*
- 21 The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously;*
- 22 those the LORD blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off.*
- 23 If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm;*
- 24 though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand.*
- 25 I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.*
- 26 They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.*
- 27 Turn from evil and do good; then you will dwell in the land forever.*
- 28 For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off;*
- 29 the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.*
- 30 The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just.*
- 31 The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip.*
- 32 The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives;*
- 33 but the LORD will not leave them in their power or let them be condemned when brought to trial.*
- 34 Wait for the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it.*
- 35 I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a green tree in its native soil,*
- 36 but he soon passed away and was no more; though I looked for him, he could not be found.*
- 37 Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace.*
- 38 But all sinners will be destroyed; the future of the wicked will be cut off.*
- 39 The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold in time of trouble.*
- 40 The LORD helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.*

The theme of this psalm is, obviously, "dwell in the land." This phrase, and "inherit the land" are found at least seven times in this psalm.⁶⁹⁴ In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight gives this

⁶⁹⁴ See the verses 2, 9, 10, 22, 27, 29, and 34.

psalm the title: “The Righteous will possess the Land.” The strange thing is that the conquest of Canaan in David’s days was an accomplished fact. David used his royal powers mainly to wipe out some pockets of resistance. But this hardly relates to the content of this psalm. Inheriting the land, and dwelling in the land, therefore, must have a more profound meaning than the occupation of a geographical place. We have to interpret this psalm in the light of what the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrew says about entering the rest of God. We read there: “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.’ Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, ‘So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘ ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ ’ And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: ‘And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.’ And again in the passage above he says, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”⁶⁹⁵

Possession of the land is used in Scripture as a rich symbol for the heritage God has given us in a hostile world. Jesus’ beatitude: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”⁶⁹⁶ is probably based on this psalm. According to *Vincent’s Word Studies*, Christianity has given a completely new meaning to the Greek word *praeis*, which is translated with “meek.” According to Aristotle, meekness had the connotation of “between hardheaded anger and a negative characteristic which was not even able to bring itself to righteous anger.” In the Biblical sense the word has acquired the meaning of an inner tenderness, which is the result of God’s greatness and the realization of man’s smallness. This characteristic is clearly present in this psalm. The psalm deals with two types of people: first, those who see their lives as not dependent upon God, and who, consequently, live for themselves, and second, those who have surrendered themselves to God, and who have subjected themselves to His will, and live a life of obedience. The man who lives for himself believes that the world revolves around him alone. He sees himself as the center of the universe, and he tries to manipulate everything for his own advantage. The meek sees God in the center. It is his greatest satisfaction to serve God. We have to keep the distinction between the two in mind when studying this psalm, because there is constant tension between the two groups. We live in a world that is possessed. Some of us realize that we live in enemy occupied territory, others have made a pact with the enemy.

Man’s problem is that his field of vision is limited to life on earth; our five senses cannot observe what happens after death. Faith in God helps us to see over the boundaries, but our physical eye cannot see that far. As far as our everyday life is concerned, we live in this world alone, not in the one to come. This fact distorts reality for us; unless we can see the perspective, we cannot see things as they really are. This faulty image of reality is the cause for the fretting, or jealousy the psalmists speaks about. David addresses the man who has put his trust in God. It seems that the person who does not take God into account in his life comes out better in this world than the believer. This is true, as long as we look at a section of life, without putting things in their perspective. When David says: “Like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away,” we can hardly interpret this in the light of life on earth only. We cannot maintain that those who commit injustice always receive their just reward on earth. The people David has in mind are those who believe that the end justifies the means, and who do not follow the rules of life. Their only concern is their riches, and they do not care about the way they accumulate them. The Bible calls them “evil men,” and “those who do wrong.” Evil is their way of life. These are people who not

⁶⁹⁵ Heb. 3:14 – 4:11

⁶⁹⁶ Matt. 5:5

only make an unintentional wrong moral judgment, but their philosophy of life is evil. David encourages us, not to look at the end result, but at the way it was obtained. It is not too hard to become rich if one is willing to climb over dead bodies.

Over against this David shows what the attitude of a Christian ought to be. The first requirement is trust in the Lord, Yahweh. We have to take Him at His Word, and we have to compare the false appearance of daily life against the measure of His revelation. We have to keep the rules. The strange thing is that we apply this principle in all kinds of sports and games, but not there, where it is most important, in daily life. Doing good is nothing more or less than acting in accordance with the character of God.

The expression “dwell in the land” is loaded with meaning. In vs. 3 it is used as a parallel for “trust in the Lord.” Both sentences say the same thing. As we said above, the conquest of Canaan was an accomplished fact in David’s days. So there is more involved here than the physical occupation of a geographical area. It pertains to an attitude towards life; to a claiming of God’s promises, to an acceptance of the logical results of salvation. For Israel this meant deliverance from Egypt and entrance into Canaan, by means of God’s supernatural intervention, which was an image of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His resurrection life within us. Dwelling in the land means resting from one’s own work, as the writer to the Hebrews states: “For anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”⁶⁹⁷ It means a refusal to try to live in our own strength, and it means leaning upon the life of Jesus which is within us. We have to learn to do this consistently, and to simply enjoy the Lord. That is what David means when he says: “Delight yourself in the LORD.” Fellowship with God is a source of enjoyment and satisfaction. It is strange, however, that we, more often, consider Bible reading and prayer as an obligation, rather than an relaxation and enjoyment. Yet, our “Quiet Time” brings us joy and it dissolves tensions.

All social contacts and love relations, and all friendships on earth are a vague image of our relationship with God. When David says: “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart,” he does not mean that we should delight ourselves in the Lord in order to obtain the desires of our heart. If we would enter into fellowship with God for the purpose of getting out of it what we can, we, obviously, have no idea what it is all about. Our fellowship with God cannot be driven by ulterior motives. Our attitude should be the one the prophet Habakkuk had, who wrote: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”⁶⁹⁸ The fact that God gives us the desires of our heart is a byproduct. It means, however, that if we delight ourselves in the Lord, the Lord will delight Himself in us. It is also clear that, if God is to give us the desires of our heart, some drastic changes will first have to take place within us. It would be unsafe for us to obtain our heart’s desires without thorough cleansing and sanctification. This cleansing is brought about by our delighting ourselves in the Lord. Fellowship with God will purify our motives, because we learn to subject our will to His will. James says that God does not hear some of our prayers, because our motives are not pure. We read in his epistle: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”⁶⁹⁹ It is also true that, often, we do not really know what we our true desires are. We do not really know ourselves. Fellowship with God will give us self-knowledge. In that way we will learn to distinguish our vague desires from our real needs.

C. S. Lewis expresses some of this in his book *Till We Have Faces*. He writes: “How can we meet the gods face to face, till we have faces?” Fellowship with God requires maturity.

We find in this verse one of the great promises of the Bible. God gives us a blank check. Our heart will have to be healed, so that, with a healthy heart and a sound mind we can give free reign to our desires.

A second aspect of our dwelling in the land is that we commit our way to the Lord, and trust in Him. This has a profound meaning also. The Hebrew word for commit is *galal* which, according to *Strongs Definitions*, means: “to roll (literally or figuratively).” The phrase could be translated with: “Roll your way upon the Lord.” Rolling away something suggests the removal of a heavy object, or an unbearable load. It is the equivalent of what the apostle Peter writes: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”⁷⁰⁰ The uncertainty of where the road leads us, the tension of encounter with our adversaries, and our

⁶⁹⁷ Heb. 4:10

⁶⁹⁸ Hab. 3:17,18

⁶⁹⁹ James 4:3

⁷⁰⁰ I Pet. 5:7

relationships with our fellowmen, can add up to a very heavy load. God invites us to let that load roll from our shoulders to let it fall upon Him.

The intent is not primarily sin, but tasks and responsibilities, and relationships. And then not only those things about which we feel inadequate, but also those we think we can handle. Dwelling in the land presupposes that the conquest is an accomplished fact. What lies before is the daily chores of fetching water, cutting wood, and working the fields. We have to learn to roll those tasks upon the Lord, and to let Him do the work for us. God wants us to relax. One British preacher⁷⁰¹ once spoke about God's prohibition to the priests to wear woolen underwear,⁷⁰² and he said: "God hates sweat." This may be the hardest lesson we will ever learn.

The NIV renders vs. 5 with: "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this..." Other translations say: "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act" (RSV), or "Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass" (KJV). God will act in our behalf; He will take up our case. There is no need for us to build up a reputation for ourselves. We are not expected to defend ourselves, or to furnish proof of our innocence in order to demonstrate that we are good. God will take care of our reputation. We should never get used to the fact that the Bible speaks about "your righteousness," and "the cause of your justice." We usually tend to keep on putting our acts of unrighteousness and our injustice before us as documents of our guilt, as something we have to confess before the Lord; otherwise, He would not accept us. It is true, of course, that confession of sin is part of our conversion. If we refuse to confess our sins, we also reject the sacrifice of Christ for our sins. But if we never go beyond confession of our sins, we do not understand what God's intention for us is. If we only lay our sins upon Jesus, and we do not allow Him to clothe us with His righteousness, we only do half of what we are supposed to do. The amazing thing is, not only, that God gives us righteousness, but that He calls it our righteousness. This is the essence of the sunrise over our lives: God testifies to His righteousness within us, and thus we begin to live in the light.

Being still before the Lord, and waiting for Him are some of the hardest things to do. Paul Tournier, in his book *Fatigue in Modern Society*, recommends meditation as a remedy against exhaustion. Studying the Bible and quieting oneself before God, certainly, falls into this category. If we let the verses of the Bible speak to us, we give God the opportunity to speak to us. This is part of "dwelling in the land;" it is the essence of victorious living. Our problems usually keep pace with the amount of noise we admit into our lives. In order to be spiritually healthy, we need quietness, a quietness filled with the presence of God. If we do not wait for the Lord, quietness in itself has no value. We have to expect God to speak to us.

If we decide to wait for the Lord, we acknowledge that His timing is not the same as ours. He is Lord of our time, and it is up to Him to decide what we should do and when we should do it. This kind of relationship with the Lord places our human relationships in a different light also. It eliminates jealousy, which is the cause of most of the tensions in our relations.

It is interesting to see that the words "do no fret" occur three times in the first eight verses of this psalm. The word "anger" is used as a parallel. We are rarely aware of the fact that jealousy occupies such an important place in our human relationships. We tend to compare ourselves with other people, and we believe that others get a better deal than we do. This feeling demonstrates itself in our efforts to "keep up with the Joneses." In doing so, we deny the fact that our relationship with God is unique, and that God made us as unique individuals.

Jealousy is always geared to the outside of things. As soon as we look, as Christians, at the lives of others and probe their motives and the content of their lives, jealousy will disappear. David speaks about the success or prosperity of people in carrying out evil schemes. He unmask a world of iniquity with this phrase. He shows that this prosperity is the result of man's own efforts, which was based on egoism and egotism. This prosperity does not come from God, and it is not even recognized as such. It is the fruit of manipulation. This is clear from the use of the term "wicked schemes." There is prosperity that comes from above, and there is affluence that comes from below. It is good if we are jealous of those who are blessed by God. We ought to follow the example of those people, and become ourselves people who make others jealous. This is what the Apostle Paul means to say, when he writes to the Romans: "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! I am talking to

⁷⁰¹ Major Ian Thomas

⁷⁰² Ezek. 44:17

you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.⁷⁰³

David's warning against anger and wrath makes one wonder if he read modern books on psychology. It may happen that we get angry in certain situations, and that this triggers in us an anger, which is out of proportion to the cause. We may discover that there is, under the surface of our consciousness, a large reservoir of anger that bursts open as soon as there is a fissure. In our being still before the Lord, and our waiting for Him, we have to learn to be freed from those kinds of tensions, that we cannot control ourselves. The Lord is able to heal us deep down. Jesus Christ is the best psychologist alive. We ought to give Him a chance in our lives. The peace of God, which is "dwelling in the land," is the rest of our soul. Jesus says: "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."⁷⁰⁴

It seems as if, in verses 8-10, the things on earth are mixed up with heavenly things. Everyone knows that the righteous die as well as the wicked. Inheriting the land does not mean that we will live eternally on earth. Evidently, David means to say more than that the empty place that is left by the wicked is the fact that he dies. Dwelling in the land is more than life on earth; it stands for the influence a man's life has upon his surrounding. If the fact that we live does not make any difference in the lives of others, we could just as well not have been born. Inheriting the land means that we influence the course of world history. If others have come to know the Lord through us, we have not spent our time on earth in vain. Waiting for the Lord has a great influence upon the way in which we live. Isaiah says: "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."⁷⁰⁵ We will experience this kind of deep inner peace if we live with the Lord.

In verses 1-11 the topic was man's relationship with God, which made the difference between the righteous and the wicked. The verses 12-15 deal with relationships between humans, based on their relationship with God. Those who do not know God will turn themselves against those who live in fellowship with the Lord. In the previous verses we read about jealousy in the heart of the righteous toward the wicked. Here we see hatred in the wicked for the righteous. The feelings of the wicked seem to be out of proportion also. Why would a man want to slaughter his fellowman, because he serves God? The only explanation is that this hatred is demonically inspired. This hatred culminated in the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. David says that the Lord laughs at the man who hates. Elsewhere he says: "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them."⁷⁰⁶ We should be careful, as Christians, not to be intimidated. Human violence can be frightening, if we lose sight of the omnipotence of God. Jesus warns us not to lose track of the right proportions, and to be afraid of those who can do nothing but kill the body. In Matthew's Gospel we read that He says: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."⁷⁰⁷ There is also the warning that "all who draw the sword will die by the sword."⁷⁰⁸

Vs. 16 gives us an interesting refutation of the doctrine of "Green Power," which states that every child of God should have the best of everything. We should not conclude from this that righteousness and poverty are synonymous. But intimate fellowship with God does not guarantee abundance, it does assure us of a reasonable existence though. Isaiah says: "He who walks righteously and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes, who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil-- this is the man who will dwell on the heights, whose refuge will be the mountain fortress. His bread will be supplied, and water will not fail him."⁷⁰⁹ Seeking after abundance and fellowship with God are, in principle, mutually exclusive. George Mueller, who was an expert in the realm of survival, always put the emphasis in his diary on the nutritious qualities of the food the Lord gave him for his orphanages. The words that describe our condition are "the little that the

⁷⁰³ Rom. 11:11-14

⁷⁰⁴ Matt. 11:28-30

⁷⁰⁵ Isa. 40:31 (KJV)

⁷⁰⁶ Ps. 2:4

⁷⁰⁷ Matt. 10:28

⁷⁰⁸ Matt. 26:52

⁷⁰⁹ Isa. 33:15,16

righteous have,” “times of disaster,” and “days of famine.” We have the promise that the Lord, YHWH, will uphold us, and care for us under those circumstances. Our inheritance is eternal.

The wicked, who were out after the lives of the righteous, are called “the Lord’s enemies” in vs. 20. God identifies Himself with people who surrender their lives to Him. We see this same principle demonstrated when Paul meets Jesus on the way to Damascus. In the book of Acts we read: “ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.”⁷¹⁰ Also in the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus says: “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ ” And: “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ ”⁷¹¹ In connection with the above, we can also refer to Paul’s words to the Romans: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁷¹²

Verses 21-26 introduce ethical principles in the field of economics. The wicked is dishonest in his commerce. He asks for credit without the slightest intention to pay his debts. A righteous man can always afford to give a loan, and a Christian can always afford to pay. After all, we possess the land. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”⁷¹³ If we are poor, our material poverty is only temporary and outward. If we receive God’s blessing, we possess the essence of all riches. God will make our steps firm and He guarantees our basic needs. In practice, however, we often receive much more than our minimum wage.

In vs. 25 we find one of the great promises of the Bible: “I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.” It appears from those words that David wrote this psalm at the end of his life. God promises to bless our families, and He serves as the collateral of our existence on earth. If a parent puts his or her trust in the Lord for the sustenance of the family, the children will be blessed. What a profound truth! Our dwelling in the land is demonstrated in our generosity. We can always afford to help others. Again, Paul says: “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”⁷¹⁴ Our lives should be characterized by compassion with the suffering of others. Our inheriting the land is related to the condition of our heart. Generosity is the result of our confidence that God takes care of us. Avarice is often an indication of fear that we will not be able to make ends meet. We use money to build walls and fortresses around us, as a substitute for a sense of security. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews says: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”⁷¹⁵ Dwelling in the land means that we lean on the Lord for our financial security. If we do this, our children will learn the lesson also and become a blessing to other people.

The main stress in verses 27-29 is upon the phrase: “For the LORD loves justice, and does not forsake His saints,”⁷¹⁶ or, as the NIV renders it: “For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones.” In the movie *The Jesse Owen Story*, Jesse Owen, who won a gold medal in the Olympics in Berlin in 1935, influenced the lives of several young people by taking them out for walks and explaining to

⁷¹⁰ Acts 9:5

⁷¹¹ Matt. 25:40,45

⁷¹² Rom. 8:31-39

⁷¹³ I Cor. 3:21b-23

⁷¹⁴ II Cor. 9:6

⁷¹⁵ Heb. 13:5-6

⁷¹⁶ vs. 28 (NKJ)

them the similarity between the principles of athletics and of life. Both can only exist if the game is played according to the rules. The rules of life can be summed up in the word “justice.” Dwelling in the land means keeping far from everything that reeks of corruption. Turning from evil and doing good means acting correctly in daily life. Sometimes small things, such as not returning borrowed books, can spoil our righteous life. In the Song of Songs we read: “Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.”⁷¹⁷ We have to watch out for “the little foxes.”

Our sense of righteousness and “eternal security” go hand in hand. “The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.” This sounds contradictory, but the life of a child of God is built upon this paradox.

Dwelling in the land demonstrates itself also in our speech. We could consider vs. 29 as part of the following stanza, so that the next paragraph would go from the verses 29-33. Our mouths testify to the reality of fellowship with God. See the sequence of this: The testimony of our acts precedes our speaking about it. The devil will always tempt us to speak first, his technique is a trap that is hard to avoid. It is a good principle for a new convert to keep his mouth shut, until the time that silence becomes impossible.

What we say is always determined by our relationship with the Word of God. Our wisdom in speaking will improve as we enter deeper into biblical truths, and the Word of God takes more and more possession of our lives. We will never become important in the Kingdom of Heaven without being faithful in our Quiet Time, and without systematic Bible study.

This will also determine our attitude toward the enemy. We do not read in this psalm whether David had to deal with human enemies or with Satan himself. In the trial that is mentioned, Satan is called “the accuser of our brothers,”⁷¹⁸ but the Holy Spirit is our Paraklete, that is our advocate. The Apostle Paul says: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.”⁷¹⁹

The theme of verses 34-40 is basically the same as of the preceding verses, but the keyword here is “wait.” Our Lord Jesus uses the word “wait” and “watch” several times in His parables. Waiting for the Lord means expecting the return of Christ, the *Parousia*. The virgins waited for the bridegroom;⁷²⁰ the servants waited for their master.⁷²¹ Waiting and watching are an indication of a conviction that the present situation is not normal, nor lasting. It is a disposition of our life. It should be the typical attitude for a Christian to be occupied with whatever our task may be, in the expectation that we have to give account of our actions. Both the Apostles Peter and John speak about this aspect, and they call it “the hope.” John says: “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”⁷²² Waiting for the Lord and keeping His way go together. If we wait for the Lord and obey His Word, He will exalt us and make us inherit the land. From within ourselves we will never be able to produce the quality of life, which is required to dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven; God will have to give that to us. He brings us up to that level. This does not mean that we will be exalted in relation to other people. The point here is not our reputation, but the quality of our life. God does not give us the land unless we are worthy, and He makes us worthy.

The conquest of Canaan becomes an image of our spiritual life. This is what the author of the Hebrew epistle calls “entering into God’s rest,” when he says: “It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”⁷²³ The cutting off of the wicked, or, as the RSV calls it the destruction of the wicked, has, of course nothing to do with the execution of human criminals. What is meant is the casting out of demons. It speaks about a great clean-up, such as Jesus performed when He walked the land of Palestine. He did this, as He lived on earth as a human being, so that we would follow His example. That is why He would not allow the demons to speak and call Him “Son of God.” Our being exalted by God includes authority over the Evil One. And the

⁷¹⁷ Song 2:15

⁷¹⁸ See Rev. 12:10

⁷¹⁹ Rom. 8:31,33

⁷²⁰ See Matt. 25:1-13

⁷²¹ See Matt.25:45-51; Mark 13:34-37; Luke 12:35-38

⁷²² I John 3:3

⁷²³ Heb. 4:6-10

exercise of this authority will give us great joy. The best commentary of this is found in Luke's Gospel, where we read: "The seventy-two returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.' He replied, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'"⁷²⁴ In connection with this kind of victory, the Dutch lady Corrie ten Boom said: "Most missionaries have given everything to the Lord, but they have not taken everything the Lord wants to give to them."

David compares the wicked to a flourishing tree. "I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a green tree in its native soil." The comparison sounds more flattering than may be intended. The Hebrew word translated with "green tree" is *'ezrach*, meaning a spontaneous growth, which is derived from *zarach*, which *Strong's* defines as: "to irradiate (or shoot forth beams), i.e. to rise (as the sun); specifically, to appear (as a symptom of leprosy)." The spontaneous growth may be a cancer like growth, which is spontaneous and luxurious but unnatural and fatal. This makes the comparison the more striking. This tree stands for something that deviates from the laws God had set for the flora of His creation; it is a parasite that lives at the expense of others, and kills what grows up around it. It is the weeds the enemy sowed among the wheat in Jesus' parable.⁷²⁵

The NIV says: "but he soon passed away and was no more." The Hebrew is, evidently, open for several translations. The ASV, for instance, says: "But one passed by, and, lo, he was not." We could then ask: "Who passed by?" It would seem that the passing by of a certain person caused the death of the wicked growth in God's nature. This would point in the direction of a prophecy about the coming of Jesus Christ. In Him the glory of the Lord passed by in this world and caused the power of the Evil One to wither away. When Christ arrives, we will look in vain for the manifestations of demonic activity.

The next verse again allows for different interpretations of the Hebrew text. The NIV reads: "Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace," but in the NAS we read: "Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright; for the man of peace will have a posterity." The Hebrew word, rendered with "future," or "posterity" is *'achariyth*, which can mean either: "the last or end, hence, the future, or posterity." The inference is not only that there will be a happy ending for the man of peace, but that the life of a child of God makes a difference for good in this world. Every human being leaves behind his mark upon the time in which he lives, either in a positive or a negative sense. A child cannot be born if the father and mother had never existed. In the same way the life of a man, who lives in fellowship with God, causes conversions, salvation, and blessings, which would not have come about if that person had not lived. The Jews saw in their posterity a symbol of eternal life. The life of the person who died on earth continued in his children. Posterity also contained the hope of the coming of the Messiah. Every birth embodied a confession of faith that light would conquer darkness. It stood for a protest against the present condition of the tyranny of the enemy.

The posterity of the blameless and upright is not necessarily physical. The Apostle Paul writes to Philemon: "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains."⁷²⁶ The word does not exclude physical descent, of course, but the point is the influence one's life exercises, and the blessing it brings. The Jews considered it a shame when a woman did never give birth to a child. We ought to consider it an embarrassment when we have no spiritual offspring.

No one should live for himself alone. Everything we can say about the righteous in a positive sense can be said negatively for those who have the devil for their father.

Yet, the man of God has nothing in himself he can be proud of. "The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD." Nobody will leave any positive imprint upon life unless the Holy Spirit works in and through him. If we lose track of this, we will start to slip and fall. We should always keep in mind that Christ is in us, and that the One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world.⁷²⁷ This is our refuge.

⁷²⁴ Luke 10:17-20

⁷²⁵ See Matt. 13:24-35

⁷²⁶ Philemon vs. 10 (NKJ)

⁷²⁷ See I John 4:4

PSALM THIRTY-EIGHT

A psalm of David. A Petition.

- 1 *O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath.*
- 2 *For your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down upon me.*
- 3 *Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; my bones have no soundness because of my sin.*
- 4 *My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.*
- 5 *My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly.*
- 6 *I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning.*
- 7 *My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body.*
- 8 *I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.*
- 9 *All my longings lie open before you, O Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.*
- 10 *My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes.*
- 11 *My friends and companions avoid me because of my wounds; my neighbors stay far away.*
- 12 *Those who seek my life set their traps, those who would harm me talk of my ruin; all day long they plot deception.*
- 13 *I am like a deaf man, who cannot hear, like a mute, who cannot open his mouth;*
- 14 *I have become like a man who does not hear, whose mouth can offer no reply.*
- 15 *I wait for you, O LORD; you will answer, O Lord my God.*
- 16 *For I said, "Do not let them gloat or exalt themselves over me when my foot slips."*
- 17 *For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me.*
- 18 *I confess my iniquity; I am troubled by my sin.*
- 19 *Many are those who are my vigorous enemies; those who hate me without reason are numerous.*
- 20 *Those who repay my good with evil slander me when I pursue what is good.*
- 21 *O LORD, do not forsake me; be not far from me, O my God.*
- 22 *Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior.*

Regarding the title of this psalm *The Adam Clarke Commentary* comments: "The title in the HEBREW states this to be A Psalm of David, to bring to remembrance. The CHALDEE; 'A Psalm of David for a good memorial to Israel.' The VULGATE, the SEPTUAGINT, and the AETHIOPIC: 'A Psalm of David, for a commemoration concerning the Sabbath.' The ARABIC: 'A Psalm in which mention is made of the Sabbath; besides, it is a thanksgiving and a prophecy.' Never was a title more misplaced or less expressive of the contents. There is no mention of the Sabbath in it; there is no thanksgiving in it, for it is deeply penitential; and I do not see that it contains any prophecy. The SYRIAC: 'A Psalm of David, when they said to the Philistine king, Achish, This is David, who killed Goliath; we will not have him to go with us against Saul. Besides, it is a form of confession for us.' It does not appear that, out of all the titles, we can gather the true intent of the Psalm." Clarke is never too prone to take the titles of the psalms as part of the inspired text.

The same commentary continues with: "Several conjectures have been made relative to the occasion on which this Psalm was composed, and the most likely is that it was in reference to some severe affliction which David had after his illicit commerce with Bath-sheba; but of what nature we are left to conjecture from the third, fifth, and seventh verses. Whatever it was, he deeply repents for it, asks pardon, and earnestly entreats support from God."

The keyword in the title is the Hebrew word *zakar*, which, according to *Strongs Definitions* means, "to remember." The KJV translates it in some instances with "to burn incense." Some translations, therefore, use the words "sacrifice of commemoration."⁷²⁸ If we take *zakar* to refer to a sacrifice, it is not clear which sacrifice is meant. When we go to the book of Leviticus,⁷²⁹ we come, probably, closest if we look at the peace offerings or fellowship offerings, which consisted of two categories, those that were sacrifices of praise, and those that accompanied vows. The text of this psalm corresponds more to the votive sacrifices. George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalm* suggests that the title "For the Memorial Offering" would be better translated with "To bring to remembrance." He draws a line to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This too would put the theme against the background of a sacrifice.

⁷²⁸ The Dutch NBG uses this. (Bij het gedenkoffer).

⁷²⁹ Lev. 3; 7:11-21

Returning to the thought of the Fellowship Offering, we find it hard to rank this psalm under the votive offerings, and it could hardly be classified as a hymn of praise. The fellowship offering expresses man's response to the realization of the fact that his sins have been atoned for, and that God allowed another creature to die in man's place. In this psalm, David wrestles intensely with his sin and its consequences. It seems as if the sin offering and the guilt offering which precede the fellowship offering in their psychological sequence, that is from man's viewpoint, have completely faded out of the picture. But if we leave the sacrifice out of it, we lower this psalm to a long drawn out complaint in which a sick man describes his symptoms. Knight suggests a theory that the sickness was a kind of venereal disease, such as syphilis or gonorrhea. It seems, however, that we do not get very far in understanding what the Holy Spirit has to say to us in this psalm if we concentrate upon the symptoms described. The diagnosis of the sickness is, probably, the least important part of this psalm.

Knight divides this psalm into three "cries for help," which are worth mentioning here: The first goes from the verses 1-8; the second from 9-14, and the third from 15-22. The best approach to the meaning of this psalm is, probably, to see in it the struggle of a man who has brought the prescribed sacrifices of sin offering for the sins he has committed, the guilt offering for the sinful nature he finds within him, and the fellowship offering for his relationship with God, but for whom, nevertheless, the reality of it all has never really penetrated his soul. He is like Isaiah who, in spite of the fact that an animal sacrifice was burning in his behalf upon the altar in the temple, cried out: "Woe to me, I am ruined..."⁷³⁰ until the live coal taken from the altar touched his lips. We could write above this psalm Isaiah's words: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows."⁷³¹

It is the fact that David was obviously ill when he wrote this psalm that makes the matter of his guilt so urgent. God takes David's struggle seriously, otherwise this poem would never have been incorporated in the Book of Psalms. If we stick to Knight's division of the psalm, we can say that the first section deals mainly with David's physical condition (the verses 1-8), the section part emphasizes the emotional aspect in his relationship with his fellow human beings (the verses 9-14), and in the third segment (the verses 15-22), the spiritual aspect, the effect of his affliction upon his relationship with God, is described. This division is not airtight, because different thoughts are here and there interspersed. It could be that this kind of confusion of thoughts is introduced on purpose, to make more real the fact that we are dealing with a sick person.

It is a known fact that our physical condition influences our spiritual life, and certainly has its bearing upon our emotions. In general, we function better on a social and spiritual level if we feel fit in body. We seldom realize that this in itself is a symptom of the topsy-turvy world in which we live. If sin had never entered our world, our spirit would rule supremely over our body; now, the influence of our spirit upon our physical condition is very limited, even in the best instances. It is important that we are aware of this problem. C. S. Lewis' famous pronouncement is certainly applicable here: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks to us in our conscience, but He shouts to us in our pain."⁷³² What God shouts to us is always related to the fact that our body rules over our spirit, and that this situation is abnormal. This is an important feature in the matter of faith healing.

I. The illness vs. 1-8

The opening verse of this psalm is identical with Psalm Six, but this psalm is less messianic than the other. David calls the symptoms of his illness "God's arrows." "For your arrows have pierced me," and he acknowledges that his suffering is the result of his iniquity. He sees a connection between certain sins he committed and the illness that afflicts him. We can only accept Knight's suggestion that the sickness is venereal if we do not accept the subscript "A psalm of David" as part of the inspired Scripture, and that we do not want to do. So we will leave the symptoms described here for what they are. It is tempting to think that David was wrong in believing that his sickness was a punishment for a particular sin, and to say that sickness is not always a chastisement for sin. But the only thing we can say is that sickness is not always related to particular sins we commit, and we know that some that in some cases there is a connection. There are certainly sicknesses that are the result of a sinful lifestyle. The fact that some people go through life with psychological guilt complexes, and that some sicknesses are psychosomatic does not change the facts.

When David says: "O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath," he leaves the door open for grace, but he admits that he has merited what befell him. In the life of every

⁷³⁰ Isa. 6:5

⁷³¹ Isa. 53:4

⁷³² C. S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain*

Christian there ought to be the realization that God is not unjust if He leaves us to rot in our sins. We should never abandon this truth completely. Everyone who looks at his life in the light of God will condemn himself. The seriousness of our acts, and the reality of who we are will dawn upon us, if God lets His light shine upon us. Yet, there is hope in David's words. He is aware that God is gracious and compassionate, and that we seldom receive the punishment we merit. The Hebrew word that is translated here with "discipline" is *yacar*, which *Strongs* defines as: "to chastise, literally (with blows) or figuratively (with words); hence, to instruct." The idea is that God educates us, that there is a goal He wants us to reach. That is why James says: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."⁷³³ It is obvious that David has not reached that point yet in this psalm. His main problem is that he does not see any perspective in his circumstances. He cannot see that God would allow pain in his life because He loves David. He sees only a God who is incensed, and beats him because He is angry.

The only person who ever received the full brunt of God's anger in His suffering is Jesus Christ. We may, therefore, see in these verses a shadow of the suffering of our Lord. It would have been a chronological impossibility for David to see his pain in this light. David wrestles with the fact that, after bringing the sacrifice for his sin and for his guilt, he ought to have a realization of forgiveness and of a clean conscience, but he does not. This may be the essence of his pain. He thinks he understands the "why" of his pain, but there is something that does not click. He asks himself the question: "Why does this happen to me, who am a child of God?" The Jewish rabbi Harold Kushner asks this question in his book *Why do bad Things happen to good People?* It is terrible to come to the conclusion that we do not fall under the category of "Good People." Kushner, however, does not come to this conclusion. He rather believes that the premature death of his son is due to the fact that God may be compassionate, but He is not omnipotent.

God created our body in such a way that pain is a warning signal. Because of the fall in sin, however, this system has gotten out of hand, and that which should have been a help to warn us against danger turned against us. Yet, God uses our pain as a means to draw us to Himself. In some cases we may be comforted by the fact that the pain we suffer is nothing compared to what Jesus went through at the cross. There is no pain God did not feel Himself in the body of His Son.

David did the only thing a man can do in his pain: he called to YHWH. He may not have understood what happened to him, but he did what we all have to do when we suffer. As long as we live on earth, the problem of pain will be with us, and we have to keep on looking for an answer. There are no easy answers. We should, however, never come to the conclusion that God wants to torture us. He may allow us to feel pain, but that is something different.

II. Human relations vs. 9-14

Just as riches and poverty influence human relations, so do sickness and health. This will vary from one culture to another. In a germ-free society, material possessions will exercise a stronger power; in a primitive world, a sick person will be ostracized. We see in the animal world that the stronger animals kill off the weak and the sick among them. This tendency is not completely absent in our Western world either, certainly not in a capitalistic society. A socialist government will try to avert this, at least outwardly. But only in the fellowship of Christ, where the members of the body love one another, is there place for the sick, and where healing is offered. Natural man is always repulsed by sickness. This seems to be David's problem. Only a child of God can demonstrate pure compassion, because the love of Christ compels him.

George Knight comes up with a rather strange interpretation for vs. 9: "All my longings lie open before you." Holding on to the theory of a venereal disease, he translates "longings" with sinful lust, the sexual desire that led to the sickness. It is true that the KJV translates the Hebrew word *ta'avah* occasionally with "lust,"⁷³⁴ but in *Strongs Definitions* it is rendered as: "a longing; by implication, a delight (subjectively, satisfaction, objectively, a charm)." If David were really speaking about sinful desires, his brokenness of heart and confession of sin would be rather out of place. It would be as if he would say to God: "This the way I am," without any trace of repentance.

What is intended is, obviously, that David reveals his intimate feelings before the Lord. God knows us through and through. The problem is not that He does not understand our reactions and emotions, but that we do not know ourselves, and that we often do not understand what we do, and why we do it. This

⁷³³ James 1:2-4

⁷³⁴ e.g. Num. 11:4

is one of the symptoms of a sickness, even if our illnesses are not psychosomatic. The realization that God knows us and loves us, and that, in His love, He shows us who we are in His light, is a vital part of our healing. He knows what we think and feel, and He knows what we really desire in the depth of our being.

Although David uses the words “longings” and “sighing” as poetical parallels, there is, of course an important difference between the two. Longings can be good and harmonious; our sighs are evidence of an unreached goal. At the basis of this is the model of God’s character, and our awareness of how much, as people who were created in His image, we have deviated from the original. Sighing is caused by the damage sin has caused in the life of each human being. The fact that David sighs in the presence of God is, in itself, part of his deliverance.

After the description of his emotional suffering, in vs. 9, David comes to the physical aspect in vs. 10. “My heart pounds, my strength fails me; even the light has gone from my eyes.” “The light of my eyes” may be a poetical expression for David’s wife. God called Ezekiel’s wife “the delight of your eyes.” We read in his prophecy that God says: “Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. ... So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died.”⁷³⁵ It seems safer, though, to take the expression literally.

David feels himself suddenly isolated in his social life. He needs the pity and compassion of his fellow humans for his lot, but he finds himself alone. Our thoughts go to our Lord Jesus Christ. At the deepest point in His emotional life, when He needed the support of His intimate friends, His disciples were asleep. He said to Peter, John, and James: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Then we read: “Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter.”⁷³⁶ And when they came to take Him into custody to be crucified, we read: “Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.”⁷³⁷ David experiences here something of this lowest point in the history of man. For us, who live on the other side of the cross, it is possible to fall back upon our Lord’s suffering. “The fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, [and] becoming like him in his death,”⁷³⁸ can be the greatest of consolations. For David, this was impossible to know. David speaks of people from whom he expected sympathy, and in vs. 12 he mentions a group of men who see in David’s weakened condition an occasion to attack him. “Those who seek my life” may be human beings, but if they are, evil forces from below are manipulating them. The first thing we have to bear in mind in the Kingdom of Heaven is that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”⁷³⁹ And those spiritual forces will fall upon us, especially when they find us physically weakened.

The verses 13 and 14 may also point to Christ’s suffering. In the words of Isaiah: “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”⁷⁴⁰ Thus, our Lord set the example as to how to oppose the Evil One. A. W. Tozer wrote a book *I Talk Back to the Devil*. The Biblical advise, however, is not to answer him. We are not called upon to defend ourselves; the Holy Spirit, God’s lawyer of all lawyers, will take up our defense. By taking this attitude, David places himself upon the basis of victory. Those who are covered by the blood of the Lamb have already conquered Satan. We can, therefore, ignore his accusations.

We called this section “Human Relations.” It is obvious that human relations are part of a cosmic relationship involving us and God, against the devil. Our fellowship with God, and the influence Satan exercises upon this world determines the way we live together as human beings.

III. The Spiritual Aspect: Our relationship with God vs. 15-22.

As said before, it is hard to maintain a strict division of this psalm. The thoughts in the different sections run together. But in this last section, hope in God is the main theme. The NIV says: “I wait for you, O LORD,” but most of the older versions use the word hope. The KJV, for example, says: “For in thee, O LORD, do I hope.” The Hebrew word used here is *yachal*, which is rendered in *Strongs Definitions*

⁷³⁵ Ezekiel 24:16,18

⁷³⁶ Matt. 26:38,40

⁷³⁷ Matt. 26:56

⁷³⁸ Phil. 3:10

⁷³⁹ Eph. 6:12

⁷⁴⁰ Isa. 53:7

as: “to wait; by implication, to be patient, hope.” In the New Testament “hope” has a deeper meaning than it does in the Old Testament. Paul uses the word “blessed hope” for the Second Coming of Christ. We read: “We wait for the blessed hope-- the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”⁷⁴¹ In the context of this psalm “hope” pertains to the restoration of everything that had become abnormal through man’s fall into sin. “Hope” stands for a new heaven and a new earth, but above all, for seeing the face of God. David may not express this very clearly here, but this is his intent.

David expects an answer from God, not only an answer to his questions, but that God would answer his enemies. God’s answers are often quite different from what we expect. God is always full of surprises. In the book of Job, Job puts a series of questions before God, to which he receives no direct answer. When God appears to Job, He speaks about things that were quite different from the questions that occupied Job’s mind. Yet, we get the impression that Job considered that all his questions were answered. It appears that God answers the questions we ought to have asked, which are not always the ones we do ask. We often ask the wrong questions, or we do not know what to ask. Seeing God and walking with Him will make most of our questions melt away. “The things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.” God answers us in Jesus Christ. He does not give an answer; He is the answer. Once we have learned to ask the right questions, we have become mature. This is what C. S. Lewis means to convey in his book *Till We Have Faces*. One of the main purposes of our being on earth is that we learn to ask the right questions. The problem is never that God does not know the answers to our questions. The question is not what is being said, either by God or by us. God’s answers to David stopped the mouths of his enemies. God’s answer is always creative; to David it comes in the form of salvation, healing, and rehabilitation. God’s answer to David would completely change the relationship between him and his enemies.

In this psalm, David experiences a tremendous spiritual struggle. Demons are stronger than men. The battle is unmatched, if we are left to ourselves. The devil always wants us to believe that we are alone when we face him. That is the crisis David passes through here; but pass through he does, because of his trust in the Lord. He has visions of what could happen to him, and that makes him afraid. But the assurance that God will not forsake him settles the matter. He also understands that the wall of opposition he faces is the result of pursuing what is good. In a sense, it is always encouraging when the devil takes the trouble to make life hard for us; it is an indication that he considers us to be a threat to him.

The prayer: “Be not far from me, O my God. Come quickly to help me,” is a strange mixture of hope and doubt. That is the way we are as human beings, and God does not seem to mind this. The fact that God would be far from us, and that He would have to hurry to help us is anthropomorphism. The omnipresent God is never far, and “come quickly” is a time-bound concept that does not apply to the Eternal One. The paradox finds its basis in our humanity. The Apostle Paul illustrates this beautifully in his address to the philosophers at the Areopagus, when he said: “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.”⁷⁴² “He is not far from each one of us,” but we can be far from Him, spiritually, and emotionally. Two people can sit next to each other and be miles apart at the same time. It is up to us to approach God. This may be the only reason that God allows pain in our lives: that we would draw nearer to Him.

Changes in our outward circumstances, such as physical healing, or improvement of relationships, are always secondary. The important thing is that we learn to know God as the One who is nigh, as the One who is our salvation. The NIV renders the last phrase with: “O Lord my Savior,” but other versions read: “O Lord, my salvation!”⁷⁴³ The Hebrew word is *teshuw`ah*, which is defined by *Strongs* as “rescue.” When David calls God, “my salvation” he has reached the goal God had set for him. Compared to this, nothing else in this life has real meaning.

⁷⁴¹ Titus 2:13

⁷⁴² Acts 17:26,27

⁷⁴³ (RSV)

PSALM THIRTY-NINE

For the director of music. For Jeduthun.

A psalm of David.

- 1 *I said, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence."*
- 2 *But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased.*
- 3 *My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue:*
- 4 *"Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life.*
- 5 *You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Selah*
- 6 *Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.*
- 7 *"But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.*
- 8 *Save me from all my transgressions; do not make me the scorn of fools.*
- 9 *I was silent; I would not open my mouth, for you are the one who has done this.*
- 10 *Remove your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand.*
- 11 *You rebuke and discipline men for their sin; you consume their wealth like a moth-- each man is but a breath. Selah*
- 12 *"Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my weeping. For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were.*
- 13 *Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more."*

The Adam Clarke Commentary remarks about the title: "The title says, To the chief Musician, Jeduthun himself, A Psalm of David. It is supposed that this Jeduthun is the same with Ethan, <1 Chr. 6:44>, compared with <1 Chr. 16:41>; and is there numbered among the sons of Merari. And he is supposed to have been one of the four masters of music, or leaders of bands, belonging to the temple. And it is thought that David, having composed this Psalm, gave it to Jeduthun and his company to sing. But several have supposed that Jeduthun himself was the author. It is very likely that this Psalm was written on the same occasion with the preceding. It relates to a grievous malady by which David was afflicted after his transgression with Bath-sheba." As is evident from our notes on the previous psalm, we do not share Adam Clarke's thought that that psalm was written in connection with David's affair with Bathsheba.

Jeduthun, who is mentioned in the caption, was one of the three choir directors appointed by David to lead the singing in the temple, and to be responsible for the music played. The two other ones were Asaph and Heman. We read about them in First Chronicles: "With them were Heman and Jeduthun and the rest of those chosen and designated by name to give thanks to the LORD, 'for his love endures forever.' Heman and Jeduthun were responsible for the sounding of the trumpets and cymbals and for the playing of the other instruments for sacred song. The sons of Jeduthun were stationed at the gate. David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals. Here is the list of the men who performed this service: From the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah and Asarelah. The sons of Asaph were under the supervision of Asaph, who prophesied under the king's supervision. As for Jeduthun, from his sons: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah and Mattithiah, six in all, under the supervision of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD." There was a group of 288 people, who were all related to the three mentioned above, and who stood under their direction. Their task was to prophesy under accompaniment of musical instruments. Prophecy, in this context, means, undoubtedly, more than foretelling the future. It was probably a state of ecstasy connected with the supernatural assignment given to those men. The emphasis was particularly upon giving thanks to the Lord, and singing His praises. The field of prophecy was a large one, which encompassed all aspects of fellowship between God and man. The fact that David dedicated this psalm to Jeduthun would indicate that prophecy can be based upon a prepared script. Jeduthun was asked to prophesy with the words David had composed for him. This gives to the content of this psalm an even greater depth, but it does not make the interpretation any easier.

The central thought of this poem seems to be that man's mortality is the result of God's wrath upon the sin of man. But if we dig a little deeper below the surface there appear to be more profound

thoughts. A Dutch translation of this psalm has the caption: “A prayer for acceptance.”⁷⁴⁴ The question is acceptance of what? A Dutch poet has written the following lines: “The non-resistant heart was confined with those who had become passive. One begins by accepting life, and finally, one accepts death.”

This psalm, however, seems to open with a protest. The protest is never put in words, but the inner rebellion comes through clearly. David wrestles with the reality of death. He knows that he will succumb to death’s power in the end, because he faces a force that he can never vanquish, but he rebels against this with all his strength and energy.

As far as death is concerned, we often see a good deal of pious acceptance that has nothing to do with a relationship with God. Another Dutch author of the previous century, who was a declared Atheist,⁷⁴⁵ cut through to the heart of the problem by dissecting a death announcement, which said: “We rest in the Lord’s will.” His comment was that he had never seen any add which said: “We are not finished with this matter yet!” God did not create man so that man would die. Dying is the most degrading experience a human being can undergo. Everyone who accepts death without any protest should be ashamed of himself.

Jesus protested against death. We see in John’s Gospel that Jesus was “deeply moved” at Lazarus’ grave. We read: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ... Jesus wept. ... Jesus, once more deeply moved....”⁷⁴⁶ TLB says: “He was moved with indignation and deeply troubled.” The Greek word translated “deeply moved” is *embrimaomai*, which *Strongs* defines as: “to snort with anger; to have indignation on, i.e. (transitively) to blame, (intransitively) to sigh with chagrin, (specially) to sternly enjoin.” Jesus’ attitude indicates that accepting death without protest is a godless demeanor. At Lazarus’ grave, Jesus “was not finished with this matter yet!” Not only did He raise Lazarus from the grave, but in His own death and resurrection He conquered death for each one of us. We ought to shout “hurray” at David’s protest against death. But protest against death was only part of David’s struggle. After all, his horizon was more limited than ours.

In the opening verses, David seems to say that the presence of the wicked was a reason for him to modify his attitude and speech. Evidently the wicked were good for something! They make David realize that he has a testimony to maintain. Who are “the wicked?” The Hebrew word *rasha`* is in the singular, and it means, according to *Strongs*, “an (actively) bad person.” The intent is, probably not in the first place, a human being, but the Evil One himself. Why does David feel he has to be so careful in what he says? A little further in this psalm he cannot restrain himself, but then, in vs. 9, he is silent again, this time as a result of God’s intervention. David’s initial silence may have been caused by a sense of guilt. He wants to voice a protest against death, but the realization that there is a connection between his sins and his death forces him to keep his mouth shut. The devil knows how to manipulate such feelings with great dexterity. He tries to make us believe that we ought to accept death because we sinned against God. This is a clever, but demonic device. He, who is the author of sin and death, tries to tell us that we have to die because we are guilty.

The opening verses of this psalm seem to be full of contradictions. David keeps silent in order not to sin, but at the same time he feels short changed by his own silence. Finally, the inner pressure builds up to the point that he can no longer keep himself in check. Man was created in the image of God. The image of the immortal God within us rebels against human mortality. This crisis experience is complicated by the fact that we are sinners. But, once we realize that our sins have been forgiven, the complications are reduced to a tension between life and death, immortality, and mortality. The confusion of contradictory emotions in David’s heart can be attributed to the fact that his sense of being forgiven was incomplete.

The verses 4-6 can be read in two different ways: We could say that David wants to see his life in the right perspective, so he can live intelligently. The foolishness of most humans is due to the fact that they act as if life on earth is endless, and that they will never be called upon to give account. Jesus illustrates this mentality in the parable of the rich man who, one year, had a bumper crop and said: “This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry. But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’”⁷⁴⁷ Moses says the same thing in the psalm that

⁷⁴⁴ NBG

⁷⁴⁵ Eduard Douwes Dekker, who wrote under the name Multatuli.

⁷⁴⁶ John 11:33,38

⁷⁴⁷ See Luke 12:15-20

bears his name: “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”⁷⁴⁸ David is afraid he will live irresponsibly, and therefore he compares those few years man lives on earth with God’s eternity.

We can also interpret these words in this way, that David asks God to give him insight in what will happen to him. He sees himself as a man who has sinned, but has received forgiveness; as one who should be immortal, but who will yet have to die. He says to God: “Help me to understand this.”

This is a most profound prophecy. The word *Selah* is certainly appropriate here. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight translates *Selah* as an intermezzo played by trumpets. He thinks it strange that the trumpets would sound at this place, but I believe that God Himself plays the trumpet here, because He is so happy with David’s question!

Some of the paradoxes, which abound in this psalm can be traced to the fact that there was so little insight, in David’s days, into the resurrection of the dead. The concept of life after death may have become rather vague in this epoch. David seems to search for this truth in this psalm, without fully grasping what he gropes for. If we see man’s life as nothing more than his existence between birth and death, then, in fact, it is a “mere handbreadth,” and “a breath.” Here we need the redeeming word of the New Testament. Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”⁷⁴⁹ And the Apostle John encourages us with the words: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”⁷⁵⁰ David seems to believe this truth, but he does not completely grasp it. He hears the sounding of the bells in the distance. That is the hope in the verses 7-9. He knows that the Lord has more for him than meets the eye, and this fills him with expectation and hope. He suspects some of the truth that, if God is the living God, He cannot be the God of the dead, but that He must be the God of the living. As Jesus says: “But about the resurrection of the dead-- have you not read what God said to you, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”⁷⁵¹ This hope silences David’s protest against death.

David’s silence in vs. 9 is different from his silence in vs. 1. There is an enormous difference between accepting death because there is no alternative, and accepting death because Jesus conquered death, and holds in His hands the keys of death and Hades.⁷⁵² As Christians, we face death from the viewpoint of Christ’s resurrection.

This does not take away anything from the fact that death is an unnatural phenomenon. But we know that our Lord Jesus Christ stands on the other side of the door and awaits us. We may also be confident that He will take us by the hand and lead us when the critical moment arrives. So, on the one hand, we should protest against death; on the other hand we may keep still because God has already protested for us in the death and resurrection of His Son.

All this would be relatively simple, if it were not for the fact that sin is a reality to us, and in us. That is the reason David’s prayer for salvation from all his transgressions is so pertinent. This is the meaning of his words: “Do not make me the scorn of fools.” God will rehabilitate us after our scornful experience with death. The decomposition of our bodies is painful and shameful, but God will clothe us with our heavenly dwelling. The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”⁷⁵³

The similarity between Paul’s words and David’s psalm is amazing. Both sigh because of the symptoms of their mortality. The breaking down of our bodies, and the deterioration that comes with old age are not pleasant experiences. Solomon calls this “the evil days,” when he says in Ecclesiastes: “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the

⁷⁴⁸ Ps. 90:12

⁷⁴⁹ John 8:51

⁷⁵⁰ I John 2:17

⁷⁵¹ Matt. 22:31,32

⁷⁵² See Rev. 1:18

⁷⁵³ II Cor. 5:1-5

stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”⁷⁵⁴

David sees in this destruction of his tent an indication of God’s chastisement on his sin. In a sense this is true. Also the idea that we live on this earth as foreigners is found both in this psalm and in Paul’s writing. David says: “For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were.” And Paul writes: “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.”⁷⁵⁵

The last verses of this psalm are in the minor key; yet, the Holy Spirit uses a theme that belongs in the major key. We wonder how the accompaniment must have sounded. The words stranger and alien have both a negative and a positive connotation. They mean that, as Christians, we do not belong to this world; we are part of a different culture. We are only passing through, and this world is not our final destination. Positively, it means that we have a better homeland. The Apostle Paul writes: “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”⁷⁵⁶ This resurrection renewal is part of our being aliens in this world. David did not know anything about this. He fell in the category of those of whom the writer to the Hebrews says: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”⁷⁵⁷ If we really live on this earth as aliens, God will not be ashamed to be called our God.

The writer to the Hebrews says, in essence, the same as Jesus says in John’s Gospel: “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”⁷⁵⁸ The status of a spiritual refugee is a very honorable standing.

David speaks here about being a stranger as a constant experience, although the crossing of the desert, and the conquest of Canaan were ancient history for him. All the fathers, who were strangers also, were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had died a millennium earlier. So, being an alien must have been a spiritual experience for David. David could have copied this last verse, “Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more,” from the book of Job. Both David and Job thought that their suffering was the direct result of God’s intervention in their lives. If God would no longer pay so much attention to them, they would feel much better, and their joy would return! But Job’s story proves that things are not as easy as that. It is true that God’s intervention causes pain, just as the lancing of a boil is painful. But not lancing the boil is even more painful and can lead to death. Dying is an awful experience, but if, in our present sinful condition, we would not die, we would be much worse off. The fact that God does not look away from us is our salvation. It also ought to be the source of our joy.

⁷⁵⁴ Eccl. 12:1-7 (RSV)

⁷⁵⁵ II Cor. 5:6

⁷⁵⁶ Phil. 3:20,21

⁷⁵⁷ Heb. 11:13-16

⁷⁵⁸ John 12:26

PSALM FORTY

For the director of music. Of David.

A psalm.

- 1** *I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.*
- 2** *He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.*
- 3** *He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.*
- 4** *Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.*
- 5** *Many, O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no one can recount to you; were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare.*
- 6** *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.*
- 7** *Then I said, "Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll.*
- 8** *I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."*
- 9** *I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, as you know, O LORD.*
- 10** *I do not hide your righteousness in my heart; I speak of your faithfulness and salvation. I do not conceal your love and your truth from the great assembly.*
- 11** *Do not withhold your mercy from me, O LORD; may your love and your truth always protect me.*
- 12** *For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me.*
- 13** *Be pleased, O LORD, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me.*
- 14** *May all who seek to take my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace.*
- 15** *May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!" be appalled at their own shame.*
- 16** *But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, "The LORD be exalted!"*
- 17** *Yet I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay.*

The opening verses describe in a wonderful way the testimony of one who was found by the Lord. The first words are "I waited patiently." The Hebrew reads literally "Waiting, I waited": *Qawoh qiywitiy*, which are two different forms of the same Hebrew word *qavah*, defined by *Strongs* as: "bind together (perhaps by twisting), i.e. collect; (figuratively) to expect." All English versions I checked render the verb with "patiently I waited." Whether this is patiently waiting, or impatiently depends on which shade of meaning we want to give to this idiom. And this may depend on our subjective approach to the text, whether we are patient or impatient by nature. One Dutch translation renders the verb with "passionately I waited for the Lord." It may be difficult to argue for a touch of passion in these words, but they strike me with more vigor than patience. We could at least suppose that David waited expectantly, which is different from waiting resignedly.

It is good to wait for the Lord expectantly, with ardent desire to receive. Blessings often escape us, because we do not long for them with our whole being. God's desire to bless us is immense, but it is often hindered by our indifference. Once we are delivered from apathy, there is little to obstruct the flow of God's blessing and the fullness of His presence in our lives. Only God Himself can kindle such passionate desire in our hearts. Jesus says: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."⁷⁵⁹ It is the pull of the Holy Spirit that will change our indifference into a passionate desire.

Continuous undernourishment will make a man lose his desire for food; so will sin make us lose our desire for God. A passionate desire for God is proof of a healthy spiritual condition. If such a desire is present, all else will fall in place.

⁷⁵⁹ John 6:44

Of course, God will hear our cry and turn to us! As human beings, we even pay attention to cries for help by strangers, and who would ignore the cry of his own child? How much more will God listen, when the Bible says: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”⁷⁶⁰

The NIV reads: “I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.” Other verses say: “He inclined to me...” as if God would cup His ear to listen. This, of course, is anthropomorphism. The omniscient God does not have to turn to us and listen up in order to know. But if we wait for Him fervently, and if our hearts are fully committed to Him, we will become aware of the fact that God knows us and acts in our behalf.

In verses 2 and 3 David tells us in a nutshell what God does for us when He saves us. The first thing is that we are saved from sin, which is pictured as being lifted out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire. Then there is rehabilitation, under the image of our feet being placed on a rock and being given a firm place to stand. Then follows praise, and finally, the witness of what happened. Those four points are closely related to each other, they all pertain to the life of a child of God.

There is, probably, no clearer picture of falling into sin than that of falling in a pit we cannot climb out of. The image of sinking in mud brings to mind situations in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, where I trekked in the swampy Kamu Valley, with its dangerous, slimy sinkholes. For a hygienically disposed person, mud is a repulsive substance. In the same way, sin should be repugnant to a child of God. Most of the bacteria that live in mud are bad for our health. If we cry out to God, He will save us from the power of sin that pulls us down, and that will, eventually, kill us. Most of our problems stem from the fact that we refuse to recognize our condition. We tend to live in our pit, as if that is a normal condition. We have to come to the point that we call mud mud, and confess our sin as sin.

A person who sinks in the mud has no control over himself; he is being sucked down, and fighting only speeds up the process. Help from the outside is needed, divine intervention, in order for us to be lifted out of the pit. We know that our salvation cost Jesus His life. He took our “mud” upon Himself, because the mud is also within us. Being lifted out of the pit, not only saves our life, but it also grants us forgiveness. Most of the mud is our own guilt.

“He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.” This means renewal. The foundation upon which our feet are placed is Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Paul says: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”⁷⁶¹ It often takes time before we realize that the resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our life. If our being lifted out of the pit was only possible through the death of Christ on the cross, then our being placed on a rock is the result of His resurrection. Through man’s fall into sin the whole of God’s creation sunk down in a slimy pit of measureless mud and mire. This fall was stopped when Jesus broke the bonds of death. The fact that we have a firm place to stand on is part of a cosmic process of renewal. We need this basis to be able to function normally. Physically we are created in such a way that we can function only if our feet are placed on a firm place. A falling or sinking person is a helpless person. We can, therefore, say that the Christian life is a normal life.

The problem, however, is not only the basis on which we stand but also how we move around when we stand on solid rock. If our limbs are weak, we fall, even if we stand on a rock. We need inner strength as well as a good foundation. Jesus not only rose from the dead in order to place our feet on a rock, He also put His resurrection life in us. This will “strengthen [our] feeble arms and weak knees, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it.”⁷⁶² This process is of vital importance for our human dignity. We will only be real men, and we will only live with dignity if Christ is in us.

The NIV renders the last part of vs. 2 with “And gave me a firm place to stand.” The Interlinear Hebrew Bible gives the translation: “and established my goings.” As such it is also translated in the KJV. The RSV has: “making my steps secure,” and TLB says: “and steadied me as I walked along.”

⁷⁶⁰ II Chr. 16:9

⁷⁶¹ I Cor. 3:11

⁷⁶² See Heb. 12:12

Also our songs of praise are the work of God within us. David says about his singing: “He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.” Singing praises and exalting God is a natural result of our salvation. But our reactions are not always normal. God will have to help us in this also. We need the help of the Holy Spirit in order to praise God as we should. And the Spirit is very willing to give us this help. It is embarrassing to us that we need help in order to be able to say such elementary things as “Thank You!”

Speaking in tongues does not have to be excluded at this point, but it certainly is not the only interpretation of the new song, God put on our mouths. A new song stands for an original composition; it is a hymn that evolves from our own personality and that fits our character. It is in the act of bowing before God, and in the praising of His Name that we discover who and what we are. We begin to understand that this is the purpose for which we were made.

The phrase “a new song” is found repeatedly in the Book of Psalms.⁷⁶³ The elders and the living creatures in the book of Revelation sing a new song, and so do the 144,000 redeemed who stand before the throne.⁷⁶⁴ We do not sing solos in heaven. We are part of God’s new creation, which praises God and glorifies Him. It is “a hymn of praise to our God.” Praising God makes us realize that we are part of the body, which is the result of our baptism with the Holy Spirit. Paul says: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”⁷⁶⁵

The last truth in these verses is the testimony of our lives, which will bring others to put their trust in the Lord, YHWH. Part of this testimony is, undoubtedly, oral, that is that we tell others about it; but the essence is the supernatural element, God’s intervention in our lives. It should become clear to others that what happened to us can only be explained by the fact that a miracle has taken place; that what we have become could never have been achieved by human means. Only then “will many see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.” The fear of those many stands for the recognition that God is an awesome God, and that He is to be trusted. The crux of our testimony should always be what God has done; we may never place ourselves in the center.

Verses 4 and 5 further elaborate this truth. If a man comes to the point where he makes God his trust, he is blessed. The most simple definition of blessedness is trust in God. When the Jews tried to kill the Apostle Paul, he appealed to the emperor of Rome. We read in Acts: “Paul answered: ‘I am now standing before Caesar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!’ After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: ‘You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!’”⁷⁶⁶ Paul’s confidence in Caesar turned out to be misplaced. Paul’s hope was a false hope. Yet, God was glorified in Paul’s appeal to Caesar. But if we appeal to God in Jesus Christ, we will never be put to shame. Vs. 4 could almost be a condemning comment on Paul’s appeal to Caesar. Paul’s appeal, of course, was not merely an effort to save his own neck. God sent his servant to Rome to be a witness for Him in Caesar’s court.

David states the general rule that a man should put his trust in God, and not in his fellow human beings. This means that the trust we owe God should never be given to men. It does not mean that we ought to distrust every one in life, but we have to understand that our salvation comes from God and not from men. God usually uses men to help us; but this does in no way annul the fact that the source of all help is God Himself. And we should never come to the point that we expect supernatural help from mortal men, especially not from those who have openly turned away from God.

Realizing what God has done for us is an experience just as awesome as when we look up into the night sky and try to imagine in what kind of a universe we live. Once we fix our eyes upon God, we see how His relationship with us is expressed in an endless series of supernatural interventions.

⁷⁶³ See Ps 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; and 149:1.

⁷⁶⁴ See Rev 5:9; 14:3

⁷⁶⁵ I Cor. 12:13

⁷⁶⁶ Acts 25:10-12

David, not only, marvels at the things God has done for us, but also at the thoughts He has toward us. The NIV says: "The things you planned for us no one can recount to you." Other translations render this phrase with: "Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order."⁷⁶⁷ It is sometimes hard for us to understand that God would really love us. Yet, all of God's dealings with us are based upon His eternal love for us. God does not accept sin in our lives as an unalterable condition. This does not mean that He would not take our sins into account, but He does not accept the claims of the devil upon those who are created in His image, as legal. This is hard for us to grasp, because our heart condemns us constantly. The Apostle John says: "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things."⁷⁶⁸ Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah by saying: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."⁷⁶⁹

God's wonders and God's thoughts are synonymous; they overwhelm us. Not anyone, or anything can come close to God in His character, thoughts, and actions. He is, therefore, the measure and standard against which everything in the universe is measured. Paul defines sin as falling short of God's glory. He writes: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁷⁷⁰ Since this is the case, then salvation means receiving the full measure of God's glory. In the short time we spend on earth, our limited capacity to comprehend will make it impossible for us to worship God in all fullness, as we ought to do. We can only stammer in our adoration. The four living creatures, which John describes in Revelation, who because of their great number of eyes, possess a multi-dimensional consciousness, worship God endlessly. We read: "Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'⁷⁷¹ How could we, who live in a three dimensional world, in which we are distracted by all kind of non-essentials, ever do justice to God's wonders and thoughts? We are often too thickheaded to be overwhelmed by the reality of God's being. David's perplexity is one of his best moments. Blessed is the man who puts his trust in this God!

Whether wittingly, or unwittingly, David penetrates to the core of God's secret in the verses 6-8. I suppose these verses must have become a key for Jesus, as a young man, to become conscious of His messianic call. David knew that the sacrificial rituals prescribed in Leviticus, in which animal blood had to be shed in order to make fellowship with God possible, could never be the last word. He understood the paradox that God demanded this, but that this was not what He ultimately had in mind. But David could not have known what God did have in mind. We may certainly apply here Peter's words, regarding the dilemma of the Old Testament prophets: "Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things."⁷⁷² Yet, the Holy Spirit makes David say exactly why the Word of God became flesh, and died on the cross. The substitution of animal blood was a temporary measure. God does not want man to die in his sin, but He also loves the animals He created.

First of all, we should pause, and try to think what these verses must have meant for David himself. He knew that the sacrificial animal took his place. What happened to the animal should have

⁷⁶⁷ (NKJ)

⁷⁶⁸ I John 3:20 (NKJ)

⁷⁶⁹ I Cor. 2:9 (See Isa. 64:4)

⁷⁷⁰ Rom. 3:23

⁷⁷¹ Rev. 4:8

⁷⁷² I Pet. 1:10-12

happened to him. He ought to have died, but the animal died in his stead. He understood that what happened on the altar gave God a legal basis to come to his aid, to lift him out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire, and to set his feet on a rock and give him a firm place to stand, as stated in vs. 2. He understood that, in principle, God did not desire either the death of man or of an animal. Evil spirits would find satisfaction in cruelty, and in the slaughter of an animal, but not God. God is not bloodthirsty. He created the blood that was shed. We cannot fully comprehend this divine dilemma, but we can understand some of it.

The sacrifice of an animal in man's place would be completely senseless if he did not draw certain consequences from it. If a person, for whom the sacrifice is brought, continues in his sin, then all shedding of blood is in vain. The essence of a conversion is the discovery that, if Jesus died for me, I can no longer keep on living for myself. Without an act of unconditional surrender to the will of God, the sacrifice is senseless. That is the meaning of the phrase: "my ears you have pierced." The words refer to the law, given in Exodus regarding the Hebrew slave. We read: "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free. But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life."⁷⁷³ The slave who declared: "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free," had his ear pierced as a token that he had promised obedience for life. David says that God's provision in the atonement for his sin means that he has to obey God and serve Him for the rest of his life.

As David puts it, God, as the master of His slave, has pierced his ear. In other words, the love for God in David's heart, originates in God. God Himself creates within us the desire to obey. This agrees with the words of the Apostle John: "We love because he first loved us."⁷⁷⁴ David also acknowledges that love and obedience are inseparable. Jesus says: "If you love me, you will obey what I command," and "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me."⁷⁷⁵ And John adds to this: "This is love for God: to obey his commands."⁷⁷⁶

God showed His love for David in the atonement of his sin by the blood of a lamb, and to us He proves His love in the same way through the death of Jesus Christ for our sins. Paul says: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."⁷⁷⁷

We ought to draw from this the same conclusion that David drew, that is, that if God has done such things for us, the least we can do is to surrender ourselves, spirit, soul, and body, to Him in unconditional obedience. We have to state clearly, as the slave did, when he said: "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free." The "pierced ear" should be visible as God's "scar" on our body.

But David goes deeper. God's provisions were temporal. Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings and sin offerings were not the things God required. God wants ourselves, not our sacrifices. Unconditional surrender means ultimately the loss of our lives. Victory consists in the willingness to give up our lives. This is what John says in Revelation about the defeat of Satan by the saints: "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto

⁷⁷³ Ex. 21:2-6

⁷⁷⁴ I John 4:19

⁷⁷⁵ John 14:15, 21

⁷⁷⁶ I John 5:3

⁷⁷⁷ Rom. 5:8

death.”⁷⁷⁸ There are yet things that are more difficult than the surrender of ourselves. Would it not have been easier for Abraham if God had asked for his life, instead of that of Isaac?

David’s emphasis in these verses is on unconditional surrender. He states clearly that what God wants is not the sacrifice of animals but of ourselves. The Holy Spirit says even more. These verses must have been for Jesus, the Son of God, the key the Holy Spirit gave Him to understand the mystery of His coming into this world. It would be naïve to suppose that, from the moment of His birth as a human being, Jesus had a complete understanding of the aim of His life. As with every child, there must have been in Him, as He developed from infancy to childhood into maturity, a growing awareness of the world in which He lived, and of His own identity. It is obvious that the omniscience He possessed as the Second Person of the Trinity, did not play any role in this growing awakening of his human soul. It is a great comfort to me to see that Christ, as a man, did not have any other means to know the revelation of the Father than we do. He must have heard at some point in His childhood about the angels that had appeared the night of His birth, and He must have discovered that He differed from other sinful human beings in that He did not possess the sinful nature they demonstrated. These things must have brought Him to ponder the meaning of His existence. But the main factor in His growing messianic consciousness must have been the inspired, written Word of God. The discovery “it is written about me in the scroll,” must have been a major breakthrough for Him. Jesus’ strong emphasis upon Scripture in His preaching confirms this. He, repeatedly, told the people of His time that the Scriptures bore witness about Him. We read: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.” And: “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.”⁷⁷⁹ To His disciples He said: “ ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”⁷⁸⁰ More than in any other feature of His life on earth, Jesus’ relationship to the Scriptures has become for me the main way in which we have to follow His footsteps. We seldom hear this point in the arguments for the Inspiration of Scripture.⁷⁸¹

The writer to the Hebrews quotes these verses to explain why, at the death of Christ on the cross, the ceremonial part of the law ceased to function as a means of fellowship with God.⁷⁸² We will return to this topic later on. What concerns us at present is the fact that Jesus knew that God had sent Him into the world to do His will, and that the prophecy of Psalm 40 played an important part in this growing awareness. Whether He immediately understood that this obedience would lead Him to death on the cross, we do not know. Those details may have become clearer as the time approached. Jesus must have understood early, though, that obedience would mean death for Him. After all, the sacrificial victims were killed without mercy.

Of the five sacrifices mentioned in Leviticus⁷⁸³, only three are named in this psalm: offering, burnt offerings, and sin offerings. The Hebrew for “offering” is *minchah* which is the word used in Leviticus for the grain offering.⁷⁸⁴ The “sacrifice” does not designate a special category; it comprised probably the whole of all the offerings brought. The burnt offering was the first mentioned in Leviticus and the sin offering was fourth in order. The burnt offering expresses the divine love, which is called *agape* in Greek. The sin offering accentuates man’s sinful nature. The *minchah* stands for the surrender of man, as a creature, to God his Creator. All this is included in the obedience to the will of God. Jesus understood that all these sacrifices pointed to His coming in the world, and eventually to His death on the cross.

For us, as New Testament Christians, the meaning of all this is clear. We have a hard time understanding how people in the Old Testament could have missed the point that the animal sacrifices

⁷⁷⁸ Rev. 12:11 (RSV)

⁷⁷⁹ John 5:39,46

⁷⁸⁰ Luke 24:25-27

⁷⁸¹ An exception is *Christ in His Suffering*, by Prof. K. Schilder

⁷⁸² See Heb. 1:1-10

⁷⁸³ See Lev. Ch. 1-7

⁷⁸⁴ See Lev. 2:3

could not have been God's last word. It is even difficult for us to imagine that there must have been a time in Jesus' early life when He did not see the whole picture, and He groped for the meaning of His coming in the world and His ministry. Consequently, we miss much of the ecstasy the young Jesus must have felt when He heard David's words for the first time, and began to recognize Himself in the Scriptures. This discovery must have caused a ravenous appetite for the Word of God, which forced Him to stay behind in the temple in Jerusalem at the age of twelve. It is natural that He wanted to know everything there was to know about the law and the prophets. It was as if He could read His own biography at the beginning of His life: "Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." Image any man reading the story of his own life while he is still a youngster. We cannot conceive of such an anachronism, but we could understand the sensational impact this would have, if it were true. For Jesus the whole Old Testament was a guide to understanding His own identity. On a different level, the whole Bible should be this kind of a guide to us also. If our names have been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world,⁷⁸⁵ then we ought to be able to find ourselves on the pages of the Old and New Testament.

In spite of the above, the testimony of Scripture regarding Jesus' coming was not fulfilled automatically. It did not mean that Jesus was forced to take the task upon Him, whether He wanted to or not. His obedience was based on a voluntary choice, even though His obedience was foretold in Scripture. Before the foundation of the world, there must have been a promise that the Son gave to the Father, upon which the Holy Spirit could base this prophecy. The writer to the Hebrews refers to this agreement when he says: "May the God of peace, who *through the blood of the eternal covenant* brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep..."⁷⁸⁶ But within the framework of space and time of His life on earth, Jesus had to choose whether He wanted to obey or not. God's eternal decree, or Biblical prophecy does not exclude human disobedience. It is against the background of this determination to obey that we should see Jesus' baptism by John. He requested to be baptized in order to give outward expression to the inner decision He had made to obey the call of God.

This psalm also prophesies about an obedience the people of the Old Testament did not know experimentally. "Your law is within my heart" is the result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in a man's heart. Jeremiah prophesied about this, when he wrote: " 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'⁷⁸⁷ And Ezekiel said: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."⁷⁸⁸ True obedience comes naturally to the regenerated man; it evolves from the tendencies and desires of a renewed heart. For a Christian it is easier to obey than to disobey.

At this point we should look at the apparent discrepancy between the text of the psalm and the quote of the same in the epistle to the Hebrews. David writes: "My ears you have pierced," and the text in Hebrews reads: "A body you prepared for me."⁷⁸⁹ It is obvious that the writer of Hebrews quoted from the Greek text of the Septuagint. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* asks the question: "But how is it possible that the Septuagint and the apostle should take a meaning so totally different from the sense of the Hebrew? Dr. Kennicott has a very ingenious conjecture here: he supposes that the Septuagint and apostle express the meaning of the words as they stood in the copy from which the Greek translation was made; and that the present Hebrew text is corrupted in the word 'aznayim, ...ears, which has been written through carelessness for 'az ... gewah, ...THEN, a BODY. The first syllable, 'az, THEN, is the same in both; and the latter, nym, which, joined to 'az makes 'aznayim, might have been easily mistaken for gewah, BODY; the Hebrew letter nun (n) being very much like the Hebrew letter gimel (g), and the Hebrew letter yodh (y) like the Hebrew letter waw (w); and the Hebrew letter he (h) like the Hebrew letter mem (m) in final position; especially if the line on which the letters were written in the manuscript happened to be blacker than ordinary, which has often been a cause of mistake, it might then have been easily taken for the under-stroke

⁷⁸⁵ See Rev. 13:8

⁷⁸⁶ Heb. 13:20

⁷⁸⁷ Jer. 31:33

⁷⁸⁸ Ezek. 36:26,27

⁷⁸⁹ Heb. 10:5^b

of the mem, and thus give rise to a corrupt reading; add to this, the root kaarah ... signifies as well to prepare, as to open, bore, etc. On this supposition the ancient copy translated by the Septuagint, and followed by the apostle, must have read the text thus: gewah ... kaariy ... liy... Soma de katertiso moi. Then a body thou hast prepared me: thus the Hebrew text, the version of the Septuagint, and the apostle, will agree in what is known to be an indisputable fact in Christianity, namely that Christ was incarnated for the sin of the world.”

It is difficult for us to enter into the discussion, as Clarke presents it above. The Hebrew word *karah*, which is translated with “pierced” can mean, according to *Strong's Definitions*: “to dig; figuratively, to plot; generally, to bore or open.” There is one instance in the Old Testament where the word is given a wider meaning. When king Asa died, we read: “And they buried him in his own sepulchres, which he had made for himself in the city of David.”⁷⁹⁰ But the NIV reads here: “They buried him in the tomb that he had cut out for himself in the City of David.” Whether the translators of the Septuagint had manuscripts that predated the Masorete texts, we do not know. We could conceive that the Hebrew wanted to express the thought that God had cut out, or sculpted man’s body. It is possible that the original text conveyed a wider meaning, which would then be expressed by the Septuagint, and that the scribes in the time after the Babylonian Captivity saw in the word “prepared” a preparation for slavery. We should not forget that, between David and the scribes of the Post-Babylonian Captivity there were centuries that created, undoubtedly, a gap of culture, and even of language. The Holy Spirit, however, in sanctioning the rendering by the Septuagint, and by bridging whatever gaps may have existed, gives us a wide range of truth in this one sentence. After all, in the truest sense of the word, there is no fundamental difference between the obedience, born out of love, which David speaks about, and the Incarnation of the Son, which brought to an end all animal sacrifices. David said more than he could have understood himself, but then, he is not the actual author of this psalm.

The testimony of verses 9 and 10: “I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly...” corresponds to other portions in the Book of Psalms, such as: “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you,”⁷⁹¹ and: “I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among throngs of people I will praise you.”⁷⁹² In all these instances there is a suggestion of the resurrection from the dead. The verses 6-8 of this psalm speak of Jesus’ death on the cross; so to speak of His resurrection is the logical next step. Jesus’ resurrection was God’s answer to Jesus’ obedience. The writer of the Hebrew epistle puts this in these matchless words: “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep...”⁷⁹³ The pouring out of blood and the resurrection from the dead are linked inseparably.

The shouts of joy of the resurrection are heard throughout the whole of Scripture. Christ’s resurrection is the rock, the firm place upon which God sets the feet of those He lifts out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire. It is the foundation of our justification, as the Apostle Paul says: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”⁷⁹⁴ This is the normal Christian life; it is the reason for our praise, and the content of our testimony. We may repeat the words the Lord Jesus spoke to John: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!”⁷⁹⁵ The church of Jesus Christ is the great assembly in which people shout those words to one another.

In order to describe the content of this testimony, David uses words such as: “righteousness,” “faithfulness,” “salvation,” “love,” and “truth.” The words “I proclaim” are the translation of the Hebrew *bisartiy*, which is a form of the verb *basar*. *Strong's Definitions* defines this as: “to be fresh, i.e. full (rosy, (figuratively) cheerful); to announce (glad news): -messenger, preach, publish, shew forth, (bear, bring, carry, preach, good, tell good) tidings.” For some reason the NIV leaves the cheerful part out. Other

⁷⁹⁰ II Chr. 16:14 (KJV)

⁷⁹¹ Ps. 22:22

⁷⁹² Ps. 35:18

⁷⁹³ Heb. 13:20

⁷⁹⁴ Rom. 4:25

⁷⁹⁵ Rev. 1:18

translations read: “I have proclaimed the good news...”⁷⁹⁶, or “I have told the glad news...”⁷⁹⁷ This “Good News” is the Gospel of God’s righteousness. Paul’s letter to the Romans is an extended commentary on this theme. He writes: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.”⁷⁹⁸ God’s righteousness is revealed in His solution of the problem of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This truth had become David’s personal experience, as is evinced from the first three verses of this psalm.

God’s righteousness demonstrates itself in our salvation and rehabilitation. The more we understand of the price God paid for this, the harder it will be for us to keep quiet about it. God’s wrath toward sin, and His love for man whom He created is expressed in the words: “righteousness,” “faithfulness,” “salvation,” “love,” and “truth.” These words are descriptive of God’s character. There is no contradiction between what God is and what God does. That is the reason that all God does for us brings us to the worship of His character. So we find in the verses 9 and 10 the essence of what the Church of Jesus Christ is, that is, “the great assembly.” The church consists of people who have experienced God’s righteousness in their lives through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who testify about this to each other, and who worship God in fellowship with one another.

It seems as if, in the last stanza of this psalm, from verses 11-17, David plunged back to a lower level than he was at the beginning of the psalm. It sounds as if those tremendous things he prophesied about so convincingly in the preceding verses, evade him in the practice of his everyday life. There is, of course, no question about whether God would withhold His mercy from David for one moment, but for man, who lives in time and space in a fallen creation, the reality of God’s love and truth is not always tangible. In C. S. Lewis’ book *The Silver Chair*, Aslan warns the girl Jill that the atmosphere down below in Narnia is not as clear and pure as on the top of the mountain where she stands. For that reason, the two children will have to commit to memory the five signs he gives them, and to repeat those signs for themselves twice a day, lest they would forget why they had come to Narnia. They forget to do this; this forgetting leads them into all kinds of difficulties.

There is often quite a gap between that which we know to be true and our daily experience. No one on earth always lives fully in the light of God’s revelation. We live in a hostile world, and our circumstances are always against us. Unless we are aware of this, we will never understand clearly what God is doing for us.

David speaks about troubles without number, which surround him: sins that have overtaken him, and those that make him blind to reality. The enemy is on both the outside and the inside. It is very difficult for man to live on the basis of forgiveness. Even after God has forgiven us, we often have a hard time forgiving ourselves. David’s guilt feelings block out the horizon. The objective fact of the atonement for our sins has to be practically applied to the areas of hurt in our lives. The coal from the altar has to touch our lips.⁷⁹⁹

In vs. 11 David prays for protection by God’s truth. This prayer shows a spirit of realism. He perceives the danger of being deceived by the false appearance of the things that surround him. He will only be able to keep his course straight by God’s mercy, love, and truth.

The Hebrew word translated by “mercy” is *racham*. *Strongs* defines this as: “compassion (in the plural); by extension, the womb (as cherishing the fetus).” The KJV translates this word, variously, with: “compassion,” “tender love,” “mercy,” or “pity.” The word embraces both love and forgiveness. The word translated by “love” is the Hebrew word *cheded*, which is the word used to typify God’s covenantal love for His people. It is that which puts God’s relationship with us on a legal basis. It is occasionally translated “favour,” or “loving-kindness.” The Hebrew word for “truth” is *’emeth*, which in *Strongs Definitions* is defined as: “stability; (figuratively) certainty, truth, trustworthiness.”

Since earlier David had prophesied about the juridical basis of forgiveness, we may assume that here he speaks about the subjective experience of it all. David asks that God will grant him a continuous awareness of being forgiven. He also does not want to lose track of God’s loving-kindness. He wants always to be able to remember that this is part of God’s character. The eternal God cannot commit evil. James puts it: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly

⁷⁹⁶ (NKJ)

⁷⁹⁷ (RSV)

⁷⁹⁸ Rom. 1:17

⁷⁹⁹ See Isa. 6:6,7

lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”⁸⁰⁰ This insight is absolutely necessary to counter the propaganda campaign of the enemy, who tries to twist the truth. The concept of truth is closely connected to the above. God is the God of truth, and the devil is the father of lies.⁸⁰¹ God cannot lie; He is truthful and genuine in all He does. God has no ulterior motives or hidden agendas. This knowledge of God’s character will protect us against the enemy who is around us and inside us.

The importance of our emotions in our relationship with God is expressed in the words: “My heart fails within me.” Our emotions are both important and unimportant. How we feel about something does not change the object, but it does influence our reactions. God knows this, and He will not abandon us in this respect either.

In verses 14-16 David comes back to a theme that is found many times in the Book of Psalms: the being put to shame of the enemies. We maintain that, here also, David does not primarily speak about human opponents, but about demonic powers. We find the same expressions almost literally elsewhere in the psalms. “May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame; may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay.”⁸⁰² “Aha! Aha!” is the utterance of mockery and derision of an enemy who takes delight in our pain and suffering. This is the sharpest weapon that can be used against us. God can silence him. Or better, as the New Testament puts it: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”⁸⁰³ We have the victory “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [our] testimony, if we do not love [our] lives so much as to shrink from death.”⁸⁰⁴ We do not have to take that “Aha! Aha!” passively. Ultimately, those who insult us, insult God. Jesus takes the insults that are heaped upon us very seriously.

David uses the words “may those,” or “may all” four times in these verses. This implies that he considers the situation to be a spiritual reality, which finds its expression in life on earth. Victory over the devil is a reality in heaven, and this victory has to be claimed by us on earth. This is the reason for our rejoicing, and gladness, and for our saying: “The LORD be exalted!”

It may sound strange that David asks God to make the people on earth exalt Him, but a closer look will reveal that this is less odd than it sounds. Our sense of reality is thrown off by the pollution of sin. Unless God reveals Himself to us, we will never come to the place where we rejoice in Him and exalt Him. We will not even begin to seek and love God, unless He initiates the longing in us. This does not make us into robots; worship and praise are our responsibility and we have to take the initiative.

The psalm ends with a comparison between the present and the future. David calls himself “poor and needy.” We do not know when this psalm was written, but there is a strong suggestion that it dates from the time David was a fugitive. The millionaire who lived in a palace in Jerusalem could hardly call himself “poor and needy.” It is true, though, that a man can possess much on a material level, and be spiritually poor. David sees his life in the right perspective. He knows that his present condition is not permanent. He believes that he lives in “an open system,” to use a modern expression. God can intervene at any moment. He knows the details of our existence, and He is continuously concerned about us. At any moment He can send complete deliverance.

At first sight, the end of the psalm seems to be in contrast with the beginning. At the opening of the psalm, salvation was an accomplished fact, and here it seems as if David still awaits deliverance. Yet, we know that we are in the same position; we know that we have been redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, and by the power of His resurrection, but this does not keep us from praying: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”⁸⁰⁵

⁸⁰⁰ James 1:17

⁸⁰¹ See John 8:44

⁸⁰² Ps. 35:4

⁸⁰³ Rom. 16:20

⁸⁰⁴ See Rev. 12:11

⁸⁰⁵ Rev. 22:20

PSALM FORTY-ONE

For the director of music.

A psalm of David.

- 1 Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble.**
2 The LORD will protect him and preserve his life; he will bless him in the land and not surrender him to the desire of his foes.
3 The LORD will sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness.
4 I said, "O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you."
5 My enemies say of me in malice, "When will he die and his name perish?"
6 Whenever one comes to see me, he speaks falsely, while his heart gathers slander; then he goes out and spreads it abroad.
7 All my enemies whisper together against me; they imagine the worst for me, saying,
8 "A vile disease has beset him; he will never get up from the place where he lies."
9 Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.
10 But you, O LORD, have mercy on me; raise me up, that I may repay them.
11 I know that you are pleased with me, for my enemy does not triumph over me.
12 In my integrity you uphold me and set me in your presence forever.
13 Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.

This psalm consists of three part: There is the general thesis of what God does for those who love their neighbor as themselves, (vs. 1-3); then there is the prayer of David for deliverance of those who do not love him, (vs. 4-12); and the psalm ends with a doxology which constitutes, at the same time, the conclusion of the first part of the Book of Psalms (vs. 13).

1. What God does for those who love their neighbor as themselves vs. 1,2

Our relationship with our fellow human beings has a direct bearing upon our relationship with God. Jesus puts the love for our neighbor on the same line as our love for God. He says: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'"⁸⁰⁶ The Apostle John elaborates on this theme extensively, and in his First Epistle he makes it clear that our love for God cannot be separated from our love for our brother. He says: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."⁸⁰⁷

David, however, does not merely speak about a fellow human being in general, but about "the weak," that is, the person who does not count among his fellow men. The Hebrew word is *dal*, which, in *Strongs Definitions* is defined as: "dangling, i.e. (by implication) weak or thin," and variously translated in the KJV with: "lean, needy, poor (man), weaker." *The Brown-Driver-Briggs'* definition of the word is: "low, poor, weak, thin, one who is low." The NAS translates the word with: "The helpless." We could use the expression of someone who is "let down," that is, someone who does not count among his peers. The Lord wants us to associate particularly with "the underdog." Jesus identified Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigners, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners. We read in Matthew that He says to the righteous: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."⁸⁰⁸ To Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted Christians, Jesus introduced Himself with the words: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."⁸⁰⁹

The designation "weak" suggests a measure that people use to judge one another, which is, not necessarily, the measure God uses. The teachings of Jesus abound with examples on this subject. Jesus always emphasized children. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a little child and had him stand among

⁸⁰⁶ Matt. 22:37-40⁸⁰⁷ I John 4:20⁸⁰⁸ Matt. 25:35,36⁸⁰⁹ Acts 9:5

them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.'⁸¹⁰ He gave preference to the lower class. Mark says: "Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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.'⁸¹¹ To the expert in the law who wanted to know who his neighbor was, Jesus told a parable in which He focussed on the victim of violence. Luke tells us: "In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ' 'Look after him,' ' he said, ' 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' ' 'Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'⁸¹² These are only a few examples of the many things Jesus said about "the weak."

The implication is that the measures we use for our judgment are wrong. We do not look for the eternal values in the life of our neighbor; we fix our eyes upon the physical features alone. Samuel was caught in this trap in his opinion about Saul⁸¹³ and Eliab. We read: "When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD.' But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'⁸¹⁴ We also tend to evaluate people according to what they possess. James admonishes us by saying: "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.'⁸¹⁵ That which does not measure up to our distorted standards, we call "poor" or "weak." The Holy Spirit uses the word, in the first place, ironically, but also with the purpose to awaken in us a passion for souls, and to make us look at people as God's creatures who are in danger of being lost eternally.

In Hebrew the word *dal* is in the singular. This may be one of the great hidden lessons of this verse. God does not speak about a group of people who fall behind, but about one single individual. This does not only mean that we should look at people as individuals, but particularly, that we fix our attention upon the man Jesus Christ. He not only identified Himself with people who do not meet our standards, but He does not even meet our standards Himself. Isaiah prophesied about Him: "He had nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him

⁸¹⁰ Matt. 18:1-6

⁸¹¹ Mark 10:42-45

⁸¹² Luke 10:30-37

⁸¹³ I Sam. 10:21-24

⁸¹⁴ I Sam. 16:6,7

⁸¹⁵ James 2:1-9

not.”⁸¹⁶ In his epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul speaks about the foolishness of the crucifixion of Jesus.⁸¹⁷ In Jesus Christ God turns our standards and measurements upside-down. Or rather, He demonstrates that our thoughts and evaluations are wrong. Blessed is the man who discovers this himself. God’s beatitude pertains to all who have come to the conclusion that they owe their salvation to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. If we see in the opening statement of this psalm only a wish of blessing for those who demonstrate social concern, we miss the point. Love for our neighbor has value only if it is based upon the love of Christ.

The promises in verses 1-3 are for those who are born again. Five things are promised: 1- deliverance, 2- protection, 3- honor, 4- victory, and 5- grace in suffering. All this is rather paradoxical.

1- First of all, there are “times of trouble,” or as some versions put it: “the day of trouble.” This day will find its culmination in the end times. But there are in the history of this world many days that precede the last day, which could bear the name “the day of trouble.” God does not say that He will keep us from trouble, but He promises to deliver us. Sickness, death, want, and danger will be part and parcel of our life on earth, even if we live in fellowship with the Lord. But God promises to see us through. This does not mean that we will not sustain any physical injury, but we will not be allowed to suffer spiritual damage. God never leads us into a dead end street. If we follow Him, all our experiences will mean progress, and we will be brought closer to the goal.

2- The promise of protection is closely connected to the preceding paragraph. Deliverance points in the direction of the goal to be reached. We need protection while we are on the way. To walk with God is the best assurance of safety we can ever receive. On a human level it is inconceivable that we would abandon someone we love, and for whom we assume responsibility; therefore, it should be unthinkable that God would forsake us since He guarantees our safety.

3- The honor. Most translations render the phrase with: “He will be blessed.” TLB says: “He publicly honors...” The Hebrew word is *’ashar*, which means, “to be straight, be level, right, happy, or to go forward, be honest.”

It seems incongruent to speak of honor, or blessing in this context. Who would want to honor us in a hostile world where we have to swim upstream? God honors us! Jesus says: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.”⁸¹⁸ No doubt, the angels will do the same. There is also, even in the heart of one who does not admit God into his life, respect for people who are honest and who follow the Lord sincerely. Christianity has received a bad name in this world, not because of the lives of real Christians, but because of the hypocrisy and inconsistency of people who are not what they claim to be. A person who has given the reins of his life into God’s hands is honorable. This honor will eventually take on concrete form.

4- Victory is expressed in the phrase: “He will ... not surrender him to the desire of his foes.” We maintain that, here too, those foes are not primarily human beings but demons, which are our archenemies. He who has put himself under the protection of Jesus Christ is no longer subject to the authority of the Evil One.

Yet, the outward appearance is against us. It looks as if the devil can do with us as he likes. From the book of Job, however, we learn that limits have been imposed upon Satan, which he cannot overstep. This means that we are no longer slaves of the devil, because of the threat of death that hangs over us. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”⁸¹⁹ Through His death and resurrection, Jesus changed our relationship with death. Therefore, if there is deliverance in death, there is hope in any dismal circumstance in life, in oppression, and in persecution. When Jesus says: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,”⁸²⁰ He does not mean that men cannot kill the body. He Himself was nailed to the cross by human hands. But this meant the defeat of the devil. What men do unto us brings about their own destruction. How then can we say that we are the victims?

5- Grace in suffering. We run into difficulties if we interpret vs. 3 as if God heals all sickness. Inasmuch as He does not spare us all other kinds of suffering, He does not always keep us from getting sick either. I believe in divine healing, and I have some personal experience in it. This verse seems to say that there are sicknesses that will not be taken away from us. What changes is not the condition of the body, but the

⁸¹⁶ Isa. 53:2^b,3

⁸¹⁷ See I Cor. 1:18-25

⁸¹⁸ John 12:26

⁸¹⁹ Heb. 2:14,15

⁸²⁰ Matt. 10:28^a

attitude of the patient. The NKJ renders this verse as follows: “The LORD will strengthen him on his bed of illness; you will sustain him on his sickbed.” Sickness has its bearing upon our spirit; our fellowship with God often suffers if we do not feel well. The Lord promises to sustain us in this condition. In sickness He changes depression into testimony. Some people are radiantly ill, and thus they give comfort to those who come to comfort them. God can show us that there are more important things in life than health. This does not mean that He does not heal, or that sickness and death exist according to His will; but there are cases in which God can do more with our sickness than with our health. “He who has ears, let him hear.”⁸²¹ It is important that, when we get sick, we ask God the question of what He intends with it, and that we thank Him for what He is doing with us, be it to heal us or to change us as we lie in bed.

2. David’s prayer for deliverance of those who do not love him vs. 3-12

The verses 4-12 form a commentary on the preceding verses. They describe David’s struggle as God changes his sickbed into a testimony couch. By introducing this section with the words “I said,” David puts this whole section in the past tense. All this is history. It is written from the vantage point of the deliverance God granted him. The healing he speaks about is an accomplished fact.

The connection that is made between sickness and sin in vs. 4 suggests that healing is, in the first place, a healing of the spirit. This, of course, has its effect upon David’s emotional and physical condition, but it does not, primarily, indicate physical healing. As we have seen, this was not the case in vs. 3 either. Because of his sins against God, David asked God to have mercy on him; that means forgiveness, healing, and rehabilitation. These are words of confession. Forgiveness of sin is the basis of all healing. What would it profit us, if we were physically healthy, but emotionally we were in knots, or our relationship with God was broken?

Spiritual healing and a normal functioning of our relationship with God also form the basis of our relationship with our fellowmen. The animosity David speaks about in verses 4-9 does not come from David; at least, that is not the way it is presented to us. The people who surround David hate him. We do not read that David loved his enemies, but all these verses breathe hatred. Man cannot live a normal life in such conditions; in order to lead a normal life one has to both receive and give love.

The enmity with which David sees himself surrounded has taken on both open and hidden form. There are people who rejoice in the fact that David is dying, others fake interest in his condition and are hypocritically friendly. One of the worst examples of hatred is betrayal by a bosom friend.

Jesus applied vs. 9 to Judas. Addressing His disciples, He said: “I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfill the scripture: ‘He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me. It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.’ Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon.”⁸²² Jesus’ quotation elevates this psalm to a higher level, and it makes David’s experience a picture of the suffering of our Lord. It also implies that the deliverance that was mentioned earlier is an image of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Human relations are put in the light of victory over death. This is the perspective in which we ought to see all of our relationships.

In vs. 10 it sounds as if David wants to repay evil with evil, but there is a biblical revenge that is more effective: repaying evil with good. Jesus advocates a perfect way to get back at people. In Matthew’s Gospel we read: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁸²³ And the Apostle Paul advises Christians: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but

⁸²¹ Matt. 13:9

⁸²² John 13:18,26

⁸²³ Matt. 5:38-48

leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."⁸²⁴ This is the way Jesus took revenge upon His enemies; that is "the wrath of the Lamb."⁸²⁵ The best way to avenge our enemies is to pray that the Lord will save them.

Jesus' attitude toward Judas would be worth a separate study, which is not within the scope of this meditation. Evidently, Jesus loved Judas because, in spite of the fact that He knew early on that Judas was a thief, He did not expose him immediately and remove him from the inner circle.

David's relationship with God, which is described with the words, "I know that you are pleased with me," is evinced in the twofold victory over David's enemy: an outward victory, and an inward one. His enemy does not triumph over him, and God upholds his integrity. These words can also be taken as a prophecy about Jesus Christ. It was because Jesus was a lamb without blemish or defect when He took upon Himself the sin of the world, that the devil was defeated and death was conquered. That which for David was a matter of forgiveness and cleaning was a birthright for Jesus. The result in both cases was the same: access to the Father, and being in His presence forever, that is eternal fellowship with God. There is no shortcut to this fellowship. It begins with having "regard for the weak," that is, seeing our Lord Jesus Christ, the "Man of Sorrows," and recognizing Him in our fellow human beings. It ends with unlimited communion with God, which is the highest form of relationship that can exist between two persons.

The doxology vs. 13

This doxology not only concludes this psalm, but the whole first book of the Book of Psalms. Each of the five books into which the Book of Psalms is divided ends with a doxology,⁸²⁶ psalm 150 being one great doxology that closes the whole Book of Psalms.

God is addressed here as "the LORD, the God of Israel," that is "YHWH, Elohim of Israel." YHWH is the name with which God revealed Himself to Moses, as "I AM WHO I AM."⁸²⁷ God calls Himself there: "The LORD, the God of your fathers-- the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."⁸²⁸ God reveals Himself to man for the purpose of redeeming him. If we would try to say everything about this subject that can be said, "I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written," to quote the Apostle John.⁸²⁹

In the name Elohim, we find an expression of the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth. God's revelation of Himself means that eternity penetrates the time and space in which we live. Initially, that is before man fall into sin, there was not contrast between eternity and time. Death made the relationship of the two a paradox. In God's revelation of Himself, the union is reestablished. That is the reason it has become possible for man on earth to send praises up to heaven, which will resound eternally above. It is a great miracle that a mortal man on earth can open his mouth and say: "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen." And that he can confirm this with the highest oath of "Amen and Amen!"

There is also in these words the acknowledgment that God reveals Himself in this world through the people of Israel, particularly through Israel's greatest Son. YHWH, Elohim is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.



⁸²⁴ Rom. 12:17-21

⁸²⁵ See Rev. 6:16

⁸²⁶ See Ps. 72:18,19; 89:52; 106:48; and 150:6

⁸²⁷ Ex. 3:14

⁸²⁸ Ex. 3:15

⁸²⁹ John 21:25