

BOOK II
PSALM 42-72
PSALM FORTY-TWO

For the director of music. A maskil of the Sons of Korah.

- 1** *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.*
- 2** *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*
- 3** *My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*
- 4** *These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.*
- 5** *Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and*
- 6** *my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon-- from Mount Mizar.*
- 7** *Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.*
- 8** *By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me-- a prayer to the God of my life.*
- 9** *I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I grieve about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"*
- 10** *My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*
- 11** *Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

The first psalm in the second part of the Book of Psalms, the part we called "The Exodus Book," is composed by the Sons of Korah. They are, undoubtedly, the descendants of the Levite Korah who perished in the rebellion against Moses.¹ In the days of David they had become gatekeepers at the temple.² The Holy Spirit had given them gifts that far surpassed their abilities necessary to fulfill their daily tasks. They had not become professional musicians, like the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun,³ but as good amateurs, they had mastered the art of praising God with their poetical gifts.

Their duties took to the gates of the temple, but the topic of this psalm speaks about a man who is banished from the temple, and who finds himself in "the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon ... Mount Mizar." God's presence here is expressed in terms of a localized and topographical revelation. This reminds us of Jesus' answer to the woman of Samaria, in John's Gospel: "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."⁴ Worship of God is not bound to any place. This psalm by the sons of Korah is a psalm of people who stand at the gate of worship. It is a hymn of people who have lost the sense of God's presence. The psalm is the first in a series of eight.⁵ We further find the Psalms 84,85,87 and 88 attributed to the sons of Korah.

In his commentary *The Psalms*, George Knight suggests that the main character in this psalm is a woman who, during an invasion by the Philistines, was captured and carried off to be sold as a slave in the Gaza Strip. This, of course, is mere conjecture. We do better to interpret this psalm as an expression in physical images of spiritual truths. The thirst is a spiritual thirst, and the captivity is spiritual, although physical absence from Jerusalem is not excluded.

The first image shows us a hunted deer dying of thirst. The English word "deer" does not indicate the sex of the animal, but the Hebrew *'ayal* gives us a picture of strength. *Strongs Definitions* says that it is "a stag or male deer." We can see the leader of the herd, whose death would leave the other animals in disarray. It shows the picture of someone who would leave a trail of sorrow behind if he were to perish spiritually. In our fellowship with God, we never feed upon Him for our own sake alone. If we go thirsty,

¹ See Numbers 16:1-35

² See I Chr. 26:1,2

³ See I Chr. 25:1-8

⁴ John 4:21-24

⁵ See Psalms 42-49

others will suffer the consequences also. Our prayer ought always to be: "Lord, bless me, so I can be a blessing." He who only thirsts after God for his own fulfillment does not understand what is at stake. When God blessed Abraham, He had the salvation of the whole world on His mind. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."⁶ And when Jesus invited the thirsty souls to come and drink, He said: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."⁷ The greatest satisfaction consists of the flowing through of the blessing.

Our foremost problem often is that our thirst is not intense enough. The Apostle John states twice in his Gospel that spiritual thirst is related to the fulfillment of Scripture. In the above quoted text, Jesus says: "As the Scripture has said,..." and when Jesus hangs on the cross, we read: "Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.'"⁸ Jesus' thirst was a fulfillment of Scripture.

The son of Korah recognized the danger that one could get so used to the presence of God, that his thirst would dry up. Thirst for God originates with God.

The question is what causes thirst? Physical thirst is a signal our body gives that it needs water, more than food. A man can live for days without food. Hunger will even disappear after a few days, but thirst only increases. Panting for God, for most people, is not a daily experience. Longing for God is, usually, not the passion of our lives, because of the presence of sin. Profound longing for fellowship with God can only exist on the basis of atonement for sin. A person who never confessed his sin, and who has never received forgiveness, can never pant for God in the way described in this psalm.

The psalm mentions an earlier stage in which fellowship with God was different. "These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng." At the time the sons of Korah composed this psalm, it was a known fact that God was omnipresent. The fact that Jerusalem was the seat of God's revelation did not mean that a person who traveled abroad would lose his salvation. But one could not experience this collective fellowship with God, this going "with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng," while being away. So, the point here is not an individualistic enjoyment of spiritual blessings, but the functioning of the body of Christ; the fellowship of believers who love one another in the presence of God.

In Jesus' invitation to come and drink, we read the similarity of drinking and the fullness of the Holy Spirit. We read: "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."⁹ The baptism by the Holy Spirit makes us members of the body of Christ. 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."¹⁰ We do not receive the Holy Spirit as isolated individuals, but only in fellowship with one another. Panting after God, therefore, is not a desire for personal fulfillment alone, but a deep longing for the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the fellowship of believers.

There are also elements of a witness in this psalm. There may be people around us who say: "We cannot discover God in your lives; there are no supernatural elements that serve as an explanation for your conduct." The world has a fine intuition that tells them that lives of individual Christians, and the fellowship of the saints ought to be a manifestation of God's presence. As Christians, we know that we ought to lead that kind of life, but that it is impossible on a natural level. Thirst for God, therefore, is a cry for help; it is an acknowledgment that, without the miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we will not be able to live as we should. When Elisha stood at the border of the Jordan River, with Elijah's cloak in his hands, he cried: "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?"¹¹ Unless there is in our lives a demonstration of the power of God, we will make no impression on the world around us.

The psalm speaks about "the living God." Thirst is a form of dying. A man cannot live without water. The difference between God and idols is not only that He is the living God, but also that He is the

⁶ Gen. 12:2

⁷ John 7:37,38

⁸ John 19:28

⁹ John 7:39

¹⁰ I Cor. 12:13

¹¹ II Kings 2:14

source of all life. To drink from this fountain means to be alive, as David says: 'For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.'¹²

The person who speaks in this psalm finds himself far from Jerusalem, far from the place of God's revelation. We have to remind ourselves again that this psalm is composed by the gatekeepers of the temple in Jerusalem. It sounds contradictory that one would stand at the gate of the sanctuary, and speak as if being abroad in a foreign country, but a closer look will reveal a deep lesson. Even the high priest who, on the Day of Atonement, sprinkled the blood on the cover of the ark, did not stand before the throne of glory, but only before a representation of reality. Even we, who know God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ, and who know that God has spoken His last word in Him, "we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord," to use the words of the Apostle Paul.¹³ Our thirst for God will never be completely satisfied in this life on earth. Our thirst is for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thirst for the fulfillment of our hope. Every fulfillment, and refreshment on earth is a down payment on the eternal returns that await us. Our thirst will never be quenched completely on earth.

We can analyze the first five verses of this psalm with these three questions: "When?" "Where?", and "Why?" "When can I go and meet with God?" is a question that asks how long the existing condition will last. "Where is your God?" is a mocking question asked by the enemies of the poets. And the psalmists themselves ask the question: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?"

As we have seen before, our present condition is not lasting. God may put us to the test for a time, but He never forsakes us. The question "Where is your God?" is a legitimate one, but the world does not have the right to ask us this question; we are the ones who should ask it ourselves. It is unhealthy for a person to live in the past, but we also should not belittle the experiences we had with God in the past either. In a sense, our Bible reading is a form of digging in the past; it means a falling back on what God has done for us, and for others, which is often the best defense against the attacks of the Evil One. Even though going "with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng" is something that took place in the past, it is something that really happened. It is not a figment of our imagination. Our enemy wants to make us believe that we imagine things, but he himself knows better, otherwise he would not attack us on this point. The writers of this psalm conclude that, if praising God in times past was a reality, it will be a possibility for the future also. They, therefore, ask themselves the question the cause of this depression. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?"

There is a difference between panting for God and this depression. In these stanzas the poets say three things about the soul: "my soul pants for you, O God," "I pour out my soul," and "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" All three images are particularly expressive. The intent is to show that a man's whole being is involved. This is no mere intellectual analysis of the situation. The head, the heart, and the will are all deeply involved. There is an overwhelming longing for God, in which the emotions play a major role; the tears prove this. The pouring out of the soul stands for a complete investigation of all the motives; no hiding places are left unturned. And, finally, there is a demonstration of faith, expressed in the words: "Put your hope in God." This hope is the turning point of the man's experience. The description of this crisis is very intense. It is the crisis in the heart of men who are gatekeepers at the temple.

The second stanza, from the verses 6-11, continues the same theme, expressed in different pictures, with one exception. The downcast soul is an image of defeat and depression. The human soul is not made to be downcast, but to stand up straight. If a flower turns to the sun, it does what flowers are supposed to do. In the same way human beings should not drop their heads. We have seen already that the person described in this psalm is not in Jerusalem, but in the "land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon--from Mount Mizar." We do not know if this is a topographical designation or an expression of being "away from the Lord." In both cases it means that there is a distance between this person and God's revelation. The fact that, in the next verse there is mention of "all your waves and breakers," which probably means the Mediterranean, would indicate a spiritualization. One can hardly be to the East of Jerusalem and to the West of it at the same time. The person in the psalm sees himself as an exile, and a drowning man, and one who is shipwrecked. How can one be drowning and parched at the same time?

There is a remarkable similarity between verse 7 and the prayer of Jonah from inside the fish. Jonah may have had this psalm in mind when he prayed. Both here and in Jonah's prayer we find thoughts of being banished from God's presence, and the danger of drowning. The psalmists suggest here that man is

¹² Ps. 36:9

¹³ II Cor. 5:6 (RSV).

in danger of dying when God's revelation ceases to be. But, both in this psalm as in Jonah's experience, man passes through death without being harmed by it. Yet, death is our enemy. The devil used to have the key of death and Hades, but the waves and the breakers that swept over both the psalmists and over Jonah are God's waves. "All your waves and breakers have swept over me." There is a difference between dying, and the experience of God's death; dying for God's sake means death and resurrection. A man will only have his life when he loses it. So, in final analysis, these verses speak about the resurrection of Christ. The man who puts his trust in God will not drown. God's waves and breakers may sweep over me, "By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me-- a prayer to the God of my life."

In the previous verses the psalmists went back into the past, to find comfort in difficult situations, here they reach forward. They put their hope again in God. The NIV says: "By day the LORD directs his love." The KJV reads: Yet the LORD will command his lovingkindness in the daytime." Both mean that God will show us how much He loves us. It is an intimate expression of the personal experience of God's love which remains true day and night. During the day we may be conscious of God's love, but at night our world takes on other forms. When it gets dark, our senses cease to be stimulated by our surrounding and we are thrown back upon ourselves. If we can sing and pray in the dark, we demonstrate that God's grace has really had its effect on us. At night our true self will come out. The song we sing is God's song, which means that it does not originate within ourselves. It is the Lord who triumphs over the darkness within us. We are correct if we identify darkness with death. "At night his song is with me-- a prayer to the God of my life," therefore, is a confession that the Lord has conquered death for us.

The repetition of the verses 3-5 in verses 9-11 places the situation in quite a different light. In the first instance the phrase is introduced by the words: "My tears have been my food day and night," but the second time we read: "I say to God my Rock ..." This changes the refrain into a challenge. The mortal suffering of the bones, or as the KJV puts it "As with a sword in my bones..." caused by the taunting of the enemies, has a different effect upon the person who learned to sing to God in the middle of the night, than upon the man who finds himself away from the Lord in "the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon--from Mount Mizar."

Outwardly nothing has changed, but inwardly a great victory has been won. As always, change is caused by an encounter with God, and not by a change in circumstances. Before anything changes around us, we ourselves change.

PSALM FORTY-THREE

1 Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; rescue me from deceitful and wicked men.

2 You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

3 Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell.

4 Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.

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

A footnote in the NIV reads: "In many Hebrew manuscripts Psalms 42 and 43 constitute one psalm." Why it is given a separate number in our Bibles is not clear. Some phrases are identical in both psalms. Vs. 2 in this psalm, for instance, corresponds with vs. 9 in Ps. 42, and the last verses in both psalms are identical. Yet, there are great differences between the two: the emphasis in Ps. 43 is on another kind of separation and abandon.

In vs. 1, the psalmist finds himself facing a wicked majority, and he asked to be vindicated. The words: "Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation," are a plea for justice. The KJV reads: "Judge me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation." The language is judicial. Satan sometimes makes use of judicial language, when he plays the role of "the accuser of our brothers."¹⁴ We face the horrible reality that he, who is the personification of all injustice, uses a form of legal persecution in order to drag people into a lost eternity.

Back to the beginning! This psalm was written also by the son of Korah, the gatekeepers in the temple. In the previous psalm they described the experience of a man who was banned from God's presence. They indicated that a person could stand at the entrance of the temple, and yet be endlessly removed from God's revelation of Himself. Here, they seems to say that such people form a minority.

Being Levites, they form the bridge between God and the people they serve, and as such they are being rejected. As far as the majority is concerned, it makes no difference whether God is in their midst or not. The NIV uses the phrase "an ungodly nation." The Hebrew uses two words: *lo'*, which is a negative, like "no," or "not," and *chaciyd*, which means "pious." *Vine's Expository Dictionary* describes the word as: "one who is pious, godly."... Basically, *hasid* means one who practices *hesed* ('loving-kindness'), so it is to be translated the 'pious' or 'godly one.' The word's first biblical occurrence is in <Deut. 33:8> where it represents a human being: 'Give to Levi thy Thummim, and thy Urim to thy godly one' (RSV). The word appears in <Ps. 32:6>: 'For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found...' The word is applied to God in <Ps. 145:17>: 'The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works.' This noun is derived from the noun *checed*." The masses come to the temple and participate in the rituals, and the worship services, but there is no visible fruit in the lives of the individuals. Their relationship with God is not such that they bear fruit.

The average person continues to live in his old condition, wherein he was under the power of sin, and where he gave in to his own sinful tendencies. The Levites who kept watch at the gates of the temple felt threatened by this majority, and they called to God to vindicate their position. They saw the danger of being swept away in the current. We could translate their prayer with: "O God, keep me standing through your righteousness." It is this pressure that makes them feel as if they are forsaken, and removed from God's revelation. Just as in the previous psalm, the image is used of a physical distance between man and the place of God's revelation is employed. As there, so here, we can maintain that the separation is not necessarily literal but that it is a feeling of being far away.

We can understand this struggle of the Old Testament Levite; he knows the reality of God's revelation, and he believes that God is truly present between the cherubs above the cover of the ark, as Scripture says: "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."¹⁵ But the Levite must also have had this hard to define feeling that the symbol stood for more than he could comprehend. This must have been

¹⁴ See Rev. 12:10

¹⁵ Ex. 25:22

the reason for the feeling of being unfulfilled of one who fled to God under the pressure of his interhuman relations. We, who are in Jesus Christ, understand that he who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. This deep satisfaction, which is ours, could only be divined by the Levites.

The Korahites describe this situation as a double attack: being forsaken by God to whom they had fled, and being oppressed by the enemy, threatened by death itself, so that they are like people who are mourning. This paradox has no basis in the reality in which a child of God lives, but it is a vivid expression of their feelings. Our experience of reality can sometimes be rather strange. As New Testament Christians we may quote the Apostle Paul by saying: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"¹⁶

I cannot read this psalm without remembering the story of a Dutchman who, during World War II, was led away to the firing squad by the Nazi, because he had hidden Allied pilots who had parachuted over Holland, when their plans were shot down. Going to his death he sang the hymn based on these verses:

"Send forth your light and your truth,
let them guide me;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.
Then will I go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight."

What a way to go!

If light and truth are the elements which lead us to the place of God's revelation, then it is not a physical but a spiritual distance that separates us from God. The separation is not caused by deportation but by darkness and lies. More than anyone else in the New Testament the Apostle John emphasizes that God is light, and that light is synonymous with holiness. God leads us through life by making us partakers of His holiness, which is the fulness of His being. The Holy Spirit within us will ultimately make us what He is. We are being led by the glory of the Lord. God Himself is the measure of all truth. Everything that conforms to His being is truth; everything that deviates from Him is a lie. And if God's light and truth guide us through life, it means that God Himself goes with us. Moses said to God: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here."¹⁷ We cannot do with less than that. The Father literally sent His light and truth in Jesus Christ. When the Word became flesh, light shone in the darkness, and the Word was full of grace and truth.¹⁸ The Prologue of John's Gospel is one great commentary on this truth. The coming of our Lord Jesus Christ was the answer of the prayer of the Korahites. According to the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, one of the purposes of Christ's coming into the world was to bring many sons to glory.¹⁹ Jesus brings us back to the real altar, to the heavenly Jerusalem.

For us, who have come to know Him, the altar is not only the place where the Lord of glory was crucified for our sins, but also the place where we were crucified with Him. It is the place where we give ourselves to Him, spirit, soul, and body, the place where we burst out in unrestrained praise. At the altar we acknowledge God as "God my exceeding joy."²⁰ The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is, at the same time, the awful abyss of human depravity, of demonic activity, of unselfish abandon, and of victorious love. Our song of praise contains both the dissonance, and the harmony of this mystery. There is nothing cheap in going to the altar of God. Our song of praise will cost us almost as much as it cost Him. The place of worship is full of blood, and death, and life, and joy.

If we understand this, we will say to ourselves: "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God..." Our struggle will always be in applying the truth of the cross to the present time in which we live. The coal of the altar has to touch our lips, or any other part of our life that is in need of being touched.

So this forty-third psalm and third stanza of psalm forty-two, with the question: "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" becomes a challenge by the minority that knows intimate fellowship with God, to the majority that urges us to serve God, but does not bring forth fruit, and even to the people who live a lie. Those people will probably rediscover this psalm during the great tribulation.

¹⁶ Rom. 8:31

¹⁷ Ex. 33:15

¹⁸ See John 1:5,14

¹⁹ See Heb. 2:10

²⁰ RSV

PSALM FORTY-FOUR

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. A *maskil*.

- 1** *We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago.*
- 2** *With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our fathers; you crushed the peoples and made our fathers flourish.*
- 3** *It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them.*
- 4** *You are my King and my God, who decrees victories for Jacob.*
- 5** *Through you we push back our enemies; through your name we trample our foes.*
- 6** *I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory;*
- 7** *but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame.*
- 8** *In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever. Selah*
- 9** *But now you have rejected and humbled us; you no longer go out with our armies.*
- 10** *You made us retreat before the enemy, and our adversaries have plundered us.*
- 11** *You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations.*
- 12** *You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale.*
- 13** *You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us.*
- 14** *You have made us a byword among the nations; the peoples shake their heads at us.*
- 15** *My disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered with shame*
- 16** *at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me, because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge.*
- 17** *All this happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant.*
- 18** *Our hearts had not turned back; our feet had not strayed from your path.*
- 19** *But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness.*
- 20** *If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god,*
- 21** *would not God have discovered it, since he knows the secrets of the heart?*
- 22** *Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.*
- 23** *Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.*
- 24** *Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?*
- 25** *We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.*
- 26** *Rise up and help us; redeem us because of your unfailing love.*

In this psalm we are faced with a historical problem. If we maintain that this psalm was written by the Korahites, that is during the reign of David and Solomon, then it becomes difficult to place the verses 9-16 in this period, at least not as a description of a prevailing condition of that time. Yet, we do not want to assume that the psalm was written during the Babylonian captivity, and predated to the time of the Korahites, because in that case the verses 17-21 would be out of place. From the writings of that time, that is in the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, we get the impression that the Jews who were in captivity knew quite well why all this had happened to them. The only way to escape the snares of Higher Criticism is to treat this psalm as a prophecy, which looks back in the past, and forward to the future, and applies this to the present.

True prophecy is three dimensional: it does not pertain only to the future, but also to the past and the present. That which God did in the past, and the witness of the previous generations, ought to be of great importance to us in our present relationship with God. He, who does not see his life in historical perspective, does not know where he goes, and consequently, he does not know his own identity.

God performed great miracles for Israel. The exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the desert, and the entrance into Canaan can only be explained by supernatural intervention. The meaning of these facts of salvation went far beyond the comprehension of the Israelites. God did much more than liberate a group of people from slavery, and give them a country to live in, and an identity as a nation; He set up the people of Israel as a monument of His righteousness in this world, which meant both judgment, and glorification. Egypt and Canaan fell under God's judgment; Israel was redeemed and rehabilitated. But the ultimate goal was the coming of the Messiah, the salvation of the world, and the renewal of the whole of creation. Who can ever understand the cosmic proportions of the acts of salvation God performs in the lives of His people?

The sons of Korah who wrote this psalm were discouraged. They found no reason whatsoever in the circumstances of their lives to praise God. They, therefore, did not see any future hope for themselves, or for their people. They did, consequently, the most reasonable thing a man can do, that is, they went back to the past to recall what God had done yesterday, in the preceding years and ages.

If we believe, what the author of the epistle to the Hebrews says: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,”²¹ we should, logically, ask ourselves who Jesus was yesterday. He is the God who saved us, and who called us. He is the God of Hudson Taylor, and George Mueller. He is the God who saved the Netherlands from Spanish tyranny, and who destroyed the Armada with His breath. He is the God of the martyrs who were burned on the stake. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The difference between the Old Testament and the New is probably nowhere as profound as in the opening verses of this psalm and those of the Apostle John’s first epistle. The Korahites said: “We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us ...” John writes: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life....”²² In the New Testament, not only is the generation gap bridged, but also the shadow has become reality. In the psalm people speak about what they have heard from others; John speaks as an eyewitness. The conquest of Canaan was an image of the resurrection from the dead, not the reality of the new life itself. In this psalm, the Korahites grope for this reality which is our heritage. They appeal to legends and stories that had been transmitted from generation to generation. They had to go back in history some 500 years to find the picture of Jesus Christ. We, however, have fellowship with the living Lord who dwells in us through the Holy Spirit.

The Israelite knew that he lived in Canaan, and that he was born there. He did not accept this fact as a matter of course; he knew that God had performed a great miracle to bring this about. He may have asked himself why God had chosen him above others in this world. All those considerations would have been an indication of a healthy, and realistic philosophy. The historical facts mentioned in this psalm are recorded in the book of Joshua. The name Joshua, or Jehoshua, is the same name as Jesus: “YHWH saves.” The book of Joshua is in the Old Testament what the Four Gospels are in the New.

The sons of Korah are correct in their interpretation of history. They understood that the conquest of Canaan and the subjection of the original inhabitants were more than an invasion of one nation by another nation. They realized that it had been no “struggle 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.”²³ They knew this because the power their ancestors had received to do what they had to do surpassed all human abilities. The conquest of Canaan had been due to God’s supernatural intervention. It was not the Israelites who had dried up the water of the Jordan River, or who made the walls of Jericho crumble. It was not Joshua who had caused the sun to stand still.²⁴ It was God’s mighty miracles that were at the basis of the great victory. Israel’s weapons had very little to do with the victory.

This also makes the difference, in our view of the conquest of Canaan, between human tyranny and God’s judgment over people who were totally corrupt. Israel was guided to Canaan by God, because the sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure, as God had predicted to Abraham.²⁵ The conquest of Canaan had been nothing more than the kicking in of an open door. God had already conquered Canaan before the Israelites entered it. In that respect, this period of world history is an image of the victory we have in Jesus Christ. Our victorious life is, in fact, nothing more than our standing upon the victory of Christ and our holding this position.

In the verses 4-8 the psalmists draw a line from the ancestors to their own generation, from ancient history to the present, which gives meaning to history. If the facts of salvation, which are recorded in the past, do not form the foundation of our salvation, we have failed to understand their significance.

Calling God “my King” presupposes an act of surrender, a subjection of oneself to authority, and a promise of obedience. Interestingly, the name Jacob is used here for Israel. Jacob is the name of the one who tripped others, the deceiver, the man who used ruses to achieve his goals. The use of this name places salvation in a different light. The original Jacob was delivered from himself because he confessed his sin and asked for forgiveness. As the prophet Hosea says: “He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he

²¹ Heb. 13:8

²² I John 1:1

²³ See Eph. 6:12

²⁴ See Josh. 3:14-17; 6:16-20, and 10:12-14

²⁵ See Gen. 15:16

wept and begged for his favor.”²⁶ Before the enemy outside can be conquered, the enemy inside has to be subjugated. God brings about deliverance if we ask Him. We cannot bring about our own salvation; He does it for us if we confess what we are, and beg for His grace. Once we are delivered from “self,” the devil has no more ground to stand on in our lives. If our hearts do not condemn us, the enemy outside will be conquered also.²⁷ God involves us in the victory over Satan, as the Apostle Paul says: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”²⁸ Much more is at stake than the forgiveness of our sins, and the salvation of our lives. Those are just elements of the cosmic struggle of which we are a part. God is in the process of crushing His archenemy by means of our life and testimony, and He uses our feet for this purpose.

So this psalm suggests that much more is involved than the conquest of Canaan, and the subjugation of people. The enemy which previous generations faced is, 500 years later, still active and on the attack. When this psalm was written, Canaan had already been securely in Israelite hands for centuries. It is as C. S. Lewis says in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: “Every century has a witch of the different color, but their goal is always the same.”

In the context of this battle, the psalmists say: “I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory.” Victory is in the blood of the Lamb, as we read in Revelation: “They overcame him [Satan] 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.”²⁹ Our share in the victory consists in the word of our testimony, and our willingness to give our lives for the Lord.

The fact that the psalmists do not trust in their bow or their sword does not make them pacifists. Israel did certainly use those weapons. There is, however, a difference between using the sword, and putting one’s trust in the sword. This principle applies to all facets of life. We can use money, and even build up reserves of it, without putting our trust in it. The Netherlands, for instance, does not owe its independence to the fact that it was victorious in battle, but to the covenant William the Taciturn had made with the Potentate of potentates.

God delivers us from our enemies, in whatever form they may present themselves to us. He elevates us and honors us, but He puts the devil to shame. If we praise and honor Him, He will praise and honor us.

The words “all day long,” and “forever” indicate that our praising God should be done under all circumstances. Expression of our gratitude should not depend upon our circumstances. Paul and Silas prayed and praised God in the middle of the night in prison.³⁰ This principle is evinced in the verses 9-16, where God has apparently abandoned His people.

The importance of this portion of Scripture lies in the fact that there was no period in Israel’s history in which they suffered defeat by enemies, or were deported to foreign countries, without their seeing this experience as a punishment for their sin. This fact makes it the more amazing that this psalm was written by the Korahites during the reign of David or Solomon, when Israel was in its golden age. We can, therefore, only interpret this psalm as a prophecy about Jesus Christ in His suffering and death. This supposition is reinforced by the fact that in vs. 15 the mode suddenly changes from plural to singular. It suggests that one takes the place of all. What happens to this one happens in the place of all; He takes upon Himself the disgrace of the whole nation. That which should happen to all the people comes down upon Him alone. We also find expressions in this psalm that are later used in other prophecies about the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus. We find the phrase “we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered” also in Isaiah’s prophecy: “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.”³¹ And the concept “You sold your people for a pittance, gaining nothing from their sale” is found in the payment Judas received for betraying Jesus.³² The disgrace, mockery, and derision are found in abundance at Jesus’ crucifixion. It is, therefore, an obvious conclusion that the Holy Spirit speaks here, in the first place, about the suffering that would be experienced by our Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁶ Hosea 12:4

²⁷ See I John 3:21,22

²⁸ Rom. 16:20

²⁹ Rev. 12:11

³⁰ See Acts 16:25

³¹ Isa. 53:7

³² Matt. 26:14-16

Also, the protestation of innocence, which we find in the verses 17-21, point toward Him who had no sin and who was made sin for us.³³ The matter goes in both directions: He took upon Himself our iniquities, in order that His righteousness would be imputed to us. It may be true that our protestation of innocence is not a proven fact, but it is based on judicial truth.

The fact that humanity suffers pain, and sickness, and death has always been an unsolved mystery. This problem is even more acute for those who, through regeneration, have become a new creation. Once sin is atoned for, one would expect that the curse would also be abolished. Yet, even people who have eternal life die. There are no simple answers to the problem of pain. This psalm poses the question in its most urgent form. Most people can understand at least some of the truth, when looking at the sufferings of Christ. "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows."³⁴ But why then do we, as Christians, still bear some of the burdens? We may find some of the answer in vs. 22: "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." The Apostle Paul uses this quote, and puts it in one of the most triumphant settings in his epistle 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."

The tension, in the life of a child of God, between suffering and glory exists for the Lord's sake. The psalmists says, by way of a confession of faith: "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." The Hebrew word translated here with "yet" is *kiy*, which the KJV translates with "yea." In this context it can be considered as an equivalent of "amen," a confirmation, and an affirmation of the truth. The great question "why," with which the previous stanzas were filled, is not answered in this affirmation, but a solution is found in surrender to the will of the Lord. Our "amen" to the will of Jesus usually makes our questions melt away. We begin to understand that God wants to reach His goal in us through our pain, and that without this pain the goal could not be reached.

Psalm 44:22 is one of the most profound verses in the whole Bible. The topic is not, primarily, physical death, but the surrender of "self" into death. Jesus repeatedly spoke about self denial and surrender of one's life. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."³⁵

Facing death *all day long* indicates an attitude of life. The remarkable thing is that, facing death, we enter enemy territory. We were all born in enemy country, like Moses and the Israelites in Egypt. From the beginning, the devil planned to murder us. God saves our lives, and then He sends us back into the devil's empire to be slaughtered by the enemy. But our agreement to this, our "amen" will ultimately mean the defeat of the murderer. This paradox surpasses our comprehension, but we can witness that through the life, the suffering, the death, and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, victory is complete and eternal. "The one who can accept this should accept it." It is in this context that the Apostle Paul says: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."³⁶ The goal is not to win the battle, but to destroy the enemy. Christians are like sheep to be slaughtered. The devil can attack us, and kill us at will; at least it seems like that. This he did with the Lamb of God. The day will come, however, when he, and all his followers will panic and flee from the wrath of the Lamb. "They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'"³⁷ Our death will mean his eternal undoing, but we will enter life and eternal glory.

³³ See II Cor. 5:21

³⁴ Isa. 53:4

³⁵ Matt. 10:39; 16:24,25

³⁶ Rom. 8:37

³⁷ Rev. 6:16

Can a man wake up God? This may be one of the more comical anthropomorphisms in the Bible. Another psalm is closer to the truth, when the poet says: “He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”³⁸ The living God is not subject to moments of inattention, or diminishing of consciousness. His omniscience, and energy are eternal, uninterrupted, and absolute attributes. Yet, the Lord of glory died, and He lay in a grave in the sleep of death. The impossible and the inconceivable did happen with our Lord Jesus Christ.

The psalmists, of course, did not mean to say literally that God had fallen asleep. They used a human expression to vent their frustration under the pressure of circumstances. It seemed as if God was no longer there. He did not answer. Jesus’ disciples panicked, and they woke up Jesus, saying: “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?”³⁹ We could, of course, analyze this, and find a psychological explanation, but that would not be fair. When people are under pressure of overwhelming circumstances and lives are in danger, it is no time to approach problems from a scientific angle. The devil knows this, and he exploits this kind of situation to the full. It is through his propaganda that we lose sight of reality. We have little or no defense against the false appearance of circumstances. Jesus answered the panicking disciples: “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?”⁴⁰ We are helped through such episodes, not by what our eyes can see, but by what our hearts know to be true because of our fellowship with the Father. Fear can only be healed on a spiritual level.

The Holy Spirit uses the words of the psalmists: “Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself!” to call for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Much more is involved than an effort to surmount an episode of depression. The psalmists say: “We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground.” They want to be delivered from being dust and returning to dust. This is a prayer for immortality. They understand that God created man to live, not to die. It is true that our bodies are formed from the dust of the earth, but as men, we are created in the image of God. We are more than dust if we fellowship with the Father. The devil uses the pressure of circumstances to make us believe that we are only dust. It is against this that the psalmists rebel. The psalmists cry out to God not to let this be. They cry for the resurrection, for revival, for eternal life. God has heard this cry which has sounded through the ages, and He has answered it in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus lays His right hand on the sons of Korah, and He says: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 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.”⁴¹ Does God sleep? Of course not!

³⁸ Ps. 121:3,4

³⁹ Mark 4:38

⁴⁰ Mark 4:40

⁴¹ Rev. 1:17,18

PSALM FORTY-FIVE

For the director of music. To the tune of "Lilies." Of the Sons of Korah. A *maskil*.
A wedding song.

- 1 *My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king; my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.*
- 2 *You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever.*
- 3 *Gird your sword upon your side, O mighty one; clothe yourself with splendor and majesty.*
- 4 *In your majesty ride forth victoriously in behalf of truth, humility and righteousness; let your right hand display awesome deeds.*
- 5 *Let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king's enemies; let the nations fall beneath your feet.*
- 6 *Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.*
- 7 *You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.*
- 8 *All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia; from palaces adorned with ivory the music of the strings makes you glad.*
- 9 *Daughters of kings are among your honored women; at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir.*
- 10 *Listen, O daughter, consider and give ear: Forget your people and your father's house.*
- 11 *The king is enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord.*
- 12 *The Daughter of Tyre will come with a gift, men of wealth will seek your favor.*
- 13 *All glorious is the princess within [her chamber]; her gown is interwoven with gold.*
- 14 *In embroidered garments she is led to the king; her virgin companions follow her and are brought to you.*
- 15 *They are led in with joy and gladness; they enter the palace of the king.*
- 16 *Your sons will take the place of your fathers; you will make them princes throughout the land.*
- 17 *I will perpetuate your memory through all generations; therefore the nations will praise you for ever and ever.*

This psalm is written in a major key. The sons of Korah sing a love song of the highest order. This is one of the most joyful hymns in the hymnal. Nobody knows, of course, what is meant by "To the tune of 'Lilies,'" but it seems as if no more suitable flower could have been picked to match the tone of this psalm. The lily surpasses any human garb in beauty. Jesus said: "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."⁴²

The subject of this psalm is the love between a bride and bridegroom on the day of their wedding. In the verses 1-9 the bridegroom, who is the king of the land, is the subject, and in the verses 10-17 the bride. We are not told at what occasion the song was composed, but Solomon's wedding with the daughter of Pharaoh seems to be the most logical event.⁴³

We could write above this psalm the words of the Apostle Paul: "This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church."⁴⁴ The symbolism of the psalm suggests more than a human wedding, even a royal wedding. There is quite a lot of resemblance between this psalm and the Song of Solomon. In the Song of Solomon, however the bride and groom are the main speakers, here the speaker is a third person, the court's composer. We are reminded of the words of John the Baptist about Christ: "The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete."⁴⁵

The real topic of this psalm is about the Lord Jesus and us. We are the bride. C. S. Lewis once said about God: "What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to

⁴² Matt. 6:28,29

⁴³ See I Kings 3:1

⁴⁴ Eph. 5:32

⁴⁵ John 3:29

it.”⁴⁶ The joy of the poet is about the joy of our fellowship with Christ. It is the song of John the Baptist; it is the joy of the angels who rejoice “in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”⁴⁷ That joy is theirs, and it is now complete. This joy is the contents of the blessing of God.

The psalm opens with the introduction of the poet, who describes his emotions: “My heart is stirred by a noble theme.” His joy runs over. It can happen that a subject will seize a poet, or a composer so passionately that he cannot contain himself. Frans Schubert is said to have written his lied *Fairy King*⁴⁸, with burning cheeks on a piece of scrap paper within only a few minutes. That is evidence of real inspiration. An artist produces something that is greater than he is. This psalmist proves that real art is purpose driven. There is no such thing as “art for art’s sake.” All things beautiful, everything that has artistic value, is written for “the King.” Bach wrote about his compositions: “Soli Deo Gloria,”⁴⁹ and Bruckner marked his last symphony with: “Dedicate to Dear God.”⁵⁰ In real art, man gives back to God what God had given to him. This requires an art form that strives for perfection. Dilettantes do not perform before kings. One does not become a “skillful writer” in one day either. Perfection demands patience, perseverance, and hard work. He who thinks that real art comes by itself is naï ve. With this introduction, the poet sets the tone for his poem. It is a beautiful thing that prophecy in the Bible is often so poetical.

Vs. 2 describes man, as God created him, not as we know him now, after the fall, besmirched with sin, and a prey of sickness and death. The psalmist depicts a man who knows no sin. In doing this, he draws our attention immediately to our Lord Jesus Christ. No Greek god can be compared to Him. As a man, Jesus must have been strikingly handsome, and virile. Amongst the billions born on earth, no one has ever been His equal. More than Saul, about whom it was said: “As he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others.”⁵¹ He surpasses everyone. We know nothing about Jesus’ physical appearance; at least there is no description of Him before His resurrection from the dead. John describes Jesus, as he saw Him in Revelation as: “Someone ‘like a son of man,’ dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”⁵²

We know that, during His life on earth, He proved to be more intelligent than the whole Jewish intelligentsia. Nobody ever succeeded in trapping Him. As a public speaker, He kept His audience spellbound to the point that His enemies forgot to arrest Him. John tells us: “Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him. Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, ‘Why didn’t you bring him in?’ ‘No one ever spoke the way this man does,’ the guards declared.”⁵³ The police, who had come to arrest Him in Gethsemane, fell to the ground. We read in John’s Gospel: “Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, ‘Who is it you want?’ ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ they replied. ‘I am he,’ Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground.”⁵⁴

The NIV renders vs. 2 with: “You are the most excellent of men.” Most other translations read: “You are fairer *than* the sons of men.”⁵⁵ The beauty of man is a divine quality. Since man is created in the image of God, the glory of God is reflected in the human body, both male and female. Artists and sculptors grope for this beauty in depicting the naked figure. Greek mythology, and other modes of art also strive to depict this. Human emotions, intelligence, and will, the look of the eye, and the expression of personality can all be traced to the personality of God. When the psalmists, therefore, use the expression “fairer than the sons of men” they do not speak of something that surpasses what man ought to be, but what he is. The concept of being human is used in the context of a fallen creation, as being sinful; and fairer means sinless. It is clear that King Solomon was far from being sinless, but at some points in his life he was an image of

⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis *That Hideous Strength*

⁴⁷ Luke 15:10

⁴⁸ *Erlkönig*

⁴⁹ To God Alone be Glory

⁵⁰ Dem lieben Gott gewitmet

⁵¹ I Sam. 10:23

⁵² Rev. 1:13-16

⁵³ John 7:32,45,46

⁵⁴ John 18:4-6

⁵⁵ See NKJ, RSV, ASV, KJV, NAS

“the Lord of glory.” Every love relationship between a husband and wife, and every sincere love song is a picture of the reality of Jesus Christ.

“Your lips have been anointed with grace” is a beautiful metaphor. It describes the king’s speech. There is in this simile a subtle suggestion that eloquence, and the content of words are not merely the product of human cleverness, but the result of divine intervention. God reinforces man’s word with an association of His grace, and He gives to it an appropriate form. The Hebrew word used here is *chen*, which *Strongs* defines as “graciousness, i.e. subjective (kindness, favor) or objective (beauty).”

In the context of this psalm, the expression is used for what the king says to his bride. We see a new perspective if we place these words against the background of what Jesus says: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”⁵⁶ The opening statement of the Sermon on the Mount also acquires new depth: “Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: ‘Blessed ...’⁵⁷ If we love the Lord, His Word will convey to us an experience of grace, and joy, and the grace of God will influence our own speech.

We should not take the following statement, “since God has blessed you forever,” to mean that God’s blessing would depend on our eloquence, but more that eloquence may be an indication of God’s blessing. We often fail to realize what it means to be blessed by God. We read that, at man’s creation, God blessed man. “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.’”⁵⁸ Blessing, there, meant fruitfulness and authority. The Jews of old saw in material prosperity and physical wellbeing an expression of God’s blessing. God’s blessing of Abraham, (“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing”),⁵⁹ expresses both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament definition of blessing. It meant for Abraham, both material prosperity and honor, or authority, as well as redemption from the curse in Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, blessing stands for salvation and rehabilitation. According to the Apostle Paul, the blessing of Abraham is the coming and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, by which we have become partakers of the divine nature. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul writes: “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”⁶⁰ In the context of this psalm, God’s blessing stands, undoubtedly, for the love between husband and wife, or between Christ and His church. This encompasses both the physical element of the Old Testament blessing, as well as the spiritual dimension of blessing in the New Testament. Ultimately, God’s blessing means that God gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ. So God has blessed us forever with eternal life. In order to keep things in the right perspective, we have to keep in mind that this psalm speaks about Jesus Christ. As a man He was the blessed one.

It would be easy to misinterpret the following images of the hero and his heroic acts. Weapons of destruction, conquests, and righteous wars reminds us all kinds of evil associations that are difficult to justify. If we think of Gideon, there is hardly any Bible character who had a poorer self-image than Gideon had. Yet, the angel of the Lord addressed him as “mighty warrior.”⁶¹ The call of God makes one a hero. We can hardly call Gideon’s victory an example of a war won by superior weaponry. He chased the Midianites with 300 clay jars, torches, and trumpets.⁶² Actually, the enemy defeated itself.

The presence of the enemy also is an important factor in the picture, which we cannot overlook. It is hard for a man to remain a pacifist if there is a murderer prowling around his house and who threatening the life of his wife and children. Many of God’s children have performed acts of heroism because they were prompted by the activities of the enemy. God’s victory makes us heroes. Many people, who were modest and inconspicuous, have turned into heroes, simply because “they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”⁶³ When the urge for survival ceases to dominate, heroism begins.

In the wars we know, the opposite is often the case. There it is a matter of killing before being killed. But in the spiritual warfare, being killed is not the most urgent matter to consider. In this psalm, the

⁵⁶ Rev. 2:7

⁵⁷ Matt. 5:2,3^a (NKJ)

⁵⁸ Gen. 1:28

⁵⁹ See Gen. 12:2

⁶⁰ Gal. 3:14

⁶¹ See Judges 6:12

⁶² See Judges 7:15-22

⁶³ Rev. 12:11

spiritual battle looms predominantly. Here too, “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.”⁶⁴ If the cause of Christ is characterized by truth, humility and righteousness, then the enemy we face stands for lies, pride, and injustice. It is impossible for us to love Christ and to experience His love for us, without being involved in this battle. We cannot share in Christ’s love without opposing the enemy relentlessly.

As a man, Jesus owes His glory to this warfare. The Apostle Paul shows us how Jesus attacked the enemy by emptying Himself, and by becoming obedient unto death, and that in this way He conquered the enemy.⁶⁵ Paul says: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.” In Christ we are partakers of this victory, and of His glory. If we seek honor, and influential positions in this world, we will not share in the glory to come. In the Roman empire, Jesus of Nazareth was a nobody, but in God’s reality He is King of kings, and Lord of lords.

The NIV reads in vs. 4: “Let your right hand display awesome deeds.” Most other versions use the verb “teach” here. The Hebrew word used is *yarah*, which literally means “to flow as water,” or “to point out,” or “to teach.” It would be appropriate, therefore, to say that study, and exercise are important factors in the Kingdom of Heaven. According to the writer of the Hebrew epistle, even Jesus had to learn obedience. We read: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”⁶⁶ Spiritual life is a matter of training. God’s arrows may be sharp, but we need exercise to use the bow. A Christian has to learn to become a good marksman, who can hit the hearts of men.

If we put things this way, it is clear that we are not speaking about the natural level, but about the spiritual, which is consistent with the overall message of the Bible. In Paul’s words: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”⁶⁷ John says about the risen Lord: “Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword.”⁶⁸ Those weapons are not weapons to kill but to make alive. However paradoxical this may sound, God borrows here images from man’s sick and sinful society to make us understand His spiritual realities.

It is also strange that, in our interpretation of these verses, we go back and forth between demons and men. At the same time, we do not lose sight 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.”⁶⁹ It is also clear that, in all this, the devil manipulates human beings; and it may be difficult to determine, in the life of every human being, what is directly the result of demonic influence, and what is not. A clear example of this is Peter who, at one moment spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the next instant allowed Satan to use his mouth.⁷⁰

In the days of David and Solomon, nations that practiced gruesome idolatry and sexual perversion were looked upon as personifications of the devil. In our present age, we believe that the lines can no longer be drawn that clearly; this belief is true to a certain extent, but the polarization augments rapidly. It is, therefore, important for Christians to identify clearly with the cause of Christ. We all ought to “ride forth victoriously in behalf of truth, humility and righteousness.” The world would be a different place if every Christian would identify one hundred percent with his Lord. If sinful men identify with the cause of evil, why would Christians not identify with Jesus?

This principle of identification is carried even further in the verses 6 and 7. We miss the point if we see in these verses only a prophecy about the Messiah as the Son of God. Jesus Christ is, of course, the main topic of these lines, but they do not speak about Him alone. The writer of the Hebrew epistle quotes these verses in his argumentation for the divinity of the Son,⁷¹ but the purport of the first two chapters of Hebrews, if not of the whole epistle, is that Jesus has become what we ought to have been, and which we will become by means of His atonement for our sins. Jesus Christ is God, whose throne will last for ever

⁶⁴ Eph. 6:12

⁶⁵ See Phil. 2:5-11

⁶⁶ Heb. 5:8

⁶⁷ II Cor. 10:4,5

⁶⁸ Rev. 1:16

⁶⁹ Eph. 6:12

⁷⁰ See Matt. 16:16-23

⁷¹ See Heb. 1:8,9

and ever. The Lamb is in the center of the throne,⁷² but we will reign with Him as kings.⁷³ God's plan is accomplished in Jesus Christ, and in all those who are in Christ.

The power of our Lord Jesus Christ is absolute and uncorrupted. It has been said that power corrupts man, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This may be true for fallen man, but it is not for Jesus Christ. Truth and righteousness are the foundation of His reign. His scepter is not merely a symbol of justice, but also the means of carrying out justice. God's character harbors both love and hatred, and both are absolute. God loves, with an eternal love, that which conforms to His character, and with an eternal hatred, He hates sin and everything else that is not congruent with His Being.

This love and hatred ought to exist in everyone's heart also. Someone has said: "He who says a strong 'Yes' should also say a strong 'No!'" We can only oppose sin with all that is within us, if we love the character of God with all our heart, soul, and strength. If we don't feel the same love of righteousness that God has, we will always be inclined to compromise with sin. Jesus' sinless nature cannot be detached from His love for the Father.

The statement: "Therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy" has a very profound significance. The Greek word for "the anointed" is *christós*, which is used for Jesus; it is derived from *chrío*, "I anoint." The Father has anointed the Son with the Holy Spirit, and has given to Him a human body. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."⁷⁴ The incarnation, and the subsequent suffering, death, and resurrection that resulted from it, are not mentioned in this psalm, but they are included in the anointing.

It is true, of course, that the Korahites speak here, in the first place, about the anointing of a man, probably Solomon, by means of which he became king of Israel. This means that a human being is addressed here as "Elohim." Elsewhere, the title is used for the judges of Israel, or the ministers of David's cabinet. "I said, 'You are 'gods'; you are all sons of the Most High.'"⁷⁵ Jesus quotes this verse in John's Gospel, and He said that those, to whom the Word of God has come, are called gods.⁷⁶ In doing so, He made a connection between the man's elevation, and His own divine status as Son of God. It amounts to the fact that, through the anointing of the Holy Spirit, man becomes a partaker of the divine nature. As Peter wrote: "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."⁷⁷ In a sense, this will make man equal to God in terms of glory and character. We will never reign as kings, if we are not gods. This truth is so great that it can bring about our fall, if we do not handle it with care. We will have to learn to cast our crowns before the throne, like the twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation, of whom we read: "The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, 'Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created.'"⁷⁸ Real glory is only confirmed to us if we surrender it. The safe thing to do is to fix our eyes upon Jesus, so that He can do the rest for us. He is the One the God, the Father, anointed with the oil of joy of the Holy Spirit above His companions. We are His companions "if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast."⁷⁹

It is interesting to see that the bridegroom's garments are described in terms of fragrance: myrrh, and aloes, and cassia. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* says about this: "His robes of state, wherein he appears, are taken notice of, not for their pomp, which might strike an awe upon the spectator, but their pleasantness and the gratefulness of the odors with which they were perfumed (v. 8): They smell of myrrh, aloes, and cassia (the oil of gladness with which he and his garments were anointed): these were some of the ingredients of the holy anointing oil which God appointed, the like to which was not to be made up for any common use <Exo. 30:23-24>, which was typical of the unction of the Spirit which Christ, the great high priest of our profession, received, and to which therefore there seems here to be a reference. It is the savour of these good ointments, his graces and comforts, that draws souls to him <Cant. 1:3-4> and makes

⁷² See Rev. 5:6; 7:15, 16 etc.

⁷³ See Rev. 2:21; 5:10 etc.

⁷⁴ John 1:14

⁷⁵ Ps 82:6

⁷⁶ See John 10:34,35

⁷⁷ II Pet. 1:4

⁷⁸ Rev. 4:10,11 (RSV)

⁷⁹ See Heb. 3:6

him precious to believers, <1 Pet. 2:7>.” As *Matthew Henry* remarks, the ingredients mentioned were specifically used in the preparation of the holy anointing oil, of which we read: “ Do not pour it on men’s bodies and do not make any oil with the same formula. It is sacred, and you are to consider it sacred. Whoever makes perfume like it and whoever puts it on anyone other than a priest must be cut off from his people.”⁸⁰ The use of this anointing oil elevated the king to the priesthood, a combination of offices that was not allowed in the Old Testament. Myrrh was used in burials. The mention of it evokes images of sorrow, and suffering. A parallel image would be that of Jesus, as He appears in Revelation, where John says: “He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.”⁸¹

The picture of the palaces adorned with ivory may refer to the throne of king Solomon, of which we read: “Then the king made a great throne inlaid with ivory and overlaid with fine gold. The throne had six steps, and its back had a rounded top. On both sides of the seat were armrests, with a lion standing beside each of them. Twelve lions stood on the six steps, one at either end of each step. Nothing like it had ever been made for any other kingdom.”⁸² But what are thrones of ivory in comparison with the one on which is seated the One whose appearance is of jasper and carnelian; the throne on which the Lamb reigns together with the Father? It is on the description of this throne that the hymn writer based his hymn: “Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe; only His great eternal love, made my Savior go.” We can say a hearty “amen” to the fact that the music of the strings makes the king glad! The king loves music. I am glad to realize that my love for classical music is somehow related to the Lord Jesus. We will be treated to an eternal concert in ivory palaces.

Vs. 9, which reads in the NIV: “Daughters of kings are among your honored women,” is difficult for us Westerners to interpret. There is a suggestion of polygamy in it. TLB, even, renders it with: “Kings daughters are among your concubines.” The Hebrew uses the word *b^ayikrowteykaa*, which has as root *yaqar*. *Strongs Definitions* defines this as “valuable ... clear, costly, excellent, fat, honorable women, precious.” A translation “loved ones” would be quite acceptable.

For us as twentieth century Christians, a monogamous marriage is the only acceptable marriage relationship. It seems, however, as if God objected less to polygamy in the Old Testament than we would have. God said to David: “I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.”⁸³ It becomes even more difficult if we discover that, in some instances, polygamy is presented as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. Would this be the case also in this psalm? I have no doubt about whether a monogamous marriage is God’s will for modern man. Objectively seen, we have to state that monogamy is better than polygamy. After all, polygamy degrades a woman. I also understand that a monogamous marriage relation is not God’s ultimate goal for man; sexual relations will cease to exist in the resurrection. Jesus said: “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.”⁸⁴ We should not think, though, that this will mean a lesser state. We will discover in heaven that the intimacy, and openness which was only possible in a relationship between husband and wife on earth, will govern all interpersonal relations. We will love the Lord, and all humans, and angels, as we have loved our spouses on earth, only in a greater and deeper, and more complete way. Some of this new dimension is expressed in this polygamous image. The “resurrection marriage” will be, both exclusive, as well as general. This, of course, does not give an excuse to pollute present marriages on earth with adultery, fornication, or extramarital affairs. “The one who can accept this should accept it.”⁸⁵

Vs. 9 also speaks about the supremacy of the bride; she is not put on the same level with the other princesses. The “gold of Ophir” is an external symbol for superior inner beauty. This verse forms the bridge to the next stanza in which the bride is directly addressed by the poet. Here the Holy Spirit speaks to the church through the mouth of the poet. In the book of Ruth, we find an illustration of what it means to “forget your people and your father’s house” in order to enter a world of new relationships. It means a leaving behind the old life, and a complete surrender to the new. Some of this principle of giving up the old to inherit that which is new, we find in the life of each Christian. We cannot live in two worlds at the same

⁸⁰ Ex. 30:32,33

⁸¹ Rev. 19:13

⁸² I Kings 10:18-20

⁸³ II Sam. 12:8

⁸⁴ Matt. 22:30

⁸⁵ See Matt. 19:12

time. The poet pleads with the bride for a complete surrender. Often, there are reservations in our surrender to the Lord; traces of the old life remain.

It is not bad, of course, to keep remembering one's people, and one's father's house. God does not require that we give up only that which is bad; a complete surrender to Him means giving up everything for Christ's sake. This does not mean either that we will have nothing left. " 'I tell you the truth,' Jesus said to [His disciples], 'no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.' "⁸⁶ The point is that we abandon inwardly those things that would detract our attention from the Lord. The poet, therefore, appeals to the senses of the bride: "Listen, O daughter, consider and give ear." Our relationship with the Lord is not like a blind date; there is no leap of faith; we don't commit intellectual suicide if we put on the altar all that we have and are. The only thing we have to take by faith is the fact that the king would be enthralled by our beauty because our senses cannot confirm this. It would be incompatible with our total surrender if we were conscious of our own perfections. Genuine sacrifices exclude a high opinion of ourselves. We come to the conclusion that what we give to God was not worth hanging on to. If God makes beauty out of ashes, that is His work. We can hardly be proud of something that we did not accomplish ourselves.

Real love means surrender. This is clearly expressed in a marriage relationship. The surrender of a woman to her husband does not prove any inferiority, but it is the fulfillment of her being. Peter says that Sarah called Abraham "master."⁸⁷ This did not mean that Abraham could walk all over his wife. The Genesis record clearly shows this was not the case. We read: "Then Sarai said to Abram, 'You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.' 'Your servant is in your hands,' Abram said. 'Do with her whatever you think best.' Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her."⁸⁸ And elsewhere: "The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, 'Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.' The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, 'Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' "⁸⁹ Sarah certainly did not lose her strong personality when she surrendered to Abraham. The surrender of a wife to her husband does, in no way, diminish her individuality. When the bride honors the bridegroom, and calls him "lord," she does not bow down before him as a slave. The Hebrew word is *shachah*, which is defined by *Strongs* as to "prostrate, especially reflexive, in homage to royalty or God." The KJV uses the word "worship" here. Worship does not debase a person. Being subjected to someone else does not demean. When a man works in a large concern, he is not a lesser person, because he is not the director of the works. The image portrays the reality that Christ is our Lord. We bow before Him, because we owe our life and our salvation to Him. That is how we receive His glory.

Love and obedience always go together in the Bible. Jesus said: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. ...If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."⁹⁰ And the Apostle John adds: "This is love for God: to obey his commands."⁹¹ Not only do love and obedience go hand in hand, but worship is part of that also. When the bride bows down before the bridegroom, she does more than submit herself. There ought to be some form of worship in every marriage relationship. We may not, of course, give to one another that which belongs only to God, but if God occupies the first place in our love and worship, our relationship with our spouse will reflect this.

This marriage of the princess to the king means a great exaltation of the princess in the eyes of her fellowmen. When a prince marries a girl from the people, as Prince Charles of England did, when he married Diana, it elevated a common girl to the rank of royalty. Diana was just an average, ordinary girl

⁸⁶ Luke 18:29,30

⁸⁷ See I Peter 3:6

⁸⁸ Gen. 16:5,6

⁸⁹ Gen. 21:8-12

⁹⁰ John 14:21,23

⁹¹ I John 5:3^a

until she married. Our relationship with God lifts us out of the mass of humanity to a position of royal privileges. On the one hand it is true that the world hates us, and the devil will inspire people to persecute us, but, on the other hand, many people will respect the manifestations of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives.

It is difficult to interpret the phrase: "The Daughter of Tyre will come with a gift." We suggested in the beginning that this psalm was written at the occasion of the wedding of King Solomon with the daughter of Pharaoh. If we take the daughter of Tyre to be a literal person, it could jeopardize this theory. Some scholars believe that the psalm was written for the wedding of King Ahab with Jezebel, but the Bible has nothing good to say about that union. If this were true, the beautiful poem would be in sharp contrast with the rest of Scripture. If we maintain the assumption that the occasion was Solomon's wedding to Pharaoh's daughter, the mention of the daughter of Tyre could refer to another marriage. We have already stated that there are traces of a polygamous lifestyle in this psalm. It is, however, also possible that the daughter of Tyre stands for foreigners in general, that is people not belonging to Israel. Then it would reinforce the image of the church of Jesus Christ in this psalm.

I do not know if we may connect the daughter of Tyre with the prince of Tyre, mentioned by Ezekiel.⁹² There Tyre is a picture of the Evil One, but Christ has called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.⁹³ We may be pushing this interpretation too far.

The Adam Clarke Commentary remarks: "As, at this time, Tyre was the greatest maritime and commercial city in the world, it may be here taken as representing those places which lay on the coasts of the sea, and carried on much traffic; such as parts of Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, France, the British Isles, etc., which first received the Gospel of Christ and were the instruments of sending it to all the other nations of the earth."

The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary searches even deeper by saying: "[And the daughter of Tyre (shall be there) with a gift]-- as the consequence of thy entire self-surrender to the King. It is only when Israel, the literal and the spiritual, occupies her true position, giving herself up wholly to the Lord, that she will be entreated by the people of the world to receive them into her communion, 'The daughter of Tyre' is Tyre herself, with her people, personified (cf. <2 Kin. 19:21>). So Israel here is called 'daughter' <Ps. 45:10>. Instead of 'shall be there,' supply the ellipse from the latter clause: 'the daughter of Tyre, with a gift (shall entreat thy favour), even the rich among the people, shall entreat thy favour.' 'The rich' are in apposition with 'Tyre.' She in particular is selected as being the richest city of the old world, <Isa. 23; Ezek. 27>. The Hebrew for to 'entreat thy favour' is literally to make weak, or soften the countenance [paniym ... chaluw ...]; to entreat so beseechingly that the other cannot show himself hard. The entreaty is that the Gentile suppliant may be received into the kingdom of God <Isa. 44:5; 60:6-14; Ps. 72:10>. When Israel gives herself to the Lord, Messiah shall become 'the Desire of all nations' in the fullest sense (<Hag. 2:7>; cf. <Ps. 87:4>). Then 'Tyre's merchandise and her hire shall be holiness to the Lord' <Isa. 23:18>."

The NIV renders vs. 13 with: "All glorious is the princess within [her chamber]; her gown is interwoven with gold." "Her chamber" is obviously added for meaning, but is not in the text. The KJV keeps closer to the original by saying: "The king's daughter is all glorious within." The Hebrew only uses the word *peniyamah*, which, according to *Strongs' Definitions* is derived from the word *paniyim*, "face." It is defined as "faceward, i.e. indoors." The KJV uses it in the sense of within, or the inner part. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs' Definitions* defines *peniyamah* as: "toward the inside, within, faceward. The suggestion is that the beauty of the bride is, primarily, inward. *Peter Craigie*, in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, says that the phrase is translated with: "A princess is all honor within." The Apostle Peter says this so beautifully about the Christian woman: "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."⁹⁴ This character is the image of God within us, which has been restored by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is the beauty of Jesus, which is expressed in this psalm in outward forms that point to inner loveliness. This is the beauty of Jesus' transfiguration, when we read about Him: "There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light."⁹⁵ It is the glory of His resurrection, as John observed in

⁹² See Ezek. 28

⁹³ See I Pet. 2:9

⁹⁴ I Pet. 3:3,4

⁹⁵ Matt. 17:2

Revelation: “His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”⁹⁶ In these verses of Scripture, Jesus’ inner glory shone through. There is a saying: “The fine coat makes the fine gentleman.” In the Bible it is the fine person who makes the fine clothes. It is the love, joy, and peace, and the other fruits of the Spirit that make us attractive to the Lord. In C. S. Lewis’ book *Till We Have Faces*, the bride of the Greek god is clothed in precious garments, and she lives in a palace, but in the eyes of her sister, she roams around in the wild, and is dressed in rags. The sister had no eye for the spiritual reality in which the bride lived, nor for the glory that was part of it.

The bride is accompanied by the bridesmaids as she is led before the king. This greatly increases the joy and gladness. Angels not only rejoice over the conversion of one sinner,⁹⁷ but they will also shout for joy at the triumphant entrance of the bride. As the heavenly Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, as John sees it in Revelation,⁹⁸ the angelic song will be sweeter even than the one that was heard in Ephrathah.

It is difficult to determine whether the king or the queen is addressed in the last two verses, and who the speaker is. In his commentary on the psalms, Peter Craigie says that the Hebrew grammar makes it clear that the king is the person addressed. The sons born from this marriage will continue the royal line. The father lives on in his children. In that way children acquire the symbolical significance of eternal life. This is the reason no children will be born in heaven. The man who has eternal life does not have to beget children in order to continue his existence. But there is more: our children are more than a continuation of ourselves; they are people with their own personalities. This should be the reason for our parental pride. Every father and mother who understands some of the mystery of life will always be overwhelmed at the birth of a child. When we enter into a marriage relationship, we receive so much more than we realize at the beginning. People who marry hardly understand the meaning of the act they enter into. In the same way, we can hardly foresee the results of our entering into fellowship with the Lord, of which the bond of marriage is an image.

Then we ask who it is who says: “I will perpetuate your memory through all generations.” In this psalm it is, of course in the first place, the poet, who speaks by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.”⁹⁹ God builds a monument for all those who honor Him. In the same fashion Jesus promoted Maria, the sister of Lazarus, to the hall of fame, when she anointed His feet. He said: “I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”¹⁰⁰

The real meaning of this last verse is, of course, a prophecy about the glorification of Jesus. Paul speaks of the fulfillment of this prophecy which the Holy Spirit pronounces here, when he says: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”¹⁰¹ “My heart is stirred by a noble theme...,” and I say “Amen” to this.

⁹⁶ Rev. 1:14-16

⁹⁷ See Luke 15:7,10

⁹⁸ See Rev. 21:2

⁹⁹ John 12:26^b

¹⁰⁰ Matt. 26:13

¹⁰¹ Phil. 2:9-11

PSALM FORTY-SIX

For the director of music. Of the Sons of Korah. According to *alamoth*. A song.

- 1** *God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.*
2 *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*
3 *though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah*
4 *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.*
5 *God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.*
6 *Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*
7 *The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*
8 *Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth.*
9 *He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire.*
10 *"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."*
11 *The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah*

The subscript ascribes this psalm to the sons of Korah, and adds the words: "According to *alamoth*." This last word has puzzled the experts. It is often translated as "virgins." A footnote in the NIV says: "Probably a musical term." In his Biblical Commentary on the Psalms, Delitzsch believes that it may indicate a high musical setting, or being sung by soprano voices. Strongs Definitions describes *Alamoth* as: "girls, i.e. soprano or female voice, perhaps falsetto."

There is often a strong suggestion in these subtitles that they have a deeper meaning than a mere indication of the tune on which the poem is to be sung. It could be that this title wants to connect this psalm to the preceding one. Psalm 45 was "To the tune of 'Lilies.'" A lily is a flower of virgin beauty, and this psalm was to be sung to the tune of the virgins.

The theme of this psalm, however, speaks of violence, earthquakes, floods, and revolutions. It seems to deal with a violation of the virgin beauty of God's creation. In the midst of this uproar stands, in undefiled rest and peace of God's shekinah, the city of God, which is His bride. In the Word Biblical Commentary, Peter Craigie sees a connection between this psalm and the contrast between chaos and order in the creation story in Genesis.¹⁰² This contrast is elaborated upon in this psalm, both on a natural, and a political level. We should, however, not take this theme as only dealing with impersonal elements. Satan shows his power in the chaos, and God demonstrates His might in the order of creation and in redemption.

I am inclined to believe the "gap theory" which states that the chaos that is mentioned in the creation account was the immediate result of the fall of Lucifer, to whom had been given authority over our planet, and who dragged God's handiwork with him in his fall. The creation record, therefore, could be a record of recreation and establishment of order in the midst of upheaval. If we look at this psalm in that way, it acquires a much deeper meaning. In the verses 2 and 3 we find elements of this original chaos, as well as of the flood in Noah's days, and of the earthquake in the days of Amos,¹⁰³ although this would be an anachronism. It is possible that this psalm was written by the Korahites in connection with a great natural disaster.

In our comments on Psalm 29, we mentioned that God is not the Creator of natural disasters. The fact that He may reveal His glory in those manifestations, is a different matter. James assures us 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."¹⁰⁴ The disturbance of the balance God created is always a direct, or an indirect, result of sin. In this psalm also, God is not in the chaos, and destruction, although He uses them to His advantage. He is a refuge and strength for those who want to escape those disasters.

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Upon this phrase, Martin Luther based his hymn "A mighty fortress is our God." He who does not flee the disasters to come, and who thinks he can hold his own in the chaos, is a fool. We do better to fear the manifestations of the powers of

¹⁰² See Gen. 1:2

¹⁰³ See Amos 1:1; Zech. 14:5

¹⁰⁴ James 1:17

darkness, and to run from them. God even uses this fright to save our lives. He is our refuge, which means that we have to flee towards Him.

The theme of salvation through flight is repeated often in the Book of Psalms. The person who thinks himself to be a hero, because he does not take flight, is a stupid person. There was no place for fear in God's original plan for man. When God created Adam and Eve, He stimulated Adam's natural desire for fellowship, first by causing a male and a female to be attracted to each other, but ultimately to draw man into fellowship with Himself. After the fall, fear began to dominate man's life, and now God uses our fears and feelings of insecurity, our being weary and burdened to woo us unto His rest and protection. The way God dealt with Adam and Eve, in drawing them to each other, was a pleasant experience. Our natural desires for satisfaction are always agreeable to us. The panic, caused by the menace of life, is highly unpleasant. We cannot blame God for this. The world in which we are born is the world that is distorted by sin. In the midst of this chaos and corruption stands God's salvation as a fortress, a stronghold, a bunker, a shelter. As Noah's ark was during the flood, so is Jesus Christ for us the ark of salvation.

The British atheist C. H. Wells poked fun at the opening words of this psalm, by saying that he saw no reason to conclude that prayer to God made any difference in difficult circumstances. We have no reason to believe that Mr. Wells ever fled to God for protection. It is only if we flee that we discover that God is our refuge and strength. The Hebrew words are *machaceh*, shelter, and *oz*, strength. The latter is sometimes used in connection with protection, as in Judges: "Inside the city, however, was a strong tower, to which all the men and women-- all the people of the city-- fled. They locked themselves in and climbed up on the tower roof."¹⁰⁵

The suggestion found here is that we find ourselves in a place that is under attack by the enemy, and that needs to be defended. As Christians, we are called not to lose terrain, but to hold that which we have. We are not required to conquer death, or to defeat the enemy in maneuvers of attack; God has done that already for us in Jesus Christ. It is our task to stand, and not to give up what has been given to us. Gideon did not gain the victory over the Midianites when he pursued them, but the victory came when he blew the trumpet and broke the jars of clay to let the torches shine. This principle has not changed in the course of the ages. We may still stand under God's protection, and see how the weapons of the enemy, that were aimed at us, are rendered ineffective. Our victory consists in our standing in God's victory; so we turn from refugees into victors.

The phrase: "an ever-present help in trouble," as the NIV renders it, or "a very present help in trouble"(KJV), indicates an experience of God's help. TLB reads: "a tested help in times of trouble." The Hebrew words used are *nimsaa' m^aod*, which are derived from *me' od*, meaning "vehemence, i.e. (with or without preposition) vehemently; by implication, wholly, speedily," and *matsa'*: "to come forth to, i.e. appear or exist; transitively, to attain, i.e. find or acquire; figuratively, to occur, meet or be present." The experience of others who have tried to flee to God for protection, proves the reliability of the experiment. We could say that this phrase puts our faith on a scientific basis. After all, science is nothing more than the drawing of conclusions on the basis of experiments. It is a proven fact that God is a reliable source of help for those who fled to Him in their anguish. Faith is based on reliable facts.

If a man flees to God because he is driven by fear, his fear is healed in the process. Only in fellowship with God can one look down, without fear, upon the chaos that surrounds and threatens him. The world in which we live is like a man performing a balancing act on a thin rope; without God there is no guarantee that the situation of today will still exist tomorrow. There are threats of natural disasters and wars, "Acts of God," and man-made catastrophes. Nobody believed in the flood while Noah prepared the ark, and we know that a universal nuclear war can break out any moment. It is against these kinds of demonic threats that the psalmist says: "Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."

Yet, Christians can become victims of such events, in the same way as atheists. The difference between the two is in the protection from fear. Jesus tells His disciples: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."¹⁰⁶ And demons cannot even kill the body! That is the reason they try to persuade their victims to commit suicide. In John's Gospel, Jesus says: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."¹⁰⁷ There is a solid basis for the confidence of the

¹⁰⁵ Judg. 9:51

¹⁰⁶ Matt. 10:28

¹⁰⁷ John 16:33

psalmist. He can look down upon the chaos from above, from the vantage point of fellowship of God, and under His protection.

In the second stanza (verses 4-7), we find the same elements as before, but the tone is quite different. The water is not an uncontrollable flood, but a river flowing between its banks. Water brings both death and life. This river is God's river, the artery of the Holy City.

The historical background of this phrase is, probably, the water supply of the city of Jerusalem, which was already in existence in the times of the Jebusites. This conduit was renovated in the days of King Hezekiah.¹⁰⁸ We may assume that this aqueduct was functioning when the Korahites wrote this psalm. In this psalm this water supply line is seen as symbolic of the heavenly reality. Ezekiel picks up the image in his vision of the temple brook,¹⁰⁹ and in Revelation, John describes the completion of these prophecies with the words: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb."¹¹⁰

Water symbolizes a spiritual reality. The chaotic waters represent the powers of evil, and the river of the water of life stands for the Holy Spirit. We find both in the opening verses of Genesis: "Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."¹¹¹ The universal testimony of the Bible also points in this direction. God had chosen Jerusalem as the place of His revelation on earth. The Holy Spirit testifies to this truth in an uninterrupted stream of refreshment and renewal. It is marvelous to realize that the Korahites could walk the streets of Jerusalem and drink water from the wells that were fed by the river, knowing all the time that they performed more than only the physical act of drinking. This psalm proves that they had insight in the spiritual significance of things on earth. The Holy Spirit also speaks here about the church, but the understanding of the Korahites themselves had not reached that far.

The place of God's revelation on earth is called in the NIV: "the holy place where the Most High dwells." The KJV reads: "the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High." There had been other places where God had shown Himself to people. Jacob encountered God at Bethel,¹¹² and Moses saw God's glory from the cleft of the rock in the desert.¹¹³ We could see in this traces of what Don Richardson calls, "Redemptive Analogies."¹¹⁴ But it was in Jerusalem only that God's glory was present above the atonement cover of the ark. All this is fulfilled in the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, which is filled with the glory of God.¹¹⁵ The city of the Korahites was an image of the church. This world is in uproar, and the nations are like a raging sea, but this prophecy states that the church of Jesus Christ will not fall victim to any onslaught. The dawn of God's salvation will break upon her. This will be at dawn on the first day of the week, on the day of resurrection. Whether this means that the church will pass through the great tribulation or not, is not an issue that can be determined on the basis of this verse.

"She will not fall," or as most older translations read: "She shall not be moved" has, of course, a spiritual connotation. It does not mean that there will be victims in the physical or emotional sense of the word. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote: "We will be shaken, and we often incur deep and painful wounds." In that sense, our Lord Jesus Christ, the builder of the city, was shaken and wounded more than anyone else. But the gates of Hades will not overcome it.¹¹⁶ This is the position of the church on earth. It is also true that Jerusalem was never conquered as long as the presence of the Lord was there. The prophet Ezekiel saw in his visions that the glory of the Lord had left the city.¹¹⁷ Only after that had happened could the troops of Nebuchadnezzar take the city and burn it. The actual meaning of it all is that God is in the midst of the city, as is stated in Revelation, where John says: "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁸ See II Kings 20:20

¹⁰⁹ See Ezek. 47:1-12

¹¹⁰ Rev. 22:1

¹¹¹ Gen. 1:2

¹¹² See Gen. 28:16-19

¹¹³ Ex. 33:19-34:9

¹¹⁴ *Peace Child* by Don Richardson

¹¹⁵ See Rev. 21:9-11

¹¹⁶ See Matt. 16:18

¹¹⁷ Matt. 16:18

¹¹⁸ Rev. 21:22,23

The image expresses the position of those who live in fellowship with God in the midst of the oppression of the world. These words will, undoubtedly, become a source of comfort for those who will go through the Great Tribulation, whoever they may be.

There is another parallel between this psalm and the Book of Revelation, in that it shows the three principles of the effects of the sin of men. First of all: man will, ultimately, annihilate the human race himself by wars and destruction, which is expressed in Revelation under the image of the Seven Seals. Secondly, demonic powers will manipulate man, and push him to self-destruct. This is seen in Revelation under the image of the Seven Trumpets. Finally, everything man does to himself is the result of God's judgment upon him, as expressed in Revelation under the image of the Seven Bowls of Wrath.

The uproar of the nations, and the falling of kingdoms, in vs. 6, represent more than a poetical parallel of the roaring and foaming of the waters, and the quaking of the mountains in vs. 3, although they happen simultaneously. The designs of sinful man and of the powers of darkness will flow together in the same bed, but they are not identical. They influence each other because God has withdrawn His hand of protection from man, since man has withdrawn himself from God's protection. There will come a time, however, when God will lift His voice, and the earth will melt. God did this once by means of the water of the flood, and He will do it again through fire. The Apostle Peter says: "But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men."¹¹⁹ And just as Noah was saved in the flood, so will the church of Jesus Christ be saved in the last judgment.

The NIV says: "The LORD Almighty is with us." Most other translations stick to the more literal translation: "The LORD of hosts is with us." God is the supreme commander of the heavenly armies. This is real power by which nothing else can be compared; certainly not Mao Dze Dung's "Power from the barrel of a gun." God is The LORD Almighty, the Potentate of all potentates, as William of Orange called Him. He is our refuge, and in Him we are perfectly safe. Isaiah's prophecy: "Immanuel,"¹²⁰ "God with us," has been completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the fortress in which we have taken refuge. This is what we mean when we say that we are "in Christ." This makes us completely immune to the attacks of the Evil One.

In this context, God is called "the God of Jacob." There is a suggestion of confession of sin and of forgiveness in this title. Jacob was the who tripped people, who wrestled with God and asked for grace before he became Israel.¹²¹ He who protected Jacob against himself, and made him a new creature by means of the atonement, is also our God.

It seems strange to us that the psalmist ascribes the "desolation" which takes place on earth to YHWH. This seems to contradict the fact that, in the words of James, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights."¹²² The Hebrew word, translated with "desolation" is shamowt, which is a form of shammah, defined by Strongs with "ruin; by implication, consternation." The KJV renders it with: "astonishment, desolate, or desolation, waste, wonderful thing." The context of this psalm, however, suggests a negative connotation. The ruin of the earth is the result of the breaking of the bond of fellowship with God by man. We cannot live without the life of the Holy Spirit within us, neither can our planet exist without our fellowship with God. When death comes, decomposition also enters. Jesus said: "Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather."¹²³ Punishment for is something that is built-in in creation; decay begins when life leaves the body. We cannot hold God responsible for the broken bond. The principle of self-destruction of that which is dead is, not only, a necessary safety precaution, it is also a blessing. How else would God's holiness continue in creation if that which died would be allowed to continue to be there. The senseless murder of all human being will cease when all have fallen. There are two ways in which wars cease: either the number of victims on both sides becomes too great, or one of the two warring parties comes to itself and turns to God. The tribal warfare in Irian Jaya ceased when the Gospel got a hold of the people. It was the Gospel of Jesus Christ that put an end to the invasion of the Norse in the lower countries of Europe at the end of the first millenium.

¹¹⁹ II Pet. 3:5-7

¹²⁰ See Isa. 7:14

¹²¹ See Hos. 12:4

¹²² James 1:17

¹²³ Matt. 24:28

So we can say that the work of God shows two facets: there is the desolation on earth, which means that God leaves the godless man to fend for himself, so that man, entering into a bond with the devil, destroys himself; then there is the ceasing of wars, caused by man's conversion and man's destruction of the weapons of war. Isaiah prophesied that "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."¹²⁴ This beating swords into plowshares is something man will have to do himself. He will do this because he realizes that the power of sin over man has been broken, and consequently the weapons of war will no longer be needed. If every man on earth bows before the Lord Jesus Christ and acknowledges that He has all power in heaven and on earth, his conduct will change radically. No disarmament will ever be possible without a total renewal of inter-human relations.

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." This is the voice of God Himself speaking. This world is in the power of the Evil One. God pronounces here a prophecy regarding the future. At present, people do not acknowledge the superiority of the Almighty. The facts, however, are not dependant upon our opinion. Jesus Christ does have all power, whether we want to admit that or not. Our faith, or the lack of it does not change the facts, but it changes us. This pronouncements, therefore, is a call for consideration of our present condition. If a person understands reality, he will denounce violence and murder.

The psalm ends with the refrain we saw already in vs. 7, and which is the theme that opened the psalm. After the voice of God Himself is heard, we hear the voice of the church. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'"¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Isa. 2:4

¹²⁵ Rev. 22:17

PSALM FORTY-SEVEN

For the director of Music. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- 1 Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.**
- 2 How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!**
- 3 He subdued nations under us, peoples under our feet.**
- 4 He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved. Selah**
- 5 God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets.**
- 6 Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.**
- 7 For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise.**
- 8 God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne.**
- 9 The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted.**

The first striking feature of this psalm is its international flavor. In his commentary on the psalms, in the *Word Biblical Commentary* Series, Craig believes this to be an expression of Israel's colonialist tendencies. The theme seems to be Israel and its vassals. In practice, in David's time, when the air was constantly filled with the clatter of swords, Israel would, in fact, have looked upon all other nations as its potential colonies. God's original mandate to Israel, however, was that they were to be a kingdom of priests, as is clear from His instructions to Moses: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹²⁶ That statement does not give the impression of a rattling of weapons. We take it, therefore, that in this psalm, the Holy Spirit gives expression to God's original intention with His people, even though the poet himself may not have understood it that way.

The poet wants all nations to participate in the ecstasy of worshipping God, and it would be hard to suppose that those nations that had been subjected to Israelite rule, and that had been robbed of their freedom, would do this in a spontaneous way. Worship requires an inner renewal, not a forced change of outward circumstances.

The psalmist understands that the God of Israel is more than a national deity; He is "the great King over all the earth!" This is the reason for this international invitation to participate in this worship and praise.

Throughout the ages, Israel has occupied a unique position in this world. Many nations, who endeavored to gain a world hegemony, have risen and fallen. In all those efforts man occupied the central place; and the gods of those nations were never considered to be more than local deities that swallowed up other local deities. Israel has always known, at least in its moments of greatness, that their God was "the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!" Israel also never endeavored to surpass the boundaries of the territory God had allotted to her. This psalm, therefore, cannot be seen as intending to sing the praises of Israel's position as a world power, but rather to open the eyes of all peoples on earth for the reality of God's presence and majesty. In view of the condition in which the world of nations has existed, ever since the construction of the tower of Babel, Israel's task was an amazing one. This psalm, therefore, must be seen as a statement of evangelism and eschatology. Even the Korahites in the days of David and Solomon were not so naïve as to suppose that the whole world would fall down in an ecstatic way, and worship God. The fulfillment of the prophecy of this psalm can be seen in the vision John had in the book of Revelation of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language."¹²⁷ This international brotherhood of nations will only be possible through the redemption by the blood of Jesus. To interpret this psalm without reference to this truth would make no sense.

We maintain, therefore, that the invitation contained in this psalm is only meant for the redeemed, that is, for the church of Jesus Christ. The present condition of this seems to be no better suited for the realization of the invitation than it was when this psalm was first composed. But all the elements that are necessary for the fulfillment are present today. The atonement of sin has been achieved, and the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the church. Yet, we cannot say that praise and worship of God on earth has

¹²⁶ Ex. 19:4-6

¹²⁷ Rev. 7:9

reached universal proportions. We ought, therefore, to continue to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come."¹²⁸ The important thing is that the eyes of man will open to reality. God's greatness and omnipotence are not subject to change; but man passes through this world as if there is no God. He is completely blind to the glory that surrounds him. Healing of the soul will make us burst out in applause and shouts of joy for YHWH, the Most High. No adoration will ever be possible without this discovery of reality. The essence of faith is seeing that which is invisible. The writer of the Hebrew Epistle says about Moses: "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible."¹²⁹ The story of Elisha and his servant Gehazi illustrates this. We read in the second book of Kings: "When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh, my lord, what shall we do?' the servant asked. 'Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."¹³⁰ Therefore, the Apostle Paul says: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."¹³¹ The enemy, who lives in the invisible world, blinds the eyes of men to this reality.

There is, therefore, a direct link between the discovery that is implied in verses 1 and 2, and the victory about which verses 3 and 4 speak. This victory would be, in first instance, the conquest of Canaan at the end of the long journey which began with the exodus from slavery in Egypt. The topic is, not colonialist aspirations, but judgment over sin. The subjugation and occupation of the land was not Israel's idea but God's. God even had to convince Moses first, before there was any question of an exodus of the people, and, with a few exceptions, the Israelites were always wanting to go back to Egypt. They were always very shortsighted and hardly ever understood that God wanted to use them to pull down the strongholds of the enemy. Satan had dug himself in in Canaan, already in Abraham's days when "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."¹³² God meant Israel to be a kingdom of priests, the stewards of God's revelation on earth. Their hearts should have embraced the whole world. The fact that they began to glorify their traditions and revel in their "Jewishness," in no way altered God's intent for them. God wanted all the nations of the earth to gather under the banner of Israel, and of God's revelation to them and through them. Israel's inheritance was much greater than the land of Canaan. But Israel was so satisfied with the lesser, with the replica of reality, that she never attained the reality of God's inheritance for her, and finally, she forgot that it even existed.

But in this psalm, the Holy Spirit looks at these privileges of God's children: the salvation of the world, the eternal heritage about which Jacob may be rightfully proud, and the eternal love which God demonstrates to those who obey Him.

Beginning at vs. 6, it becomes clear that this psalm is really written about our Lord Jesus Christ. We witness His ascension to the throne. Before this moment in history took place, He told His disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..."¹³³ The disciples who heard those words on earth, saw only Jesus' departure from them; they could not see His arrival in glory. If they could have seen that, they would have sung His praises together with the angels. After the Holy Spirit came upon them, on the day of Pentecost, this psalm surely acquired a deeper meaning for them.

For us, the ascension is a link in the chain of the facts in the history of salvation; one of the many facts. It began with the incarnation. We tend to see the Lord's crucifixion as the most important link in the chain. But in this psalm the full stress is put on the ascension. The other links in the chain are not even mentioned. This omission produces a special effect. We have to understand that the factors that are not mentioned are the ones that led up to this apotheosis. Without the birth of Christ, without His death, and without His resurrection, there would not be an ascension. We have this advantage over the Korahites that we can see the complete chain, and that we know the significance of each of its links. They looked at one link of the chain with great amazement, without understanding where it came from or where it was leading.

Even if Christ had not been born, God would have been the king of the earth, and He would have ruled over the nations. But Jesus' ascension places God's omnipotence in a completely new light, in that it

¹²⁸ Matt. 6:9,10

¹²⁹ Heb. 11:27

¹³⁰ II Kings 6:15-17

¹³¹ II Cor. 4:18

¹³² See Gen. 15:16

¹³³ Matt. 28:18

draws man into God's eternal plan. Ascension means that a Man, born on this earth, enters heaven and takes His place on the throne of the universe. If God does this for one single Man, it opens limitless opportunities for all the others. Jesus entered heaven in order to bring many sons to glory. This is one of the reasons what this psalm was so suitable to be sung at the ascension of one of Israel's kings, which is the opinion of several commentators. After all, earth is a picture of heaven. In this way, by seeing the images on earth, we become eyewitnesses of the real heavenly glory of which we, ourselves, will be partakers later. We may now exercise our vocal cords for the shouting to come.

In this psalm God has ascended amid shouts of joy and amid the sounding of trumpets of angels, and we, as humans, are encouraged to join in the singing. In the account of the actual ascension,¹³⁴ we do not read of any sounding of trumpets. It could be that this was beyond the scope of the disciples' hearing. The angels announced that Jesus' Second Coming would take place in the same way as His ascension. The Apostle Paul may have used a combination of the account of the ascension and of this psalm to give his prophecy about Jesus' return: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first."¹³⁵

So the angels have the part of the trumpets, but man is responsible for the singing of psalms of praise. If this is so at the occasion of the ascension, it will, no doubt, be the same at the Lord's return.

Psalm singing is the transliteration of the Greek. The KJV renders vs. 7 with: "For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding." The Adam Clarke Commentary says about this: "[Sing ye praises with understanding] Zamruw ... maskiyl ..., sing an instructive song. Let sense and sound go together. Let your hearts and heads go with your voices. Understand what you sing; and feel what you understand; and let the song be what will give instruction in righteousness to them that hear it. 'Sing wisely.'-- Anglo-Saxon. Multitudes sing foolishly." "Sing praises" is used as one verb in Hebrew. The word zamar is used five times as a verb in verses 6 and 7. *Strong's Definitions* describes it: "through the idea of striking with the fingers; properly, to touch the strings or parts of a musical instrument, i.e. play upon it; to make music, accompanied by the voice; hence to celebrate in song and music." The repetition lends great emphasis to the text: "Sing, sing, sing, sing, sing!" The enthusiasm and ecstasy are contagious. We realize that we sing too little. God wants us to use our gifts to glorify Him in Jesus Christ. That is the reason He gives us gifts, artistic gifts and other.

In the light of the ascension, that is, in connection with the completion of the whole work of atonement accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ, God's ruling over the nation ought to be interpreted, first of all, in an eschatological fashion. Jesus Christ has to reign as King, until everything that rebelled against God is subjugated. Paul says this in his epistle to the Corinthians: "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."¹³⁶ More is involved than a demonstration of God's omnipotence. Fullness of time and purpose will have been achieved when man acknowledges this omnipotence and submits to it. The Apostle Paul describes this fulness as follows: "Therefore God exalted him [Christ] to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."¹³⁷

It is this acknowledgment that forms the core of the last verses of this psalm. The world leaders will be part of the revelation which God gave to Abraham, which is the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Concerning this, Paul says in his epistle to the Galatians: "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."¹³⁸

In *The Word Biblical Commentary*, Craig translates this verse with: "The princely ones of the people are assembled with the people of Abraham's God." He does admit, however, that this version is based upon the supposition that a "kaplography" may have entered the text! Jesus mentioned people coming in from the outside when He commented on the faith of the centurion. He said: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."¹³⁹

¹³⁴ See Acts 1:9-11

¹³⁵ I Thes. 4:16

¹³⁶ I Cor. 15:25

¹³⁷ Phil. 2:9-11

¹³⁸ Gal. 3:14

¹³⁹ Matt. 8:11

This gathering of the nobles of the earth is, obviously, on the basis of their faith. It is suggested here that pagans will come and share in Israel's heritage. Paul calls this "the mystery of Christ."¹⁴⁰ The Holy Spirit makes clear in this psalm what the meaning was of God's promise to Abraham. Not only would the heathen be saved, but the nobles of the earth, that is, the men of power of this world, would acquire insight into the origin of power.

Few people in this world understand that most earthly potentates are being manipulated by Satan. The devil revealed his secret to Christ during His temptation, when he said: "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."¹⁴¹ Satan did not say from whom he had received this authority! In our present dispensation, everyone who is in a position of power, is subject to the influence and the attacks of the Evil One. Therefore, in his series *Lord of the Rings*, the British author Tolkien could reaffirm Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts.

The NIV reads vs. 9: "The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted." The Hebrew uses the words *maagineey erets*. *Strongs Definitions* describes *magen* as: "a shield (i.e. the small one or buckler); figuratively, a protector." Hence, the KJV renders the verse with: "The princes of the people are gathered together, even the people of the God of Abraham: for the shields of the earth belong unto God: he is greatly exalted." This makes us understand the illegality of the devil's claim. The shields, the banners, the heraldry, and all the other symbols of human power and dignity belong to God, and they are derived from His glory. He is the Lord of lords, and the King of kings. Those who run for a political career in this world should never forget this. It seems that, for instance in the presidential races in the United States this truth is far from the minds of the candidates. The real command of power becomes clear only when they are seen in relation to Jesus Christ. Most people running for offices do not know what they are doing, because they do not realize the source of the power they strive for. When Pilate said to Jesus: "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.'"¹⁴² Pilate never understood this.

If in this fallen world the relationship between power and its divine source is such that some people are given power to govern, even though they do not recognize the origin, nor live in fellowship with God, how then will it be in the new world to come, when man will understand and give God the glory? This is what this psalm tries to express.

¹⁴⁰ See Eph. 3:4-6

¹⁴¹ Luke 4:6

¹⁴² John 19:10,11

PSALM FORTY-EIGHT

A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah.

- 1 Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain.**
- 2 It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth. Like the utmost heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King.**
- 3 God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress.**
- 4 When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together,**
- 5 they saw [her] and were astounded; they fled in terror.**
- 6 Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labor.**
- 7 You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish shattered by an east wind.**
- 8 As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD Almighty, in the city of our God: God makes her secure forever. Selah**
- 9 Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love.**
- 10 Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness.**
- 11 Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments.**
- 12 Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers,**
- 13 consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation.**
- 14 For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.**

In a sense, this psalm is a continuation of the preceding one. In the previous psalm the topic was God's plan of salvation through the glorification of Jesus Christ, after His incarnation, suffering, and death. In this psalm, the theme is God's revelation of Himself and His glory in the church, which is the fruit of Jesus' labor. We find the fulfillment of this psalm in John's vision of the New Jerusalem, as the bride of the Lamb: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."¹⁴³ This psalm opens that same vision for us; that is the glory of Jesus Christ in His church. The beautiful symbolism in which this glory is expressed is the content of this moving poem.

We can divide this psalm into four parts: Verses 1,2: God's glory in Zion; verses 3-6: the world's reaction to God's revelation of Himself; verses 7-11: the believers' reaction, and verses 12-14: the measuring of Zion.

Beyond doubt, the first image uses the temple in Jerusalem as a model. Mount Zion was originally the place where David built his palace. It was the first citadel David conquered, which turned out to be of vital importance in the taking of the city. We read in the report of the conquest: "David captured the fortress of Zion, the City of David. David then took up residence in the fortress and called it the City of David. He built up the area around it, from the supporting terraces inward."¹⁴⁴ The name Zion was later used for the place where the temple was erected on Mount Moriah, and finally for the whole city. The beauty of it all is that this place on earth was, even in David's days, always as a symbol of something that was greater than its outward dimensions. In C. S. Lewis' book *The Last Battle* there is a barn that was bigger inside than outside, which expresses well the principle we see here. The Israelites of old realized that the world in which they lived was an image of a heavenly reality. They understood that the presence of God in Jerusalem expressed in earthly forms and images something of that which surpasses all description, and which will be fully understood only in heaven. Such insight gives a special hue to the things on earth. There is in the Flemish city of Ghent a medieval altarpiece by the brothers van Eyck, entitled: *The Adoration of the Lamb*. The unearthly effect of glory in the painting is achieved by the use of very earthly objects: An altar from a Roman Catholic church is put in a meadow with flowers and a very ordinary lamb stands on top of the altar. The effect is overwhelming. Earthly objects tend to become more earthly as they express more clearly the heavenly reality. In the same way, the Son of Korah stood before the temple in Jerusalem, which is an extraordinarily beautiful and well built edifice, yet a building made from ordinary stone. With

¹⁴³ Rev. 21:2,10,11

¹⁴⁴ II Sam. 5:7,9

the eye of the spirit they saw “the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.”¹⁴⁵ They attributed much more to the Mount Zion on earth than meets the eye. In that way they did not see what is visible, but they saw the real meaning of the visible things. Only those who know the Lord are able to do such things; they see Him everywhere because their communion with God is uninterrupted. It is the knowledge that He is everywhere where we are, because we only want to be where He is. That is why Zion is part of heaven on earth, and this is the essence of worship and adoration.

It is also true that we will only know God in heaven if we have known Him on earth. We will be able to partake of the heavenly worship only if we have practiced it on earth.

“Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise...” What a statement in a hostile world! For the average person the earth is not full of his unfailing love,¹⁴⁶ as David expresses elsewhere. Demons veil God’s glory before our eyes. If God had not come Himself and revealed Himself on earth, we would have perished in darkness. Zion, therefore, stands for God’s revelation on earth. That was the place where the ark stood. When this psalm was written, Zion was the only place on earth where God dwelt; it was an image of the Incarnation. In our dispensation, we praise and worship God, who came to us in Jesus Christ. There is a sense in which the Lamb and Mount Zion are one and the same. When we have seen Him, or when we have seen the city, we have seen the Father.

The NIV reads in vs. 2: “Like the utmost heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion.” The KJV, and several other versions translate the name Zaphon with “on the sides of the north.” Strongs Definitions defines tsaphown or tsaphon as: “hidden, i.e. dark; used only of the north as a quarter (gloomy and unknown).” In The Word Biblical Commentary, Craigie says in a footnote that the primary meaning of Zaphon is a holy mountain that was found in the mythology of Canaan. The geographical location of the mountain changes with the source of the myth. Similar phenomena are known all over the world. The mountain tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, place the origin of man in the neighborhood of a village called Seima, where the first human being came out of a hole in the ground. That, in the mind of the people of the Middle East, there would be a Mount Zaphon, where God (or the gods) lived, would fit the picture. The important point for us is that the Holy Spirit takes this human tradition seriously. It is obvious that the fortress Zion where David lived, was geographically quite different from the Mount Zion “on the sides of the north,” about which the Sons of Korah speak here. It becomes even more interesting when we see that Jesus seems to give His sanction to this piece of mythology, when He quotes this psalm in the admonition: “But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.”¹⁴⁷

As we said before, the real intent is to present the heavenly reality. The intriguing part is that a topographical vocabulary is used, not only to express the things on earth (Mount Zion), but the spiritual reality. Some theologians believe that heaven, as the seat of God’s presence, is found in the north of the universe. On the basis of our human experience it is difficult to assert a specific physical location of heaven, if it can even be conceived in physical terms. The fact that this would strike us as primitive thinking does not mean anything. A great deal of truth can be hidden in what we call “primitive concepts.” It is true that the north is often mentioned in the Bible in connection with the throne of God.¹⁴⁸ We all should understand more about this in less than one century! In the meantime we should refrain from mocking primitive representations of heaven.

Some years ago, TIME Magazine carried an article in which an Israeli who was standing in front of the Wailing Wall was quoted as saying that God was present in the stones of that wall. In saying that, he denied the truth of Ezekiel’s prophecy in which the prophet sees the glory of the Lord leaving the temple and the city before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it.¹⁴⁹ The stones of the Wailing Wall are now more dead than dry bones. But when those stones were still alive, because of the presence of God, the believers understood this living manifestation was more than it appeared to be: it pointed to the eternal, immutable reality of God’s being, in the same way as, in John’s Gospel, the miracles described therein are pointers to the reality of Christ.

¹⁴⁵ See Rev. 14:1

¹⁴⁶ Ps. 33:5

¹⁴⁷ Matt. 5:34,35

¹⁴⁸ See Isa. 14:13,14 (KJV)

¹⁴⁹ See Ezek. Ch. 8-11

The God the Sons of Korah worshipped was not merely the God of Zion, but the King of heaven and earth. Zion is the joy of the whole earth because God dwells there. The Korahites also understood that the God of this revelation was more than the revelation of God. There is a subtle danger in the battle that has raged throughout the ages around God's revelation of Himself. In the last centuries this battle has taken on the shape of "The Battle of The Bible." It is, in fact, very dangerous to take away something of the inspiration of the Scriptures, but we can become so involved and excited about the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture that we leave the God who inspired the Scriptures on the side. The Korahites understood that the glory of God was more than the ark. In the same way King Hezekiah, centuries later, would understand that healing was more than the bronze snake. We read in the book of Second Kings: "He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)"¹⁵⁰ Daniel knew that God was more than windows that were opened toward Jerusalem.¹⁵¹ So for us, the Holy Spirit will have to be greater than the inspiration of Scriptures; otherwise, the letter will kill us, as the Apostle Paul observes.¹⁵²

The NIV renders vs. 3 with: "God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress," but the KJV reads: "God is known in her palaces for a refuge." The Hebrew word is 'armown, which, according to *Strongs*, means "be elevated; a citadel (from its height)." It is translated variously in the KJV with "castle" or "palace." Palaces are among the most luxurious dwelling places that exist, but citadels are functional, intended for the defense of a place against attacks of the enemy. As the KJV puts it, it is the glory of God that forms our defense, and that is a deep and beautiful thought. If we are in Christ, the enemy has no foothold in us. The expression "He has shown himself to be ..." points to a practical experience. Our faith in the invisible God will, sooner or later, manifest itself in the visible world. Our experiences are not essential to our faith; they do not form the basis of it, but they serve as a confirmation, and a reinforcement of our faith. The more we experience God's protection, the more we will see of His glory. And, in reverse, the more we see His glory, the safer we will feel.

Verses 4-6 describe what this protection means to the attacking enemy. The kings are human potentates who are being manipulated by the Prince of Darkness. World history, as well as the history of the church, is full of examples of kings who joined forces, and who left with their "tails between their legs" when they hit the wall with which God protect His own. The writer of the second psalm sets the tone, when he says: "Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One."¹⁵³ In many instances it seems as if the devil has the upper hand. Throughout the centuries, martyrs have been killed by the thousands, and Christians have been persecuted. But thus far, the gates of hell have not yet prevailed against the church of Christ, and the blood of the martyrs always turned out to be the seed of the church. It requires a broad panoramic view to understand that the powers of darkness are ultimately powerless against the church of Jesus Christ. If we look at that which is visible, it often seems that all is lost. But in this psalm, the psalmist sees demons bent over in pain like a woman in labor. We ought not to miss the irony of this picture: here are men who are very much aware of their prowess and masculinity. The fact that they fall victim to a specifically female form of suffering makes their fate the more embarrassing. The image represents them as what they do not think themselves to be: weak females who suffer labor pains, but who do not give birth to a baby. They flee, therefore, for themselves. A person who is confronted by God is usually more afraid of himself than of anything else. He flees "the wrath of the Lamb."¹⁵⁴

There is a suggestion of economic power in the mention of the ships of Tarshish. In *The Word Biblical Commentary*, Craigie suggests that the image of the ships is parallel to the labor pains of the woman. There are differences of opinion about the meaning of the name Tarshish. It may be the name of a place, such as the Phoenician colony in Spain. The original meaning is probably the open sea. The east wind that demolishes the ships depicts God destroying strong men psychologically, as well as materially. We see the same picture in the book of Revelation, where the city of Babylon is destroyed as a center of spiritual fornication and of economic power.¹⁵⁵ We do not often think of the church which is filled with the glory of God, as a means of condemnation for the economic powers of this world. Yet, the Bible is full of

¹⁵⁰ II Kings 18:4

¹⁵¹ See Dan. 6:10

¹⁵² See II Cor. 3:6

¹⁵³ Ps. 2:1,2

¹⁵⁴ See Rev. 6:16

¹⁵⁵ See Rev. ch. 18

protest against exploitation, and it is also full of social concern. After all, it is rather difficult to love your neighbor as yourself, and at the same time, enrich yourself at his expense. God's presence in man convicts him of the way he does his commerce.

In verses 8-11 we encounter the person who has experienced God's grace and forgiveness, and who loves Him. He beholds the same scene that the kings in the previous verses saw, but for him it contains no fearful elements. That which is the smell of death to the one is the fragrance of life to the other.¹⁵⁶ At this point, the faith of the person who loves God changes into beholding. Initially, we all only know about God through what we hear, like Job who said: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you."¹⁵⁷ Jesus pronounces a blessing upon "those who have not seen and yet have believed."¹⁵⁸ There will come a time, though, when we will all see clearly Him in whom we have put our trust. The Book of Proverbs expresses this beautifully with: "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."¹⁵⁹ Even while we are on the road, we will be able to discern more clearly, but the culmination will be the day when we will see Him in all His glory.

Let's try to catch the ecstasy of this Korahite who wrote these words. His feet stood in Jerusalem; he played the role of a pilgrim who had come from afar, and he said: "This is the way it will be when I arrive at the real city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God, of which this city is an image."¹⁶⁰ It is obvious from the tone of the whole psalm that the topic is the real Zion, the mountain that will fill the whole world.¹⁶¹ Jerusalem on earth is only secure inasmuch as she clearly reflects the real city. It is about the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, that the psalmist says: "God makes her secure forever."

The beauty of this psalm comes from the fact that it flashes back and forth between time and eternity. In vs. 9 the psalmist has both feet on the ground again. This does not mean that he returns from a mystical sphere to the harsh reality of this world. The reality of the New Jerusalem is greater than that of its earthly shadow. But meditation is something one does on earth; seeing and meditating are not done simultaneously. God allows us to peek at fragments of glory, and we feed on that while on our way to heaven. That is meditation. As long as there is a temple, the ultimate reality has not been reached yet. There is no temple in the New Jerusalem.¹⁶² Meditation brings out, in the first place, God's lovingkindness, or His unending love, as the NIV calls it, His checed. In the midst of all the power and glory of Zion it is obvious that the essence of God's character is lovingkindness. The place that is indicated in connection with that discovery is "within your temple," which has a profound symbolic meaning. God's goodness is central; it is the Name of God, the revelation of His being. Throughout eternity we will forever be fulfilled with the Revelation of God's character. The Name of God can be expressed in the words: praise and righteousness.

The praise of God fills this earth. The whole of creation acknowledges, confesses, and worships His Name. The fact that Satan, for a fraction of eternity, has diverted this praise to a dead end, is no reason to be overly concerned. The fall and its consequences are a passing stage. "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."¹⁶³ The fact that most people do not yet see this, is due to their blindness. The tragedy of our present dispensation is not that God's glory is absent, but that man is unable to see it.

We should not underestimate the position man occupies in all this, both in the negative, as well as in the positive sense. The blindness of man is, for the greater part, due to the darkness in which he lives, and in which this world is steeped. The opening of man's eyes to the glory of the Lord will be decisive for the rehabilitation of the whole of creation. "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD." And "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed."¹⁶⁴

Next to God's unending love, His righteousness is mentioned. Without righteousness, God's unending love would be impossible. Righteousness is the basis of all of God's relationships with all His creatures. The practical application on creation of God's righteousness is called justice. Righteousness is

¹⁵⁶ See II Cor. 2:15,16C

¹⁵⁷ Job 42:5

¹⁵⁸ John 20:29

¹⁵⁹ Prov. 4:18

¹⁶⁰ See Heb. 11:10

¹⁶¹ See Dan. 2:35^b

¹⁶² See Rev. 21:22

¹⁶³ Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14

¹⁶⁴ Rom. 8:19

also the expression of the truth of God's character. The moral behavior of God's creatures derives its value from the character of God, and it will be judged accordingly. God's character will be the measuring stick to distinguish between good and evil. It is, therefore, of vital importance for the life of man to understand God's righteousness. It is this righteousness which, in the words of the Apostle Paul, is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁶⁵ When we read, therefore, in vs. 11: "Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments," we should think primarily of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. That is enough reason for Mount Zion, which is the symbol of the church, to rejoice, and for the villages of Judah, or as the KJV renders it "the daughters of Judah," to be glad. All our acts will be judged in the light of Jesus' death on the cross. Those who believe in Jesus do not fall under God's judgment, but whoever rejects the atoning death of Jesus as payment for his sins, "God's wrath remains on him."¹⁶⁶ We can never separate the revelation of God's glory from God's righteousness, which is His punishment of our sins in Jesus Christ.

In the last three verses of this psalm, we are encouraged to take a walk around Zion. The question is: "Which Zion?" If the meaning is Mount Zaphon, this invitation can hardly be taken literally. If the citadel of Zion on earth is meant, the reference to the "next generation" is hard to explain. There was little reason for the Sons of Korah to believe that Zion would not be there for future generations. Even this literal walk around and through the city of Jerusalem, therefore, should be understood as an image of a spiritual reality.

The theme of the measuring and studying of Jerusalem returns several times in the Scriptures. The prophet Ezekiel gives a very detailed description of the rebuilt city of Jerusalem and the temple.¹⁶⁷ The purpose of this was to make all of Israel feel ashamed of their sins. We read that God said to Ezekiel: "Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them the design of the temple-- its arrangement, its exits and entrances-- its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations."¹⁶⁸ This would result in obedience to the will of God. In Revelation, the Apostle John is told to measure the temple, and the worship service carried on in it.¹⁶⁹ This gives a picture of the testimony of the believers during the Great Tribulation. The last measuring of Jerusalem is recorded at the end of Revelation. In that great chapter of the Bible we read: "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass. I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book

¹⁶⁵ See Rom. 1:17

¹⁶⁶ See John 5:24; 3:36

¹⁶⁷ See Ezek. ch. 40-42

¹⁶⁸ Ezek. 43:10,11

¹⁶⁹ Rev. 11:1,2

of life.”¹⁷⁰ In this place in Scripture the measuring and description of the city are meant to demonstrate that He who is seated on the throne will make everything new.¹⁷¹ The testimony of the Korahites comes closest to this last survey.

The application of this object lesson should not be lost: God makes monuments in this world. The actual buildings are not made out of stone and mortar, but they are the lives of men. The fact that God saves human beings, and that He uses them to reveal Himself is a monument. In the Old Testament those monuments were usually made of stone; in the New Testament we see how Jesus often paused to erect a monument. The clearest example is the memorial He establishes for Maria who anointed His feet. We read that in Matthew’s Gospel He said: “I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”¹⁷² If a person honors God, God will honor that person. People like George Müller and Hudson Taylor have themselves become monuments of God’s grace. The foundations, the walls and the streets of the New Jerusalem are not made out of dead materials, but out of human lives. The city is the bride of the Lamb. God wants us to survey His acts of grace. In practice this is impossible to do in a literal sense, but we can imagine that, if man can measure the exact circumference of the equator, God’s acts also can be studied in a scientific way. His acts are, in a way, measurable. They do not go against the laws of nature, but rather they confirm them.

The world is filled with counterfeits, with things that are attributed to God’s power, but that have little or nothing to do with it. This does, however, not take away anything from the genuine character of God’s acts. The Incarnation of the Word, His life, suffering, death, and resurrection are facts that have taken place on our planet. They were “measurable facts” just as much as the birth, life, and death of all other creatures in the world. Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ does not mean intellectual suicide, or the giving up of all logic; faith confirms the facts. God did intervene in world history, and He still intervenes in the lives of individuals today. This is still noticeable in the confusion of life in the world in which we live. The rising of the sun, and the coming of the new day of eternity will confirm our conclusions. Every new generation has to rediscover and experience this. But it is the task of the parents to teach this to their children. Young people ought to be able to see in the lives of the generation that goes before them that God is a reality. How else would He become a reality to them?

Father Kevin O’Sullivan O.F.M., who wrote a commentary on the Psalms that is used in a *Roman Catholic Book of Prayer*, believes that the historical background of this psalm was the siege of the city of Jerusalem by Sennacherib in 701 BC, when the city was saved from the enemy; he states that it was written after the blockade was lifted. This theory has its attraction, but the reference to the Sons of Korah would then be meaningless in connection with this psalm.

The psalm ends with the declaration: “For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.” The last word in Hebrew is *muwt*, which means death. The NIV renders this with “the end,” but most other translations use the phrase “unto death.” The contrast between “forever and ever,” and “unto death” is interesting. The thought of death brings us back to earth, where we have to follow a path that is difficult to see, and where we are in need of supernatural guidance. Death is the end of our earthly existence. The psalmist, having been drawn up to the heavenly Zion and to God’s eternal glory, is seems unlikely that he the psalm would end with the word “death.” This leaves us in the middle of the tension in which we live on earth. We would have anticipated that the psalmist would have said: “He will be our guide even through death into eternity.” Obviously, the tension is intentional, and it is beneficial. If God is really the God the psalmist describes to us, then His guidance will not end at death. The psalmist intends to generate faith that death may *be* the last word, but death does not *have* the last word.

¹⁷⁰ Rev. 21:9-27

¹⁷¹ See Rev. 21:5

¹⁷² Matt. 26:13

PSALM FORTY-NINE

For the director of music. Of the sons of Korah. A psalm.

- 1** *Hear this, all you peoples; listen, all who live in this world,*
- 2** *both low and high, rich and poor alike:*
- 3** *My mouth will speak words of wisdom; the utterance from my heart will give understanding.*
- 4** *I will turn my ear to a proverb; with the harp I will expound my riddle:*
- 5** *Why should I fear when evil days come, when wicked deceivers surround me--*
- 6** *those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches?*
- 7** *No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him--*
- 8** *the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough--*
- 9** *that he should live on forever and not see decay.*
- 10** *For all can see that wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others.*
- 11** *Their tombs will remain their houses forever, their dwellings for endless generations, though they had named lands after themselves.*
- 12** *But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish.*
- 13** *This is the fate of those who trust in themselves, and of their followers, who approve their sayings.*
Selah
- 14** *Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them. The upright will rule over them in the morning; their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions.*
- 15** *But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself. Selah*
- 16** *Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases;*
- 17** *for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him.*
- 18** *Though while he lived he counted himself blessed-- and men praise you when you prosper--*
- 19** *he will join the generation of his fathers, who will never see the light [of life].*
- 20** *A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.*

This psalm is the last in this series of three psalms, beginning with Psalm 42, which carries the name of the Sons of Korah. It forms a profound coda to this song cycle. The subject is death. The rendering of the psalm in TLB is particularly beautiful and captivating, and George Knight's comments in his *Commentary On The Psalms* is very good also. There is an unmistakable similarity between this psalm and the book of Ecclesiastes. Vs. 12 and 20, which read: "But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish," and "A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish," sound like Solomon's words: "Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless," and: "I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand."¹⁷³ The Korahites may well have written this psalm in Solomon's lifetime. This kind of philosophy was fashionable at that time.

There is a possibility that the last verse of Psalm 48 was originally part of the title of this psalm: "For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death."¹⁷⁴ If this is true, it would give a different perspective to the psalm, without which it would be difficult to determine what the psalmist actually wants to say. Does he compare the power of man with the power of death, or does he contrast the power of death with the power of God? In the book of Ecclesiastes, the perspective of heaven is purposely left out. Solomon wanted to demonstrate that one of the consequences of excluding God is that the life of man becomes purposeless. In that way he wanted to prove the existence of God, and the necessity of obeying Him. In this psalm, however, it seems that the poet draws a more direct line from life on earth to eternity. In vs. 15, for instance, another way is shown for the man who knows fellowship with God. We read: "But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself. Selah" Craigie, in

¹⁷³ Eccl. 3:19; 5:13-15

¹⁷⁴ (KJV)

Word Biblical Commentary, thinks that this verse is meant to be an ironic quote of a godless person who thinks that God will make an exception for him.

The introduction gives to this psalm an international allure. “All peoples,” that is the population of the whole world is addressed. In that sense, this psalm is akin to Psalm 47. In this psalm Israel alone is not the subject, as in Psalm 48, but all peoples, at all places, and at all times. The problem discussed concerns everybody, without distinction of their position in the world.

The psalm is presented as a prophecy, as if the psalmist is in a trance, and he utters truths that lie deeper than the human conscience. This prophetic character is suggested by the words: “words of wisdom,” “utterance from my heart,” “a proverb,” and “my riddle.” The trance is brought about by the music of the harp. “While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came upon Elisha.”¹⁷⁵ To us, levelheaded Westerners, this sounds strange. The problem is that this kind of spiritual experience can be inspired demonically or heavenly. In the case of this psalm there is no doubt, however, about its origin.

The topic is a mystery. TLB renders vs. 4 with: “I will tell in song accompanied by harps the answer to one of life’s most perplexing problems.” That is a beautiful translation. The question is: What is the problem? The word “fear” is used twice in the psalm (vs. 5, 16), although the NIV uses “overawed” in the latter, the Hebrew word is *yare’* the same in both verses. This fear has no connection with death in that context. The point is not whether man has to die or not, but why one man can have power over another that allows him to persecute and oppress. The theme of this psalm may be expressed in Jesus’ words in Matthew’s Gospel: “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.”¹⁷⁶ The fear is not fear of death, but fear of men. This fear is conquered by the discovery that the person who has power over us is a mortal being himself. The deception upon which the other person bases his power is exposed.

The first misplaced confidence of man which gives him the illusion of power is his possessions (verses 6-12). The second misconception is the infallibility of their own insight, and judgment. Vs. 13 speaks about “those who trust in themselves, and of their followers, who approve their sayings.” Those people are impressed by their own words. The psalmist put both of those alleged certainties in the scale and finds them wanting.

The time mentioned in vs. 5 is “the evil days.” There have been many “evil days” in world history. For me, the years of Nazi oppression are still fresh in my mind. The most evil day of all is still to come, at the time of the “Great Tribulation.” This psalm will become more and more relevant as world history rushes to its end.

In the only question that matters in man’s final destination, money, power, and possession have no value at all. The way in which this psalm presents the problem is very moving, and psychologically effective. Nobody in this world lives unto himself alone. The question the fool in this psalm asks himself is not, what he can do to receive eternal life for himself, but how he can use his power and influence to give to his brother, the one he loves, the security he misses himself. We find this kind of unselfishness not only among God’s children. The rich man, for instance, in Jesus’ parable experienced, as an important part of his suffering in hell, the fact that he had five brothers who were damned.¹⁷⁷ It may be more heartrending to see that a brother or a child is lost for eternity, than to realize that one is lost oneself. The irony is that the solution lies in the salvation of oneself after all. We can only have a certain influence, as far as the eternal destiny of our loved ones is concerned, if we live in fellowship with God. But if we only want to save our own lives, we will lose our own life as well as the lives of the ones that surround us.

It is amazing to see how much insight the psalmist demonstrates in the human nature of his oppressors. He sees them human as human beings who want to redeem their brothers.

The suggestion that wise men and fools end up dying in the same fashion does not imply that the psalmist does not see a difference in the eternal destiny of man. There is often a contradiction between what a man sees and the inner convictions that motivate him. The psalmist says that the godless live as if they will never die, and at the same time he realizes that all men must die. Although no exception has ever been made for anyone, he acts as if he would be the first one ever for whom an exception would be made. When the author William Soroyan heard that he had been diagnosed with incurable cancer, he telephoned a journalist and said: “I thought that an exception would be made for me. What do I do now?” It is utter foolishness not to prepare oneself for the end of one’s earthly life. The psalmist does not say this in so

¹⁷⁵ II Kings 3:15

¹⁷⁶ Matt. 10:28

¹⁷⁷ See Luke 16 :27,28

many words, but the suggestion is there that this lack of preparation demonstrates itself in the persecution of others. On the other hand, the realization that this life is only a preparatory stage for eternity will stimulate love for one's neighbor. The shortsighted person builds monuments for himself; God erects memorials for those who take Him into account in their lives.

King Solomon speaks about the same subject in the book Ecclesiastes. We read: "And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment-- wickedness was there, in the place of justice--wickedness was there. I thought in my heart, 'God will bring to judgment both the righteous and the wicked, for there will be a time for every activity, a time for every deed.' I also thought, 'As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?'"¹⁷⁸ Yet, we know that man is more than an animal. By breathing His breath, or His Spirit into man's nostrils, man became the bearer of God's image. We read: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ... the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."¹⁷⁹ Only after man broke the bond of fellowship with God, He said: "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."¹⁸⁰ If man is put here on the same level as the animals, this is a reference to the fall. For those who are in Christ Jesus things are quite different. When we are in Christ, it is said of us: "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas."¹⁸¹ Disobedience lowers a man to the level of the animal; obedience makes him the crown of God's creation.

Ecclesiastes seems to put man and beast under the same classification; the psalmist tries to make a distinction even between one man and another. It is the person who is perfectly satisfied with himself, who is put in the same category as the animals: those who are so impressed by their own wisdom. The Jewish theologian and philosopher Martin Buber wrote a book *I, And Thou*, in which he emphasizes the importance of human dialogue. Man who is created in the image of God carries on a dialogue with his neighbor; the animal-man knows only monologues. He is always reading his own script. Some are so preoccupied with themselves that they do not realize where they are, and where they are going. TLB puts it beautifully by saying: "Death is the shepherd of all mankind."

In spite of the negative character of the subject it treats, the poetry in this psalm is of the highest quality. A sheep, destined to be slaughtered, grazes peacefully in the meadow and chews its cud, without the slightest notion that this is its last meal. That which is sad in the case of an animal is the deepest tragedy in man who should know his destiny. Our thoughts go to the Lamb of God, who was taken to the slaughterer, and who was fully conscious of the reality of the moment. Like the stupid man who does not realize where he is going, Jesus took on the same attitude, but not because of ignorance. He knew the enemy, and He went like one of the herd, in order to be able to lead many sons to glory.¹⁸²

The great surprise of this psalm is found in the last part of vs. 14 and in vs. 15: "The upright will rule over them in the morning; their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions. But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself. Selah." I cannot understand why Craigie, in *The Word Biblical Commentary*, does not interpret these lines in the light of the resurrection of the dead. He sees vs. 15 as a quotation of idle hope, cherished by the man who is doomed, thinking that he will escape in one way or another. But then, who are the upright that will rule over the wicked? If there is indeed no distinction between the righteous and the sinner, this psalm is nonsensical. Then fear of man is only replaced by fear of death. But in reality, fear of man can be overcome only by the hope of the resurrection.

We should return for a moment to the ransom paid for a brother, referred to in vs. 7. Our hope is based on the fact that our Brother has paid the ransom for us. Peter says this so beautifully in his first

¹⁷⁸ Eccl. 3:16-21

¹⁷⁹ Gen. 1:27; 2:7

¹⁸⁰ Gen. 3:19

¹⁸¹ Ps. 8:5-8

¹⁸² See Heb. 2:10

epistle: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”¹⁸³ This fact places us in the category of the righteous to whom the position is given to rule in the morning, the morning of the resurrection of the dead. This also is our guarantee that God will redeem our lives from the grave and surely take us to Himself. Our Lord Jesus assures us: “I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”¹⁸⁴ We understand that this does not mean that our bodies will no die. The words of the psalmist, therefore, should be taken in the sense that God will redeem us from the power of the kingdom of death. He takes us up into glory when we leave this earth. How could we take these statements as coming from the mouth of the wicked? Some people maintain too easily that the Old Testament believer had no concept of life after death. “He will surely take me to himself” can hardly mean anything less than immortality.

The last verses, 16-20, are more or less a summary of the main theme of this psalm. Material riches and everything connected with that, has no value whatsoever in the light of eternity. The keywords in this section are: “without understanding.” Earthly pomp should be an image of heavenly glory. The human being who thinks that he has achieved his goal in life by piling up possessions, and who purposely keeps life after death out of the picture is not human in the deepest sense of the word. The psalmist compares him to a beast, not because of the way he dies, but because of the way he lives. Both aspects are emphasized in verses 12 and 20. Our attitude toward death determines our attitude toward life. We can only live victoriously if we have overcome death. In Jesus Christ we are more than conquerors!

¹⁸³ I Pet. 1:18,19

¹⁸⁴ John 8:51

PSALM FIFTY

A Psalm of Asaph

- 1** *The Mighty One, God, the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.*
- 2** *From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth.*
- 3** *Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before him, and around him a tempest rages.*
- 4** *He summons the heavens above, and the earth, that he may judge his people:*
- 5** *"Gather to me my consecrated ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice."*
- 6** *And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for God himself is judge. Selah*
- 7** *"Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you: I am God, your God.*
- 8** *I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me.*
- 9** *I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens,*
- 10** *for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills.*
- 11** *I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine.*
- 12** *If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.*
- 13** *Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?*
- 14** *Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High,*
- 15** *and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."*
- 16** *But to the wicked, God says: "What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips?*
- 17** *You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you.*
- 18** *When you see a thief, you join with him; you throw in your lot with adulterers.*
- 19** *You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit.*
- 20** *You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son.*
- 21** *These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face.*
- 22** *"Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue:*
- 23** *He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God."*

This psalm is the first in the Book of Psalms that carries the name of Asaph. The other ones are Psalms 73-83. We meet Asaph for the first time as the ark is brought over to Jerusalem. "He [David] appointed some of the Levites to minister before the ark of the LORD, to make petition, to give thanks, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel: Asaph was the chief, Zechariah second, then Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-Edom and Jeiel. They were to play the lyres and harps, Asaph was to sound the cymbals."¹⁸⁵ The sons of Asaph appear to have received the gift of prophesy, and during the preparations of the building of the temple, their job description was to prophecy while using harps to praise the Lord.¹⁸⁶ After the Babylonian captivity, the sons of Asaph were still an existing group who took up their historic responsibilities at the at the reconstruction of the temple. We read: "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel."¹⁸⁷ It is, therefore, quite likely that most of the psalms that carry the name of Asaph were composed by Asaph's sons over a period of several centuries. It is impossible to determine whether this fiftieth psalm is of the hand of Asaph himself, or whether his sons were responsible for it. The contents can pertain to the service in both the tabernacle and in the temple.

Some commentators believe that it was customary in Israel to celebrate an annual renewal of the covenant with God. The psalm would then be sung at the occasion of such a celebration. There are, however, no indications of such a custom in the Old Testament.

Two thoughts predominate in this psalm: 1. The international character of the poem, and 2. The deep insight in the meaning of the temple ceremony.

¹⁸⁵ I Chr. 16:4,5

¹⁸⁶ See I Chr. 25:1-3

¹⁸⁷ Ezra 3:10

As far as the international character of the psalm is concerned, it fits well into the series that begins with Ps. 46. The psalm is meant to be a testimony to all nations of the world. The topic is God's revelation of Himself in Zion. Evidently, the Israelite of that time had a clear insight in the role Israel had to play in the world, as a kingdom of priests, as God had showed Moses at Mount Sinai. God had said: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹⁸⁸ These two aspects, that the whole earth belongs to God, and that God had given Israel a task to fulfill on earth on His behalf, form the main theme of this prophecy. God reveals Himself in this world, in the first place, *through* people to whom He has revealed Himself. It is not a theophany, a revelation of God in the direct sense of the word, where the whole world sees the unveiled glory of God. The light has to shine forth from Zion, and has to illuminate the world through the testimony of the people of Israel. The psalm issues, in the first place, a call for world evangelization. Then there is also a reproof to Israel, because her life is so little in accordance with the task God has given her.

"The Mighty One, God, the LORD." This title is full of significance for a world that knows mighty ones but does not know God. It corresponds to the Name given to Jesus in Revelation: "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."¹⁸⁹ The world in Asaph's days was full of idols, but I do not think that the psalmist merely suggests that God is above the idols. That would associate the Almighty God with dead statues, which were symbols of demonic powers. There is no common basis for a comparison between God and evil spirits. God is here rather represented as the Lord of the hosts of angels, and of other heavenly authorities.

"God" (Elohiym) is the universal name for God, by which He was originally known in the whole world. The Mè tribe, the mountain people in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, retained the name *Ugatame*.¹⁹⁰ "LORD" is a rather poor rendering of YHWH, the Name by which God revealed Himself to Moses¹⁹¹; it is the Name that is related to the covenant which God made with Israel. This double title, therefore, speaks of God's general revelation of Himself in creation, and of His special revelation to Israel in the law, which is the Word of God. We are reminded of the opening verses of the epistle to the Hebrews, where the author 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."¹⁹² The Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant for the whole world. Wherever the sun shines, this message has to be heard.

At the same time, Zion is the focus of God's revelation. God had concentrated the light of His glory in a beam that fell on the cover of the ark of the covenant. Of this small surface of about one square meter, God had said: "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites."¹⁹³ This made Zion the center of the world.

God not only speaks, He also summons the earth. In the first two chapters of Genesis, God speaks to His creation, in the third chapter, God calls man. In between the two is the fall. The implication of the sequence of speaking and summoning here is the same. God calls the earth as He called Adam: "Where are you?"¹⁹⁴ The omniscient God knew, of course, where man was, but Adam himself did not know where he was. God calls His creation so that His creation might know where she is. "Where am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?" Those questions are of vital importance for every person who wants to live a real conscious life. Those questions show the way to the salvation of the world. God's revelation of Himself in Zion is closely connected to His calling, and His saving of the world.

The psalmist described this manifestation of God in terms that are borrowed from the description of His appearance on Mount Sinai. We read there: "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the

¹⁸⁸ Ex. 19:5,6^a

¹⁸⁹ Rev. 19:16

¹⁹⁰ Meaning "Creator"

¹⁹¹ See Ex. 3:14

¹⁹² Heb. 1:1,2^a

¹⁹³ Ex. 25:22

¹⁹⁴ Gen. 3:9

trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain.”¹⁹⁵ There is no record that this kind of manifestation ever took place in Jerusalem. It does not seem the intent of the psalmist to suggest that either. David paints a similar picture elsewhere. “The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry. Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it. He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind. He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him-- the dark rain clouds of the sky. Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning. The LORD thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded. He shot his arrows and scattered [the enemies], great bolts of lightning and routed them. 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.”¹⁹⁶ The manifestation of God’s glory is expressed in terms of impressive natural phenomena that are understandable to man. We know the impression a thunderstorm and an earthquake can make upon us. But, as the prophet Elijah experienced, God was not in the windstorm, the earthquake, and the fire.¹⁹⁷ It often depends upon the person and his character as to how he experiences God’s revelation. The perfect beauty of Zion, can be a shocking and overwhelming experience for some. If we experience God’s beauty as silence, it is an indication that the storms have become still in our own lives. Fire and storm are a form of judgment upon our lives, a judgment we pronounce upon ourselves. The title of Francis Schaeffer’s book *He Is There And He Is Not Silent* is probably derived from this psalm.

The grammar of the first three verses of this psalm is interesting. Some versions put God’s speaking in vs. 1 in the present, others in the perfect tense. But then “will not be silent” in vs. 3 is in the future tense. The impression we get is that God’s speaking is not something that happens in a point of time, but that it is a continuous communication. It is to be expected, though, that we, who live in time and space, would experience God’s speaking as taking place at a certain moment. Such things happen when time and eternity intersect. If sometimes we hear God’s voice, and sometimes we do not, it may be because we are not always perfectly tuned in to Him. God’s call is continuous, and He is never silent.

Against the international stage which Asaph has set up for us, God directs His summons to the “consecrated ones, who made a covenant with [Him] by sacrifice.” Most other translations use the word “saints.” The Hebrew word is *chaciyd*, which means pious, or saint. They are the ones who have entered the covenant with God that was sealed by sacrifices. It is by means of those sacrifices that God’s universal righteousness is manifested. For us, who have come to understand the meaning of those sacrifices through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, the message of this is clear enough. The Apostle Paul says that God’s righteousness is revealed in the Gospel. In his Roman epistle we read: “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.”¹⁹⁸ The sacrifices brought by the Israelites were an image of “Him who had no sin to be sin for us [by God], so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”¹⁹⁹ Asaph may not have understood this, but the Holy Spirit who inspired these words knew what He was speaking about. The paradox between God’s wrath and His love is resolved in this act of righteousness by Christ. God summons us on the basis of the cross of Christ. Those who enter into a covenant relationship with God, stand on this foundation. The psalm may, therefore, be applied to the church of Jesus Christ without any restrictions.

However strange this may sound to us, God judges us on the basis of our being forgiven. Against this background of world evangelization, we are confronted with the question as to what the cross of Jesus means to us personally, and how deeply it has been applied to our lives. It is always tempting to pick the fruits of atonement, and then go one’s own way instead of living a life of obedience. Pardon of sin will be an effective truth for us, only if we consider ourselves to be crucified with Christ, as the Apostle Paul says. To the Galatians, he wrote: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,” and “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified

¹⁹⁵ Ex. 19:16-20

¹⁹⁶ Ps. 18:7-15

¹⁹⁷ See I Kings 19:11-13

¹⁹⁸ Rom. 1:16,17

¹⁹⁹ II Cor. 5:21

to me, and I to the world.”²⁰⁰ Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost Of Discipleship*, warns against the danger of “cheap grace.” This predicate is applicable to the people against whom God testifies in this psalm. To Israel, He says: “What is the meaning of those sacrifices you bring to Me?” To us: “You say you have been saved by the cross of Christ, but how do you apply this cross to your own life?”

God did not reproach Israel that they brought sacrifices, in the sense that they would have interrupted the routine of the ritual. To the contrary, they were very punctual in the fulfillment of their obligations. It almost seemed as if they were doing God a favor by bringing their sacrifices. They gave the impression that they themselves could do without those sacrifices but they brought them because otherwise God would be shortchanged. The essence of idol worship is that man pacifies the gods by giving them what they want. God ridicules the idea that people on earth would have to feed Him. He is the Creator of all the animals, and of life itself. Everything that breathes is dependent upon Him. Paul explained to the philosophers in Athens: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”²⁰¹ The sacrifices are brought for our sake, not for His.

If the bringing of sacrifices becomes a routine, the awareness of who God is, is lost. Therefore, God says in vs. 7: “I am God, your God.” The ritual of sacrifices was part of the covenant YHWH had made with Israel, but in this context God presents Himself as “Elohim.” We can never enter into fellowship with Yahweh if we do not remember continuously that He is the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth.

As creatures, we bring as sacrifice an animal, a fellow-creature, in exchange of our lives to the Lord of the earth. If we thoughtlessly bring sacrifices, we do not only fail to understand who God is but also who we are ourselves: sinners who have forfeited their lives. Sacrifices were never brought to still God’s hunger but ours. God is not bloodthirsty. We hardly understand what it means that God’s holiness is being compromised by our sin. It is terrible if a person thinks he can stand before God in his natural, filthy condition. It is even worse if this person brings the prescribed sacrifices that atone for his sins, without knowing what he does, or in an effort to cover up the sins he is not willing to give up. The latter is, probably, the main point in these verses. Man, in his blind stupidity, thinks that he can deceive God. He brings a sacrifice which presupposes contrition and confession of sin, not for the purpose of receiving forgiveness and rehabilitation, but as a decoy. The only one who is being deceived is man himself.

For us, New Testament Christians, whose pardon rests on the blood of Christ instead of on animal blood, the principle of the matter is the same. The shadow is replaced by the reality but the tendency of the human heart to deceive and to manipulate has not changed.

Does this not affect the solidity of world evangelization? How can the kingdom of heaven become a reality on earth if God has to build it with such miserable wretches as we are? In the parable of the weeds, Jesus says: “The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom.”²⁰² It seems that the worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind, representing seven years of famine in Pharaoh’s dream²⁰³ would be a more fitting picture of the average Christian. This psalm is meant to bring us to contrition and confession.

David says in another psalm: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.”²⁰⁴ The thought expressed in those words does not run parallel to Asaph’s psalm. David prophesied that God’s goal was not animal sacrifices, but the sacrifice of Christ. When the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews quotes David’s psalm, he adds: “...although the law required them to be made.”²⁰⁵ The same can be said about this psalm. The law prescribed sacrifices. David’s words are primarily directly to Jesus; in Psalm 50 Asaph speaks to us.

The animals that were killed had been created by God; they belonged to Him. No one can rightfully say that he brought his own sheep or bull as a sacrifice. God Himself had prepared the sacrifices that had to be brought. Abraham understood this when he said to Isaac: “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”²⁰⁶ The place that was later called “The LORD Will Provide”²⁰⁷ is an eternal

²⁰⁰ Gal. 2:20; 6:14

²⁰¹ Acts 17:24,25

²⁰² Matt. 13:38

²⁰³ Gen. 41:27

²⁰⁴ Ps. 40:6

²⁰⁵ Heb. 10:8^b

²⁰⁶ Gen. 22:8

testimony to this truth. David said: "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand."²⁰⁸ This is a profound lesson we have to learn. The key to this is the word *grace*.

We learn from this admonition how deceitful the human heart is. We try to twist the process of our redemption, and of our fellowship with God in such a way that we would end up receiving the glory. The Lord shows us again in this psalm that the whole plan of salvation, from beginning to end, is a matter of grace alone. It is a frightful thought that the ritual of sacrifice, which is meant to save and sanctify us, could end up being a pitfall for us.

Verses 14 and 15 show us a way out of the dilemma. The KJV reads here: "Offer unto God thanksgiving," but the NIV says: "Sacrifice thank offerings to God." The law on the thank offering, or fellowship offering, is detailed in Leviticus.²⁰⁹ This sacrifice comprises also the offering that accompanies a vow, which is hinted at in vs. 14. All this cannot be interpreted, of course, in the sense that God would prefer a fellowship offering over a burnt offering. That would be completely contrary to the tone of this psalm. Asaph does not deal with technical details here. The Holy Spirit wants us to understand that we have to use the sacrifice that takes our place to praise and worship God, and that, as a logical result of the atonement by means of the animal we killed ourselves, we should surrender ourselves to God, in order to serve Him. After all, fulfilling our vows, does not mean that we make a deal with God, but that we surrender in obedience to Him. This will result in answered prayer. God says: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me."

The idea that praise is a sacrifice is a revolutionary thought. On the one hand it means that it does not cost us a thing to praise God; on the other hand it costs us everything. Another life died in our stead, but this also means that we die ourselves, although not in the physical sense of the word.

A missionary friend in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, gave his testimony after the sudden death of his wife. He said he had come to understand the term "sacrifice of praise." Whether he was in the mood for praise or not made no difference. The act of praising God had a therapeutic effect upon him.

The bringing of the fellowship offering in its various forms presupposes insight in the meaning of the sin offering and the guilt offering. A fellowship offering could only be brought if atonement for sin was an accomplished fact. The bringing of a fellowship offering signified, in a way, a return to normal life on the basis of the blood that was shed. It involved eating and drinking, which is an indication of life going on. But there was also the realization that this meant unmerited grace for a person who had forfeited his life. This realization is expressed in the thank offering, and the votive sacrifice. "To him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."²¹⁰

It is impossible to bring the thank offering and votive sacrifice and, at the same time, get bogged down in a routine consisting of sin offering, guilt offering, and thank offering. A living, loving relationship with God is maintained and protected by praise and obedience. Man cannot live without some kind of routine, of course, but if praise is part of our routine, we will be kept from ending up in a series of lifeless liturgies. Love and obedience are logical responses to the redemption of our life.

"The day of trouble" occupies an important part of our experiences with the Lord. God does not give us any guarantee that this day will not catch up with us at one time or another. To the contrary, vs. 15 seems to tell us that we can count on the fact that trouble will come. It sounds as if trouble is part of God's plan for our lives. The Lord seems to say: "Of course, there will be serious difficulties. How else would you learn experientially that I am with you, and that I answer your prayers?" God promises us both trouble and help. There is no better antidote against deadly routine than a crisis. Our praise acquires a deeper and richer tone if it is born out of the experience of help in times of trouble. Vs. 15 is often quoted out of context. It is questionable that we will be able to see our prayers answered if they are not linked to our praise and obedience. Many prayers are born out of need. The popular concept is that trouble breeds prayer. This is not always true, and even if it is, it is not a normal condition. We may cry out to God in a time of need, but when we learn to praise God in a crisis, we have, obviously, moved to a higher level of fellowship with Him; it is a sign of victory.

Against the background of this psalm, we may conclude that praise in times of trouble gives us a key to world evangelization. It is a passport to the kingdom of priests. Praise brings about answers to

²⁰⁷ Gen. 22:14

²⁰⁸ I Chr. 29:14

²⁰⁹ See Lev. ch. 3, and 7:11-21

²¹⁰ Rev. 1:5,6 (NKJ)

prayer, and answered prayers honor God. Answered prayers also make us into people who become an honor to Him, because praise is never a matter of the lips alone. God honors those who honor Him with their lives.

The last part of this psalm is directed to the wicked. The question is, who are they? In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight says, correctly, that they are not a separate group of people. These people have been addressed throughout the whole psalm. They are the ones who “recite” God’s laws, and take His covenant on their lips. The Hebrew word for recite is *capfar*, which, in *Strongs Definitions* is given as: “to score with a mark as a tally or record, . . . to enumerate; intensively, to recount.” God used the word with Abraham, when He said: “Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them.”²¹¹ The people in question were quite familiar with both the form and the content of God’s Word; they were Israelites.

A person can be included in God’s covenant, and yet be wicked. The British preacher/evangelist, Ian Thomas, once said: “It is sometimes difficult to discern between the reasoning and actions of Christians and of non-Christians.” Some Christians behave like atheists. There is, of course, nothing against the making of a scientific study of God’s revelation. We could rank the enumeration of God’s laws in that category. There is, however, a danger in approaching God’s Word, without the willingness to surrender to it, and to obey it. Much of the Higher Criticism falls under this heading. This is, obviously, the mentality God condemns here. In New Testament times this attitude had grown into full maturity among the Pharisees and scribes. In recent decades it has entrenched itself in many of our theological schools.

If we do not approach the Word of God with the determination to obey it, we put ourselves up as judges and critics over God’s revelation. This not only robs the Bible of its awesome character, but it also robs us of the ability to understand what the Bible says to us. The key to all intelligent Bible study is obedience. We have to begin by acknowledging the authority of the Bible over our lives. How else would the Spirit of God be able to correct us, and to lead us in the right paths? The contents and quality of our lives is determined by our relationship to the Word of God. We will never enter into an intimate fellowship with the Lord, and we will never amount to anything in the Kingdom of Heaven, if we do not take our Bible study seriously. A person who is not willing to be corrected by the Bible is wicked and godless.

The word “wicked” has a moral connotation in modern English. Originally, the Hebrew word *rasha* meant a person who was wrong. A godless person is not only an agnostic, but one who does not recognize any ethical restrictions in his social intercourse. Verses 18 and 19, therefore, mention theft, adultery, lies, and deceit. This suggests sins that are committed openly. The psalm does not expressly say that these people steal themselves, or personally commit adultery, but they associate with people who do.

Our lifestyle is closely connected to our fellowship with God. A failure to recognize the meaning of the sacrifices indicates a lack of confession of sin, and failure to abandon sinful behavior. A dim vision of who God is also brings about a blurred understanding of the awfulness of sin and its consequences. Rejection of God’s revelation of Himself always results in a hatred of discipline. The result is that the concept of property rights gets blurred (which is stealing), and the sanctity of marriage is violated. The phrase: “You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit,” probably suggests more a loss of control than an active intent to deceive. If we do not recognize that fact that sin is within us, sin increases its control over our lives; yet we are supposed to keep our sinful nature under control. God gave this warning to Cain: “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.”²¹² A person who does not control his tongue is the immediate victim of the power of evil; lies, deceit, and slander will be the fruit of his lips. If we lie, we demonstrate that we have cut the bond with truth. Deceit is the direct result of this broken relationship in our intercourse with others, and slander is the application of all this for the purpose of destroying our neighbor. Our most natural and intimate relations will be affected by this. God puts the finger on these sins, not among the pagans, but among believers. If this Gospel were preached in our churches today, a revival might break out.

God’s silence in vs. 21 contrasts sharply with His speaking earlier in this psalm. There is, however, no contradiction between the two. God is, actually, never silent, but unless the communication between Him and us is open, we will not hear His voice. It is sin in our lives which mutes God’s voice for us. If, from this, we draw the conclusion that God is silent, we are way off the mark. If we no longer hear God’s voice, His revelation ceases to be for us. This means that corruption will set in. This will make us

²¹¹ Gen. 15:5

²¹² Gen. 4:7

lose all sense of proportion, and we will make God to be “created in our image and likeness.” The gods we create ourselves will, ultimately, be less than we are, so that we will be able to manipulate them. In that way we commit idolatry. Our moral behavior will be judged in the light of God’s character. If we make the character of God to be a projection of our behavior, we lose all norms according to which we can be evaluated. The great danger of this is that this is not what reality is like. Our efforts to manipulate God, or our false representations of Him, do in no way change God’s reality. If, for instance, we meet a wild animal in the jungle, and we suppose that he is a dead and stuffed creature, we are in much greater danger than if we recognize the reality. God shows Himself here as this kind of wild animal, who will tear us apart. He says: “Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue...” In C. S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*, we often read the phrase about Aslan: “He’s not a tame lion, you know.” Whether we see in Jesus Christ the Lamb that was slain or the Lion of Judah, depends on what we have done with our sins. The prophet Amos uses the image of a roaring lion when speaking about God; he says: “The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem.”²¹³ The same idea is expressed by the writer to the Hebrews when he says: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”²¹⁴

Some people find it difficult to reconcile this with the image of God as a loving Father. God’s anger about sin is, however, in no way contradictory with His love for man He created. But if we associate with the devil, we will receive our share of God’s wrath that is directed against him. Which side of God’s character we will be exposed to depends upon our choice.

The psalm ends with one of the pearls of the whole Bible. After the negative verses that deal with man’s shortsightedness, we see, in the last verse the light appearing on the horizon, and the doors of heaven open up. “He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.” In connection with vs. 14, we saw already what is implied in the bringing of a thank offering. In the previous verses, the thank offering was recommended as an antidote against getting bogged down in senseless rituals. The thank-offering keeps our relationship with God full and living on the basis of the sacrifice of Christ. The mention of the thank offering in this last verse is placed against the background of a lack of understanding of reality. The person in the previous verses had no notion about who God is. He thought that God was like himself; He had been completely blinded by the darkness that surrounded him. To that kind of person, the Holy Spirit says: “If, without seeing anything, you begin to thank and praise God in faith, the results will be amazing.” It is comparatively easy to praise God when we can see Him clearly, and when we feel grateful. We tend to think that people are crazy who praise God when their backs are bleeding and their feet are shackled in iron, as Paul and Silas did in the prison of Philippi. But the outcome of their action justified their behavior.

What the Holy Spirit says here seems so obvious: “He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me.” After all, honoring God is the essence of the sacrifice of praise. But the bringing of a thank offering takes on new dimensions when it is brought in the darkness of our circumstances. There is nothing unreasonable in the fact that, if we trust, on the basis of the known facts of salvation, we trust that all things work together for good, even if we see no light at the end of the tunnel, or if we do not understand the reason why we pass through certain experiences. God says that He is honored if we thank Him under all circumstances. In doing this, we open a way for the Holy Spirit to show us the reality of God’s salvation.

Preparing a way presupposes that there are obstacles to overcome. Those obstacles are both inside and outside us. There is demonic resistance; the powers of darkness will try to keep us from seeing what is there. The question is not whether God’s salvation exists or not, but whether it is visible or invisible. The greatest obstacle, however, is within us. The fact that God’s salvation surrounds us, but we cannot see it, is an indication that there is something wrong with our eyes. If we understand this, we can thank God for what we cannot see. The Holy Spirit assures us that praise will change our circumstances. Our eyes will be opened, and will get used to the light, and we discover that “the earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.”²¹⁵ It would be worthwhile to try this out, and bring this kind of thank offering, wouldn’t it?

²¹³ Amos 1:2

²¹⁴ Heb. 10:31

²¹⁵ Ps. 33:5 (NKJ)

PSALM FIFTY-ONE

For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*
- 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.*
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.*
- 5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*
- 6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.*
- 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*
- 9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.*
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.*
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.*
- 14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.*
- 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.*
- 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*
- 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*
- 18 In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem.*
- 19 Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

This psalm occupies a special place in the Book of Psalms. It is a confession of sin by David, the king of Israel, Israel's greatest king. David was, probably, one of the greatest men who ever lived. His poetic gifts place him among the highest rank of artists of all times. The depth of his emotions is nowhere evinced so clearly as after this deep fall. It is paradoxical that David's greatness is demonstrated so clearly in this confession of his awful sin. Abraham Kuyper has said correctly: "The garment of penitence does not disgrace man."

This fact does, in no way, lessen the horror and repulsiveness of David's acts. We have to remember, though, that before David wrote this psalm, God had already forgiven him. 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.'" ²¹⁶ Yet, this divine pardon did not affect the depth of his emotions. The fact that David wrote this psalm, after he had received God's grace, proves that he had not yet been able to put the matter behind him. He had no sense of being forgiven. God may have forgiven David, but David had not forgiven himself yet. This struggle is at the core of this psalm. It is the cry of a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart.

The fact that man does not forgive himself as fast as God forgives him is, in itself, not an unhealthy thing. It demonstrates a sense of reality. Satan can use this, though, to manipulate guilt feelings, and cause depression, which separates from God. There is "godly sorrow" and "worldly sorrow." The Apostle Paul says: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." ²¹⁷

In Psalm 51, we see David's struggle to clear his own conscience before God. Together with Psalm 32, this poem is a demonstration of, what we may call, the psychology of forgiveness. In Psalm 32, the awareness of forgiveness had already dawned; in this psalm the light only breaks through at the end.

There is no doubt, not even among Bible critics, about the historical background of this psalm. We read the report of David's adultery with Bathsheba, of the murder of Uriah, and of Nathan's confrontation

²¹⁶ II Sam. 12:13

²¹⁷ II Cor. 7:10

in II Samuel.²¹⁸ George Knight, in his *Commentary On The Psalms*, reminds us of the fact that the Old Testament knew no forgiveness for the sins of adultery and premeditated murder. The person who committed those sins had to be executed. The knowledge of this fact must have played an important part in David's struggle. He was the first person ever for whom God made an exception. That elevates this psalm to the level of a prophecy, and makes it a pointer to the sacrifice of Christ, which brought about atonement for sins that could not be atoned for under the old covenant.

This poem is, beyond doubt, a masterpiece. We should not be so naïve as to suppose that David wrote it immediately upon Nathan's confrontation with him. It is quite possible that it was not composed until everything was over. Thus the contrition of the moment became the basis of an artistic utterance, which the Holy Spirit presents to us as a model of confession of sin and of repentance.

In the opening verse, David appeals to God's lovingkindness, compassion, and grace. The plea for forgiveness does not only imply a confession of sin, but also an acknowledgment that punishment is deserved, and that David has forfeited his life. In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the latter prays: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."²¹⁹ The Greek word used for "have mercy" literally means, "be reconciled." The intent is that God would accept the sin offering that has been put on the altar as a propitiation for sin. It is important to remember that forgiveness is an act of judicial value. God does not pardon us on the basis of our tears, but on the basis of the payment for our sins by the blood of Christ. That does not mean that tears are not important but, thank God, they are not the basis for our forgiveness.

The sacrifice for David's sin is not mentioned in this psalm, but this does not mean that none was brought. The stress in this psalm is on the fact that it is fitting, for a man who has sinned, to have a broken spirit and a contrite heart. Forgiveness and pardon may be judicial matters, they should become self-explanatory to us. This does not mean either that we ought to wear black the rest of our lives, and eternally moan about our sins. Contrition and brokenness should, however, be a basic factor in our relationship with God. If God is gracious to us, He gives us something that we did not merit.

David cannot have understood the depth of God's mercy to which he appeals in the psalm. He did not know that the sacrifice, which would be the basis for his pardon was the Son of God Himself. God's mercy is the goodness of God, which is an immutable characteristic of His eternal being. He demonstrates His unfailing love, or lovingkindness, His compassion for His creatures that have become a prey of the devil. The word translated with "compassion" can be taken literally, meaning, "suffering together." In Hebrew the word is *chanah*, which means "to incline," or even "to pitch a tent." God literally came down to our level; the Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us, and took upon Himself our sufferings. But David can hardly have fathomed this.

The difference between David's struggle with his guilt and ours is that we can appeal to God's righteousness in Jesus Christ. When Christ died on the cross, the demand for God's righteousness was satisfied. The pardon of our sins is, in the first place, a judicial act. This was true of David also, but he may not have seen it that way. We can say "amen" to John's statement: "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."²²⁰ It is true that, in vs. 14, David refers to God's righteousness, but the "how" and "why" of it, are not clearly stated. It makes an immense difference in our understanding of forgiveness whether or not we comprehend what the basis for it is.

Besides being a demonstration of God's righteousness, the cross of Christ is also an tremendous proof of God's love for us, that is His lovingkindness, and compassion. But our emotions should rest on the basis of the juridical aspect of the cross.

In the verses 1 and 2, David uses the words: "transgressions," "iniquity, and "sin" to describe the acts he committed. The Hebrew words used are *pesha`*, which literally means "a revolt," iniquity is *avon*, which can be translated as "perversity," or "evil," *chatta'ah* is "an offense." What David had done was a willful transgression of the moral boundaries God had set. He had revolted against God. His sin was the same kind Adam and Eve had committed in paradise. The offense is in complete opposition to God's righteousness. It means that, in sinning, man's acts go against the character of God. Sinning means missing the mark; it means doing that which debases us, and makes us less than human. David sinned against the will of God, against God's character, and against the goal God had set for his life. He asked God that his transgressions be blotted out; which means that the acts he committed will be erased from the books that

²¹⁸ See II Sam. 11, 12

²¹⁹ See Luke 18:13

²²⁰ I John 1:9

will be opened on the day of judgment. He asked to be washed of his iniquity. This request pertains to the aspect of a personal experience. When a person takes a bath, he feels clean and fresh. David asked that God would give him a sense of being forgiven. In his request for being cleansed of sin, he asked for a renewal of his life. The things David asked for are no small matters. He expressed the truth that, unless God renewed him completely, there would be no hope for him. That is a profound confession of sin.

The awareness that God is right when He sentences us to death forms the basis of God's work of grace in our lives; yet we rarely find this kind of consciousness of sin among people. We often pay more attention to, what the doctors call "a feeling of psychological guilt," than to the sinful acts that soil our soul.

The verses 3 and 4 clearly indicate that David had a profound understanding of his sinful acts. The names of Uriah and Bathsheba are not mentioned in this psalm. By withholding those names, David penetrated to the core of the problem. What we do to other people is only good or bad in as much as it is in accordance with, or is in opposition to, the character of God. What we do to others, we do to Him, and what we omit to do for others, we fail to do unto Him.²²¹ David's adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah were sins committed against God. "Against you, you only, have I sinned." This does not mean that Bathsheba and Uriah were not involved in the matter. We can say that David raped the image of God in Bathsheba and murdered it in Uriah. God, not only identifies Himself with our neighbor, He comes to us in our neighbor. That is the reason we have to love our neighbor as ourselves. On the other hand, it means that we have to be "as God" to our neighbor. If sin had not entered the world, it would have been normal for men to demonstrate God's character to one another. That is what Jesus did. Therefore, He could say: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."²²² When Jesus Christ was crucified, mankind murdered God Himself. It is a staggering mystery that this most gruesome of all sins brought about the salvation of the world!

David also understood the fact that the sins we commit against our neighbors, and which God takes as committed against Him personally, demonstrate the purity of His judgment: "... so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge." This is difficult for us to understand, because if we take the insults as committed against us personally, it diminishes our objectivity. We should remember, though, that God Himself is the standard of all judgment. Every act committed is either good or bad in as much as it is in accordance with His character, or deviates from it. That is the reason every human being has within him, as part of the divine image, an intuitive understanding of the difference between good and evil.

Vs. 5 is one of the verses in the Bible that form the foundation for the doctrine of man's hereditary sinful nature. David says that the tendency to sin was already in him the day he was conceived. Some people believe that man does not inherit a sinful nature, but that it is the result of demonic influences upon a child after birth. The sin of David's conception would then be the fact that it was the result of an extramarital relationship, of his father Jesse. The problem is that there is no scriptural proof to back up this theory. It is sometimes easy to make the Bible say what we want it to say. It is true that the doctrine of hereditary sin is an often abused part of theology, but this does not take away from the fact that every human being born in this world participates automatically in Adam's revolt against God, and suffers the consequences of this revolt. If this were not so, there would have been no reason for the immaculate conception of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no doubt about it that the devil finds a rich soil in our sinful nature to plant his own seeds. It is also true that, although sin may already be in us when we are born, sin is not part of human nature as God created man. Sin, like sickness and death, goes against the grain of our nature.

Hereditary sin does not diminish our personal responsibility for the acts we commit. David does not hide behind his sinful nature and says: "This is the way I am; it is not my fault." Contrarily, he confesses that he is rotten to the core. That is a difficult confession for a person who needs self-respect and respect from others. We have reached the deepest point if we understand that we trust ourselves. The problem is that the image of God remains within us. The presence of two opposite poles in us causes an unbearable tension. In the center of our being, in the heart, that hidden inner room of our personality, the place the Holy Spirit ought to fill, the devil sits enthroned. To discover this is a terrible experience. It is at the same time the most wholesome discovery one can make. Most people go through life thinking they are much better than they are. They never come to the point where they open their inner chamber to the Lord and invite the truth and wisdom of God to enter, in order to be governed by Him.

²²¹ See Matt. 25:40,45

²²² John 14:9

David's initial attitude to Bathsheba and to Uriah had been outwardly kind and benevolent. He did not give the impression of wanting to rape Bathsheba, nor of intending to murder Uriah. But what devilish ploys to pat Uriah kindly on the shoulder and send him back to Joab with the letter that contained his death sentence. David was a wolf in sheep's clothing! Yet "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone."²²³

David's sin with Bathsheba is probably one of the most well known sins in world history. This is due to the fact that David was one of the most pious men in the Old Testament. What matters is not how deep we fall, but how sincerely we confess our sins. If we compare David's sin with the sins of Saul, Saul comes out clean as a whistle. But if we compare David's contrition with that of Saul, we understand why Saul was lost, and David was forgiven.

The phrase: "Cleanse me with hyssop" is a reference to the Passover celebration. We read in Exodus: "Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning.'"²²⁴ In using this image, David confessed that another creature had to die in his place, in order to keep him from being condemned by God. The words "cleanse me" are the translation of the Hebrew *chata'*, which literally means "to miss," and which can be translated with "purge me."

In the Passover ritual, the application of the blood to the doorframe was nothing more than a protection against the coming judgment. In the context in which David uses it, it becomes a personal purification. Hyssop is also mentioned in the ritual of the cleansing of a leper.²²⁵ In Leviticus, it is not clearly stated how the hyssop is used there, but it is safe to suppose that it served to sprinkle the leper who had been declared healed of his sickness. The leper to be cleansed had to shave all the hair on his body twice in eight days, which made him look like a newborn baby. Then there was the accompanying ritual of the two birds, one of which was killed, and the other was covered with the blood of the first one. It was then released. Through this ritual, we see the image of the death and resurrection of Christ. The whole ritual of the cleansing of a leper was a picture of the new birth of the Christian. The Holy Spirit says to us, through the mouth of David, that we are cleansed and regenerated by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It seems incongruent that, in the confession of his sin, David could see himself as clean and whiter than snow. Without this hope of forgiveness and healing, however, a person will never come to the point of confession of his sin. The Spirit of God prompts us to open our hearts, and to disclose the depth of darkness and dirt inside us by whispering to us that our sins will be forgiven. We saw already that, before David wrote this psalm, he learned from Nathan's mouth that God had forgiven him. This is the reason why, in his deep inner struggle, the light slowly began to dawn.

With the hope that purification is possible also comes the hope that joy will return. David prays: "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Restore to me the joy of your salvation." Joy and gladness are not independent entities; they are a byproducts. David speaks about "the joy of your salvation." If a man seeks joy alone, outside fellowship with God, he seeks in vain. Without joy, however, we cannot live, just as a plant cannot grow in the dark. God has not created us to live in the dark. What David prays for is healing of his fellowship with God. Fellowship with God is like listening to joyful music, to which the crushed bones will react and be healed. The image is well chosen. We still use the expression: "I can feel it in my bones," which expresses an intense experience. If our bones are crushed, our inner man will no longer respond to God's music. David uses powerful words here. Were his bones literally crushed? Probably not. But the effect of sin in his life was that he could no longer stand before God. We need healthy bones to be able to stand erect. So, the effect of sin is the crushing of bones or the inability of standing up. The consciousness of being in the presence of God brings awareness of the awfulness of sin. After his forgiveness, David sees himself like the lame man in the book of Acts: "He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God."²²⁶

²²³ John 8:7

²²⁴ Ex. 12:21,22

²²⁵ See Lev. 14:4,6

²²⁶ Acts 3:8

God can, of course, not hide his face from David's sin, as David asks Him to do. He cannot ignore our sins and act as if nothing ever happened. But He can blot out our sins, which He did in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The fact, however, that the case is closed, and that the sin has been paid for does not imply that the heart has been cleansed of all tendencies to commit sin again. David, therefore, prays that God will create in him a pure heart and renew a steadfast spirit within him. Better than Nicodemus, David understood that a man must be born again in order to be able to see the kingdom of God and to enter it.²²⁷ David could not know, of course, that in saying these words he reached forward to a new dispensation of God's grace. But the Holy Spirit put those words in his mouth to make us understand the danger to which we are exposed. A man who commits sin can easily fall for the same temptation, unless a radical change has taken place in his life. We cannot cleanse our own heart; God must do this. Also, our relationship with God is not built on our own determination; God will have to give us a spirit of steadfastness. Many people experience difficulties in their "quiet time" with God, because they do not ask for the help of the Holy Spirit in that matter.

The prayer: "Do not cast me from your presence" indicates how intense was the struggle for David, and how destructive the effect of sin is in the awareness of our being protected in fellowship with God. God never even considers the possibility of casting away one of His loved ones who come to Him with confession of sin and in contrition. David knows in all of this that the Spirit of God has not forsaken him. This is evident from the words: "Do not ...take your Holy Spirit from me." David may have thought of the example of Saul, who lost his mind when the Spirit of God left him.²²⁸ It must have dawned on him that there was a possibility that such a thing could happen to him also. This must have frightened him. The brokenness of David, and his deep and sincere confession are proof of the fact that the Holy Spirit was doing His convicting work in David's heart. Even if David's prayer here was unnecessary, it was a good request.

Without the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we cannot see ourselves as God sees us, and we cannot judge our acts correctly in His light. Without the Holy Spirit we have an inflated opinion of ourselves, and the image we believe we project has little connection to reality.

Both in verses 8 and 12, there is a reference to joy. In the latter, this joy is in relationship to salvation. All this seems incongruent in the larger context of this psalm. We tend to think that a person, who has sinned as David did, ought to be banned from joy, at least for a certain period of time. Yet, we cannot say that David easily shook himself free of the consequences of his sin. There is a fine line of division between the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in one's heart, and the manipulation of our guilt feelings by the devil. "The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, ...[has been overcome] by the blood of the Lamb."²²⁹ This means that those whose sins have been forgiven overcome Satan by showing him the proof of their pardon. The joy of salvation is an important part of our forgiveness. Without this joy, it would be very difficult to help others who have sinned. David demonstrated an amazing insight when he placed his own experience in the larger context of his testimony towards others.

Joy goes hand in hand with obedience. The parallel to "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" is: "and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." The suggestion is that, obedience to God has to receive stimuli from outside; if this were not so, David would fail again morally. God is willing to help us obey, and then we can experience the joy of our salvation.

Some people are eager to teach transgressors God's ways, without being willing to go those ways themselves. By compensating for our own lack of obedience in this way, we can cause immeasurable harm to the spreading of the Gospel. But if our preaching of God's Word is based on our own experience of being forgiven, we have a powerful testimony. David paid a high price for this. It is never God's intention, of course, that we sin in order to experience forgiveness, but if we have gone through the trauma of confession, and we have received pardon, then we are better suited to testify of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ than any angel in heaven.

Nothing we experience in life affects ourselves alone. Even if we sin, it is never a merely personal matter. When Adam sinned, it meant the corruption of all of creation, and every sin of every human being following has meant an increase of this decay. Every sin pardoned, therefore, does not affect only one person. The Apostle Paul formulates it this way: "But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me,

²²⁷ See John 3:1-7

²²⁸ See I Sam. 16:14

²²⁹ See Rev. 12:10,11

the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”²³⁰ If it is clear that even murderers like David, and Paul can be saved and renewed, then no one is excluded from this hope.

It is amazing to see how David, even while he was still in the process of confessing, had already this insight in the “why” of his experience. That, in itself, is already a breakthrough. It is always the devil’s policy to try to keep away hope in such circumstances. The fact that David saw traces of hope was just as much the work of the Holy Spirit in him, as the brokenness of his spirit.

The Hebrew word for “bloodguilt” is *midaamiyim*, which is the plural form of *dam*, “blood.” The term refers to the avenger of blood, the relative of the victim who had the right to kill the murderer. We read in Numbers: “If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at him intentionally so that he dies or if in hostility he hits him with his fist so that he dies, that person shall be put to death; he is a murderer. The avenger of blood shall put the murderer to death when he meets him.”²³¹ This was what David thought of when he wrote: “Save me from bloodguilt, O God.” TLB renders this with: “Don’t sentence me to death. O my God.” The same word occurs in the phrase: “Their blood will be on their own heads,” in the context of incest and adultery.²³²

The question is: does David ask to be delivered from the consequences of his acts? That does not seem to fit in with the whole tone of the psalm. We may assume, therefore, that the request has a deeper meaning than appears on the surface. We may think of Ezekiel’s accountability in warning sinners of their impending doom. In his account we read that God says to him: “Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.”²³³ In the previous verse, David spoke about his testimony towards transgressors and sinners for the purpose of their salvation. A casual look at this would give the impression that David runs ahead of himself, and that his zeal to witness is a psychological trick to camouflage the depth of his own guilt. But the verses 12 and 13 suggest that David had to overcome similar resistance as Ezekiel did before he could go and speak to his fellowmen. David recognized, however, the urgency. He realized that, if he would not share the secret of his guilt and pardon with others, who had fallen in the same snare as he, God would hold him responsible for their lost souls. “Save me from bloodguilt,” means: “give me the moral courage to witness to others.” The mention of God’s salvation and the opening of his lips to praise God reinforces this line of thought.

The salvation David experienced cannot be separated from the person of God. The plea: “O God, the God who saves me,” is literally in Hebrew: “O God, God of my salvation.” David speaks of God and salvation as being identical. God does not merely *give* us what we need, He *is* what we need. There is no better victory over fear to testify, than the realization of who God is. The indwelling of Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, in our hearts is, in fact, what the Apostle Paul calls “the hope of glory.”²³⁴ In the context in which Paul places this in his epistle to the Colossians, this word is the basis for our witness. From a human perspective it would be impossible to place David’s horrible sin next to his singing about God’s righteousness. When we understand this paradox, we have grasped the mystery of the Gospel. What else can a man do, who has been dead, and has been brought back to life, than sing God’s praises?

As we have seen already, the request: “O Lord, open my lips,” is a parallel to: “Save me from bloodguilt, O God.” The realization that it is God who has to speak through us when we witness to people, makes the difference between effectively winning people for Christ, and a fanatical buttonholding. This verse is often cited out of context in church liturgy to introduce a call for worship. It contains the acknowledgment that, without the help of the Holy Spirit, man is unable to praise God as he ought to. In this case, one can make no objection to the use of this verse out of context, as long as we understand that the words have a deeper meaning within the frame of this psalm. David adds a very practical dimension to the practice of witnessing, and the experience of being forgiven. Praising God is not only, and not even primarily, a question of using one’s lips; it cannot be separated from the love and compassion for our fellowmen who have fallen in sin, and who are in danger of being lost eternally. Declaring God’s praise with the mouth is identical to having a passion for souls.

²³⁰ I Tim. 1:16

²³¹ Num. 35:20-21

²³² See Lev. 20:11,12,14

²³³ Ezek. 3:20

²³⁴ See Col. 1:27^b

The last stanza of this psalm is obviously the verses 15-19. Many commentators, however, consider the last two verses to be a later addition to the psalm, probably dating from the times of Nehemiah. But the mention of the sacrifice at the beginning and at the end of this stanza argues against this theory. David intended to elaborate on the meaning of the burnt offering at the opening and the closing of this section. If we give in to the tendency to refer verses to a later period, because the logic of thought escapes our twentieth century brain, we end up in the dangerous quagmire of Higher Criticism. Also, history would argue against additions to the sacred text, especially in the post-exilic period.

The NIV opens vs. 16 without the preposition “for” which is found in most of the other translations, and in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew word *kiy*, says *Strong's Definitions*, indicates a causal relation, an antecedent or consequent. The KJV translates it with words like “forasmuch, inasmuch,” etc. This forces us to have another look at the context of the psalm. We tend to believe that, instead of developing a mounting line of thought in this poem, David vacillates between glimpses of hope, and depressive retrospect. If the little word “for,” however, lays a connection between witnessing to sinners in order to make them turn back to God, and “a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart,” then we have to draw the conclusion that David does not merely speak about himself in the following verses. David has penetrated deeply into the problem of the utter destruction that is caused by man’s sin. This is much more than a warning against superficiality.

David uses the phrase “You do not delight in sacrifice,” elsewhere in the psalms. In Psalm 40, we read: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire.”²³⁵ When the writer to the Hebrews quotes the latter, he adds the parenthesis: “although the law required them to be made,”²³⁶ which applies to this psalm as well. David did not speak about the ceremonial law in a denigrating manner, but he wanted to demonstrate that the bringing of animal sacrifices had no meaning in itself, if it was not accompanied by the realization that the sacrifice was substitutional; the bringer should have died himself, but the animal took his place.

In the Fortieth Psalm, it is clear that what God has in mind is the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. In this psalm God wants us to understand that He is justified when He condemns us to death. If we really understand that we merit capital punishment, the result in us will be a broken spirit and a contrite heart. The miracle consists in the fact that God accepts this brokenness as a sacrifice that is a sweet aroma to Him. There is nothing beautiful in the spiritual brokenness of a person, nor was there any beauty in the tortured body of our crucified Lord. The miracle is that we may put the brokenness of our lives, the rubble of our spirit, that which nauseates us, on God’s altar, and that God says: “I do not despise it.” God sees in the bleeding animal that goes up in smoke on the altar, the symbol of a human being who rebelled against Him, and who has put down his arms. If, in that way, we return to dust, the miracle of creation is repeated: God takes this dust, these ashes, and forms us into a new creation by imparting His Spirit into us. Pardington calls this: *The Crisis of the Deeper Life*, which is nothing more or less than God’s act of recreating us.

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit...” means that another sacrifice does not exist. A sacrificed lamb, even the sacrifice of Jesus at the cross, has no meaning whatsoever for us, if we do not place ourselves upon God’s altar with “a broken spirit, [and] a broken and contrite heart.” This is the sacrifice of our whole man; the spirit being the organ of fellowship with God, and the heart the seat of our intelligence, our emotions, and our will.

David uses this image for a converted person in general, not in the first place to express his own contrition and confession, although it can, of course, be applied to his personal experience. Within the context of this psalm, however, it is used of the transgressors, and sinners, mentioned in vs. 13.

The last two verses of this psalm come as a complete surprise. It seems as if they do not belong to what precedes. We ought to remember, though, that David’s sin had consequences far beyond his own life. His sin had polluted Zion and had cracked the walls of Jerusalem. Sins are never private affairs only. If we think that these verses are additions from the times of Nehemiah, we ignore the cosmic consequences of our sins. The walls of Jerusalem had not been broken down by king Nebuchadnezzar, but by the sins of the people of Israel. Nehemiah did not only rebuild the way in a physical sense of the word, he rebuilt a witness and a testimony in this world. David prophesied here that, in Paul’s words: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. [And that we] are the body of Christ, and each one of [us] is a part of it.”²³⁷ If the crack in Jerusalem’s wall that was caused by David’s sin were not mended, the whole city would easily become a prey to the enemy. Only God can build walls

²³⁵ Ps. 40:6

²³⁶ Heb. 10:8

²³⁷ I Cor. 12:26,27

that keep out the enemy, and only God can build what man has broken down. If God pours out grace over Zion, and blesses His church with His good pleasure, because the members of the church have placed their broken spirits and contrite hearts upon His altar, the body will begin to function normally again. "Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar." As we have already seen, in connection with vs. 16, God does not demand sacrifices. But if the cross is not the basis of our lives, rituals have no value. It is in the fellowship of the saints, among those who live in Zion, within the confines of the walls of the city, that the whole spectrum of sacrifices, which typify the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, come to life.

PSALM FIFTY-TWO

For the director of music. A *maskil* of David. When Doeg the Edomite had gone to Saul and told him: "David has gone to the house of Ahimelech."

- 1 *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?*
- 2 *Your tongue plots destruction; it is like a sharpened razor, you who practice deceit.*
- 3 *You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth. Selah*
- 4 *You love every harmful word, O you deceitful tongue!*
- 5 *Surely God will bring you down to everlasting ruin: He will snatch you up and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living. Selah*
- 6 *The righteous will see and fear; they will laugh at him, saying,*
- 7 *"Here now is the man who did not make God his stronghold but trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others!"*
- 8 *But I am like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever.*
- 9 *I will praise you forever for what you have done; in your name I will hope, for your name is good. I will praise you in the presence of your saints.*

The title of this psalm places it against the historical background of David's flight from Saul, and the murder of the priests of Nob.²³⁸ We reject the suggestion, as is given by George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, that the title would be an addition by a later editor of the Book of Psalms, in an effort to give a historical perspective to the poem. Why do we not find any objections to this kind of titles in connection with Psalm 51?

The Edomite Doeg is called in this psalm a "mighty man." The Hebrew word is *gibbowr*, or *gibbor*, which comes from *geber*, defined by *Strongs* as "a valiant man or warrior." Some versions translate it with "hero." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* writes about this man: "The position he held is described as that of 'the mightiest' of Saul's herdsmen (<1 Sam 21:7>). Septuagint reads: 'tending the mules.' Rabbinical legends speak of him as the greatest scholar of his time." "The chief herdsman," or great shepherd could mean that Doeg was the most influential spiritual advisor of King Saul, but this is not clear. Whether "detained before the LORD," as mentioned in I Samuel, means that he had been dedicated to YHWH by a Nazarite vow, we do not know either. Scriptures seem to indicate that he had a special relationship with the Lord, and we read that he reported David's visit to Ahimelech to Saul.²³⁹

In spite of the title, it does not seem that the sin which David accuses Doeg of in this psalm is the fact that he reported David's visit to Ahimelech to the king. His crime was that he obeyed Saul's order to the massacre. We read: "The king then ordered Doeg, 'You turn and strike down the priests.' So Doeg the Edomite turned and struck them down. That day he killed eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod. He also put to the sword Nob, the town of the priests, with its men and women, its children and infants, and its cattle, donkeys and sheep."²⁴⁰ His excuse was the same that was used by the Nazi war criminal: "Orders are orders." He went, however, well beyond the call of duty in killing all the women, children, and infants. It is important to note that none of Saul's officers were willing to execute Saul's orders for the atrocity.²⁴¹ Doeg was also the only person who knew that Ahimelech was innocent. He was present when David lied to the priest, and he must have known that Ahimelech acted in good faith. His act can only be explained by the fact that he was a sadist. Doeg, the Edomite, had stood in the presence God at Nob, but he did this with hatred for those who served the God of Israel. He found pleasure in the killing of the priests, the women, and the babies. For those who can still remember the Nazi period, and the Holocaust, all this sound terribly like a recent event.

Knight refers to David's desire for revenge in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, and he says: "God is as gracious to this gleeful, gloating poet, whether he be David or me, in all his narrow-mindedness, as He is to the most generous hearted believers." It is a compliment to George Knight that he includes himself in

²³⁸ See I Sam. 21:1-9; 22:6-23

²³⁹ See I Sam. 22:9,10

²⁴⁰ I Sam. 22:18,19

²⁴¹ See I Sam. 22:17

this group of “narrow minded” people. This psalm, however, is the inspired Word of God; and I believe that it is sinful not to burst with indignation at the hearing of the cries of women and infants who are being slaughtered. David’s outburst is the indignant voice of the Holy Spirit. There is a time to proclaim God’s love to people who confess their sins, but when we proclaim to devils in human form, who behave like animals, that God is love and that He will overlook our weakness, we talk nonsense.

TLB brings out quite well the tone of David’s sarcasm: “You call yourself a hero, do you? You boast about this evil deed of yours against God’s people.” In connection with Psalm 34, we have seen already that David’s conduct was not always irreproachable. In this case also, David takes responsibility for what happened. We read: “But Abiathar, a son of Ahimelech son of Ahitub, escaped and fled to join David. He told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD. Then David said to Abiathar: ‘That day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, I knew he would be sure to tell Saul. I am responsible for the death of your father’s whole family.’”²⁴² The difference between David’s responsibility and this matter, and Doeg’s guilt, however, needs no further comment. This psalm is a cry of David’s wounded soul. The fact that David feels responsible for what happened, only made the wound deeper. It could be that the writing of this psalm was part of David’s inner healing.

Doeg may be seen as a prototype of all who are separated unto the Lord, but who have surrendered their lives to Satan, as Judas did, and as the Antichrist will do. Doeg is like the person who knows the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but who, instead of surrendering himself to the grace of God, places the reigns of his life in Satan’s hands. As we have seen, Doeg was “detained before the LORD.” The problem is, though, that, although it takes an act of surrender to dedicated oneself to God, one hardly ever, consciously, makes this kind of surrender to Satan. The choices we think we make are usually between God and ourselves. Very few people realize that it is impossible to merely choose for oneself. Unless we make a clear choice for the Lord, the devil always automatically enters into the matter. The devil tries to destroy us by building us up first. The fact that Doeg boasted about his acts and considered himself to be a hero, proved that he was filled with himself.

The second part of the verse seems to present problems to the translator. The rendering of the NIV reads: “Why do you boast all day long, you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?” This translation has a good deal of logic in it. NKJ remains closer to the original, by saying: “The goodness of God endures continually.” According to *The Tyndale Commentary*, a misreading of words in the Hebrew text may have taken place; instead of *el-hasid* (against God’s people), the word *hesed-el* (the covenant of God) was read. TLB brings this out with its rendering of “You boast about this evil deed of yours against God’s people.” This seems less abrupt than the way the KJV and NKJV put it. In the light of the murder of the priests, the translation “against God’s people” makes, definitely, more sense. Doeg does not seem to have had a very prominent position among Saul’s servants. David describes him as a “mighty man,” more in the sense of a brute, someone who loves violence. In the way Doeg reports the incident of David’s arrival at Nob, we could see an effort to promote himself by intrigue. The main reason for carrying out Saul’s order of the execution would have been to establish himself in Saul’s court. And the fact that he caused panic in Nob may have been a source of amusement to him. The psychology of terror can be very satisfying to the one who uses it.

The main reproach David makes Doeg is the fact that he spoke. James says: “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.” Our tongue is the instrument our body uses to demonstrate whether there is truth or falsehood inside us. The tongue itself does not sin. Our deceit lies in the fact that we do not translated faithfully what is in our hearts. A soft-spoken murderer is more dangerous than a screaming lunatic. There is, in our modern times, much talk about communication. It is almost a fad to emphasize the need to say to one another exactly what we think and feel. The problem is that some of our feelings are inspired by the devil. In Doeg’s case, soft words were a camouflage for a murderous soul. In the account of the events in I Samuel, we read very little about what Doeg actually said. It sounded like a reasonable businesslike account of the facts. On the basis of David’s accusations, however, we get the impression that when Doeg was at Nob; he acted as David’s friend. And behind the seemingly factual report of the facts lies, undoubtedly, the motivation to enhance his standing with the king, and to get promotion among the courtiers. David sums up Doeg’s character with the words: “You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth.” Jesus speaks about people who love darkness instead of light. In John’s Gospel we read: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light

²⁴² I Sam. 22:20-22

because their deeds were evil.”²⁴³ For those people there is still the hope; their reluctance to come to the light demonstrates that there still is a feeling of shame. It appears that Doeg was beyond this point already.

From vs. 7, we could draw the conclusion that Doeg made out quite well financially, after committing his crime. David says of him: “Here now is the man who did not make God his stronghold but trusted in his great wealth and grew strong by destroying others!” It is likely that an important portion of the possessions of the inhabitants of Nob disappeared in Doeg’s pocket.

In vs. 5 David prophesies that Doeg would die in accordance with the way he had lived. We do not know how this prophecy was fulfilled. Everyone has to die, but not all die in the same way. We deduct from David’s words that Doeg would die a violent death. Doeg had been proud of his crimes, and he boasted about them. He must have been dumbfounded at the moment he found himself before the Lord unto whom he had been set apart, and faced the “Day Of Wrath,” the “Dies Irae.” Dying is traumatic for each person. For those who belong to Christ, the presence of the Lord at the moment of death is their comfort, and the resurrection from death their hope. How terrible, however, it must be for a man who has caused the death of others, to stand before God as an adversary and an enemy. This world is full of crime. Doeg’s mass murder is insignificant in comparison with the six million mass murders of Hitler, or the seventeen million mass murders of Stalin. David succeeded in lifting this crime up above the stream of events in this world, and placing it in the light of eternity. In that way, this man, Doeg, becomes the personification of evil, and his act a symbol of all cruelty and sadism.

The verses 6 and 7 are, probably, the main reason for George Knight’s objection against David’s “narrow-mindedness,” mainly because David makes the righteous laugh at Doeg. Only if we have never been in the power of a Doeg, can we object. Laughter is not necessarily an expression of sadistic enjoyment; if this were the case, then it would be a matter of repaying evil with evil. It can be a demonstration of a deeper satisfaction. It was, for example, a great boost to justice that Adolf Eichman, the engineer of Hitler’s “Final Solution,” the extermination of the Jewish race in Europe, stood trial in Jerusalem, and was executed in Israel. The prediction of Doeg’s death is a lesson and a warning. The righteous who see and fear realize that God will hold us all responsible for our acts. The laughter is a result of seeing man and his actions in the right perspective. Look at Doeg, this hero, this brute, as he stands before God! He falls dead at Jesus’ feet. Even if Jesus would stretch out His right hand, and say: “Fear not!” as He did with John, the Apostle,²⁴⁴ Doeg would be unable to hear this; and even if he could hear, it would make him cringe the more.

If we turn vs. 7 around, we get a picture of the basis of the life of a child of God. A Christian does not make God his stronghold. He flees to Him when the pressures of life become too heavy, and he places himself under His protection. A stronghold is a fortified place, a shelter, a bunker. The picture speaks of trust and surrender. Doeg experienced the same pressures that David did, but he fled in the wrong direction. His exercise of terror was, in fact, a flight from reality.

Doeg’s only security was his material wealth. He had surrounded himself with riches, and he had succeeded in accumulating a great quantity of material goods. As we have seen, most of his affluence may have been the result of the murder of the priests. On the basis of his riches, he considered himself invincible. This conviction became his undoing. Doeg’s trust in his wealth was an illusion. Those who do not take God into account, live in a dream world, and have severed the bonds with reality. Reality belongs to Christ, as the Apostle Paul says.²⁴⁵

Doeg only realized whom he had served his whole life only when it was too late. The devil lulls man to sleep, and only allows him to awake when there is no escape. C. S. Lewis, in his book *That Hideous Strength*, gives a good example of this in the picture he paints of Dr. Frost, the pseudoscientist, who became an instrument used by Satan to invade a small university town in England.

The beauty of this psalm lies in the comparison David makes between Doeg and himself in vs. 8. The olive tree is a symbol for the nation of Israel. The image suggests in a subtle way that Doeg was an Edomite, and that he had never become part of God’s covenant with Israel. His nationality did not exclude him automatically, because when we met him for the first time, he was “detained before the Lord.”

The flourishing olive tree is also an emblem of growth. The place where the tree is planted and flourishes in is fellowship with God. Trees, of course, do not grow literally in houses; the fenced in garden was probably counted to be part of the house. David does not confuse his images, when he sees himself as a

²⁴³ John 3:19

²⁴⁴ See Rev. 1:17

²⁴⁵ See Col. 2:17

young tree, planted in God's garden, in the court of the temple. His strength and growth come from God. He grows in ground that is holy because of the presence of God. The picture does not show any fruit or maturity yet, but there is life and growth. What a contrast with the corruption, and the stench of death, coming from Doeg's life!

David must have written these words while in the cave of Adullam, since that is where he received word about the murder of the priests.²⁴⁶ The psalm sounds like a spontaneous reaction to this horrible report, and it is logical to assume that it was composed immediately upon receipt of the message.

There are three psalms that were composed during this period:²⁴⁷ this one, probably, being the last one written, after David had come to rest, and had begun to accept his circumstances. In that condition, he calls himself: "an olive tree flourishing in the house of God." His state of affairs throws a peculiar light on the image. David had come to the conclusion that, in comparison with Doeg, he had received the better deal. On the one hand was Doeg, who had acquired an enormous fortune, which allowed him to go into early retirement; on the other hand was David, who had just been fired as supreme commander of Saul's army, and who dwelled as a poor fugitive in a cave. And David says to Doeg: "You lost, and I won!" The difference is the basis of their trust: Doeg trusted in his great wealth, David in God's unfailing love. At this point, nothing has changed yet in David's circumstances, but as far as David was concerned, God had acted, and everything was all right.

David understood that there was no need to personally take revenge upon Doeg. God had already anointed him to be king, and whatever would happen to him, would have its bearing upon the kingdom. If we identify ourselves with God's kingdom, God will take care of our personal interests. If we praise Him, He will honor us. Jesus, on His way to the cross, calls Himself: "a tree that is green."²⁴⁸

The psalm ends with a note of praise, based on God's judgment over Doeg. We may conclude this from the words: "I will praise you forever for what you have done." Yet, at this point, nothing has happened yet to Doeg, but David knows that God had already judged him. In putting things this way, David elevated the case of Doeg to the level of God's righteousness and justice over against the injustice of the devil. This is not a case of a personal grudge, but part of the struggle between good and evil. Jesus speaks in this way about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in this world. He says: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."²⁴⁹ Judgment consists of the fact that "the prince of this world now stands condemned," because of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. And at the end of time, the elders in heaven will sing praises to God, because the devil has been judged and vanquished. In Revelation we read: "The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.' And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: 'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great-- and for destroying those who destroy the earth.' Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm. And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down-- that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven 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. 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. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to

²⁴⁶ See I Sam. 22:20

²⁴⁷ Ps. 52, 57, and 142

²⁴⁸ See Luke 23:31

²⁴⁹ John 16:8-11

you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.’²⁵⁰ This is the song of the Seventh Trumpet. David heard the sound of that trumpet from afar.

How can we reproach David of narrow mindedness, if we see the horizon opening before us in this way? The perspective David saw, became the guiding principle for David’s further life. David had taken refuge in the cave of Adullam; his life was still in danger at this point. He had just received word about the mass-murder, for which he felt himself responsible. All this would have been enough to break a person spiritually and emotionally. But David bows down before God and praises Him. This song of praise makes the light break through, and it opens the right perspective. David saw himself, and Doeg, immediately in the light of God. He knew that, in spite of the outward appearances, Doeg was a lost man, and he knew that the cave was only a temporary abode. He awaited the revelation of God’s Name and the fellowship of the saints.

²⁵⁰ Rev. 11:15-19; 12:7-12

PSALM FIFTY-THREE

For the director of music. According to *mahalath*. A *maskil* of David.

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

With the exception of a few words, this psalm is identical to Psalm 14. Most of what we wrote about that psalm is applicable to this one. The big difference is in vs. 5 in both psalms. In this psalm it reads: "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," but in Ps. 14: "There they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous."

We will limit our comments to that particular verse. The topic here is the victory of the righteous over the powers of godlessness and injustice. In our comments on Ps. 14, we mentioned that it was not a matter of an atheistic philosophy, but of a lifestyle that did not acknowledge God's standards, which is evinced in the persecution of fellowmen. The result for the unrighteous is panic on the day of judgment. The man who lived without God will be confronted with the record of his own life, and with the acts for which he is held responsible. His prayer will be for the mountains and the rocks to fall on him and hide him. It is the prayer we read about in Revelation: "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountain and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"²⁵¹ This panic is not caused by outward circumstances but by the condition of his own soul. Man will condemn himself before the throne of God. The redeemed will stand before the same throne unafraid, and will not fall under God's judgment. There is no panic when there is no evil conscience.

The scattering of the bones is not only symbolic of death itself but also of the worthlessness of the life that was lived. There will be no monuments for the man who has lived his life without God, at least no monuments that God erects. If fellowship with Him is the only valid reason of our existence, how terrible it will be to be rejected by God!

The tone of this psalm places the scene on earth, whilst the persecution of the saints is still in full swing. But David sees beyond the limitations of time and space to the consummation of all things. For a moment, he places time in the light of eternity, which, immediately, highlights the victory.

Two important factors are mentioned in this victory over the foolishness of an atheistic lifestyle: God scatters, and man is put to shame. The feeling of shame is always part of God's judgment. He who feels ashamed condemns himself. Judgment consists in the drawing of a comparison between God and man who was created in His image. The foolishness of man is demonstrated in the fact that man tries to evade judgment by saying: "There is no God." The righteous is the person who has already passed through God's judgment, and who has received forgiveness for his sins.

If the righteous put the unrighteous to shame, it means that God's standard are manifested in his life, and are experienced as a condemnation by the "atheist." Paul says: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."²⁵²

²⁵¹ Rev. 6:15-17

²⁵² II Cor. 2:15,16

PSALM FIFTY-FOUR

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A maskil of David.
When the Ziphites had gone to Saul and said, "Is not David hiding among us?"

- 1 *Save me, O God, by your name; vindicate me by your might.*
- 2 *Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth.*
- 3 *Strangers are attacking me; ruthless men seek my life-- men without regard for God. Selah*
- 4 *Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.*
- 5 *Let evil recoil on those who slander me; in your faithfulness destroy them.*
- 6 *I will sacrifice a freewill offering to you; I will praise your name, O LORD, for it is good.*
- 7 *For he has delivered me from all my troubles, and my eyes have looked in triumph on my foes.*

The historical background for this psalm is stated in the subscript. On two occasions the Ziphites went to Saul to report the presence of David in their territory.²⁵³ The first time David escaped narrowly. It is reasonable to suppose that this psalm pertains to that more traumatic episode.

Immediately preceding this event, we read how David took the town of Keilah back from the Philistines, and installed himself there temporarily. He did this with God's consent. But the Lord also made it clear to David that the inhabitants of Keilah would have handed him over to Saul without any qualms of conscience. They did not show much gratitude to David for their deliverance.²⁵⁴ In the desert of Ziph, David had a brief encounter with Jonathan, who encouraged him to continue to trust the Lord. David's trust in his fellowmen must have been deeply shocked, when he heard that a delegation of Ziphites went to Saul to betray him.

Saul was at the point of surrounding David. It was, probably, at this tensed moment that David prayed the words of this psalm. God heard David's prayer. Deliverance came from an unexpected corner: the Philistines were the answer.²⁵⁵ This psalm was written at a place called *Sela Hammahlekoth*. The NIV leaves this name untranslated, but other versions render it with "Rock of Escape."

According to George Knight, this place must have been only a few miles from Hebron and the people who betrayed David must have been his kinsmen. The prophet Micah would later say: "A man's enemies are the members of his own household,"²⁵⁶ words which Jesus quoted in Matthew's Gospel.²⁵⁷

David calls God "Elohim," that is the Creator, the one in whose image and likeness he was made. His is a cry of despair: "Save me, O God, by your name." He appeals to God's Name, that is His being. He calls for help, not only because of who God is, but also because of who he himself is, as bearer of God's image. After all, he did not arrive in this situation because of disobedience to God's will, but because of his obedience and he is in trouble, not because he had deviated from God's image, but because he had obeyed God's call. For those reasons, he felt that he ought to be able to go through life in an honorable way, but now he compares himself to "a dead dog, a flea."²⁵⁸

David did not ask God for forgiveness; he had already received that assurance. He asks for vindication, which goes with forgiveness. Some people are never amazed that they are persecuted and despised as Christians. Their self-image is so poor that their low status does not astonish them. Without realizing this, we put the blame on God, if we take such a situation to be normal. David was much closer to reality with his prayer for his rights than some of us are. The power of God is needed for this vindication. Where injustice and rejection are prevalent, the enemy is close, and he can only be overcome by the power of God.

Vs. 2: "Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth," is not rhetorical poetry. If David asks God to listen to him, he presupposes some equality between God and himself. Fellowship with God means listening to one another. Our relationship with God is not a one-way street.

In using these words, David also draws a line between himself and people who do not know God. In the following verse, he calls these "men without regard for God," "strangers" and "ruthless men." The

²⁵³ See I Sam. 23 :19, and 26 :1

²⁵⁴ See I Sam. 23 :1-13

²⁵⁵ See I Sam. 23 :14-28

²⁵⁶ Micah 7:6

²⁵⁷ See Matt. 10 :36

²⁵⁸ I Sam. 24:14

Hebrew words are *zuwr*, and *`ariyts*, which Strong's defines as "foreign, strange, profane," and "fearful, powerful or tyrannical." According to The Tyndale Commentary, this can also be rendered as: "arrogant people."

As we have seen already, David was at Ziph, among his own people, whom he calls here "strangers." Our relationship with others depends, ultimately, upon the intimacy of our, and their relationship with God. The real blood relationship is in the blood of Christ. This relationship determines the difference between humility and arrogance.

There may also have been elements of jealousy in the relationship between David and his kinsmen. It is sometimes difficult for blood relatives to accept the fact that God intervenes in the life of one of the members of the family. David had learned to keep his eyes upon God. Ever since Samuel had anointed David, the Spirit of the LORD had come upon him in power.²⁵⁹ He had learned to have a daily walk with God. Saul had had a similar experience to that of David, but with him this had not led to a personal knowledge of the Lord. The difference lay in their inner surrender. God is, of course, omnipresent; but we have to learn to keep our eyes fixed upon Him. It is possible, as with Moses, to see Him who is invisible.²⁶⁰

We cannot ascertain with certainty whether there had, at this point, already been a change in David's circumstances; this was probably not yet the case. Saul had probably not yet given up the pursuit, but victory had already begun within David himself. All victory begins in man's spirit. After all, outward circumstances are no independent entities; they are shadows of a heavenly reality. That which we experience on earth as a struggle is the result of a battle in the heavenly places. However strange this may sound, our attitude toward God is the determining factor in this. The NIV opens vs. 4 with: "Surely God is my help." Other versions read: "Behold, God is my helper."²⁶¹ The word "behold," or "see" speaks more of insight than of sight. David sees God's help with his spiritual eye, before there is any physical evidence. It begins with faith. He experiences God's help, in the first place, as a spiritual and emotional encouragement.

At one time in our missionary career, we had to be evacuated from our mission station because of a rebellion. We went to our annual missions conference, which opened with a day of prayer. During one of the prayer meetings the Lord met us; I had felt a heavy burden on my soul, thinking we had come to the end of our ministry, and I had shed tears with my prayers. God assured me that the situation was in His hands. This was for me the breakthrough, the moment of victory. When I returned to the mission station after this conference, the rebel leader declared himself ready to surrender. I understood then that the victory had been won during the conference, and not at the mission station.

Some commentators see in vs. 5: "Let evil recoil on those who slander me; in your faithfulness destroy them," an objectionable utterance of David's thirst for revenge. But on the two occasions when David did have the opportunity to take revenge upon Saul, we see that he spared Saul's life.²⁶² David repaid evil with good. But this does not mean that God should let the evil people do go unpunished. Saul's efforts to kill David were more than attempts to eliminate someone he did not like. He wanted to murder the one God had chosen for the throne. Saul endeavored to prevent the coming of the kingdom. Saul confessed to David: "I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands. Now swear to me by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants or wipe out my name from my father's family."²⁶³ This demand gave an indication that he understood clearly what his own motives were. It was not God who cut off Saul's descendants and wiped out his family name. It is true that "The Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him,"²⁶⁴ but this meant nothing more or less than that Saul had withdrawn himself from under the Holy Spirit's protection by his disobedience, and had opened himself up to demonic influences. Saul was solely responsible for his own life and death. He ended his life by committing suicide. God does not send evil spirits upon people, but, in Jesus' words: "Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather."²⁶⁵

David's vow to bring freewill offerings is more than a desire to express his gratitude to God. He believed that God would bring him back to the sanctuary, the place where the ark stood, and where

²⁵⁹ I Sam. 16:13

²⁶⁰ Heb. 11:27

²⁶¹ NKJ

²⁶² See I Sam. 24 and 26

²⁶³ I Sam. 24:20,21

²⁶⁴ I Sam. 16:14

²⁶⁵ Matt. 24:28

sacrifices were made. David expressed the same thought to Saul, when he said: “They have now driven me from my share in the LORD’s inheritance and have said, ‘Go, serve other gods.’ Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the LORD.”²⁶⁶ Because of his status as a refugee, David could not bring offerings at the place where they had to be brought.

The freewill offerings mentioned here are the sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus,²⁶⁷ which were often accompanied by a vow. They were also an expression of gratitude for the fact that the atonement for sin, which was symbolized by the sin offering and guilt offering, was accomplished. Without a sin offering and a guilt offering, no freewill offering or fellowship offering would be possible. Praising the Name of the Lord goes together with the bringing of the sacrifice. In a poetical sense both are parallel, but praising the Lord is never a matter of words alone. Praise is the reaction of the whole person to the goodness of God. We praise God by, as the Apostle Paul says: “[offering] your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.”²⁶⁸ He also says: “Offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.”²⁶⁹

As we mentioned before, it is unlikely that David’s outward tight circumstances had already changed at this point, but David realized that those who were out to take his life were powerless. How David’s eyes looked in triumph on his foes, we see in the instances where he saved Saul’s life, already mentioned above. The triumph was in seeing the foe in the right perspective. It is better to be a refugee under God’s protection than to sit on the throne and be a toy in the hands of the enemy.

²⁶⁶ I Sam. 26:19^b,20^a

²⁶⁷ See Lev. 3 :1-17 ; 7 :11-21

²⁶⁸ Rom. 12:1

²⁶⁹ Rom. 6:13

PSALM FIFTY-FIVE

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A *maskil* of David.

- 1 Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea;**
- 2 hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught**
- 3 at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger.**
- 4 My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me.**
- 5 Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me.**
- 6 I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest--**
- 7 I would flee far away and stay in the desert; Selah**
- 8 I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm."**
- 9 Confuse the wicked, O Lord, confound their speech, for I see violence and strife in the city.**
- 10 Day and night they prowl about on its walls; malice and abuse are within it.**
- 11 Destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets.**
- 12 If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him.**
- 13 But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend,**
- 14 with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.**
- 15 Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave, for evil finds lodging among them.**
- 16 But I call to God, and the LORD saves me.**
- 17 Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice.**
- 18 He ransoms me unharmed from the battle waged against me, even though many oppose me.**
- 19 God, who is enthroned forever, will hear them and afflict them-- Selah men who never change their ways and have no fear of God.**
- 20 My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant.**
- 21 His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords.**
- 22 Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.**
- 23 But you, O God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of corruption; bloodthirsty and deceitful men will not live out half their days. But as for me, I trust in you.**

No historical background is given for this psalm, but we find it placed in a series of poems in which David is fleeing from Saul. The contents of the psalm fits the spiritual condition of one who is being hunted down, and whose life is in danger. Maybe even more than in the other poems in this series, David is here emotionally at the lowest point.

We have seen already, in connection with Psalm 54, that the Desert of Ziph was close to David's birthplace, and only a few miles from Hebron. The Ziphites may have belonged to David's family. In this psalm, David speaks about "a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God."²⁷⁰ This is not clearly stated, but the possibility exists that it was one of David's closest friends who betrayed him to Saul. This was one of the experiences that hit him hardest: his confidence in mankind had been deeply shocked, and his soul was deeply wounded.

David's disappointment became a prophecy of what Jesus experienced when Judas betrayed Him. In another psalm David wrote a thought which is parallel to this one, and which Jesus quoted in connection with Judas' betrayal: "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me."²⁷¹

We all need fellowship with other people. A man cannot live and function without some form of human intercourse, fellowship, and mutual love. For a moment David was afraid that God would treat him in the same way as his friend had treated him, and that He would abandon him and hide from him. It is true

²⁷⁰ Vs. 13, 14

²⁷¹ Ps. 41:9, see John 13:18

that human relationships are meant to be a reflection of God's love for us. God wants us to learn about the love of our heavenly Father through the affection our earthly father and mother show us. But the images that surround us are distorted, and we often receive the wrong signals. In some cases this leads to the impression that God's reality is like the human shadows of it that surround us. We tend to think that God is unreliable, and that He would leave us, as men do, at the critical moments when we need Him most. David seems to demonstrate this spirit when he prays as if God will slip away from him.

The opening verses sound a tone of despair; David is restless. He says: "My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught." The Hebrew word for "distraught" is *huwm*, which suggests going around in a circle. This can mean a physical going around, or a mental anguish. He was surrounded by noise, and he felt overwhelmed by terror. All this is expressed in a vivid way in images of a screaming enemy from whom David had to flee; disaster fell upon him as a crumbling wall. None of this happened by accident; it was the intentional work of men. David was even afraid to die. He had only one thought, which was to be able to fly away from it all. "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest..." Lord Byron wrote this in the form of a poem, beautifully put to music by Mendelssohn: "O, for the wings, for the wings of a dove!" All this was written before the invention of the helicopter. But even this invention has done nothing to diminish man's angst in life.

Ever since the days of Noah's flood, the dove has been a symbol of peace and renewal. David probably wanted to express more with this picture than a wish to flee the circumstances in which he found himself. He longed for peace and quiet, for a place where he could come to himself, and experience uninterrupted fellowship with God. The desert is not always a place of barrenness. Surely, God can reveal Himself to man in a desert. He did this to the people of Israel, to Elijah, to John the Baptist, to Jesus, and to Paul. Nor is it always wrong to flee. How else could God be called a refuge if fleeing were sin?

David's use of poetical language is beautiful. The desert is portrayed against the city, which is the topic of the following verses. But in places of arid loneliness, there are also windstorms against which man has to find protection. Finding oneself does not always mean finding inner peace; peace is only found in communion with God. There may, however, be less distraction in the desert than in a noisy city. Outward circumstances are not the important factors. When we do come to ourselves, we may discover that the greatest noise comes from inside. This is the reason why some people need "background music" from early morning till late at night to block out the inner tumult.

David speaks in this psalm about the betrayal by a friend. Was David trying to say, with the images he uses that, as he flees the unreliability of others, he discovers that he himself cannot be trusted either? This discovery may have been the greatest shock of all.

In his description of the city, in verses 9-11, David may have had a mental picture of the construction of the tower of Babel.²⁷² The implication is a conspiracy against the Lord. Just like the inhabitants of the Babel of old, people in this picture are united to resist the will of God. David does not necessarily speak about a city in the physical sense of the word. When John writes in Revelation about Babylon, he is not speaking about a topographical place.²⁷³ The city is a symbol of any organized human effort to oppose God's plan. David does not see himself either, in this psalm, as an individual who is the object of a personal revenge but as the Lord's anointed, the personification, the incarnation of God's plan with man. There is a strong prophetic tone in this psalm, which is accentuated by the pictures of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas in verses 12-14. David's city is "the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified."²⁷⁴ This city ought to have been the place of God's revelation in this world. That is why the ark had been brought over to Jerusalem. But as the Spirit of God departed from the city, as Ezekiel saw it leave in a vision,²⁷⁵ the city became like a dead body, given over to corruption. That which was eventually conquered and burned by Nebuchadnezzar was a skeleton of the place where God used to live. The prophet Jeremiah wept over that which once was the place of God's revelation. The gold had lost its luster, and the fine gold had become dull.²⁷⁶ Where there should have been love, fidelity, and life, David found hatred, betrayal, and death.

²⁷² See Gen. 11:1-9

²⁷³ See Rev. 17-19

²⁷⁴ Rev. 11:8

²⁷⁵ See Ezek. 8-11

²⁷⁶ Lam. 4:1

It is hard for us to imagine what Judas' betrayal of Jesus must have meant for our Lord. The kiss with which Judas greeted Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane contained everything hell has to offer mankind. David experienced some of this ultimate betrayal here.

Some Bible critics object to the spirit of vs. 15: "Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave, for evil finds lodging among them." In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight observes that David demonstrates narrow-minded revenge, which knows nothing of God's love. I prefer Bach's indignation upon Judas' betrayal in the *Saint Matthew's Passion*, where the choir bursts out in the mighty chorus: "Has lightning, has thunder vanished in the clouds? Open your fiery pit, O hell, wreck, ruin, engulf, shatter with sudden force the false betrayer, the murderous blood." David borrows a picture from the book of Numbers, where Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who had revolted against the leadership of Moses, were swallowed up by the earth, and went down alive into the grave.²⁷⁷

Again, it is clear that the topic is not a personal revenge, David speaks about, but betrayal and insurrection "against the LORD and against his Anointed One."²⁷⁸ It is not about David, but about the Kingdom. It is a blessing if one can identify with the Kingdom the way David did here. An insult to an ambassador is the equivalent of an insult to the country he represents. We have to distinguish between that which is directed to us personally, and that which is aimed at us as representatives of Jesus Christ. As far as that last instance is concerned, the Lord has given to us the same keys He gave to Peter, and "whatever [we] bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever [we] loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."²⁷⁹

It is surprising to see how, in verses 12-14, David addresses his enemy. In the whole of this psalm, God is the Person addressed, except for these few verses. This personal reaction gives to the emotions of David a more heartrending quality. It almost sounds like a plea, like Jesus' last words to Judas: "Friend, why have you come?"²⁸⁰ and: "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?"²⁸¹

David calls his betrayer: "a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God." The first three designations indicate fellowship between human beings, the latter one points to common fellowship with God. There is an ascending line in the choice of words. Fellowship between human beings before God is the strongest bond that exists, and corruption of that which is the best is the worst corruption that can exist.

As we have seen, the use of the image of the going down alive in the grave draws a parallel line between the insurrection of Korah and the plot against David's life. The parallel is continued in the contrast of the leadership of Moses and David and maybe even between Moses' humility and David's.²⁸² In vs. 16, David compares his attitude to that of the ones who wanted to kill him. He contrasts his fellowship with God with their evil intents. He has decided not to seek any human help against this conspiracy, but to cast himself upon the Lord for help. Before help was even on the horizon, and before there was a change of circumstances, David began to believe that God would save him. The first thing God does for the man who calls upon Him is to give peace of mind. If there is inner peace in fellowship with God, then outward circumstances are of little consequence. The Apostle Paul says, therefore: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."²⁸³ He wrote those words while in a Roman prison.

There is, of course, a tremendous difference between David's cry of distress evening, morning, and noon, and Paul's thanksgiving under all circumstances. But God hears both. David's distress suggests physical pain, but the sharpest pain in this psalm remains the betrayal by an intimate friend. The cry of the evening, morning, and noon indicates the regularity of David's prayers. Three times a day, he seeks the presence of the Lord.

This healthy routine saves him in unhealthy circumstances. He addresses God as: "God, who is enthroned forever." He sees God sitting on the throne of the universe, and this vision grips him so much that there follows a "Selah" in the middle of a sentence. It may have dawned on David that God's sitting on the throne had something to do with his own promised ascension to the throne of Israel. Whether David had already been crowned king, or had only received the anointing makes no difference. The important thing is

²⁷⁷ Num. 16:28-35

²⁷⁸ Ps. 2:2

²⁷⁹ see Matt. 16:19

²⁸⁰ Matt. 26:50 (NKJ)

²⁸¹ Luke 22:48

²⁸² See Num. 12:3

²⁸³ Phil. 4:7

David's insight in the meaning of his kingship. If, at this point, David was fleeing for Saul, as we suppose he was, he must also have drawn a line of comparison between his own kingship, and Saul who had already been dethroned by God, but who kept on reigning for almost forty years.

Saul would, therefore, be included in those whom God would hear and afflict, or humble. The Hebrew word *ʾanah* can be translated as "to abase," or "to humble." But we are not sure who the person David speaks about is. We do understand, however, that more is involved than David's personal concerns. God sits on the throne, and this truth had to be expressed in David's monarchy. It is this principle that the enemy, who in this case, was one of David's personal friends, opposed. There are two principles that form the theme of this psalm: the great, universal, conflict, which cuts across David's personal affairs; such is always the case. The ultimate battle for the throne of the universe is being fought out on the battlefield of the lives of individuals. It is an awesome discovery that we are not mere pawns in a cosmic chess game, but that our choices are important factors in the outcome of the battle. This seems to be the great lesson the book of Job teaches us.

The first part of vs. 22: "Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you ..." has become famous because of Peter's quote of it in his first epistle: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."²⁸⁴ In Peter's epistle, the context is almost the same as in this psalm. Peter also speaks about humility, as opposed to pride in inter-human relationships, and about our fellowship with God, alertness toward our real enemy, the devil. In connection with this threefold relationship, he uses the word "cares" or "anxiety." It is anxiety that comes from the fact that we lose sight of the factual relations.

The question in this psalm is "who was David addressing"? It could be that he was merely trying to encourage himself. But it is more likely that he speaks to those who are around him. A third, but less plausible, possibility would be that he addressed the enemy. In that case the words would not be without a touch of irony. The important thing is that we know ourselves to be spoken to. David wanted his experiences to be an encouragement to others.

The word "cast" is a strong expression; it says more than "to let go." We need some exertion to fling down the load we have been carrying. It is an act that requires our full involvement. We have to make up our minds that we do not want to have anything to do anymore with our anxiety and distress. It also requires confidence that God will indeed care for us. If we surrender to Him, we leave the consequences up to Him. If we keep on feeling anxious after our surrender, we indicate that we revoke, in part or completely, our initial act of surrender. This would amount to a motion of non-confidence. In being anxious, we indicate that we consider the God who created the universe, and who upholds all things by the word of His power, to be not reliable enough to take care of the details of our lives. It helps to see how ridiculous such a notion would be.

David draws the conclusion that God made him invincible. Such a conclusion can be dangerous; it can mean a guaranteed downfall. But this care may be cast upon God also! When I began to learn how to walk, I was afraid to fall. I have been walking for years now, and I am not even conscious of the fact that I walk. It is the same with real faith; we trust God without being aware of the fact.

There is another insinuation in this text, a treasure hidden in it by the Holy Spirit of which David himself cannot have been aware. If we cast our cares upon YHWH, He, the Almighty God, stoops to carry our load. We know this to be true because Jesus Christ "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!"²⁸⁵ Isaiah prophesied about this humiliation: "He will bear their iniquities.... For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."²⁸⁶ In Jesus Christ God offers us His own back to carry the load for us. If we realize the enormity of this fact, it seems impossible that we would ever have the smallest trace of anxiety. But most of us are rather persistent in our shortsightedness. As was the case with David, the enemy will then give us his heaviest barrage.

The betrayal by an intimate friend is, in fact, a heavy burden to bear. Yet, David came to the point where he could unload this burden upon the Lord; how else could he have penned these words?

We always have to be brought back to the humility of Jesus Christ. God will bring us, over and over again, in situations where this truth is put to the test. We have to be alert to bring our anxiety to God, as soon as we discover the first trace. We have His promise that He will never allow us to fall. We should allow these words to penetrate our souls as beams of healing light.

²⁸⁴ I Pet. 5:7

²⁸⁵ Phil. 2:7,8

²⁸⁶ Isa. 53:11,12

Would it not be better to have the psalm end here? There are people who will go down in the pit of corruption. The bloodthirstiness and deceit may have begun when anxiety took over their lives. They saw no way out, and began, therefore, to try solving their problems themselves. Satan was kind enough to give a helping hand. This verse is more a warning than a statement of revenge. It begins with a lack of confidence in God, and it ends with deceit and murder.

PSALM FIFTY-SIX

For the director of music. To the tune of "A Dove on Distant Oaks."
Of David. A miktam. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.

- 1 *Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack.*
- 2 *My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride.*
- 3 *When I am afraid, I will trust in you.*
- 4 *In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?*
- 5 *All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me.*
- 6 *They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life.*
- 7 *On no account let them escape; in your anger, O God, bring down the nations.*
- 8 *Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll-- are they not in your record?*
- 9 *Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me.*
- 10 *In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise--*
- 11 *in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*
- 12 *I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank offerings to you.*
- 13 *For you have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.*

This psalm is the second of the six *Miktam* we find in the Book of Psalms.²⁸⁷ According to *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, the word is derived from *michtam*. The Dictionary says: "Its meaning is uncertain. The word may be a musical term indicating how the psalm should be sung." *Strongs Definitions* describes it as "an engraving, i.e.... a poem." Most versions do not translate the term. As we have seen, in connection with Psalm 16, as an engraving, it can mean either a monument or a jewel.²⁸⁸

The historical background for this psalm is David's episode at the court of Achish king of Gath.²⁸⁹ This fact connects this psalm with Psalm 34, which has as subscript: "Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left." It is generally supposed that the more triumphant Psalm 34 was written after this one. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight dishes up an unbelievable amount of nonsense in connection with this title, among others, connecting it somehow to Jonah. I see no reason to attach another meaning to the title: "To the tune of: A Dove on Distant Oaks," than to the indication of a tune to which the psalm was to be sung.

David's episode at Gath was one of the deepest points in his life. He was afraid, and he panicked. Evidently, at that point, he had not yet learned to trust God completely, and to overcome his angst. It is the more remarkable, therefore, that this psalm is entitled a *miktam*, that is a monument in his life. We would have understood it, if he had used the term of a psalm written at the occasion of the slaying of Goliath, when he was a youngster.²⁹⁰

The question is, where do we place the monuments in our life? His fleeing to Gath in itself could hardly be considered a heroic act. It seems more that David did not know what he was doing when he fled in panic to hide from Saul. It brought him from the frying pan into the fire. It must not have been a known fact in Gath, the birthplace of Goliath, that David was the one who had killed their national hero. David was recognized, however, as the supreme commander of Saul's army, as the one who was actually wielding power in Israel. Achish's servants called David "the king of the land."²⁹¹ When David began to simulate lunacy, they no longer considered him to be a serious threat, but someone like Rudolph Hess.²⁹² David escaped this way.

²⁸⁷ The others are Ps. 16, and 57-60

²⁸⁸ Jewel is the meaning the Dutch NBG gives

²⁸⁹ I Sam. 21:10-15

²⁹⁰ See I Sam. 17

²⁹¹ See I Sam. 21:11

²⁹² Excuse the anachronism. Hess was a man from Hitler's inner circle, who, at his own initiative flew to England during WWII, to try to convince Great Britain to surrender. It was believed that Hess was a mental patient.

As soon as David found himself surrounded by revengeful Philistines, he realized that he had committed the greatest stupidity of his life, and he reacted to this by erecting a monument! We mentioned in our comment on Psalm 34 already that David's behavior was immoral at this point. Here we see that it was not very smart either. God showed him both aspects clearly with beneficial results.

David sees himself in the power of evil men who would like to do nothing more than skin him alive. The Philistines were not mentioned in the list of original inhabitants of Canaan²⁹³; they were, undoubtedly, the offspring of one or more of the groups mentioned, and had inherited the evil conduct of their Canaanite ancestors. It was because of their sins and depravity that God had given their land to Israel. In the first chapters of the book of Judges we read how Israel failed to exterminate the Canaanites, as they were supposed to have done. For that reason they suffered defeat at the hands of the Philistines many times over. Part of David's problem can be traced to the fact that Israel had abandoned the position of victory in which God had placed them. This may be the reason that David begins this psalm with a prayer for forgiveness: "Be merciful to me, O God..." Mercy implies that it is unmerited. This is the prayer of a man who forfeited his rights; it is a plea for pardon.

We could argue that the Philistines had not been treated well by David; Goliath was not the only person he had killed. He may even have had Goliath's sword in his possession when he arrived at Gath. The difference between the guilt of murder and the killings of David lies in the divine mandate that had been given to Israel. For us, twentieth century people, this is hard to understand, but God's mandate was an objective reality for David, not a subjective concept. He was under God's orders. That is the reason that David had slain his tens of thousands. Yet, the fact that David was now in the power of those he should have defeated is mainly his own fault. He had fled to them in his panic. The fear of dying by the hand of Saul was a result of his doubt of God's promises. He had not believed that Samuel had anointed him to be king over Israel at God's command. Had he seriously believed this, he would have known that Saul could not harm him.

In a sense, all David's problems are a result of God's call and anointing, but the fact that he was trampled on as he was at that point, he owed to himself. He fled in panic, and panic is sin.

Fear can choke us if we begin to doubt God's promises. The fear of men is always the result of the fact that we lose sight of the value of God's Word. This is the reason that these two points, the fear of men, and the reliability of God's Word, are a recurring theme in this psalm. They became part of David's inner healing. David asked for forgiveness, and he returned to the Word of God, as it had come to him. He trusts again in God, whose Word he praises.

David did not lose himself in an endless plea for forgiveness. For God it is always enough if we come to Him, and, in all seriousness, say: "I have sinned." Those words were David's salvation after his sin with Bathsheba. We read in the records: "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.'"²⁹⁴ The whole problem is solved with two short phrases. It seems almost too easy, but it is true. The great difference between David and Saul was that Saul could never bring himself to the point where he said to God: "I am sorry!" Saul was willing to whisper his confession in God's ear, but he did not want anyone else to know about it.²⁹⁵ David confessed his sin and accepted the consequences.

The people should have honored David, but they trample him under their feet. It is a terrible thing to be despised by our fellowmen, and to be treated as an insect that people crush under the sole of their feet. A man cannot live without respect. Many people are more bent on seeking acceptance from other people than being accepted by God. Jesus said to the people of His time: "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?"²⁹⁶ David seeks the praise that comes from God when people try to trample him under their feet.

We do not read what the Philistines did to David; the account in I Samuel is rather short. David must have asked for asylum, stating as a reason that Saul tried to kill him. His being sent away could, therefore, be seen as a refusal by Achish to grant him asylum. The Philistines may have thought that, if they let David go, Saul would certainly kill him. But before letting him leave, they played their games with David. David's experience at those moments can be compared to the torture of our Lord Jesus by the hands

²⁹³ See Gen. 15:19,20, Ex. 3:8

²⁹⁴ II Sam. 12:13

²⁹⁵ See I Sam. 15:24-31

²⁹⁶ John 5:44

of the Roman soldiers.²⁹⁷ David could not have understood that he was, in a sense, a partaker of the sufferings of Christ, but the Holy Spirit uses this parallel to elevate David's experience above the level of a mere personal occurrence. This fact determines the value of this psalm; it is the main reason that this poem was incorporated in the inspired Word of God. It shows us that our experiences should be judged in relationship to God. This is what Peter means when he says: "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain 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."²⁹⁸ The word translated with "commendable" is the Greek word *charis*, which literally means "grace."

David did have a certain responsibility in what happened to him, and he was definitely to blame for his attitude, but all this was cancelled out by God's forgiveness as a result of his confession of sin.

There seems to be a paradox between verses 3 and 4; David is afraid and he is not afraid. We saw already that fear and trust in God cannot go together. What David wanted to say, of course, is that he was afraid but that God healed his fears. The means of healing was the Word of God. The only portion of the Bible David could have known was the Pentateuch. Evidently, he found therein enough promises of God to experience healing.

The overwhelming power David faced is beautifully described in poetical form. The poetic parallel consists in a repetition of the same words, but in reversed order. We see how thoughts of fear must have rushed through David's mind. He saw himself at the foot of a mountain with the enemy standing on the top. That is a hopeless situation. Humanly speaking, David had already lost the battle. We mentioned that the Pentateuch was the only part of God's Word David knew, but the Word of God had also come to David in a direct and personal way. We do not read that Samuel pronounced certain words when he anointed David,²⁹⁹ but the ritual would not have been completely silent. And when the Spirit of the Lord came upon David with power, this would not have been a silent and merely emotional experience either; God must have addressed David's whole being, including his intelligence.

David praises the Word of God. This declaration occurs three times in this psalm. When the Word of God comes to a person, the result is a new creation. The Apostle Paul describes this 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."³⁰⁰ And Jesus goes even further by saying that those to whom the Word of God has come are called "gods."³⁰¹ He also says that the Word of God purifies a person. Addressing His disciples, He said: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." Although David could not yet fully participate in the righteousness of Christ as we do, he must yet have experienced some of the above. He realized that, in spite of the fact that people wanted to trample him, and take his life, he was precious in the eyes of God. The Word of God showed him who he was, and that his worth before God had nothing to do with the circumstances in which he found himself. It is a good thing, and it will do us good, if we not only occupy ourselves with the Word of God, but also delight in it. The writer of the first psalm 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."³⁰² If we delight in God's Word, our trust in God will be strengthened. We will then understand how empty are the threats of men and demons, even if they would try to kill us. Jesus 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."³⁰³ We believe that being killed would be the worst thing that could happen to us, but Jesus states that there are things that are worse.

It is not clear how the twisting of David's words, the lurking, the conspiracy, and the attempt on David's life fit in the picture of the situation in which David found himself. We do not know either what the Philistines planned to do to David. The twisting of words suggests some kind of judicial procedure. It is possible that the Philistines did not want to execute David without first taking him to court. In our age, we are quite familiar with the witch-hunts and kangaroo courts of some communist regimes and of the Nazis in

²⁹⁷ See Matt. 27:27-31

²⁹⁸ I Pet. 2:19,20

²⁹⁹ See I Sam. 16:11-13

³⁰⁰ II Cor. 4:6

³⁰¹ See John 10:34,35

³⁰² Ps. 1:1,2

³⁰³ Matt. 10:28

Germany. Those procedures serve to cover up injustice with a cloak of justice and righteousness. It could be that David's appearing before Achish was the equivalent of an appearance in a court of justice.³⁰⁴ During this legal procedure it would have become clear that David's words were falsified and twisted. David's conclusion was that this society was corrupt to the core.

In Deuteronomy we find a short description of the cruel practices of the nations of Canaan, before Israel conquered the land.³⁰⁵ About four hundred years later, those practices may still have been alive among the Philistines. When David experienced personally how terrible the situation was, he reminded God of Israel's mission to possess the land. "On no account let them escape; in your anger, O God, bring down the nations" is not a misplaced desire for revenge upon people who had harmed David personally, as George Knight supposes in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, but a return to Israel's original divine mandate.

I do not pretend to know how this all fit in God's overall plan. David had gotten himself in trouble through his own fault, but God, at the same time, used David's experience to show him what the presence of the Philistines in the land meant, and how their culture and lifestyle were a danger, not only for Israel's existence, but also for God's revelation of Himself to the world. Personal experience is the best teacher. God permitted this episode in David's life in order to prepare him for the throne.

Vs. 8 paints a moving miniature of David's wanderings as a refugee. Moses recorded a similar account of the trekking of Israel through the desert. David understood that God is not indifferent to man's suffering on earth; He keeps a careful record of where we are and how much sorrow we undergo. The picture of God who counts and writes down how many tears we shed is beautiful poetry. How deeply God is involved in our sorrows becomes clear in the incarnation of Christ. Isaiah says: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows."³⁰⁶ The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes: "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."³⁰⁷ The realization of God's compassion and involvement opened the door to victory for David. He still stood as a single individual facing an overwhelming majority of hostile people, but suddenly he realized that if God is for us, it does not matter who is against us, and he took a hold of the victory. He knew that this bloodthirsty mob would be powerless to do anything against the man who stands under God's protection. They were still crowding upon him, but he said: "My enemy will turn back." He put his hand upon the throne of God, and in doing this the matter is decided in the heavenlies.

He celebrates the victory by repeating the chorus: "In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise." "In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" The music to which those words were set must have sounded beautiful. I am trying to imagine what it must have sounded like. We should let these words ring in our lives every day.

Just as in vs. 8 we hear the tones of the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, so in the verses 12 and 13, we hear the music of the resurrection. David felt as if he came back from death to life, and he bound himself to God with a vow to bring a thank offering, as was prescribed in Leviticus.³⁰⁸ The mention of sacrifices expresses, first of all, a confidence that David would return to the place where the tabernacle stood. His flight from Saul meant that he was physically removed from fellowship with God. In talking to Saul about his servants, he had said: "They have now driven me from my share in the LORD's inheritance and have said, 'Go, serve other gods.'"³⁰⁹ It is difficult for us, who do not conceive of God's presence in terms of a topographical reality, to follow this line of thought.

David also understood that the saving of his life demanded that he would praise God, and serve Him, which would be his "reasonable service."

David had stumbled, and he had fallen. In his panic he had lied to the priest, and that lie had made him responsible for the death of the priests in Nob. He understood that only God could keep a man from falling. Jude says this so succinctly at the close of his epistle: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy..."³¹⁰ We fall if we lean upon ourselves. If we walk before God in the light of life, this is God's work. In the light of New

³⁰⁴ See I Sam. 21:11-15

³⁰⁵ See Deut. 18:9-12

³⁰⁶ Isa. 53:4

³⁰⁷ Heb. 4:15

³⁰⁸ See Lev. 3:1-17, and 7:11-18

³⁰⁹ I Sam. 26:19

³¹⁰ Jude vs. 24

Testament revelation, we can say that walking in the light means much more than escape from death. It means a life of fellowship with God in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is difficult to imagine that David wrote these words following his experience at Gath. He understood that the end of all his pain and anxiety would be that God would be glorified in him. If we can glory in this way in such difficult circumstances, we are indeed more than conquerors.

PSALM FIFTY-SEVEN

For the director of music. To the tune of, "Do Not Destroy" Of David. A *miktam*.
When he had fled from Saul into the cave.

- 1** *Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.*
- 2** *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills [his purpose] for me.*
- 3** *He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me; Selah God sends his love and his faithfulness.*
- 4** *I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts-- men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords.*
- 5** *Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.*
- 6** *They spread a net for my feet-- I was bowed down in distress. They dug a pit in my path-- but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah*
- 7** *My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music.*
- 8** *Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn.*
- 9** *I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples.*
- 10** *For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies.*
- 11** *Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.*

This psalm also is a *miktam*, a memorial stone to mark a monumental moment in David's life. In I Samuel, we read about David's arrival and stay in the cave of Adullam.³¹¹ How much time David spent there is not known. We read that the prophet Gad counseled David, at one point, not to stay in the cave but to go to Judah. It is also not clear whether this cave was the same one in which Saul went to relieve himself.³¹² If that is the case, we can understand the wisdom of Gad's advice. *Adam Clarke* believes that the words in the title of the psalm, "Do Not Destroy," in Hebrew `Al Tasheet, refers the divine inspiration David received when he crawled to Saul, and cut off a corner of Saul's robe instead of killing him. That incident took place, however, in the Desert of En Gedi. It is possible that the psalm relates to both incidents, and it is also possible that the cave of Adullam was in the Desert of En Gedi, in which case the problem would be solved.

The psalm begins with the same appeal to God's grace as the previous psalm. The only difference is that the phrase, "Have mercy on me" is repeated once. David had finally arrived at the place where God wanted him to be, and David understood that this was due to God's gracious intervention. We can, therefore, see "have mercy" not as a plea for forgiveness of sin, but as a basis for living. In the previous psalm, the topic was a sin that had to be forgiven; in this psalm it is life under God's protection.

David sees the walls of the cave as proofs of God's security. For once, the outward circumstances are not contrary to the spiritual reality but they are parallel to it. Taking refuge in God is more than a physical matter. David says: "In you my soul takes refuge." The inner rest of being sheltered in God's hand is more important than being protected from the threats of Saul. The statement: "I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed," sounds like the words of another psalm: "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge."³¹³ How good it is to realize that God protects us, and that this is part of His grace toward us. David's sense of protection is the best indication that he had received pardon for his sins. If we live a life of lying and deceiving, we place ourselves automatically outside the shelter of God's protection, and we expose ourselves to the attacks of the enemy. But if we confess our sins, and ask forgiveness, as David did, we are immediately safe and protected. That is the reason that it is so dangerous to live with un-confessed sins. Safety, confession, and forgiveness always go hand in hand.

In vs. 2, David makes a legal appeal to God as the highest authority. In the same way, the Apostle Paul appealed to the Roman emperor.³¹⁴ We have the legal right to ask God to take our case. This is not a matter of emotions; whether we feel safe or not, has little or nothing to do with this. God deals with us on

³¹¹ See I Sam. 22:1-5

³¹² See I Sam. 24:3

³¹³ Ps. 91:4

³¹⁴ See Acts 25:11

legal grounds. God is “God Most High” the incomparable one. There is no higher appeal; there is no higher court, He is the advocate, the Paraclete. We can trust Him completely with our case; He will see us through. The accuser of our brothers will be hurled down.³¹⁵ If we identify ourselves with God’s cause, He will identify Himself with ours. We will be able to say what David says: “He sends from heaven and saves me.” This happened literally in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit’s choice of words is correct, as it always is. At the cross, the devil was openly put to shame, and unmasked.³¹⁶ Salvation consists in the fact that Jesus’ love and faithfulness conquered, both on the cross and in me.

The comparison with lions reminds us who the enemy is. Peter says: “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”³¹⁷ “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.”³¹⁸ David must have known this when he played the harp for Saul, and he saw how the evil spirit worked in Saul, and then left him.³¹⁹ The fact that, in the parallel assertion, David speaks about men who are like “ravenous beasts-- men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords,” is not inconsistent with this thought. The Hebrew word, translated here with “ravenous” is *lahat*, which in *Strongs Definitions*, is rendered with “to lick, ... to blaze.” The KJV translates it with: “burn (up), set on fire, flaming, kindle.” Most of the time, the devil attacks us through our fellowmen. This is obvious from Jesus’ rebuke to Peter: “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.”³²⁰ The mention of men’s teeth and tongues suggests that David had been attacked by slander. This hurt him more than any physical injury.

The beauty of this psalm exists partly in the impressive perspective David paints for us. He was completely surrounded by rock, which blocked his view, but his spirit recognized that the cave symbolized God’s protection for him. He saw the glory of God, which transcends time and space. In a literal sense, God cannot be exalted above the heavens, because He is infinite, and surpasses all dimensions. Solomon expressed this beautifully in his prayer of dedication of the temple, when he said: “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”³²¹ When David prayed: “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth,” he did not ask for a change in the existing conditions, but for a personal awareness of God’s reality. The problem is not that God is not exalted above the heavens and that His glory is not over all the earth, but that man is hardly aware of this. David’s prayer from inside the cave resembles Moses’ request to see God’s glory.³²² There is a remarkable resemblance in that God placed Moses also in the cleft of a rock and closed the door. Both for Moses and David, the realization of God’s glory emerged as their freedom of movement was restricted. God gives us spiritually more space, as our physical circumstances become more restricted.

From inside the cave, David also understands that much more was at stake than his personal safety. The important thing is God’s glory over all the earth. If our lot is linked to this, we are always perfectly safe.

It is quite possible that vs. 6 “(They spread a net for my feet-- I was bowed down in distress. They dug a pit in my path-- but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah),” refers to the moment when Saul entered the cave and David cut off a corner of his robe.³²³ That incident must have been one of the most comical highlights in David’s life. At that point, Saul was more trapped, and more defeated than at any other moment in his life. David must have understood that if God could deliver his enemy into his hands in such a way, he had nothing to fear.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight clarifies that the “heart” (vs. 7), in Hebrew is the seat of the intellect, and “soul” (vs. 8) the seat of emotions. Interestingly, the Hebrew text does not seem to have the word “soul,” although some version translate the word “glory” with “soul.” The KJV has: “Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early.”

³¹⁵ See Rev. 12:10

³¹⁶ See Col. 2:15

³¹⁷ I Pet. 5:8

³¹⁸ Eph. 6:12

³¹⁹ See I Sam. 16:23

³²⁰ Matt. 16:23

³²¹ I Kings 8:27

³²² See Ex. 33:18 ff.

³²³ See I Sam. 24:4-8

Adam Clarke's Commentary says about this: “[Awake up, my glory] Instead of k^a bowdiy ... ‘my glory,’ one manuscript, and the Syriac, have kinowriy ..., ‘my harp.’ Dr. Kennicott reads kebowriy, which he supposes to be some instrument of music; and adds that the instrument used in church-music by the Ethiopians is now called kaber. I think the Syriac likely to be the true reading: ‘Awake up, my harp; awake, psaltery and harp: I will awake early.’ Such repetitions are frequent in the Hebrew poets. If we read my glory, it may refer either to his tongue; or, which is more likely, to his skill in composition, and in playing on different instruments. The five last verses of this Psalm are nearly the same as <Psa. 108:1-5>. The reason of this may be, the notes or memoranda from the psalmist’s diary were probably, through mistake, twice copied. The insertion at the beginning of <Psa. 108> seems to bear no relation to the rest of that ode. Rabbi Solomon Jarchi tells us that David had a harp at his bed’s head, which played of itself when the north wind blew on it; and then David arose to give praise to God. This account has been treated as a ridiculous fable by grave Christian writers. I would however hesitate, and ask one question: Does not the account itself point out an instrument then well known, similar to the comparatively lately discovered AEolian harp? Was not this the instrument hung at David’s bed’s head, which, when the night breeze (which probably blew at a certain time) began to act upon the cords, sent forth those dulcet, those heavenly sounds, for which the AEolian harp is remarkable? ‘Awake, my harp, at the due time: I will not wait for thee now, I have the strongest cause for gratitude; I will awake earlier than usual to sing the praises of my God.’ ”

There is an interesting contrast between the fixed mode, or the rest of the heart, and the waking up of the instrument. Darkness has to flee as the song of praise is woken up.

Vs. 9: “I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples” is almost identical to a verse in Psalm 18: “Therefore I will praise you among the nations, O LORD; I will sing praises to your name.”³²⁴ In that psalm, David had come to the end of his life, and he looked back over a forty year reign. In this psalm, David had not yet mounted the throne. It is important to see how David sang the same theme at the beginning, and at the end of his public life. It indicates that David never lost sight of Israel’s call to be the bearer of God’s revelation. God wanted to win the world for Himself through the people of Israel. God has His eye on the nations, on the people of this earth. “ The field is the world.”³²⁵ In God’s plan for the world, salvation is the means, not the final goal. The purpose is that people in the whole world, people who are created in God’s image, and likeness, will praise God, and sing psalms to Him. The greatest tragedy is not that people are lost, but that God is not being exalted and praised by all. David had a clear concept of Israel’s task: they had to be a kingdom of priests. The Old Testament shows how terribly Israel failed to perform its duty. Church history hardly presents a better picture for the church of Jesus Christ. Ever since sin entered the world, man has seen himself as the focal point of all. Israel came to the point where it considered God’s revelation to be their private property. They became so enthralled with themselves that they felt it was a great honor for God that He was allowed to live in Jerusalem, as someone who could rent an expensive flat in an exclusive neighborhood. Our understanding of our task in this world can never be separated from our vision of the Person of God and His glory.

The KJV renders vs. 10 with: “For thy mercy is great unto the heavens, and thy truth unto the clouds.” We find the same phrase in other psalms also: “Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.”³²⁶ For David the clouds in the sky were the limit of his vision; they were the unreachable boundaries of his world. The fact that our horizon is pushed back to outer space does in no way diminish the greatness of God’s mercy and faithfulness. To the contrary!

What a breakthrough for a cave dweller to understand that God’s mercy fills time and space. At the beginning of this psalm, David saw how God’s goodness closed in around him in a protecting way, as the walls of his cave; at the end he saw how the God who saved him breaks through all limits of the universe.

The psalm ends with the refrain of vs. 5, which, as we have seen, means a prayer for the understanding of reality. It is like an Old Testament form of the New Testament prayer: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”³²⁷

³²⁴ Ps 18:49

³²⁵ Matt. 13:38

³²⁶ Ps. 36:5

³²⁷ Matt. 6:9,10

PSALM FIFTY-EIGHT

For the director of music. <To the tune of> “Do Not Destroy,” Of David. A *miktam*.
When he fled from Saul into the cave.

- 1 *Do you rulers indeed speak justly? Do you judge uprightly among men?*
- 2 *No, in your heart you devise injustice, and your hands mete out violence on the earth.*
- 3 *Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies.*
- 4 *Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears,*
- 5 *that will not heed the tune of the charmer, however skillful the enchanter may be.*
- 6 *Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions!*
- 7 *Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted.*
- 8 *Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun.*
- 9 *Before your pots can feel [the heat of] the thorns-- whether they be green or dry-- the wicked will be swept away.*
- 10 *The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.*
- 11 *Then men will say, "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth."*

This psalm is the second in a series of three with the title *Al-taschith*, “destroy not.” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* says about this title: “The title seems to have no reference to the subject of the Psalm. See the introduction to the preceding. Saul having attempted the life of David, the latter was obliged to flee from the court, and take refuge in the deserts of Judea. Saul, missing him, is supposed by Dr. Patrick to have called a council, when they, to ingratiate themselves with the monarch, adjudged David to be guilty of treason in aspiring to the throne of Israel. This being made known to David was the cause of this Psalm. It is a good lesson to all kings, judges, and civil magistrates; and from it they obtain maxims to regulate their conduct and influence their decisions; and at the same time they may discern the awful account they must give to God, and the dreadful punishment they shall incur who prostitute justice to serve sinister ends.” If Clarke’s supposition is correct, all three of the psalms could have been written when David was in hiding in the cave. If, however, is *Al-taschith* is merely an indication of the tune to which the psalm was set, the theory does not hold.

From a linguistic point of view, this psalm offers all kinds of problems. The existing text has, evidently, suffered a lot of damage.

The Tyndale Commentary divides the psalm in four parts:

1. The Challenge (verses 1,2),
2. The Charge (verses 3-5),
3. The Curse (verses 6-9), and
4. The Purge (verses 10-12).

The topic is the application is the application of justice. The NIV reads in the first verse: “Do you rulers indeed speak justly?” *The Hebrew Interlinear Bible* says literally: “indeed, O congregation, righteousness do ye speak?” The Hebrew word, translated “congregation” is *'elem*, which literally means “silence.” The NKJ translates the question: “Do you indeed speak righteousness, you silent ones?” This illustrates how difficult the Hebrew text is to interpret. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight supposes, strangely enough, that the “silent ones” are idol images, idols which man created after his own image and likeness. But he does not go so far as to attribute supernatural powers to these images. It is not clear whether he believes that there are satanic influences at play. *The Tyndale Commentary* takes *'elem* to refer to earthly rulers. In a parallel construction in Psalm 82, we read: “God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgment among the ‘gods’: ‘How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Selah’ ”³²⁸ The Hebrew word used there is *'elohiym*, of which *Strongs Definitions* says that it means: “gods in the ordinary sense; but specifically used (in the plural thus, especially with the article) of the supreme God; occasionally applied by way of deference to magistrates; and sometimes as a superlative.” The KJV renders it variously as: “angels, ... God... judges.” *The Tyndale Commentary* which refers to that psalm, supposes that, in that context, the word *'elohiym* refers to angels. In his quote of the

³²⁸ Ps. 82:1,2

psalm, in John's Gospel, however, Jesus clearly speaks about men who occupy a high position, and to whom authority was given to judge, not about angels. We read: "Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods' '? If he called them 'gods,' ' to whom the word of God came-- and the Scripture cannot be broken--...'"³²⁹

It is not unreasonable to suppose that David was fleeing for Saul when he wrote this psalm, and that he accused Saul and his counselors of the injustice they did unto him. It amazes us, though, that, in this context, the term "gods" would be used for mortal men. It means that man is lifted above himself, and above the level of his earthly limitations that usually hem him in. The term "gods" establishes a relationship between man and the only true God, the Almighty. It indicates that man, even fallen man, is more than an animal. The fact that God's Name is given to man indicates a bond with the character of God.

In our being related to God, there are other, more every-day type characteristics which we have in common with God, such as: knowledge, wisdom, love, fidelity, and many others. Pronouncing judgment is not an every-day activity of man. Yet, this authority is an important part of the mandate God gave to man at his creation. Jesus lays claim to this authority to act on the Day of Judgment, on the basis of His humanity. In John's Gospel, He says: "And he [the Father] has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man."³³⁰ The Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we will judge angels?"³³¹ All this affirms our conviction that one of God's purposes for the creation of man was to conquer Satan, and to bring back everything that was fallen when Lucifer fell under the authority of God. If God entrusts to man the task to judge words, and angels, He places him in the heavenlies. It is nigh to impossible for fallen man to image this. If God addresses men with the term "gods" we tend to believe that He is wrong, or that He means someone else. Even after we know that we are saved, we have a hard time to understand the implications of our new position. We are amazed to read verses like: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."³³²

In this psalm, man is addressed as if the fall never took place. God denies us the opportunity to excuse our weaknesses by saying: "That's the way I am. I cannot help myself." This shows us how we ought to be. All this implies a judgment upon our lives, but it also addresses us from a position of victory over sin. Jesus always addressed people as if sin had no right to rule over them. So God says here to the king of Israel and to his ministers: "Why are you not what you ought to be? And why do you not do what you ought to do?"

As man is promoted in life to a higher position, he often believes that he becomes less accountable. This is the reason why corruption always reaches the top. This is true, not only on a secular level but also in the church. Very often, we seek more our own interests than the Kingdom of God and its righteousness. The devil takes full advantage of this. It is important that we keep our focus on God's image, and that we exercise our spiritual authority in a way that is in accordance with this image.

Vs. 2 confirms what Jesus says: "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. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"³³³ Sin does not come in from the outside. Our hands perform what our heart tells us to do. Man cannot be called "god" without being a partaker of the divine nature. The doctrine propagated by some Christians that man is born into this world with a clean sheet, and that all sin is the result of demonic influences is untrue. David exposes this theory here as a lie. Unless we are born again, the poison that is within us will kill us. Sin, in this world, has always been associated with the serpent. If we are not freed from the power of sin, we will become partakers of the serpent's nature. The poison that kills us will kill others also.

Jesus became this brass serpent when He died on the cross. He said to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."³³⁴ The deadly poison will only be neutralized in us if we look up to Him. If not, we will continue to strike at people till we die ourselves. No incantation is effective, except the blood of Jesus Christ.

³²⁹ John 10:34,35

³³⁰ John 5:27

³³¹ I Cor. 6:2,3

³³² Rom. 16:20

³³³ Matt. 15:18-20

³³⁴ John 3:14,15

The verses 7-9 contain a curse that is hard to understand for us, New Testament Christians. To believe, at this point, as George Knight, that the “gods” are supernatural beings would be an easy way out. But then we run into trouble with the overall interpretation of this psalm. We cannot change horses in the middle of the stream, and jump from one position of interpretation to another, just to suit a preconceived idea.

Part of our problem is that we have learned to see ourselves, in principle, as equally evil as all other people. Our lives would be as full of poison as the lives of the wicked, if it were not for God’s grace. This influences our judgment over the lives of others. David does not seem to have had this concept, or he must have looked at the problem in a different way. *The Tyndale Commentary* clarifies here that verses 7-9 seem to have missing words in the received text, and that most translations have tried to patch up the text. This only means, however, that some of the images do not come through clearly; it does not make the truth unclear; the point David wanted to make is obvious. First of all, we have to establish that indignation is not a sin. We are not told what the actual reason for David’s outburst was. We also do not know what occasioned the writing of this psalm. Horrors, committed in the name of justice, are worse than outright acts of injustice. If “gods” who, more than anyone else, ought to reflect some of the character of the eternal God do things that slander the Name of God, it would be a sin if this does not evoke outrage in us. Also, we have to remember that David does not speak here about an injustice done to his person for which he seeks revenge. The subject is the Lord’s business, and the person of God. David emphasizes the fact that revenge belongs to the Lord. He asks God to take the matter in hand, at the same time he allows his imagination to run free. The tearing out of the fangs of lions stands for the crushing of their power. He asks God to take away the power of the godless magistrates.

In vs. 7 he prays that God will undo the effect of their acts, and the two images of the slug, and the unborn child in vs. 8 speak of viability. They stand for a lack of development, of form, of growth. Vs. 9 is probably clearest in the rendering of TLB: “God will sweep away both old and young. He will destroy them more quickly than a cooking pot can feel the blazing fire of thorns beneath it.” That picture also speaks of a hindrance of development. Evidently, the transmitted text is rather unclear.

The greatest objection from the side of humanistic critics is against vs. 10: “The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.” Gladness and bloodbaths do, indeed, not go together. We have to be careful, though, not to accuse the righteous of sadism. The reason for the gladness of the righteous is not the amount of blood but the totality of their victory. The bathing in blood of the feet of the righteous suggests that they have taken part in this victory, and that they were instrumental in bringing it about. Godlessness is being trampled by the feet of righteousness. In some cases the Holy Spirit uses pictures that are repulsive to us, in order to evoke repulsion in man about the horror of sin, and in order to bring him to repentance. The picture David paints here has the same effect as the one we find in Revelation, where the birds of prey are invited to eat the flesh of Christ’s victims. We read: “And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, ‘Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.’ ... The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.”³³⁵

David, actually, asks for a “short cause.” The general complaint was that the righteous is righteous in vain, and that justice does not reign on earth. This makes men doubt the existence of God. David is of the opinion that this misunderstanding would be eliminated if God would, from time to time, intervene in world affairs. This does happen sometimes, as is evident from the defeat of Hitler after a twelve-year reign of terror. The general rule, however, seems to be that God allows evil to ripen till harvest time. This is the lesson Jesus teaches in the parable of the weeds in the field. In Matthew’s Gospel we read: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’ ... His disciples came to him and said, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the

³³⁵ Rev. 19:17,18,21

field.' He answered, 'The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.'³³⁶

The problem of the continued existence of evil in this world occupied the minds of many of the Bible's authors. It is the theme of the book Job, and Asaph wrestles with it in Psalm 73.

David concludes this psalm with a question. We do not know whether his prayer was heard.

³³⁶ Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43

PSALM FIFTY-NINE

For the director of music. *To the tune of: "Do Not Destroy,"* Of David. A *miktam*.
When Saul had sent men to watch David's house in order to kill him.

- 1** *Deliver me from my enemies, O God; protect me from those who rise up against me.*
- 2** *Deliver me from evildoers and save me from bloodthirsty men.*
- 3** *See how they lie in wait for me! Fierce men conspire against me for no offense or sin of mine, O LORD.*
- 4** *I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me. Arise to help me; look on my plight!*
- 5** *O LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors. Selah*
- 6** *They return at evening, snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.*
- 7** *See what they spew from their mouths-- they spew out swords from their lips, and they say, "Who can hear us?"*
- 8** *But you, O LORD, laugh at them; you scoff at all those nations.*
- 9** *O my Strength, I watch for you; you, O God, are my fortress,*
- 10** *my loving God. God will go before me and will let me gloat over those who slander me.*
- 11** *But do not kill them, O Lord our shield, or my people will forget. In your might make them wander about, and bring them down.*
- 12** *For the sins of their mouths, for the words of their lips, let them be caught in their pride. For the curses and lies they utter,*
- 13** *consume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more. Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob. Selah*
- 14** *They return at evening, snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city.*
- 15** *They wander about for food and howl if not satisfied.*
- 16** *But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble.*
- 17** *O my Strength, I sing praise to you; you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God.*

This psalm is the last in the series of three psalms "To the tune of 'Do not destroy.'" In chronological order it is actually the first because it was written after Saul's first attempt to eliminate David. We read the story in the book First Samuel.³³⁷ This psalm also is a "miktam," a precious stone, or priceless monument in David's experience.

This is David's first flight from Saul. Man has the ability to get used to everything in life. Even the feeling of tension when the noose is pulled a little tighter around one's neck can become common. But first experiences tend to engrave themselves on our memory more deeply, with the fright and panic that accompany them. This psalm is David's first distress signal; many others would follow. He may have written the poem some time after the event took place, although we get the impression that writing may have been David's way of reacting to certain situations in his life. At the end of his life, David would look back and write Psalm 18, in which we read: "... when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." Then he understood that God had heard the prayer he had sent up, for the first time, in this psalm: "Deliver me from my enemies, O God."

Samuel had anointed David as king; "and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power."³³⁸ Little would David have expected that he would immediately become the target of the great murderer of men. From that time on, he would go through life surrounded by evil powers that wanted to destroy him. We do not anticipate this when we surrender ourselves to the Lord. It is not an empty formality, but the most earnest necessity, to put ourselves under the protection of the Most High. David knew this from the moment Saul's spear missed his heart by a few inches and stuck into the wall of the palace; he realized that he looked into the eyes of a bloodthirsty madman.³³⁹

³³⁷ See I Sam. 19:11-17

³³⁸ I Sam. 16:13

³³⁹ See I Sam. 19:10

The word “enemies” is plural. Evidently, there were some among Saul’s servants who would have liked to see David eliminated. Possibly, David understood from the very beginning that Saul was a mere pawn in a greater game; the real enemy was a spiritual one.

The confession: “for no offense or sin of mine,” and “I have done no wrong” does, of course, not imply that David was without sin, but that the official complaint that had been brought against him was false. David characterizes his enemies as “evildoers” and “bloodthirsty men.” This points to a customary practice, a lifestyle; evil deeds and murder were a way of life for those people. We could call them professional criminals.

David presents his case to God, as if God would not know about it, and would not be aware of what was going on. He wanted to rouse God, as if He were asleep. God does not need to be awakened, but David’s sense of reality needed to be. David had to become conscious of the fact that the One he invoked was the omniscient and omnipresent One. It is one of the important features of prayer that we open up for God’s reality, and that we learn to judge the present in which we live in the light of eternity.

In vs. 5 David calls God: *Yahweh, Elohiym, ts^abaa’owt, Eloheey Yisraa’el*, “LORD, God of hosts, God of Israel.” In drawing a line from the situation in which he finds himself to the character of God, David realizes who God is, that is the LORD of the covenant, and of revelation, the supreme commander of the heavenly armies, and the creator of heaven and earth. When we enter into God’s presence in prayer, our eyes will be opened to this reality. At the moment of His capture, Jesus said to His disciples: “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?”³⁴⁰ In other words: “Do you not realize that My Father is *Elohiym, ts^abaa’owt*?”

“The nations” in vs. 5 is the rendering of the Hebrew word *gowyim*, which is usually translated “gentiles” or “heathen.” Here, the word is used for David’s enemies who are predominantly Israelites. Some may have been Edomites, like Doeg whom we met in a previous psalm.³⁴¹ Not every Israelite was an Israelite in the true sense of the word. The Apostle Paul says: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”³⁴² Those who wanted to kill the Lord’s anointed, which is what David was, put themselves outside the covenant. In a sense, this made them worse than the people Israel had driven out of Canaan. In referring to these nations, and evoking the history of the conquest of Canaan, and God’s supernatural intervention, David places his own experience in the right perspective. He prays that God will intervene in his life, as He did in history. After all, what happened to him was just as much a part of the history of salvation as the conquest of Canaan. “Selah.”

Vs. 6: “They return at evening, snarling like dogs, and prowl about the city” is the sad refrain of this psalm. We find it again in vs. 14. It refers to the subscript: “When Saul had sent men to watch David’s house in order to kill him.” If the city police did, in fact, make such noises as David describes here, they must have given a ridiculous performance, which did not make David’s circumstances, as prey for these hunters, any more comfortable. But God laughs at this show. David uses the same words as in another psalm: “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”³⁴³ This thought may only have come to David later when it was all over, and when he had time to write this poem. While he was in this tense situation in his life, he asked himself what God in heaven would think of this, and, in his mind, he saw a mocking smile on the face of the Almighty. It is salutary to imagine how things on earth look from above; it helps to diminish the tension. It made David resolve that, from then on, he would no longer stare at circumstances surrounding him, but look up to God above. The house, which had become unsafe to him, and from which he escaped through a window, was exchanged for God’s fortress, that invincible bunker, where he was completely safe.

Faith needs to be exercised. At that moment, David received glimpses of God’s reality which surrounded him, but in the following days, he would fall back in panic. The repose of faith did not come to him until he arrived at the cave of Adullam.³⁴⁴ David’s prayer to see God’s love and mercy, and lovingkindness, for victory over this enemies would be answered, little by little within David’s own heart. After all, God’s lovingkindness had always been with David, and his enemies had already been overcome

³⁴⁰ Matt. 26:53

³⁴¹ See the subscript of Ps. 52

³⁴² Rom. 2:28,29

³⁴³ Ps. 2:4

³⁴⁴ See I Sam. Ch. 19-22

before they surrounded the house. David was invincible under God's protection, but he had to learn to stand in this victory, by exercising daily fellowship with God.

There seems to be a contradiction in what David wants God to do with his enemies. In vs. 11, he says: "But do not kill them, O Lord our shield, or my people will forget," but in vs. 13 we read: "consume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more." When he asks God not to kill them, he does not want them to be granted pardon, but to become an object lesson. People's memories are so short. At the end of the Second World War, the general consensus was that this should never happen again, but in spite of the war monuments, the feeling of horror has long disappeared. David should not have been worried. The devil has never rested throughout the centuries. The solution to the paradox of verses 11 and 13 lies probably in the fact that in the former case, David speaks about the spiritual powers that instigated this evil, and in the latter about the human beings who were being manipulated by those demons.

The statement "Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob. Selah" is a beautiful summary of God's revelation in this world. David demonstrates that he understands that, in Jesus' words, "the field is the world."³⁴⁵ If God really rules over Jacob, meaning: if believers obey Him completely, the whole world will be reached with the Gospel. David proves that much more was at stake than his climbing out of a window, or his personal safety. He understood that his anointing was part of the history of salvation, and that the attempt to kill him was an attack on God's revelation in this world.

When David reproached his enemies that they sinned with their mouths, he did not only mean that they were only talk and no action. We have examples in world history in which rhetoric and demagoguery have been used as strong weapons. Hitler was an accomplished demagogue, and his speeches prepared for a great war, and for the gas chambers. We read about the Antichrist: "The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies."³⁴⁶ But the great tribulation will consist of more than rhetoric alone.

Vs. 14 repeats the sad refrain of vs. 6. In Jewish society a dog was not man's best friend, but the image of a pariah, that fed itself with the offal of society. These people feed on rot and sin, but the person who believes in God, and who has placed himself under His protection, has a song of praise in his heart and in his mouth. Mark the difference between the howling of the dogs and the song of man. The dogs howl in the evening, and David sings in the morning. According to Revelation, the dogs are outside the city,³⁴⁷ but David is inside the safety of God's fortress, surrounded by His lovingkindness. They snarl, but David sings psalms of praise. We should ask ourselves who is the oppressed here.

³⁴⁵ Matt. 13:38

³⁴⁶ Rev. 13:5

³⁴⁷ See Rev. 22:15

PSALM SIXTY

For the director of music. <To the tune of> “The Lily of the Covenant.” A miktam of David. For teaching. When he fought Arama Naharaim and Aram Zobah, and when Joab returned and struck down twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt.

- 1 *You have rejected us, O God, and burst forth upon us; you have been angry-- now restore us!*
- 2 *You have shaken the land and torn it open; mend its fractures, for it is quaking.*
- 3 *You have shown your people desperate times; you have given us wine that makes us stagger.*
- 4 *But for those who fear you, you have raised a banner to be unfurled against the bow. Selah*
- 5 *Save us and help us with your right hand, that those you love may be delivered.*
- 6 *God has spoken from his sanctuary: "In triumph I will parcel out Shechem and measure off the Valley of Succoth.*
- 7 *Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet, Judah my scepter.*
- 8 *Moab is my washbasin, upon Edom I toss my sandal; over Philistia I shout in triumph."*
- 9 *Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom?*
- 10 *Is it not you, O God, you who have rejected us and no longer go out with our armies?*
- 11 *Give us aid against the enemy, for the help of man is worthless.*
- 12 *With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies.*

This psalm could be entitled “The Price of Victory.” At first glance there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the title and the content. The heading, which describes the historical background, portrays one of David’s most spectacular military victories.³⁴⁸ There is some confusion about the difference between the twelve thousand man in this psalm, and the eighteen thousand in the historical record in I Chronicles, and I Samuel. Also, the victory seems to be attributed to three different persons. The numerical discrepancy is explained by most experts as an error in copying.

The Tyndale Commentary says about this psalm: “But for this psalm and its title we should have no inkling of the resilience of David’s hostile neighbors at the peak of his power. His very success brought its dangers of alliances among his enemies (cf. II Sam. 8:5), and of battles far from home. At such a moment, when his main force was with him near the Euphrates (II Sam. 8:3), Edom evidently took its chance to fall upon Judah from the South.” David won the victory on the battlefield, but he lost the battle at home. That is the reason this psalm is not a song of victory, but the cry of a saddened heart.

The immediate lesson is that, in our spiritual struggles, no position should be left undefended, and God’s priorities should always be kept in clear focus. Many of the workers in the Kingdom of Heaven won great victories on the front line, but lost out in their marriages, and in their family life.

As David returned home, he realized what had happened in his absence, and in brokenness of spirit, he fell down before the Lord.

Is it true that God had rejected and broken David and Israel? Yes, and no! We cannot point to any specific sin which left the door open for the enemy, as was the case in Joshua’s battle for Ai.³⁴⁹ With David, it seems to have been a matter of a lack of experience. God permitted Israel to be defeated at home in order to teach David a painful lesson.

It is important to put on the full armor of God, as Paul says: “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”³⁵⁰ Unfortunately, many people do not learn the lessons of history. The devil uses the same tactics over and over again, and thousands get trapped. In Churchill’s *History of the Second World War*, the author describes Hitler’s strategy, as that of a spider in a web. The reason Germany lost the war, he said, was that the spider left the center of the web. We have to be careful in the spiritual battle that our ministry does not grow any faster than we grow ourselves. There is a possibility for the devil to draw us out too far. He will even go so far as to show us visions of lost souls in order to make us stretch beyond the limit. There is a fine line between reaching out in faith to that which actually lies beyond our reach, and recklessly stretching farther than the Lord wants us to reach, thus playing into the devil’s hand. We always

³⁴⁸ See II Sam. 8:13, and I Chron. 18:1-13

³⁴⁹ See Josh. 7:1-12

³⁵⁰ Eph. 6:13

have to ask ourselves to what degree our fellowship with God is influenced by our ministry for Him. If we are watchful in this, everything will be all right.

We are not told what exactly happened in David's absence; it is quite possible that "You have shaken the land and torn it open; mend its fractures, for it is quaking," describes a literal earthquake. In that case this "Act of God" would reinforce the impression David had that God had rejected His people. It is more likely, however, that David speaks about destruction caused by war. It could also be a combination of the two.

David must have felt himself to be "on cloud nine" after the victory that brought him to the boundaries of the land that God had promised Israel; now he hit the earth maybe harder than needed be; we do not know! The good thing is that he takes the broken pieces to the Lord. There is no trace of confession of sin in his words. He charges the damage to God's account, not to his own. It sounds as if he wanted to say: "I have done what God wanted me to do, and now look what happened!" He takes the disaster to be the result of his obedience. Such things happen. When Israel entered the desert, we read: "The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink."³⁵¹

As we said before, the impression we get is that of inexperience, not of sins committed. God had the spiritual maturity of David and his people in mind. In order to achieve that maturity, He allowed the enemy to carry out some counter attacks on a limited scale. Like Job, David did not see any difference between what God was doing and the work of the devil. If we are young Christians, and we are not conscious of any particular sin in our lives, a feeling of being forsaken by God is often an indication that God is working in our lives.

David describes this experience as God showing His people desperate times, and giving them wine that makes them stagger. Emotionally and intellectually this was a shattering feeling. People who see hard things sometimes become hard. Some emotions are too painful to work through. God wants us to remain tender in heart, even when circumstances harden around us. What God allows us to go through may make us stagger; it may blur our thinking power. David's mentioning of these two factors indicates that he is aware of the danger of reacting negatively. One's reaction is an important part of healing and growth.

Vs. 4 can be translated in different ways, some words having more than one meaning. The context, in this case, is not very helpful. The reading of the NIV is: "But for those who fear you, you have raised a banner to be unfurled against the bow. Selah." The NKJ remains closer to the older versions by saying: "You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth. Selah." TLB reads: "But you have given us a banner to rally to; all who love truth will rally to it; then you can deliver your beloved people. Use your strong right arm to rescue us." The Hebrew word translated "bow" or "truth" is *qoshet*, which *Strongs Definitions* defines as: "to balance; equity (as evenly weighed), i.e. reality." The Amplified Bible renders the verse with: "[But now] You have set up a banner for those who fear *and* worshipfully revere You – to which they may flee from the bow – a standard displayed because of the truth. Selah..." A Dutch Version translates "bow" with "archers."³⁵² The Septuagint rendering suggests a fleeing from the bow of the archers, but Jerome believes that a gathering beneath the banner of truth is intended. The idea of rallying to the banner of truth may be the best interpretation of David's vision of the task God had given him and the people of Israel in the world. This would elevate this poem above the level of an earthly war. Without a vision of God's revelation, and Israel's responsibility in connection with it, this psalm would have little significance.

The banner is there for those who fear God, that is: for those who recognize the reality of God's presence. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote this beautiful poem:

Life is courageously carrying a banner of war that may be torn,
stained, or almost fallen down, through good and bad days.

One stumbles, one often incurs many deep wounds ...
but no courageous man will run away as if death was on his heels!

Life is ... no peace here below,
No asking for a truce:

³⁵¹ Ex. 17:1

³⁵² Boogschutters (NBG)

Life is: carrying the banner of the cross
into the hands of God!

This is the job description this psalm gives to us also. Rallying under the banner implies that we do not try to face the enemy separately and individually. The fellowship of the saints is of great importance in this battle. It may have been David's weakest point in this campaign that he failed to mobilize Israel as a whole. God permitted these setbacks at the home front to make the people rally, and to prepare the ones He loved for battle.

We note the contrast between the feeling of rejection in vs. 1 and the assurance of being loved in vs. 5. Jesus loves us, as John says in Revelation: "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."³⁵³ The actual topic of this psalm is the spiritual battle of the royal priesthood against the powers of darkness.

Once the rallying of God's beloved to the banner of truth is an accomplished fact, prayer for victory follows naturally. Here we notice the difference between David's banner of truth, and the banner of the cross around which the fellowship of the saints is experienced. The cross is proof of the fact that the victory is won. Our task is to disarm a vanquished foe.

According to *The Tyndale Commentary*, God's speaking "in His holiness," or "in His sanctuary" (vs. 6), may refer to the reading of the law during the Feast of Tabernacles at the end of the Sabbath Year. This reading was prescribed in Deuteronomy.³⁵⁴ But if God spoke "in His holiness," it may also mean that God addressed David directly and personally. It is also possible that a prophet gave this message of God to David in answer to David's prayer. This kind of answer to prayer, by means of a prophetic message, we find, among others in the stories of Hezekiah³⁵⁵ and Josiah.³⁵⁶ There are also examples in the Book of Psalms where God speaks directly.³⁵⁷

The Word of God does not contain any new revelation in this psalm. The conquest of Canaan is pictured in bold strokes. This could indicate that the occasion was, in fact, the reading of the Pentateuch. The Word of God, in this case, is the written Word, which is also a reliable source of revelation for us.

Sechem and Sukkoth were the first parts of the Promised Land Jacob appropriated for himself when he returned from his uncle Laban. Gilead is the territory on the other side of the Jordan River. Manasseh occupied the territory on both sides of the River Jordan; this tribe formed a bridge between the two parts. Ephraim and Judah were the most important tribes, respectively in the north and in the south of the country. So these verses give us a picture as to how the occupation of Canaan took place historically. That put the present in the right perspective. Moab as washbasin, Edom under a sandal, and triumphant shouts over Philistia are all pictures of victory over the enemy. The list opens and closes with triumph. It sounds as if God reached back in history, and became ecstatic about this plan of salvation that took about four centuries to take effect, and that was already about one thousand years old in David's days.

The way this is portrayed is almost childishly playful. In C. S. Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the children Susan, and Lucy play tag, and leap frog with the Lion Aslan, after his resurrection from the dead. Lewis catches this spirit of exuberance in a beautiful way.

This exuberant rapture that comes out of the sanctuary stands in sharp contrast with David's discouragement and brokenness of the first stanza.

It is interesting to look at what happened at Succoth when Jacob arrived there for the first time.³⁵⁸ He built his first house there, and purchased his first piece of land where he built an altar for the God of Israel. This pioneer's act by the man, who had just scored a victory with the Lord at Peniel, evidently caused exuberant joy in heaven. Whether Jacob was able to sense something on earth from what went on in heaven, we do not know. God had given him a surety in the promised land.

We read in Numbers how Moses made arrangements with the tribe of Reuben regarding the occupation of Gilead.³⁵⁹ We also learn from Numbers that Manasseh drove out the Amorites.³⁶⁰ That which

³⁵³ Rev. 1:5^b,6

³⁵⁴ See Deut. 31:10-13

³⁵⁵ See Isa. 37:14-35;38:2-8

³⁵⁶ II Kings 22:11-20

³⁵⁷ See Ps. 12:5; 81:6-16; 95:7-11

³⁵⁸ See Gen. 33:17-20

³⁵⁹ See Num. 32

Jacob had purchased four centuries earlier now became Israel's permanent possession. Initially, Moses had trouble seeing God's will in these arrangements, but centuries later, David heard that all this had been part of God's eternal plan. God reminded David how it had all begun. In that light, David was able to evaluate the present and the future.

The words: "Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet, Judah my scepter," express the thought that God is the actual owner of the land. The conquest and protection are not the work of David. The final responsibility rested with God, and David had to give account to Him for what he did with His property. "Ephraim is my helmet, Judah my scepter," literally reads, according to the Hebrew Interlinear Bible,: "Ephraim also {is} the strength of mine head; Judah {is} my lawgiver." The amazing thing is that God Himself calls Ephraim "my helmet," and Judah "my lawgiver," thus identifying Himself closely with His people.

The defeat, which forms the basis of this psalm (whether it was an invasion by Edom, or a destructive earthquake, or both), had not been something that happened without God being in control of the situation. It had been part of God's plan. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ was the defeat upon which every victory is based. This is the picture this psalm portrays here.

The fortified city in Edom must have been the city of Petra, which was built on a rock, and which was considered invincible. The prophet Obadiah would later say about Petra: "The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?'"³⁶¹

When Israel arrived at the border of Edom, on its way from Egypt to Canaan, and Moses asked for free passage through their territory, they were refused. Since Edom descended from Esau, Jacob's brother, Israel decided not to go to war with Edom.³⁶² Consequently, the conquest of Canaan was not begun from the south, although this would have been the logical place, but from the east, on the other side of the Jordan River. Not only did Esau forfeit the blessings that would have become his in connection with the acquisition of Canaan by Israel, but he tried to undermine Israel's power through sporadic invasions.

As far as we know, David never succeeded in capturing Petra. But this seems to be the goal he set for himself by faith in this psalm. We could ask ourselves the question if, perhaps here also, David tried to reach farther than God wanted him to. The victory over Edom in the Valley of Salt, which is mentioned in the caption of this psalm, had, of course, already taken place before this poem was written. This poses some hard questions:

Obviously, God wants us to be victors, but this does not mean that all defenses will crumble before us. It is unlikely that the nation of Israel as a whole shared David's vision. David was a man of spiritual maturity, and most of the Israelites were probably not more than spiritually mediocre. God did not want to hand victory to His people on a silver platter. God meant Satan to be crushed under their feet, as Paul says in Romans,³⁶³ but He wanted the whole community to be involved in that. God never gives great spiritual victories to people who are spiritual immature. Probably, David himself had not penetrated deeply enough in the will of God to be ready for this victory. Petra would not fall until Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. God would overthrow Edom like Sodom and Gomorrah, as Jeremiah prophesied: "'Edom will become an object of horror; all who pass by will be appalled and will scoff because of all its wounds. As Sodom and Gomorrah were overthrown, along with their neighboring towns,' says the LORD, 'so no one will live there; no man will dwell in it,'"³⁶⁴ but this would not be done by the hand of David, or of any of his successors. We are not told why not. The formidable enemy David faced is the same enemy which we face; he has more than one string on his bow. He can only be overcome by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony, and if we do not love our lives so much as to shrink from death.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁰ Num. 32:39-42

³⁶¹ Obad. vs.3

³⁶² See Num. 20:14-21

³⁶³ See Rom. 16:20

³⁶⁴ Jer. 49:17,18

³⁶⁵ See Rev. 12:11

PSALM SIXTY-ONE

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. Of David.

- 1 Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.**
- 2 From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.**
- 3 For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe.**
- 4 I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings. Selah**
- 5 For you have heard my vows, O God; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.**
- 6 Increase the days of the king's life, his years for many generations.**
- 7 May he be enthroned in God's presence forever; appoint your love and faithfulness to protect him.**
- 8 Then will I ever sing praise to your name and fulfill my vows day after day.**

It is difficult to determine what occasion prompted the writing of this psalm by David. The two times when he was exiled were during his flight from Saul and his flight from Absalom. In his book *My Daily Psalter*, Father O'Sullivan believes that it was during the flight for Absalom. Unless we take the verses 6 and 7 to be later additions to the psalm, the prayer for the king, coming from David's mouth would strike us as strange, if David was already sitting on the throne of Israel.

It is not necessary, however, to know exactly when the psalm was written in order to have a clear understanding of its contents. The point is that David finds himself far away from the place where God had revealed Himself, the place where the Ark of the Covenant stood. The NIV reads: "from the ends of the earth..." The Hebrew word *`erets* can mean either the earth at large or a country. It makes little difference how far away from the Lord we are; an inch is just as bad as a mile. For us, who live in a dispensation in which the true worshipers worship the Father in spirit and truth,³⁶⁶ it is difficult to put ourselves in the place of one who is subject to the topographical boundaries of God's revelation. It is always possible that David used the phrase "the ends of the earth" in a metaphorical sense. One could live in the shadow of the temple in Jerusalem, and yet be at an infinite distance from the presence of God. Fellowship with God is always a spiritual matter, even in a dispensation where God revealed Himself in a way that was physically observable. David had lost the sense of God's presence, and we are not told why.

Vs. 4 mentions a foe in general terms. There is no mention of any particular sin, or of a confession of sin. The "rock that is higher than I" suggests that David had lost sight of the horizon; his world had become too small, and he lacked perspective.

Our fellowship with God is indispensable for an evaluation of ourselves, and of the situation in which we may find ourselves. We read in the Gospels how Jesus would stop from time to time to draw a line from the place where He stood to the throne of God, and then judge His circumstances in the light of eternity. Such a panoramic vision cannot be a daily experience, and it does not have to be; however, if we never find an answer to the two questions who we are, and what the importance of our acts are in the great frame of God's design, we are not the human beings God wants us to be. The existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre was at least right in that part of his worldview.

The rock is too high for us. We cannot lift ourselves up above our own level; God will have to do that for us. That is the essence of David's prayer here. He asks that God would make him the man He wants him to be. As far as this is concerned, he is "at the ends of the earth." He is far removed from the image of God in which he was created. In that sense we can understand the growing faint of David's heart to mean, not only as a picture of intense desire, but more literally, as a weakening of the functions of the mind, the emotions, and the will. Outside fellowship with God, we grow dull; we can only be fully ourselves in the presence of the Lord. God will have to lead us to the rock that we cannot climb in our own strength.

In the light of New Testament theology, David's picture opens even greater perspectives. We can see in it an image of the sinful "I" that hinders the man who is born again. The Apostle Paul expresses this in the words: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."³⁶⁷ A. B. Simpson wrote: "O, to be free from myself, dear Lord..." A person who is full of himself is at the ends of the earth, far from fellowship with God. "The rock that is higher than I" is Christ. Standing on that rock means to be crucified, to be dead, and buried with

³⁶⁶ See John 4:23

³⁶⁷ Gal. 2:20^b

Him, and to live in the power of His resurrection. For David this was an unreachable goal; for us, who are in Christ, this elevation to the top of the rock has already taken place.

David often used the image of the rock in his psalms. Elsewhere, we read: “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.”³⁶⁸ Those images are an expression of three aspects of spiritual life. The first rock is the foundation on which we stand, and upon which we are built up. The second rock of refuge is the cleft rock, which symbolizes the body of Christ which was struck and broken on the cross, by which we receive forgiveness and renewal. And the third rock is the one upon which the stronghold is built, which is our position in Christ in which we stand against the attacks of the enemy, who wants to undo the victory of the risen Lord in our lives.

David speaks about the refuge, and the strong tower as experiences he had already had in the past. Those experiences are the reason for his request to be placed on this rock that is higher than he. We can see in David’s desire a parallel with Moses’ request to see God’s glory. We read in Exodus: “Then Moses said, ‘Now show me your glory.’ And the LORD said, ‘I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.’ Then the LORD said, ‘There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.’”³⁶⁹ Isn’t this also the essence of David’s request? Blessed is the man who has this kind of ambition in life! The closer we draw to God, the more we will realize that “the rock is higher than I.” Unless God places us there, we will never reach the top. Real fellowship with the Lord is supernatural. O, Lord Jesus, lead me to the rock that is higher than I!

In vs. 4, David manifests another aspect of the same desire. Dwelling in God’s tent and taking refuge in the shelter of His wings speaks of the intimacy of fellowship. The tent is the tabernacle that was still in use in David’s days, and the wings are probably a reference to the cover of the ark upon which atonement was made. The two cherubim spread their wings over the place where the blood was sprinkled, and where God had promised to reveal Himself to Israel. God had said to Moses: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”³⁷⁰

David knew, of course that, as a layman, he was not allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, let alone touch the cover of the ark. But the Holy Spirit may have made him understand that this restriction was only temporary. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews makes some very profound remarks about this point. We read: “Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings-- external regulations applying until the time of the new order.”³⁷¹

In his prayer for intimate fellowship, David reached forward prophetically to the confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, about which the same author to the Hebrews says: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us

³⁶⁸ Ps. 18:2

³⁶⁹ Ex. 33:18-23

³⁷⁰ Ex. 25:22

³⁷¹ Heb. 9:1-10

from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”³⁷² As New Testament Christians we have, more than anyone else, the right and the privilege “to dwell in [God’s] tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of [His] wings.” How great and overwhelming this privilege is, we will better understand as we meditate upon the visions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John on the island of Patmos.³⁷³ The cover on the Ark of the Covenant was not merely a primitive representation of something that did not really exist; it was a material expression of a spiritual reality.

The vow in vs. 5 must have taken the form of a sacrifice. The Hebrew word used is *neder*, about which *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says the following: “*neder*... ‘vow; votive offering.’ This noun occurs 60 times in biblical Hebrew and is often used in conjunction with the verb (19 times): ‘...any of thy vows which thou vowest...’ <Deut. 12:17>. Modern versions compress the noun and verb into one idiom: ‘Or whatever you have vowed to give’ (NIV), or give a technical usage to the noun: ‘Or any of your votive offerings which you vow’ (RSV).”

All vows in the Old Testament had a legal basis in the sacrifice of an animal, as described in Leviticus.³⁷⁴ David dedicated himself to God on the basis of the shed blood. Votive offerings express obedience, gratitude, and surrender. David’s deep longing for fellowship with the Lord is closely linked to his surrender and obedience. The New Testament teaches that love without disobedience is not possible. Jesus says: “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”³⁷⁵ And the Apostle John wrote: “This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands.”³⁷⁶

David, evidently, had the assurance that God had accepted his votive offering, and he used this certainty as a basis for his prayer for a deeper fellowship with God. As we saw before, the point is the experience of the moment, that is the depth of a daily communion with God. It is good and necessary to reach back to previous experiences. But looking back is not the same thing as being satisfied with yesterday’s blessings for today. God’s love, or lovingkindness, His *chesed*, that is His covenant love ought to be an experience that is daily new for us.

The heritage is represented in material terms, in the possession of the Promised Land. But, at the same time, David speaks about more than earthly possessions. The real heritage is the presence of God Himself, as symbolized in the existence of the ark. Thus God spoke to Abraham: “I am your shield, your very great reward.”³⁷⁷ And to Aaron He said: “I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.”³⁷⁸ Canaan was an image of this inheritance. Peter connects this inheritance to the resurrection of Christ 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.”³⁷⁹ David may not have fully realized what he was saying, but this is the real contents of his words.

Everything we own at present is borrowed goods that we will have to give back when we leave this world. Our real possessions will be given to us when we arrive at the other side. The surety of these possessions which is given to us now is the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul said: “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.” This truth is mind-boggling. Some years ago, a lady in Florida won fifty-five million dollars in the lottery. Anyone who has received the Holy Spirit as a deposit, and who would be willing to trade places with this lady, is a fool. I, as an immortal child of God, do not want to be swallowed up by mortality. Standing on the rock that is higher than I, I can see this horizon; under the shelter of His wing, the Lord whispers to me what is awaiting me on the other side. We have to think, in connection with the above, of Jim Elliot’s words: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to obtain what he cannot lose.”

³⁷² Heb. 10:19-23

³⁷³ See Isa. 6:1-4; Ezek. ch. 1, and Rev. ch. 4

³⁷⁴ See Lev. 3, and 7:11-21 (especially the verses 16-19).

³⁷⁵ John 14:21

³⁷⁶ I John 5:2,3^a

³⁷⁷ Gen. 15:1

³⁷⁸ Num. 18:20

³⁷⁹ I Pet. 1:3,4

The language of the verses 6 and 7 goes far beyond the prayer of a mortal man who sits on an earthly throne. It is, therefore, not important for the understanding of this psalm to know whether this is a prayer for David, or by David for some other king of Israel. The only one who is “enthroned in God’s presence forever” is our Lord Jesus Christ. The angel Gabriel said to Mary: “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”³⁸⁰ David’s prophetic prayer is fulfilled in those words. This fulfillment is also the only basis on which a man can stand on the rock of fellowship with God, and take refuge in the shelter of His wings. Without the glory of the kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ, there would not be victorious living for us.

David does not say this in so many words, but at the place where he takes refuge under the wings, the blood of atonement has been sprinkled. Every experience of fellowship with God begins and ends with this atonement. The Epistle to the Hebrews says: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”³⁸¹ There is also no fellowship and victory over sin without the shedding of blood. Our experiences on earth are closely connected to the fact that Jesus stands before the Father in our behalf, as our High Priest. The Lamb is on the throne.

This is the reason that this psalm is such a fitting song of praise. Singing praises to the Name of God means singing to God’s being. This requires insight into who God is. That is what makes the shouts of glory well up in our hearts.

As in vs. 5, so here the fulfilling of vows speaks of obedience. I cannot stand and live on the rock that is higher than I without daily obedience to the will of God.

³⁸⁰ Luke 1:32^b,33

³⁸¹ Heb. 9:22^b

PSALM SIXTY-TWO

For the director of music. For Jeduthun. A psalm of David.

- 1** *My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him.*
- 2** *He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.*
- 3** *How long will you assault a man? Would all of you throw him down-- this leaning wall, this tottering fence?*
- 4** *They fully intend to topple him from his lofty place; they take delight in lies. With their mouths they bless, but in their hearts they curse. Selah*
- 5** *Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.*
- 6** *He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken.*
- 7** *My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge.*
- 8** *Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Selah*
- 9** *Lowborn men are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie; if weighed on a balance, they are nothing; together they are only a breath.*
- 10** *Do not trust in extortion or take pride in stolen goods; though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*
- 11** *One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong,*
- 12** *and that you, O Lord, are loving. Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done.*

The keyword in this psalm is "silence." The NIV opens this psalm with: "My soul finds rest in God alone." The RSV reads: "For God alone my soul waits in silence," and the KJV: "Truly my soul waiteth upon God." The Interlinear Bible reads literally: "Only to God (in) silence (is) my soul." According to *Strong's Definitions*, the word translated "finds rest," or "waits in silence" is *duwmiyah*, which means: "stillness; adverbially, silently; abstractly quiet, trust."

Silence, in our human experience, is never a complete absence of sounds. Only in death is absolute silence; where there is life, there is vibration. People have done experiments by placing persons in a one hundred percent soundproof place. The result was that those people began to hear their own heartbeat, and the swishing of their blood amplified like a thundering noise. Silence before God, therefore, cannot be a soundless experience, but it is a shutting out of all the cacophony that bombards us from all sides, in order to listen to the sounds of life in fellowship with the living God. Silence before God is what we hear when we go into our room and close the door. This is not a Buddhist's loosing oneself in the Nirvana, but a closing the door to the noises of sin in our lives.

"Truly my soul silently waits for God"³⁸² points to a reality that is greater than the one we ordinarily live in. Much of our lack of sense of reality is due to a lack of silence in our lives. Quakers have a habit of practicing silence in order to be led by an "inner light." Silence brings healing, both physically and spiritually. When our bodies are sick we need bed rest, and our souls are restored beside quiet waters.³⁸³

"Only to God," says the Hebrew text. All the intimacy of a deep fellowship with the Father is contained in those words. The Holy of Holiest, the place where the ark stood, was the most silent place in the world. Only in that silence, can we hear the heavenly music that surrounds the throne. We read in Revelation how the four living creatures never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come," and "the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever."³⁸⁴ We cannot hear any of these songs of heavenly praise because of the terrible noise that surrounds us on earth, some of which is of our own making.

In the opening verse, David states the fact that his soul has turned to God in silence. This is not an exhortation, as in vs. 5. Our souls are created for this kind of turning to God. If we learn to practice silence we will discover that this silence is natural and beneficial. As in nature a flower will naturally turn to the light, so our souls have a built-in compass that makes us turn toward God. People who do not practice silence, harm themselves.

³⁸² NKJ

³⁸³ See Ps. 23:2^b,3^a

³⁸⁴ Rev. 4:8,10

Becoming quiet and being alone with God requires practice. The fact that it is one of the soul's natural abilities does not mean that our souls will automatically become silent. Walking, for instance, is a natural function of the body, but we all had to learn to walk; so it is with the silence of our souls.

Summarizing, we can say that we need silence in order to flee the negative effects of the noise of sin in our lives. Secondly, we need silence for our inner healing, and lastly, we will not be able to hear the music of worship, let alone participate in this worship, unless we turn in silence toward God.

Being silent without turning to God is a frightening experience. Being alone with ourselves and being confronted with the reality of our sin will give us a sense of being forsaken by God. Our salvation comes from Him. This is the reason why it is so important to turn to God alone in our silence. Silence may never be an emotional and self-serving experience by itself. Silence before God has value only if it is based upon the atonement in Jesus Christ. This is the reason why psychoanalysis has so little value.

The Apostle John writes: "I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name. I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, dear children, because you have known the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one."³⁸⁵ From this quote we conclude that silence is part of the experience of the "fathers." It is an element of our spiritual growth and maturity. At the end of his long life, in which he saw countless answers to prayer, George Mueller testified: "Yes, I know the Lord!"

Practicing silence does not always entail a falling away of all oppression. As long as David uses terms like "rock," and "fortress," and as long as there are men who assault him, there is an indication of distress. It is in the midst of those storms and uncertainty that silence has to be practiced. As long as we hear the clamor, we have the tendency to believe in the reality of the attacks upon us. In the silence, we experience God's salvation as a rock, as the solid ground we stand on, and the fortress as the protection, as the authority with which God has clothed us. These images are favorites of David to express what God's salvation means for him. In other psalms also, he uses the same terms: "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."³⁸⁶ The rock is the one that was cleft, in which he could hide, and the fortress is the strategic point that dominates the area.

We learn from this how important it is to discover in the silence "how much the Lord has done for [us], and how He has had mercy on [us]."³⁸⁷ The Apostle Paul says: "We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us." It is through the Holy Spirit that we can turn to God in silence. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Silence.

The verses 3 and 4 show us under what circumstances David wrote this psalm. A superior force of human and demonic power fell upon him. If David had not turned to God, this noisy force would have trampled him under foot. But now, he sees his opponents for what they are: "a leaning wall, this tottering fence?" The different versions give a variety of meanings of this clause. Some, like the NIV, present it as if the leaning wall and tottering fence represent David, but others, like the NKJ, make the attackers the object: "You shall be slain, all of you, like a leaning wall and a tottering fence." Evidently, the Hebrew text can be read in different ways. The Interlinear Bible reads literally: "You will shatter him, you like a wall leaning; a fence tottering." The wall was intended to fall upon David, but once it crumbled to could not raise itself up again, and crumble a second time. It may be true, as Paul says, 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,"³⁸⁸ but the enemy usually comes to us in the form of men, fellowmen who are full of jealousy.

"They only consult to cast him down from his high position."³⁸⁹ People in high positions are always the object of envy. This phrase would make us understand that David, at the moment he wrote this psalm, was sitting on the throne of Israel, and he was not immune to the intrigues of his ministers and counselors. The people he mentioned made the truth subservient to their self-interest. People who do that have no concept of who God is. Truth, after all, is derived from the character of God. A lie is everything

³⁸⁵ I John 2:12-14

³⁸⁶ Ps. 18:2

³⁸⁷ See Mark 5:19

³⁸⁸ Eph. 6:12

³⁸⁹ NKJ

that deviates from God's person. The people David speaks about are also pious; that is: people who hold on to the outward form of piety, without inwardly have a share in it. David sees the enemy coming upon him in the form of people who address him with words of blessing, but who, in their hearts, wish him to go to hell. When he turns, therefore, in silence to God, he actually prays for fellowship with the real saints, the genuine fellowship of those who are washed by the blood of the Lamb.

There is a fine shade of difference between vs. 1 and vs. 5: "soul finds rest in God alone," and "find rest, O my soul, in God alone." The first is the stating of a fact. It is the natural tendency of the soul to find its rest in God alone. God created man's soul for that purpose. But we do not always what we ought to do, and we are not always what we ought to be. Sometimes, we have to force ourselves to do what should have come naturally to us. Once we have decided to practice silence before God, Satan will mobilize all his forces against us. We will need more strength than we can muster ourselves, and we will, therefore, need help from the outside. The Holy Spirit will have to draw us, not to say, to pull us through. But He loves to do that!

David addresses himself in vs. 5, as if his soul is ignorant of its own good. Strangely enough, this is usually the case. The word "hope" in vs. 5 is parallel to "salvation" in vs. 1. This means that the intent of both words is the same, but the contents is different. Hope emphasizes the realization of salvation. It indicates that salvation has not come yet in all its fullness, but hope is nonetheless immovable. This is clear from the repetition of "I shall not be greatly moved," in vs. 2, and "I shall not be moved,"³⁹⁰ in vs. 6. The principle stated in the beginning has now become a personal experience. David wants to convey that fellowship with God has to be both an objective truth, and a subjective reality.

David presents a logical argument for silence before God. If our hope and our salvation are in God alone, it is reasonable that we take time to turn to God in silence. God wants us to make the facts of salvation a personal experience.

We get the right perspective if we contrast vs. 3 with vs. 7. The devil will attack us with the purpose to embarrass us, and, unfortunately, he usually finds enough ground for this in our lives. Only if we seek our moral strength outside ourselves, and if we rest our honor upon God, will He make us honorable. Jesus says: "My Father will honor the one who serves me."³⁹¹ Salvation and human dignity always go hand-in-hand.

God is not only a refuge for David personally, but also for the people. If God is the rock of foundation of our lives, He is also the refuge. In Jesus' brief parable of the two foundations, the rock on which the house was built is, at the same time, its protection. He says: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock..."³⁹² This protection does not mean that God does for us what we ought to do ourselves. We are the ones who build, and we stand firm. Our protection consists in that we are what we are because we are in Him.

The value of taking refuge is also demonstrated in the transition of the personal to the communal, from the person to the people. David exhorts his people, as a nation, to put their trust in God. As far as I know, it has never happened in world history that a nation as a whole put its trust in God. We may take David's appeal, and apply it to the church of Jesus Christ. The church consists of individuals who have put their trust in God, and who have put themselves under His protection, and who also have a common faith in God. Together as a church, we can undertake things that require faith in God.

As David addresses the nation, he also speaks to people individually. We can hardly envision a whole nation pouring out its heart to God; that is always a personal matter. We have, in English, the term "open-hearted." To be openhearted, literally, means not to have a closed heart. If our heart is open before God, all the filth that is harbored inside will come out and be expelled. Confession, cleansing, and healing are closely related to each other. God will be to us a refuge if we pour out our heart to Him. The devil tries to keep us under his control by keeping the festering sores of our heart closed up. His tactics are to make us sin, and then hide from God and from ourselves. If we turn to God in silence and confession, healing begins. In that way the broken pieces of our life will be built into a house on the rock. According to Jesus' definition, taking our refuge in God consists of hearing His Words and putting them into practice. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."³⁹³ All this is linked together. Being silent before God,

³⁹⁰ Both quotes from NKJ

³⁹¹ John 12:26

³⁹² See Matt. 7:24-27

³⁹³ Matt. 7:24

trusting Him, pouring out one's heart to Him, and taking one's refuge in Him forms a chain from which no link can be taken. A man's soul is a very complex organ. God knows this, because He created man Himself. He knows what to do with our kinks and tangles.

Verses 9-12 form a profound analysis of that which is essential in the life of a human being. In vs. 9 David looks again in the light of God at the men who storms towards him as an enemy. He comes to the conclusion that they are not worth his fears, whether they be high or low. The words "But a breath" means that life is too short for this kind of fear. Human life is like a sigh: one breathes in and out, and it is over.

Our respiration also reminds us of our dependence. We have no life in ourselves. If we are no longer able to inhale oxygen from the outside, we are dead. This in itself makes us "lowborn." But David must also have had the social status of his opponent in mind. Only if we are conscious of the fact that we are dependent upon God for the life of every single cell in our bodies, and that "In him we live and move and have our being,"³⁹⁴ we are "highborn."

God does not object to the fact that we are of noble birth, but if a person inflates himself, while he is nothing, he is a liar. People in Amsterdam, who are known for their sense of humor, have a saying: "If you are nothing, and you do not think a great deal of yourself, you will never amount to anything either." Without the honor that comes from God, man does not amount to anything, and if man yet does as if he is important, he lies. This is why Jesus could say to Pilate: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."³⁹⁵ It is a liberating experience to be able to look at people in this fashion.

The word "breath," in this context, is also used as a weight indicator. David packs a whole world of irony in this poetical image. God holds the balance in His hand to weigh man. We see this picture also in Daniel's account of King Belshazzar, of whom God says: "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting."³⁹⁶ On the one side of the scales is the glory of God; on the other side is the life of a human being. Man is no heavier than a breath, a gulp of thin air.

Yet, it was this breath that gave life to the first man, Adam. We read in Genesis: "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."³⁹⁷ Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the word breath also means spirit. Adam became a bearer of God's image when the Holy Spirit of God was infused in him. If people who are "in Christ" are put in God's scales, the holiness of God and the righteousness of Christ in them will keep each other in balance. Those who do not have the Spirit of Christ will amount to nothing but air.

Generally speaking, we are not called upon to judge other people, but occasionally God will show us how He looks at those who criticize us. We should always ask ourselves how much we mean to the Kingdom of Heaven. The more that question occupies our minds, the lesser we will be bothered by thoughts of how much influence we have in this world.

If in vs. 9, David looked up to the balance in God's hand, in the following verse he looks down to what happens on earth. If a man acquires power over a fellow human being, he invariably falls into the trap of misusing that power. Power corrupts! This is the theme of Tolkien's book Lord of the Rings. We keep the right perspective only if we keep our eyes on the reward God will give to each person. David addresses his admonition in the first place to those who attack him, but he also looks at the danger that involves himself. As king of Israel, he has to stay away from pitfalls such as the misuse of power. He became a rich man in the course of his life. The huge contributions he made from his own possessions to the building of the temple prove that he took his own exhortation to heart.

It is generally understood that the expression "One thing ... two things" in vs. 11 is a Hebrew idiom. We may, however, also take this statement in a literal sense. David sees the unity between God's speaking in the physical world and in the spiritual realm. The Apostle Paul exposes this principle 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."³⁹⁸ David does not draw a line of comparison between the Word that called creation into being and the Word that became flesh, which gives us the new birth. He demonstrates that the Creator is also the Almighty and loving God, who will ultimately pronounce judgment. In other words: being God's creations entails responsibility.

³⁹⁴ See Acts 17:28

³⁹⁵ John 19:11

³⁹⁶ Dan. 5:27

³⁹⁷ Gen. 2:7

³⁹⁸ II Cor. 4:6

The surprise in the last verse of this psalm is the connection David sees between God's love and His judgment. We tend to think that God's righteousness and God's judgment belong together. Only if we understand that our sins have been punished in Jesus Christ, can we comprehend that God's "reward" is the greatest proof of His *cheved* that is His covenant love. If, however, we refuse to lay our sins on Jesus Christ, the wrath of God will remain upon us, and God's lovingkindness will pass us by completely.

PSALM SIXTY-THREE

A psalm of David. When he was in the Desert of Judah.

- 1 O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**
- 2 I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.**
- 3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.**
- 4 I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.**
- 5 My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.**
- 6 On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.**
- 7 Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.**
- 8 My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.**
- 9 They who seek my life will be destroyed; they will go down to the depths of the earth.**
- 10 They will be given over to the sword and become food for jackals.**
- 11 But the king will rejoice in God; all who swear by God's name will praise him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced.**

Like Psalm 61, David also wrote this psalm while in captivity. The place of banishment is the Desert of Judah. This places the psalm, obviously, in the period when David fled from Saul, when he also composed Psalm 57.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Derek Kidner supposes that the psalm was written during David's flight from Absalom, based on the fact that David calls himself "the king" in vs. 11. The problem, however, is that during that flight, David did not even spend one single night in the Desert of Judah but, at the advice of Huzzai, crossed the Jordan that same night.³⁹⁹ It is interesting, though, that Kidner sees no reason to exchange the rendering of the KJV: "Early will I see thee," with the more neutral: "earnestly I seek you" of the NIV. The Hebrew word *shachar* refers to dawn, not necessarily to youth.

David's surroundings influenced his spiritual condition. The dry, parched land had its effect upon his soul, and he noticed the same thirst and dryness within him as what surrounded him. It is quite possible that he did not have enough drinking water to quench his thirst; that may have evoked the thought that man does not live by water alone. Centuries later, Jesus would be in similar conditions and confess: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."⁴⁰⁰ Jesus' words were a quotation from Moses' address to Israel in Deuteronomy: "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."⁴⁰¹

Those words have great depth. In God's original plan of creation there was no place for deserts. Man was never meant to live in such arid places. All this is the result of the entrance of sin into this world. Man has to learn, all over again, who is the source of his life. God does not want deserts but He uses them. Without our journey through life's desert, we would remain people without depth, and without love.

We ought not to be influenced by our circumstances, but we are physical beings, and physical conditions do have a bearing upon our spiritual life. Jesus was victorious at this point in His life also. His spirit dominated His body, because He was filled with the Holy Spirit. God wants us to learn the same lesson Jesus learned, so that we can have an uninterrupted fellowship with Him under all circumstances.

David realized, in the Desert of Judah, that he was about to perish because of thirst, both physically, and spiritually. It was probably the danger of dying of thirst that opened his eyes to what was about to happen to him. He realized that he would soon stand before the throne of God, and in that light he began to take an inventory of his spiritual condition. He understood that fellowship with God, at that moment, was more important than drinking water. The greatest question was not "to live or not to live." We will return to this in connection with the words in vs. 3: "Because your love is better than life."

Jesus uses repeatedly the image of water to express a spiritual reality. To the Samaritan woman, He says: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him

³⁹⁹ See II Sam. 17:22

⁴⁰⁰ Matt. 4:4

⁴⁰¹ Deut. 8:3

and he would have given you living water.”⁴⁰² And elsewhere in John’s Gospel we read: “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”⁴⁰³ When David cried out: “my soul thirsts for you,” he actually asked God for the Holy Spirit to come upon him. This passionate cry with which the psalm opens is very moving. What would the world be like if every one of God’s children would call upon Him in this way? The problem with most of us is that we are not thirsty enough. The prophet Jeremiah renders the Word of God as follows: “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”⁴⁰⁴

Man, as a whole, is involved in this thirst after God. Our spirit is the organ for fellowship with God. “Earnestly I seek you” is a cry of the human spirit. “My soul thirsts for you” is an utterance on the level of the emotions, the intellect, and the will. “My body longs for you” is “The Lord for the Body.” If physical thirst gave the impetus for this prayer, it means that the body was the first part of this human being that gave the signal, but the sequence David follows indicates that the spirit is first in order of priority. This is important.

The opening words are a form of testimony: “O God, you are my God” is an acknowledgment on the deepest level that God is the Creator, and that David recognized Him as such, and that he had chosen for Him. The words “my God” imply a choice. Objectively considered, Elohim is the Creator of all mankind. But the confession “my God” determines the relationship between Him and us. God wants us to recognize Him as the source of our life; He wants us to seek Him as a baby instinctively seeks his mother’s breast. If necessary, God will put all the pressures of thirst upon us to make us drink, because that is our only hope of salvation.

In the second verse, David takes a step back in time. When he fled for Saul to the Desert of Judah, there was no temple yet in Jerusalem. David never knew that sanctuary. At that time the ark stood in Abinadab’s house on the hill in Baalah of Judah.⁴⁰⁵ David must have visited that place, but we have no record of this in David’s biography. We know that he was present when the ark was transported from there to Jerusalem.

There was something in the young David that had been in Joshua, of whom we read: “Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.”⁴⁰⁶ David had seen God’s glory and power. In a sense this must have been a physical and sensory experience. For an Israelite who loved the LORD his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, such an encounter with God must have been a feast for the whole man: spirit, soul, and body were involved. The color and splendor of the tabernacle, the savor of the incense, the taste of the fellowship offering, and the singing of the Levites produced genuine awe. And although human hands could not touch the ark, everything in the tabernacle was a tangible expression of a heavenly reality. Above all, there must have been the overwhelming sense of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

In spite of all this, David’s experience cannot compare to the ecstatic testimony of the Apostle John, who writes: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.”⁴⁰⁷ We have no reason whatsoever to be jealous of David. He would have been jealous of us!

The extreme contrast between the experience of an encounter with God in Kiriath Jearim, and the falling away of all outer stimuli evoked in David a passionate thirst. The remembrance of God brought back to David two specific features: God’s power and God’s glory. Within the framework of God’s command to Israel to possess the land, God’s power, of course, was of the utmost importance. For us, this corresponds to the great commission, which Jesus introduced with the words: “All authority in heaven and

⁴⁰² John 4:10

⁴⁰³ John 7:37-39

⁴⁰⁴ Jer. 2:13

⁴⁰⁵ See I Sam 7:1, and II Sam. 6:1-3

⁴⁰⁶ Ex. 33:11^b

⁴⁰⁷ I John 1:1,2

on earth has been given to me.”⁴⁰⁸ In David’s time, Israel had not yet completely carried out the mandate that had been given to them to possess the land. David understood that he was faced with an unfulfilled task, and he knew that God’s power would be indispensable.

The concept of God’s glory is harder to define. From the vision Isaiah had, we may conclude that there is a relationship between holiness and glory. Upon the “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty” of the seraphs follows the parallel phrase: “the whole earth is full of his glory.”⁴⁰⁹ That which is called “holy” in heaven is “glory” on earth. This does not simplify the definition. We can hardly image how the purity and greatness of God’s character is expressed in color, light, and in perfect form which, for lack of another word, we call “glory.” The Hebrew word for “glory” is *kabowd*, which literally means “weight.” Paul conveys this concept in a Hebrew idiom when he writes: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”⁴¹⁰ This does not help our understanding of the essence of glory either. We will not be able to penetrate the mystery and understand the depth of glory until we know God fully, and that will take up eternity. Yet, a glimpse of God’s glory is enough to change a person completely. Moses had changed when he descended from the mountain where he had caught a glimpse of God’s glory from behind.⁴¹¹

The lesson David had to learn from his thirst was that there were more important things than water. We conclude that David learned that lesson. Vs. 3: “Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you” is one of the golden verses in the Bible. One of the most important discoveries a person can make is that there are more important things than life itself. “Life” is, of course in this context, human life on earth, not the eternal, absolute life of God Himself. From our earthly perspective, we tend to think that our life on earth has top priority; yet everyone knows that man has to die. In spite of this fact, people are often willing to steal and to commit murder in order to stay alive themselves. Jesus emphasizes, over and over again, that the key to eternal life is the willingness to die. God does not demand of us that we give up life without anything in return, but that we exchange it for something better: His love, His lovingkindness. If a man is ready to die for God’s lovingkindness, he will live by that lovingkindness. D. L. Moody used an illustration about a baby playing with a pair of scissors. His older sister tried to take that dangerous toy away from him, but the child began to scream. But when the girl came with a nice large orange and showed that to the little brother, the baby’s hands opened, the scissors dropped, and he took the orange. In the same way God shows us His lovingkindness. If we open our hands and reach for it, we will not be able to hold on to our own life at the same time. Whether we want to or not, life will slip away from us. This does not happen all at once, of course; it is a developing process that will take a lifetime. It begins with the recognition that God’s lovingkindness is better than life, and it is followed by a choice. As we progress in life, we will understand how good our choice has been. Lovingkindness, God’s *chesed*, which His goodness, His character, harbors a treasure of hope for us. When we think of His strength and glory, we can still ask ourselves if we will profit from it, but God’s lovingkindness makes us understand that He wraps us in the embrace of His loving arms. This realization will make our talking about “giving our life for the Lord” rather insignificant.

In the remainder of this psalm, David loses himself in praise. Typical words he uses are: praise, lift up my hands, sing, and rejoice. These words represent a whole gamut of moods: dignified, pensive, and exuberant. “With singing lips my mouth will praise you” can both signify words as well as music. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews speaks poetically about “the fruit of lips that confess his name.”⁴¹² In the light of what James says about the sins of the tongue,⁴¹³ we can see praising God with singing lips as a discipline of the mouth to use it only for those things that honor the Lord.

David’s determination to praise God is the result of the vision he had of God in the sanctuary. Without vision, we will not be able to praise. Ordinary life is not conducive to praise; circumstances are always against us. During our life on earth we will always live “in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” It is, of course, not healthy to always reach back to the past, but we should also not forget the important events of yesterday. The Bible helps us in remembering. If we use Scripture on a daily basis, our memories will be kept alive. “I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory,” and

⁴⁰⁸ Matt. 28:18

⁴⁰⁹ Isa. 6:3

⁴¹⁰ II Cor. 4:17 (NKJ)

⁴¹¹ See Ex. 33:18-23; 34:29

⁴¹² Heb. 13:15

⁴¹³ See James 3:2-11

“I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands” always go together. In the sanctuary we receive the vision that will set the tone for the rest of our lives.

David’s choice of words suggests that he did write this psalm in his early life, as he was fleeing from Saul, not at the end during his flight from Absalom.

In the Bible the lifting up of hands is a symbolic gesture for prayer; it is not a precept. We do not read, for instance, that Jesus ever prayed lifting up His hands.

David describes the effect of his praise, in typical Old Testament fashion, as a physically satisfying experience. The thirst with which the psalm opens is the most elementary of human needs. The NIV gives a modernized version of vs. 5 by saying: “My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods.” The KJV is truer to the original by saying: “My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness.” It is rather humorous that fat, in our modern society, is considered to be bad for one’s health. The satisfaction with marrow and fatness is an image of abundance. The fat must have been vegetable fat, since it was prohibited for the Israelites to eat animal fat and blood.⁴¹⁴ David must have had butter or olive oil in mind. Whatever the substance, the idea is that fellowship with the Lord is compared to a gastronomic delight. God not only feeds us abundantly, but He feasts with us with all kinds of delicacies.

In the use of such images, there is always the danger that we cannot distinguish between the facsimile and the reality it represents. Material things, like food, are often more real to us than spiritual relations, but in reality the spiritual is more factual. The Apostle Paul makes this clear by saying: “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”⁴¹⁵ We have to learn to be satisfied with that which is eternal. Jesus said to His disciples: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”⁴¹⁶ The points of comparison between a feast and spiritual reality are the satisfaction and the joy. God will always take time, in the midst of the battle, to organize a party for us. David says elsewhere: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”⁴¹⁷ And in the parable of the prodigal son, the fatted calf is killed to celebrate the son’s resurrection from the dead.⁴¹⁸ The marriage feast of the Lamb will be celebrated while Satan and the Antichrist rage and tyrannize on earth. God is never disturbed by threats, indifference, and noise.

And when is this feast celebrated? When, of all places, David is in bed, and he cannot sleep! This sounds like the greatest incongruence. People usually lie awake because they worry about something. In the midst of our worry, God comes to invite us to His feast. We should learn to use our sleepless nights for better things than for anxiety. David remembered the help God had given him in the past and he applies this thought to his present situation. Faith is always stimulated by remembrance. It is logical to suppose that, if God has helped us in the past, He will do the same in the present, and in the future. Why not? Faith is not a leap in the dark; it begins with going toward the light, and after that there is the memory in the dark of what was seen in the light. This psalm is filled with that kind of memory: “I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.”

The image of God’s wings is used frequently in the Bible. God said to Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”⁴¹⁹ The psalmist says: “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.”⁴²⁰ And Jesus cries out over Jerusalem: “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.”⁴²¹

Vs. 8, “My soul clings to you” suggests a unity and intimacy similar to a marriage relationship. The same Hebrew word, *dabaq*, translated “to cling,” is used in Genesis: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”⁴²² It may sound strange to us that David uses a word that has a sexual connotation to describe his relationship with God. We tend to draw a sharp line between sexuality and spirituality, mainly because the devil has caused so much havoc in

⁴¹⁴ See Lev. 7:22-27

⁴¹⁵ II Cor. 4:18

⁴¹⁶ John 4:34

⁴¹⁷ Ps. 23:5

⁴¹⁸ See Luke 15:21-24

⁴¹⁹ Ex. 19:4

⁴²⁰ Ps. 91:4

⁴²¹ Matt. 23:37

⁴²² Gen. 2:24

the domain of man's sexual behavior. The Holy Spirit, though, shows us that the physical unity between husband and wife is a shadow of the real unity between God and man. How wonderful this is to see God in the sanctuary, and then enter into a love relationship with Him. This goes beyond our wildest dreams. We usually think of adoration and praise of God as something that creates a distance between Him and us. David speaks about God in terms of the tenderest caressing, stroking, and intimacy known to man. Very few people know this kind of relation with God. This may also be the reason that so few are able to enjoy married life to the full. It is a two-way street: Intimacy with God creates the basis for a good and healthy relationship between spouses, and a sound marriage will reinforce our love of God. All this requires an effort.

We have to look at the upholding by God's right hand in the same way. Moses says: "Underneath are the everlasting arms."⁴²³ In this context, we can also look at the image as an expression of mutual love; like a boy who holds the hand of his girlfriend, or a husband and wife who walk together, holding hands. David portrays a mature relationship. Walking with God, means going alongside, holding His hand. God takes the initiative; He is the one who first stretches out His hand to touch us.

The psalm ends with a description of the contrast between David and his adversaries. They are first mentioned in vs. 9, but they were already implicitly present at the beginning. They were the reason for David's being in the desert; they sought David's life. As we said earlier, we take them to be Saul and his men, but behind them stands the one who is "a murderer from the beginning."⁴²⁴ Those who have put themselves at the devil's service face a gloomy future. "The depths of the earth" stands for the place of spiritual corruption, the *gehenna*, or ethereal garbage dump, the place Jesus described with the words: "Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."⁴²⁵ It is the place where man undergoes spiritual decomposition. Just as "the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father,"⁴²⁶ and will be conformed to the likeness of God, so those who have rejected salvation will bear the image of Satan. The image of their Creator will, at the end, completely fade away in them.

"All who draw the sword will die by the sword."⁴²⁷ The irony is, not only, that man will die by his own methods, but also that he will die by the hand of his fellowmen. After all, the sword is wielded by the hand of men, and being "given over" is what one man does to another. The body of those killed will become a prey of wild animals (the hyena's). Objectively, it does not matter much what happens with the body after death; but it is a sign of scorn that affects the emotions when the body of a man is given over as food for wild animals.

In such a context, the title "king" acquires a deeper meaning than that of a person who sits on the throne of Israel. Fellowship with God elevates, not only David, but every human being above this image of refuse and decomposition. "Those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness [will] reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."⁴²⁸ Our future is that of kings who will rejoice in God eternally. Revelation says: "... His servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."⁴²⁹

This prophecy pertains not only to the future; in as much as we walk in the light, we also will hear this heavenly music more and more clearly now. We are the ones who rejoice in God. The initiative is ours. It is up to us whether we will be influenced by our surrounding, or whether we will rejoice in the Lord. The Apostle Paul exclaims: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"⁴³⁰

To "swear by God's name" does not merely mean the outward ritual of pronouncing an oath, but it is to appeal to God as the standard against whom all truth is measured. If we fall back upon God's character as the basis of our lives, we are like the man who built his house upon a rock. Swearing involves our speaking. "All who swear by God's name..." are people who are reliable because the count with God. What David says here is, in no way, in opposition to Jesus' admonition in Matthew's Gospel: "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the

⁴²³ Deut. 33:27

⁴²⁴ See John 8:44

⁴²⁵ Mark 9:48

⁴²⁶ See Matt. 13:43

⁴²⁷ Matt. 26:52

⁴²⁸ Rom. 5:17

⁴²⁹ Rev. 22:3^b,4

⁴³⁰ Phil. 4:4

earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."⁴³¹ Jesus protested against the verbal virtuosity of His contemporaries, who used the Name of God to give legitimacy to their lies. Every man whose "yes" means "yes," and whose "no" means "no" swears by the Name of God and praises Him. The Hebrew word translated "praise" is *halal* which can also be translated as "to make a show, to boast." This boasting is not a glorification of self, but it stands for the satisfaction of seeing that God is justified.

In this last verse of the psalm, David must have had the throne of God and the day of judgment before his eyes. "The mouths of liars will be silenced." Judgment means that when a man stands before the throne of God he will either condemn himself. Only those who are covered by the blood of the Lamb will be exonerated. The Apostle John wrote: "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."⁴³²

⁴³¹ Matt. 5:33-37

⁴³² I John 3:21,22

PSALM SIXTY-FOUR

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1 Hear me, O God, as I voice my complaint; protect my life from the threat of the enemy.**
- 2 Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked, from that noisy crowd of evildoers.**
- 3 They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows.**
- 4 They shoot from ambush at the innocent man; they shoot at him suddenly, without fear.**
- 5 They encourage each other in evil plans, they talk about hiding their snares; they say, "Who will see them?"**
- 6 They plot injustice and say, "We have devised a perfect plan!" Surely the mind and heart of man are cunning.**
- 7 But God will shoot them with arrows; suddenly they will be struck down.**
- 8 He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin; all who see them will shake their heads in scorn.**
- 9 All mankind will fear; they will proclaim the works of God and ponder what he has done.**
- 10 Let the righteous rejoice in the LORD and take refuge in him; let all the upright in heart praise him!**

The tone of this psalm is quite different from that of the previous one. *The Tyndale Commentary* points out that, in Psalm 63, God was in the center and the enemies stood on the side. In this psalm the enemies take the limelight, but the final result is the same. The main part of the psalm is taken up by the conspiracy of the enemy. God's revenge is rapid and swift. One single arrow puts an end to all the threats. The psalm begins and ends with David's reaction, first to the threats of the enemy and then to God's retribution. This reprisal is an answer to David's prayer. When the answer comes it has far-reaching consequences that go well beyond the horizon of David's own life. It is a liberating experience to place the threats in this psalm in a larger context. It cuts the ground from under the enemy's feet. We realize how cleverly this psalm is composed.

The Hebrew word translated in the NIV "my complaint" is *siyach* which *Strongs Definitions* defines with "a contemplation; by implication, an utterance." The Hebrew meaning is neutral. According to *The Tyndale Commentary*, the word does not convey resistance to the circumstances, but more a reflection upon a situation in which man finds himself. This can be either good, as in "May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the LORD,"⁴³³ or bad, as in Job's utterance: "I loathe my very life; therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul."⁴³⁴ In David's case, he lifts up his voice to God to tell Him that his circumstances leave much to be desired, and he wants God to enter into the same experience as he undergoes it.

The omniscient God does not need to be informed, but for a man whose scope of vision is limited, it is salutary to tell God about his circumstances. Jesus says: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him,"⁴³⁵ but this does not relieve us of the duty to pray. It is of vital importance for us to put our circumstances before the Lord, in order for us to see them in God's light.

In doing so, David appeals also to God for protection against the enemy. We learn from what happened to the sons of Sceva, how important this protection is. We read in Acts: "Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, 'In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.' Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. [One day] the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?' Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding."⁴³⁶ David realized that, without God's protection, he could easily become a prey of a paralyzing panic. Unless we are covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the devil will have a handle on us. As a snake hypnotizes his victim before swallowing it, so would we fall under the spell of the Evil One. Unless God protects us, the enemy would surely impair our ability to think and act logically; he tries to frighten us. The only remedy against this is reconciliation with God, receiving pardon for sin, and putting on the whole

⁴³³ Ps. 104:34

⁴³⁴ Job 10:1

⁴³⁵ Matt. 6:8

⁴³⁶ Acts 19:13-16

armor of God. Sometimes healing of anxiety will be instantaneous, but often it is a growing process of increasing spiritual health.

There is no indication in this psalm as to what the circumstances were under which David wrote. The conspiracy against him may have been formed during Saul's reign, or during his own regime. Initially, the plot was one of mere slander. People tried to destroy David's good name with evil words: with sharp tongues and words like deadly arrows. Man's tongue can be sharper than a sword and more deadly than the bite of a venomous snake. James teaches us that we, as Christians, have to be on our guard against the sins of the tongue.⁴³⁷ It is easy to become indignant about the slander of the godless, but as God's children, we have to watch our own tongues also, and pray that God will put a guard over our mouth. The psalmist prayed: "Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips."⁴³⁸

David faces the question of how to react to slander about himself that is rampant. David complained about it to the Lord, but we do not read that he took measures against it. If it occurred during the reign of Saul, there was little David could do, however, especially if Saul himself was implicated. If it was during his own reign, David might have answered.

Jesus pronounces a blessing upon those who have become the object of slander for His sake. We read: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."⁴³⁹ This kind of beatitude would have sounded strange to the ears of the Old Testament believer. The cross of Christ has brought about a drastic change in man's thinking. In the Old Testament, form and contents were still unified. It is only in the New Testament that we see the incongruous situation of the Lord of glory as a condemned criminal. It was supposed in David's time that God could be known and obeyed; in the New Testament we learn that the purpose of the law was to give knowledge of sin. As the Apostle Paul says: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."⁴⁴⁰ It is one thing to be slandered in an atheistic world, but quite another thing when people, who claim to be God's children, conspire evil against a person.

The plot thickens in verses 5 and 6. We do not learn what the conspiracy is all about since David only describes for us the thoughts of the plotters of evil. His description could fit Absalom's scheme to dethrone his father, but we cannot be certain about this. The purpose of this psalm is to describe the psychology of a conspirator. This restless activity of the enemy makes us think of C. S Lewis' book *Screwtape Letters*. Everything is done underground. The underlying philosophy is that God does not have the slightest idea of the plans of man. The person who holds on to this illusion usually considers himself to be very intelligent. An Indonesian pastor used the illustration of a clergyman who planned to steal bananas from someone's garden. He told his little boy to watch while he climbed the fence, and to warn him if there was somebody who saw him. While the father tried to cut down the bananas, the boy cried out: "Daddy, there is someone." The father jumped back over the fence and asked, "where?" The little guy answered: "In your sermon this morning, you said that God always sees us."

With the words "Surely the mind and heart of man are cunning," David, obviously, gives universal contents to the image. This phrase, probably, gives us the key to the understanding of this psalm. When, in the opening verse, he says: "Protect my life from the threat of the enemy," he may be speaking of the enemy within. His words concur with Jeremiah's words: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."⁴⁴¹ It is the tendency of men "to take their stand against the LORD and against his Anointed One.... To break their chains and throw off their fetters."⁴⁴² Even if it was not David's intention to depict the corruption of his own inner being, as New Testament Christians, we may certainly draw this lesson from his words. Left to ourselves, even after our conversion, we are still utterly unreliable. We need to make this discovery before our hearts can be cleansed in depth. This is a crisis experience. Pardington was right when he spoke about *The Crisis of the Deeper Life*. We all have to get to the point where we confess to the Lord that we are basically dishonest, that we are lost in the labyrinth of our own soul and are unable to find our way out. I remember the line in a poem: "A hart thirsting for the highest values in life, I was hit by the arrows of God's love and bled to

⁴³⁷ See James 3:1-12

⁴³⁸ Ps. 141:3

⁴³⁹ Matt. 5:11

⁴⁴⁰ Rom. 3:20

⁴⁴¹ Jer. 17:9,10

⁴⁴² See Ps. 2:2,3

death in His arms.” It may sound as if David speaks about someone else who was hit by God’s arrow, but we could read the verse as if David himself was hit.

The wicked use a whole arsenal of weapons, but God needs only one single arrow. In the Hebrew “arrow” is in the singular. That arrow is the cross of Jesus Christ. All pardon of sin, all reconciliation, all brokenness of spirit, and all healing rests on the fact that He died in our stead, and that we have been crucified with Him.

God’s arrow does not kill. The statement rendered in the NIV with “suddenly they will be struck down” is translated in the NKJ with: “suddenly they shall be wounded.” The Hebrew word *makkah* means “a wound.” This kind of wounding is characteristic for the spiritual life. In the measure that we walk with the Lord, sin will lose its power over us. The bleeding to death of the “old man” means the healing of the image of God in us. As we said before, we cannot hold on to ourselves, and at the same time reach out to God’s lovingkindness. God lures us away from ourselves by showing us something more desirable. Here, we are shown the other side of the coin. God’s arrow will hit us so deeply that we will never completely recover from our wounds. Christians are basically wounded people; the more deadly the wound the better.

There are, of course, people who never reach God’s lovingkindness, and who lose their lives by holding on to them. In this psalm, David has in mind a sinner who does not want to be forgiven. The fact that they tumble over their own tongue, as the NKJV puts it, points in this direction. The tongue is one of the main instruments of sin. The sharpening of the tongue like a sword, in vs. 3, and the stumbling over it in vs. 8^a prove this. James singles out the tongue as the greatest culprit in our lives.⁴⁴³ That which is God’s greatest means of revelation, the Word, and what for man ought to be the most beautiful element of his life, has become the main tool of the devil. God meant the word to be a vehicle for truth, but it has become a medium of the lie. As James says: “We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.”⁴⁴⁴ If we lie we will, ultimately, be caught in our own lies. Only God’s arrow can put an end to our deceit.

David makes it sound rather black-and-white, that people would shake their heads over other people, as if the world, on the one hand, consists of sinners who do nothing but sin, and on the other hand of pure and perfect saints. The line of separation between good and evil runs through everybody’s own heart. We have little reason to shake our heads about other people. The Holy Spirit probably caused David to use these words because He looked ahead to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads.”⁴⁴⁵ These verses speak about more than about sinners who receive punishment for their evil deeds. The subject behind these words is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. A world of unbelievers stand on the sideline and hypocritically shake their head in amazement. Few people understand Isaiah’s prophecy: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”⁴⁴⁶ Only if we understand this, will we really fear and proclaim the work[s] of God and ponder what He has done. The Hebrew puts “work” in the singular, as if it pertains to one single act.

Presently, “all mankind” does not yet recognize this single act. David, with the eye of the Holy Spirit, looks here beyond the horizon of his own life and times. Jesus says about this act of atonement: “When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”⁴⁴⁷ This, obviously, does not mean that all mankind will repent of their sins and be saved. So, the terms “fear” and “proclaim” pertain to both the saved and the un-saved. It could be that the “fear” refers to the lost and “proclaim” to the saved. Yet, there is a sense in which the person who is not saved proclaims the work of God also.

Vs. 10, however, refers solely to the person who is covered with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There are no righteous people outside Christ. The object of the joy of the righteous is the person of God, YHWH, not the fact that some people “stumble over their own tongue,” as the NKJ puts it. The Apostle Paul writes about this rejoicing in Christ when he writes: “Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord,’ ”⁴⁴⁸ and: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴³ See James 3:1-12

⁴⁴⁴ James 3:2

⁴⁴⁵ Matt. 27:39

⁴⁴⁶ Isa. 53:4,5

⁴⁴⁷ John 12:32

⁴⁴⁸ I Cor. 1:31

Although David does not say it this way, as we mentioned in connection with God's arrow that hits every individual, his use of language is particularly suggestive. If only the wicked were the ones to receive God's judgment, why would the righteous have reason to take refuge in God? There is, obviously, the understanding that the danger of God's wrath can hit everybody. The man who is justified in Jesus Christ realizes that he cannot rely upon himself, and that deceit would overcome him also unless he takes refuge in God.

David mentions three things that characterize the life of a righteous person: joy, protection, and praise. If we have fellowship with the Lord, and are no longer dependent upon outward circumstances that influence our emotions, then joy will be the undertone of our lives. That joy may sometimes surface as a protest against the circumstances, and the joy will be a strong testimony of God's grace. That is why Paul advises the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"⁴⁴⁹ This joy is also the second section of the fruit of the Spirit, mentioned in the epistle to the Galatians.⁴⁵¹

This joy is not born out of pleasure in the misfortunes of others, but out of the realization of redemption from the tyranny of sin within us. Pleasure in the fact that others are lost would be completely contrary to the character of the image of God in us. In the same way, it would be impossible for the righteous to boast in their own righteousness, as if it were the fruit of their own efforts. Paul mentions this boasting, when he says: "He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'"⁴⁵² This boast implies that we, ourselves, are honorable. The Father will honor us, and so will some people. God credits the righteousness of Jesus Christ to our account.

⁴⁴⁹ Phil. 4:4

⁴⁵⁰ Phil. 4:4

⁴⁵¹ See Gal. 5:22

⁴⁵² I Cor. 1:28-31

PSALM SIXTY-FIVE

For the director of music. A psalm of David. A song.

- 1 Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled.**
- 2 O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come.**
- 3 When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.**
- 4 Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.**
- 5 You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas,**
- 6 who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength,**
- 7 who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations.**
- 8 Those living far away fear your wonders; where morning dawns and evening fades you call forth songs of joy.**
- 9 You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it.**
- 10 You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops.**
- 11 You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance.**
- 12 The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness.**
- 13 The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing.**

This is one of my favorite psalms. In the Christian Reformed Church I used to attend as a child, this psalm was sung as a hymn: “The song of praise climbs up from the halls of Zion, to You in silent awe.” I remember the beautiful seventeenth-century tune to which those words were set.

The theme of this psalm resembles that of Psalm 19, but the order is reversed. In the former, David begins with nature and concludes with fellowship with God; here, he opens with the spiritual and finishes with the spiritual.

The topic of silence connects this psalm with Psalm 62, but there are also shouts of joy and singing. The NIV merely reads: “Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion.” The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament says: “To you (is) silence praise.” The Hebrew word, translated with “await” is *duwmiyah*, which is defined by Strongs Definitions as: “stillness, silently.” Based on the Septuagint and the Vulgate, the NEB and the Jerusalem Bible translate the first sentence with: “Praise is due to Thee.” But TLB paraphrases: “O God in Zion, we wait before you in silent praise, and thus fulfill our vow.” And the NAS: “There will be silence before Thee, {and} praise in Zion, O God.”

Silence, as a form of worship, can be very effective. The Tyndale Commentary remarks correctly that silence is sometimes the climax of adoration. That fact makes this silence different from that in psalm sixty-two, where man enters into silence in order to shut out all the noises that can disrupt fellowship with God. There, silence is a preparation for intimacy with the Lord, here it is a form of worship.

Our words can only partially express our experiences. One of my former teachers once said: “If you can say all you feel, your feelings do not amount to much!” Our stillness before God fills in what is lacking in our words. It is like the silence of a smile exchanged between two lovers. Without love and openness, such a silence cannot exist. Wordless communication requires a growing together; it is a mutual experience. God smiles upon us in silence, and we smile back. Thus, we mutually understand what is meant.

The Apostle Paul would say: “And who is equal to such a task?”⁴⁵³ It is only possible if Christ has been formed in us. This silence cannot be confused with a vulgar and indifferent relationship. The version that is sung mentioned above, speaks correctly about “silent awe.” We will never be able to overcome or solve the tension between the eternal God and the puny creature we are. This is what makes this intimacy into such a glorious paradox.

The place where this praise of silence rises before God is Zion, the site of God’s revelation. This is an important aspect: God has chosen where and how we should worship Him. Obedience to this revelation is an absolute necessity. We are dependent upon God’s revelation; that is the basis of worship. If the Word

⁴⁵³ II Cor. 2:16

had not become flesh, there would not be any praise and silence for us, nor any reason to fulfill our vows. If God had not spoken to David through the prophets, or to us in His Son, no one would be able to surrender himself to God to serve Him.

This fulfillment of vows can also be seen as part of the silence, as a confirmation. As every silent smile exchanged between loving spouses is a confirmation of their wedding vows, so in the silence of our worship, we say to God that the previous surrender of ourselves to Him is still valid.

The fact that God hears our prayers is mentioned here as one of God's characteristics. The Hebrew uses only one word for "O you who hear": *Shomeea*. "O you who hears prayer" is like one of God's names. God not only hears our prayers, He is "The Hearer of Prayers." This guarantees the answer to our prayers, which is not the same as receiving everything we wish for. Real prayer is based on love and obedience to the will of God. Jesus spells out the conditions for answered prayer when He says: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."⁴⁵⁴ If we stay within those limits, God will answer our prayers.

The NIV renders the second part of vs. 2 with: "To you all men will come." The Hebrew word *basar* has a wider meaning, and is generally translated with "flesh." The NKJ, for instance, reads: "To You all flesh will come." David's words include the whole breadth of God's creation, in which man is included as a part. It is everything that God made and that needs His sustenance. There is a hint of a reference to the birds and the lilies, in connection with God's provisions for human needs, as in Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel: "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."⁴⁵⁵

There is also a hint to the scope of our needs. The wants of creation are physical, which is also a fundamental human necessity of life. But as men, we cannot live by bread alone. Our spiritual needs may be less primary than our physical ones but they are more important. Our life stretches out over different levels. Real life can only be lived in fellowship with the Father. But God cares for the whole man: spirit, soul, and body.

David, obviously, considers the spiritual level to be the most important one, since he speaks immediately about sins and transgressions, and about forgiveness of the same. Sin refers to the nature of our decisions and our acts; transgression stands for the acts themselves. We commit sin because we are sinners. Sin has taken a hold of us as a power that governs our thoughts and feelings. The theological phrase "a sinful nature" is, in a sense, misleading in that sin is not part of God's creation. It is true that we possess a sinful nature since our birth, but that is not the same thing as being created a sinner. The devil wants us to believe that sin is part of our humanity, which is mere devilish propaganda. "We were overwhelmed by sins," implies that our spirit is bound by sin from the beginning, to the point that we no longer know who we really are. Only when we are in Jesus Christ, are we what we should have been from the beginning. He died both for our sins and for ourselves. If we identify with Christ, as Paul does when he says: "I have been crucified with Christ,"⁴⁵⁶ we are free from the power of sin. David cannot have known what price God paid for the atonement of our sins, but the Holy Spirit wrote these words for us.

Vs. 4 says: "Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!" This does not mean that God does not long for fellowship with all men He created. He takes the initiative. Jesus says: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."⁴⁵⁷ But man has the ability to resist the

⁴⁵⁴ John 15:7

⁴⁵⁵ Matt. 6:25-34

⁴⁵⁶ Gal. 2:20

⁴⁵⁷ John 6:44

drawing of the Holy Spirit. God's desire is toward us, but ours is not always towards Him. The person who yields to the drawing of the Father is pronounced blessed.

David uses the image of the tribe of Levi, the members of which served in the tabernacle and in the temple. But every Israelite was allowed come into the courts. God's election of the Levites only meant that their being in God's courts was a full-time service. Every boy, born in the tribe of Levi, was included in this election. God had chosen Levi, and all his offspring in him. That which is a physical phenomenon in the Old Testament is spiritually true for us. Through the new birth we have come into the same relationship with Jesus as the Levites were with their ancestor Levi. God has chosen us in Christ in order to be near Him and live in His courts.

Although it would have been impossible for David to see himself as one of the Levites, he does place himself among those who "are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple." The goodness of God's house was the fat and the blood of the sacrificial animals, which man was not allowed to use for consumption.⁴⁵⁸ The fat had to be burnt on the altar and the blood poured out at its base. The intention is evidently to express that man does participate in that which uniquely belongs to God alone. God satisfies us with that which is His. This is also implied in the words "the good things of ... your holy temple." That which is holy is separated unto God.

The good things are also the shew bread and the priestly portions of the sacrifices that were brought. In a spiritual sense it stands for the complete satisfaction of the whole person (spirit, soul, and body), who is in Jesus Christ.

We will all agree that God could satisfy our spirit. The satisfaction of our physical desires is such a common thing that most people do not even think about God's part in this. And we rarely realize that God wants to restore our soul: our intelligence, our emotions, and our will. All of this is included in the stillness of which vs. 1 speaks. David looks back, while praising God, to see from where he came: from the oppression of sin into the full satisfaction of his fellowship with God.

The scope of this psalm is particularly large. David lets his gaze roam over the whole horizon of God's goodness. He does not specify what is included in the "awesome deeds of righteousness" which God performs in answer to man's prayer. We may fill in what those deeds are in our own experience. They comprise the creation of the universe, and the spectacular exodus of Israel from Egypt, as well as their entrance into Canaan and, above all, the facts of salvation of Jesus Christ. We should understand that, if God performs such awesome deeds for creation in general, and for the salvation of man, the possibilities of our prayers being answered are limitless.

The addition of the word "righteousness" indicates that God's deeds pertain particularly to our salvation from the unrighteousness in which we live. God's answering of our prayers in righteousness contrast with "We were overwhelmed by sins." We cannot exaggerate the universality of this. God is "the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas." David demonstrates a tremendous missionary vision in these words. The physical images he uses of mountains and seas, obviously, have a spiritual connotation. The roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves are mentioned in the same breath with the turmoil of the nations. So the pictures speak about men. The mountains represent the powers and the rulers of the world population. Nothing is as fragile as human authority; one day it is there, the next day it is gone. We discover also that nothing is as temporary as the populace of this world. God promises here to establish the mountains and to still the roaring of the seas. This points to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We should also note the contrast between the stillness of vs. 1 and the deafening noise of the world in verse 7. As sinful human beings, we are born in this clamor; the immediate result of our conversion and regeneration is an inner quietness. Thus we learn to praise and adore God and to have fellowship with Him. David sees in the stillness of his own heart the guarantee that God will put an end to all tumult and racket in this world. Those living far away will see this, and there will be songs of joy all over the world. So, stillness is not the ultimate goal, because songs of joy do make noise also. The difference between tumult and sound is in the basis of it. Shouts of joy are directed towards God, and they are based upon the harmony of God's deeds.

David enumerates God's blessings and the resulting prosperity in terms of agriculture and cattle-breeding, of an abundant harvest and rich income. These are pictures of a spiritual harvest. In this context also, the earth is an image of heaven. Elsewhere David writes: "The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love."⁴⁵⁹ Everything around us pictures a spiritual reality. The NKJ reads:

⁴⁵⁸ See Lev. 7: 23-27

⁴⁵⁹ Ps. 33:5

“You visit the earth and water it.” When God visits the earth He brings more than just nice weather, favorable conditions, a good harvest and a booming economy. Those are only outward byproducts of God’s presence. What good does a record harvest do to a man who is dying with cancer? “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”⁴⁶⁰ In Ezekiel’s vision, the water in God’s river brings healing and life.⁴⁶¹ The joyful and robust health of the fields, of the meadows and the herds are images of the joy of the person who has been reconciled with God. In the same way that man’s sin disrupted the balance of creation and brought about the flood, which resulted in fertile land turning into a desert, so man’s redemption will influence nature that surrounds him.

David reaches a poetical peak in this psalm: “The valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing.” The Tyndale Commentary remarks correctly that there is no harvest thanksgiving hymn that equals this psalm.

“You visit the earth and water it.”⁴⁶² We think of springtime. After the death of nature during the long winter months, the ground bursts open with new life. In the northern hemisphere we rightfully celebrate Easter in the spring; nature that surrounds us reflects the resurrection from the dead. As a heading above David’s phrase, we could place Jesus’ words: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”⁴⁶³ David describes an ideal world. We could almost say that such conditions cannot be found on earth. There is no mention of “the sweat of your brow” to which Adam was condemned to eat his food after he sinned. This is a new earth. Of these kinds of fertile conditions we see only occasional traces on a farmer’s field. It is also a picture of the personal experience of the new man in Christ.

God is omnipresent. “You visit the earth,” therefore, is, in a sense, an impossibility. David describes a subjective experience, not an objective reality. I looked at nature with different eyes after my conversion, and I have learned that this is a common reaction of many, after they have received a new life in Christ. David’s discovery that God is present in nature corresponds with his awareness of God’s presence in his own heart. In all of this he reaches forward to the time when “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”⁴⁶⁴

The NIV reads: “You crown the year with your bounty.” Other translations, like the NKJ, say: “You crown the year with Your goodness.” The year of God’s goodness is the year of jubilee. It is difficult to determine which season of the year David is speaking of. Above, we associated God’s visit to the land with spring, but some phrases suggest summertime, and other harvest. The year of God’s goodness seems to comprise them all. The crown of the year is, obviously, the harvest, but this applies only for us if we live in those parts of the world where there are distinct seasons. In large parts of Asia, Africa, South America, for instance, this psalm would need a lot of explanation in order to bring the images to life for the inhabitants. The universal lesson is that the whole earth jubilates to the glory of God. Man has to lift up his eyes and recognize the goodness of God, particularly in the realm of God’s provision of the needs of men.

It is good to reread the whole psalm again at this point, and to see the unity of the, rather varying, different parts. The psalm begins in heaven, in Zion, which is the reality of the spot on earth where God has revealed Himself to man, the place of His special revelation. It finishes on earth, on the fields and hills of God’s general revelation. There is a descending line from the particular to the general, from that which is intimate and highly personal to that which is wide open and public. It might be more stimulating for us to read the psalm backwards. After all, we know that we are on earth, and on our way to heaven. But the psalmist makes us go in the opposite direction. He wants us to remember that we are citizens of heaven, living on this earth, where we have to put our heavenly vision into practice. From the mystic experience of stillness and praise, we descend to the prayers and the hearing of prayers. Then we are reminded of the atonement of our lives, and the pardon of our sins. We find ourselves in the temple, serving the Lord and being satisfied by Him.

We see how God keeps the rulers of this world in check and creates order in the chaos of the seas of world population. And, finally, we are led outside to see the earth which manifests the glory of God by being what God wants her to be. As we said before, this does not correspond with the image of the world we know. We need silence before God to discover how many traces of the original glory are still visible.

⁴⁶⁰ Matt. 16:26

⁴⁶¹ See Ezekiel 47:1-12

⁴⁶² NKJ

⁴⁶³ John 10:10

⁴⁶⁴ Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14

There is also a suggestion in this psalm that the praise of redeemed mankind has this effect upon the earth to make it from a place of curse, of thorns, and thistles into a place where the hills and the valleys shout for joy and sing.

PSALM SIXTY-SIX

For the director of music. A song. A psalm.

- 1 Shout with joy to God, all the earth!**
2 Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!
3 Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you.
4 All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name." Selah
5 Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man's behalf!
6 He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot-- come, let us rejoice in him.
7 He rules forever by his power, his eyes watch the nations-- let not the rebellious rise up against him.
Selah
8 Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard;
9 he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.
10 For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.
11 You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.
12 You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.
13 I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you--
14 vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.
15 I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats. Selah
16 Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.
17 I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue.
18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;
19 but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.
20 Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!

There is in this psalm no indication that David wrote it, but there is a clear relationship with the previous psalm. The editor of the book may have had a hand in this sequence.

The rendering of the NIV is rather polished with: "Shout with joy to God, all the earth!" The KJV sounds rougher with: "Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands."

In the previous psalm the prominence was on the Creator; in this psalm it is man who lets his adoration rise up to his Redeemer. It is important to note that all the earth is called upon to participate. In this way the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and her entrance into the Promised Land is put within the framework of the redemption of the whole earth. This elevates these events above the realm of historical facts with only national significance to the salvation of the whole of creation.

This is best expressed in the experience of the single individual. "Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me" (vs. 16). It becomes clear that much more is involved in Israel's history than the forming of a nation. Israel's importance lay in the fact that God had entrusted His revelation to them. The Apostle Paul says this so beautifully in his epistle to the Romans: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."⁴⁶⁵ The real subject of this psalm, therefore, is God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ.

Various reasons are given for praising God. In the first stanza the emphasis is on the Name of God that is on His being, His character. The reference to "all the earth" points to the relationship every living thing has with Him who is the creator of all. There is a suggestion that the whole of creation is an expression of God's being. As David says elsewhere: "The earth is full of his unfailing love."⁴⁶⁶

But even in this first stanza there is mention of enemies. This sets the tone for the rest of the psalm. Where the enemies of God are, there is the tyranny of evil, and redemption is needed. These enemies crash into the wall of God's character. They have to acknowledge that they cannot stand up against the glory of God's character and of His deeds.

⁴⁶⁵ Rom. 9:4,5

⁴⁶⁶ Ps. 33:5

But we have to start at the beginning. The earth is called upon to produce shouts of joy. This is not necessarily an aesthetically pure sound. It is also not limited to the human voice alone. The best description of the choir is found in the last phrase of the book of psalms: "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD."⁴⁶⁷ The parallel phrase to "Shout with joy to God," is "Sing the glory of his name," which is obviously done by human beings. *The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament* sounds more crudely here with the rendering: "Shout the honor of His name." This is not poetry or another high form of art. The accent is upon the spontaneity and volume more than upon the virtuosity and purity of tone. There is, however, an ascending line in the mental comprehension of the part of creation that utters the praise. Even on the human level there is progression. Man profits from the praise he gives to God. Glorifying God brings us closer to Him, and the closer to Him we get, the more human we will become, and the more the image of God in us will become visible. The person who praises God will become an artist.

Objectively considered, we cannot add to God's glory, but some of God's glory will be reflected on us if we engage ourselves with it. God will be glorified in us if we glorify Him. We will never be able to fully comprehend this mystery while on earth but complete comprehension is not necessary in order to practice it.

We are encouraged, in vs. 3, to address God personally, and to tell Him who He is, and what He does. Obviously, we do not contribute any to God's omniscience in doing so, but the discovery of who God is will enrich us personally. We may also presume that the living God rejoices in our fellowship with Him. If intimacy on a human level causes mutual enjoyment, would God be unmoved if a human being He created and loves comes to Him to express his appreciation and gratitude? The tension between the intimacy of a personal encounter and the fear for the awesomeness of God's great power makes this so wonderful. There is no vulgarity in our fellowship with the Lord of the universe.

A problem arises in connection with vs. 3: "Your enemies cringe before you." The *Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament* says here: "... pretend to you obedience your enemies." To cringe means to cower, but the Hebrew word *kachash* has the connotation of "to be untrue." *The Tyndale Commentary* maintains that it implies hypocrisy. The question is, who are those enemies and what kind of obedience is meant? It seems unlikely that Satan and demons would be envisioned here. The Bible does not give us the impression that they will ever come to the point of honoring God, not even by way of flattery. We suppose, therefore, that humans are intended. Then what the meaning of obedience is becomes clear. True obedience is the result of a choice, a surrender of the will of man. God made man in such a way that he holds the key to his life in his own hands. Nobody can force a human being to think certain things or feel in a certain way; not even God can do this. True obedience is based upon love, and consequently it is voluntary. But a person can fake obedience by performing certain acts without inner endorsement. We can obey out of self-interest, not because of love for God. Genuine obedience is illustrated in the case of the man who says: "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free."⁴⁶⁸ The obedience of God's enemies is pretended under the pressure of outward circumstances, not on the basis of an inner conviction. Those enemies are not ready to surrender to Him out of love, but they have no logical grounds to maintain that God is not glorious and almighty. In the story of his conversion, *Surprised By Joy*, C. S. Lewis says that he did not want to believe in God, but he could not refute the evidence. Conviction does not always produce obedience.

Vs. 4: "All the earth bows down to you," can hardly be seen as the statement of a fact. The present reality does not corroborate this; the phrase should, therefore, be seen as a wish. It is similar to the prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."⁴⁶⁹ The psalmist lets the mystery of man's disobedience lie. God will, eventually, have to act upon this Himself. It is good for man to long intensely for the time when all mankind will glorify God. The brotherhood of men can only be realized in a common worship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The stanza opens and closes with the same call to the whole earth to glorify God. There are two reasons given for this: who God is, and what He does. Those two truths are the greatest in the entire universe. These truths will either keep us occupied throughout eternity, or they will crush us.

The verses 5-7 deal with the exodus from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan. We find the report of the turning of the sea into dry land in Exodus: "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all

⁴⁶⁷ Ps. 150:6

⁴⁶⁸ Ex. 21:5

⁴⁶⁹ Matt. 6:10

that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left,"⁴⁷⁰ and of the drying up of the Jordan River in Joshua: "So when the people broke camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant went ahead of them. Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam in the vicinity of Zarethan, while the water flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah (the Salt Sea) was completely cut off. So the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground."⁴⁷¹

The strange implication of their mention in this psalm is that those two facts of salvation which, actually, only had significance for Israel, are presented here as acts God performed for the benefit of all mankind. We have seen already that more was involved than the redemption of Israel and the birth of a nation. The significance of Israel for the whole world lies in the fact that they are the guardians of God's revelation. The exodus from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan are offered here as a picture of the salvation of the whole human race. God liberates man from the power of darkness through a supernatural intervention, and He provides him with a new life in a similarly miraculous way. Our becoming a new creation in Jesus Christ is the result of God's intervention in our lives. No one can go through the sea on dry ground in his own strength. When Pharaoh tried to do this he drowned. The life of a child of God can only be explained supernaturally. No one, standing on the other side of the Red Sea, and seeing the dead bodies of the Egyptians being washed ashore, could doubt that this was God's doing. The Song of Moses, that was sung at this occasion will be sung by all of mankind as "The song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb."⁴⁷² We can hear the tones of this hymn already in vs. 7 of this psalm.

We should keep this picture at the shore of the sea always before our eyes, since it is an image of the victory God has placed us in. During their journey through the wilderness, the Israelites frequently had to fall back upon this event. The manifestation of demonic power is always temporary and limited in scope. The worst the enemy can do is kill the body. Eternity, in fellowship with Him who sits on the throne, belongs to us. This truth ought to govern the international relationships between people as well. That which pertains to the individual applies to the nations also.

In verses 8-15, the psalm acquires a completely different character from that noted in the first part. The theme is no longer deliverance from enemies, but redemption from self. We could call this stanza, "The Crisis Of The Deeper Life." The subject is a process of cleansing which is known as sanctification. The means employed are not always pleasant to experience. The verses 11 and 12 describe the process as: "You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water." Those are terrible things to undergo for people who have only recently been freed from the slavery of Egypt. This refining of the silver, as it is called, is described by the Apostle Peter as a proof of the genuineness of our faith. We read: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."⁴⁷³ Malachi speaks about the same subject in his prophecy: "

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver."⁴⁷⁴ In every instance such painful experiences are placed against the background of praise.

One of the hardest things in the life of a Christian is to thank God for trials at the moment he goes through them. But praise in times of testing helps us to keep things in perspective. 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."⁴⁷⁵ We should begin to praise God as soon as we see the difficulties approach, even before our mind can grasp that it is reasonable to do so. Praise is the key to the solution of most of the problems we encounter.

⁴⁷⁰ Ex. 14:21,22

⁴⁷¹ Josh. 3:14-17

⁴⁷² See Rev. 15:3

⁴⁷³ I Pet. 1:6,7

⁴⁷⁴ Mal. 3:3

⁴⁷⁵ James 1:2,3

The psalmist recognizes that the preservation of his life, or the keeping of his souls, as the NKJV puts it, constitutes a greater miracle than the redemption from slavery in Egypt. We may see in this revival of the soul a literal resurrection from the dead. God brings us from death to life, both in the physical, as well in the spiritual sense of the word.

We tend to become weak and superficial. God does not allow this to happen by keeping on the pressure upon our lives. Sometimes the difficulties we experience do not come as a punishment for sins committed, but they are the result of our obedience.

God puts us to the test, not because He does not know who we are and what is inside us, but because we do not know. At the end of the wilderness journey, Moses said: "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands."⁴⁷⁶ We need to discover our own tendency to disobedience and gluttony, that our main interest in life is what to eat or drink. This is a humbling discovery without which we will never come to the point of reaching for the Word of God.

Amazingly, the psalmist says about this purification process: "He has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping." The total picture of Israel's history does not bear out that Israel kept standing in temptation. The whole generation that left Egypt died in the desert, with the exception of Caleb and Joshua. The Babylonian captivity was a spiritual bankruptcy for the nation. We wonder, therefore, if this whole stanza about praise in hardship should not be seen as a prophecy about our Lord Jesus' reaction to suffering.

It is difficult to conclude from the contents of this psalm when it was composed. Some of the images recur in psalms that were written after the captivity.⁴⁷⁷ The statement "He has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping" can mean that there is still life in this apparent condition of death; that, in spite of it all, Israel still exists and that God's revelation is not lost. Some genuine victories come in the disguise of a defeat; such as Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok,⁴⁷⁸ and Jesus' death on the cross.

Vs. 12: "We went through fire and water," was adopted by Toccoa Falls College as its maxim. During the presidency of Dr. Forrest on three different occasions part of the school was destroyed by fire, and when Dr. Opperman was the president the dam broke and the flood killed thirty-nine people. In spite of these three tragedies, we can see many blessings that have come to the school. When God allows us to pass through painful experiences, He always brings us to a place of abundance. As long as we hold on to certain things of the old life, our lives will be meager and poor. As we leave behind us houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for Christ's sake, we will receive a hundred times as much.⁴⁷⁹

The joy and ecstasy of the verses 13-15 express in symbolic terms the character of abundance. A wellspring of love and obedience opens up in these verses. The psalmist sees in his mind a long line of sacrificial animals which he will kill for the Lord. Those animals will be brought as a burnt offering. This kind of sacrifice constitutes the highest form of sacrifice to the Lord. The fire on the altar would be kept burning all night, completely consuming the sacrifice.⁴⁸⁰ This sacrifice was *My Utmost For His Highest*. This sacrifice constituted an Old Testament expression of the New Testament *agape*.

We often promise obedience to the Lord when we find ourselves between a rock and a hard place. Jonah is a good example of this. Martin Luther made a vow to enter a monastery during a heavy thunderstorm, when he was afraid of being struck by lightning. When things go well for us, obedience to the will of God will rarely enter the picture. It is in times of suffering, that we get to know who God really is: not someone who enjoys making life miserable for us, but the God who takes us by the hand to lead us through because He passed through the same tensions and hardships as we do. God shows us particularly His compassion when we are in trouble. We will learn to understand His deep love for us, not when all goes well but when everything seems against us. His tears are bigger than ours. This makes it easier for us to surrender to Him and to obey.

Mary, Lazarus' sister who after the resurrection of her brother poured a pint of pure nard on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair, had gone through death and resurrection; nothing was too much for

⁴⁷⁶ Deut. 8:2

⁴⁷⁷ See e.g. Ps. 129

⁴⁷⁸ Gen. 32:22-32

⁴⁷⁹ Matt. 19:29

⁴⁸⁰ Lev. 6:9

her to present to the Lord.⁴⁸¹ Jesus says about her: "I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."⁴⁸²

The psalmist also wants it to be known throughout the world why he brings his burnt offerings to the Lord. The whole plan of salvation can be summarized by saying that the purpose of the preaching of the Gospel is the bringing of the burnt offering, the pouring out of precious nard, the laying of oneself upon God's altar. The whole of salvation and sanctification points in this direction.

The last stanza deals with prayer, not so much with the contents of a prayer but with the results of prayer. The poet wants us to know what prayer did in his own life. Prayer blesses, in the first place the one who prays. Prayer is a function of man's spirit. If we see man as a tri-unity, as the Apostle Paul did when he wrote to the Thessalonians: "May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,"⁴⁸³ we understand that spirit is the organ for fellowship with God. The soul is the seat of our intelligence, emotions, and our will. The body is the material in which these organs are wrapped and which gives expression to their functions.

In the Old Testament the various functions are not always neatly distinguished. It is, therefore, difficult to determine from vs. 16 whether the psalmist wants to say what answer to prayer means for him on the level of his emotions, intelligence, and will. The NIV renders the verse with: "Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me." In the KJV we read: "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul." The Hebrew word used is *nepesh*, of which *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says: "Nepesh ..., 'soul; self; life; person; heart.' This is a very common term in both ancient and modern Semitic languages. It occurs over 780 times in the Old Testament and is evenly distributed in all periods of the text with a particularly high frequency in poetic passages. The basic meaning is apparently related to the rare verbal form, *napash*. The noun refers to the essence of life, the act of breathing, taking breath. However, from that concrete concept, a number of more abstract meanings were developed. In its primary sense the noun appears in its first occurrence in <Gen. 1:20>: 'the moving creature that hath life,' and in its second occurrence in <Gen. 2:7>: 'living soul.' However, in over 400 later occurrences it is translated 'soul.' While this serves to make sense in most passages, it is an unfortunate mistranslation of the term. The real difficulty of the term is seen in the inability of almost all English translations to find a consistent equivalent or even a small group of high-frequency equivalents for the term. The KJV alone uses over 28 different English terms for this one Hebrew word. The problem with the English term 'soul' is that no actual equivalent of the term or the idea behind it is represented in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew system of thought does not include the combination or opposition of the terms 'body' and 'soul,' which are really Greek and Latin in origin. The Hebrew contrasts two other concepts which are not found in the Greek and Latin tradition: 'the inner self' and 'the outer appearance' or, as viewed in a different context, 'what one is to oneself' as opposed to 'what one appears to be to one's observers.' The inner person is *nepesh*, while the outer person, or reputation, is *shem*, most commonly translated 'name.' In narrative or historical passages of the Old Testament, *nepesh* can be translated as 'life' or 'self,' as in <Lev. 17:11>: 'For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for [yourselves]....' Needless to say, the reading 'soul' is meaningless in such a text. But the situation in the numerous parallel poetic passages in which the term appears is much more difficult. The Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate both simply use the Greek and Latin equivalent 'soul,' especially in the Psalms. The first occurrence is in <Ps. 3:2>: 'Many are saying of my soul, There is no deliverance for him in God' (NASB). The next occurrence is in <Ps. 6:3>: 'And my soul is greatly dismayed; But Thou, O Lord-- how long?' (NASB). In both passages the parallel contrast is between *nepesh* and some aspect of the self, expressed as 'him' in <Ps. 3:2> and not expressed but understood in <Ps. 6:3>. There is no distinction as to whether it appears as an 'A' or 'B' word in the parallelism. However, since Hebrew rejects repeating the same noun in both halves of a poetic line, *nepesh* is often used as the parallel for the speaker, primary personal subject, and even for God, as in <Ps. 11:5>: 'The Lord trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence [he himself] hateth.' Such passages are frequent, and a proper understanding of the word enlightens many well-known passages, such as <Ps. 119:109>: 'My life is continually in my hand, Yet I do not forget Thy law' (NASB)."

⁴⁸¹ See John 12:3

⁴⁸² Matt. 26:13

⁴⁸³ I Thes. 5:23

Evidently, the concept of “soul” in this verse includes both the spiritual and the merely human emotional aspect of man’s being. It is, of course, clear that a living relationship with God will have a renovating influence upon man’s intellect, his emotions, and his will.

It is important to understand that “let me tell you what he has done for me,” refers to the answers the psalmist has received on his prayers. A superficial glance would make us think that the psalmist speaks about the saving of his life, but the context suggests rather that the topic is his fellowship with God. This man has come to the point in his life where he enters into such an intimate fellowship with God that he could call upon the Lord and be heard instantly.

It is said about Johan Christoph Blumhardt, who was at the center of the revival in Möttlingen, Germany, in the nineteenth century, that in some cases he only had to look up to heaven and knew immediately the will of God concerning a certain person or matter. George Mueller of Bristol also knew this certainty, but it often took him a long time of searching in God’s presence.

The example par excellence, however, is our Lord Jesus Christ who always had immediate access to the Father. He said at Lazarus’ tomb: “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me,” and at another occasion: “ ‘Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.’ ”⁴⁸⁴

That is what God can do for our soul. This does not imply that a person will become sinless while on earth. The Apostle John contradicts this when he says: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”⁴⁸⁵ But the Apostle says in the same epistle: “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.”⁴⁸⁶

This same kind of absence of evil we find in vs. 18: “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” George Mueller often cited this verse as one of the necessary factors in answered prayer. We have to let the Holy Spirit test our motives when we pray. To be honest before God is one of the most difficult tasks in the life of man. It is almost as difficult as being honest with oneself. We are born deceivers. If our hearts really do not condemn us, then God has performed a miracle within us. In other words, Christ has made His dwelling in our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

In some instances this may mean that we will see immediate answers to our prayers, as was the case with the psalmist. But the time factor is of little importance. The main thing is in this testimony is that God is able to renew the soul of a human being to the point that there will be intimate intercourse between God and man. This will make us discern what we ought to pray for and our joy will be complete.⁴⁸⁷ This is a secret we all must learn.

The problem with sanctification is that it cannot be a conscious experience and remain pure at the same time. As soon as we become aware of the fact that we are pure we forget how this came about, and we tend to think that it is the result of our own successful efforts. Only if we draw close to God, will sin lose its grip upon us. Yet, the Bible does not teach that we should constantly live under conviction of sin. The author of the Hebrew epistle writes: “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!”⁴⁸⁸ The danger seems to be in being too much preoccupied with the analysis of the condition of our heart. We are on safe ground if most of our attention is upon our service to the living God.

The psalmist makes clear that the condition of our heart is important in relation to our prayer life. If we do not first allow God to cleanse our heart, we can hardly expect that He will do something else for us in answer to our prayers. This is a circle: the condition of our heart influences our prayers and the answer to our prayers has its effect upon our soul.

We can clearly see a descending line in this psalm; the psalm opens with an appeal to the whole earth, then those who fear the Lord are addressed, and in conclusion one single soul praises God. If we read the psalm backward, we see the influence one single person who prays to God can have upon the whole

⁴⁸⁴ John 11:41,42; 12:27,28

⁴⁸⁵ I John 1:8

⁴⁸⁶ I John 3:21,22

⁴⁸⁷ See John 16:24

⁴⁸⁸ Heb. 9:14

earth: God deals with individuals, He begins with one man, but the one who knows God will never be alone for long; he bears fruit. Thus, the harvest of the whole earth is gathered in.

PSALM SIXTY-SEVEN

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm. A song.

- 1** *May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, Selah*
- 2** *that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.*
- 3** *May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you.*
- 4** *May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. Selah*
- 5** *May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you.*
- 6** *Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us.*
- 7** *God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.*

Based on vs. 6 – “Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us”; some versions⁴⁸⁹ have as heading for this psalm “Thanksgiving Hymn For The Harvest.” It seems, however, that more is involved than the yield of a field. Material prosperity is an image of spiritual blessings. *The Tyndale Commentary* sees in this psalm a rhymed version of the blessing of Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”⁴⁹⁰

The opening words are derived from the 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.”⁴⁹¹

Nowhere is the vision of Israel’s task in this world formulated as clearly as in this psalm. God blessed Israel so that they would be a kingdom of priests in this world. This was the original mandate given to Israel at Mount Sinai, after the people had left Egypt.⁴⁹² This promise was ultimately fulfilled in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Paul says about this: “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.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”⁴⁹³ The secret which “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived”⁴⁹⁴ forms the basis of this psalm. It is a hymn of thanksgiving for the harvest. Some harvest!

God begins with His grace, the unmerited favor by which we receive pardon and cleansing of sin. He rehabilitates us, and the shining of His face upon us means that we become partakers in His glory and holiness. The writer of Hebrews shows us how this is brought about. He says: “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”⁴⁹⁵

The goal is not that Israel would smugly and comfortably enjoys God’s presence in their midst but that, in this dark world, they would be a light unto other nations. Only in a few places in the Bible does the realization of this task come to the surface. Israel’s history demonstrates very little mission awareness. In this psalm, though, the Holy Spirit uses the writer to show the people what He wants them to be. Israel’s history and their way of life was meant to be an object lesson for the rest of the world. God wants us to live in such a way that others will detect something of the salvation which is in Jesus Christ.

What God did with Israel should lead, first of all, to personal salvation. But over and above that, nations as political units will have to understand that God expects righteousness in international affairs. Dealings between nations have always been governed by self-interest. This situation will undoubtedly remain till the return of Christ. There will come a time when God will judge between one nation and another. For most nations this will not be a reason to sing for joy. One has to love righteousness in order to rejoice about righteousness.

⁴⁸⁹ Dutch – NBG

⁴⁹⁰ Gen. 12:3

⁴⁹¹ Num. 6:24-26

⁴⁹² See Ex. 19:5,6

⁴⁹³ Gal. 3:13,14

⁴⁹⁴ See I Cor. 2:9

⁴⁹⁵ Heb. 12:10

In vs. 2 the parallel phrase to “that your ways may be known on earth” is “your salvation among all nations.” God’s ways and salvation are the same thing. Knowing God’s way gives inspiration to walk in it. Without following God’s way, there could be no question of salvation. Knowing the way, therefore, is similar to obeying God’s will. It would make little sense to pray for the whole earth to obey God’s will without personal obedience. The prayer for blessing, therefore, and the prayer for God’s face to shine upon us are closely linked to our own surrender to His will. All of earth’s misery began, after all, with one act of disobedience, and it is through Christ’s obedience that we can become obedient to God’s will. As the Apostle Paul says: “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”⁴⁹⁶ The fact that a fundamental inward change has been wrought in us through which it has become possible for us to be obedient is certainly enough reason for us to burst out in songs of praise.

It is difficult, however, to see such personal matters, as surrender to the will of God, as something that could be done by all the nations of the earth; yet, this is the vision of the psalmist. In that light, the statement: “Then the land will yield its harvest,” acquires new significance. If the field of this world produces a harvest of obedient human beings instead of a harvest of wheat the Kingdom of God has come. God’s blessing is more than a blessing of material goods. God “has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”⁴⁹⁷ This blessing will have to become visible in each one of God’s children, if we want to be the witness to the world about which this psalm speaks.

The result of God’s new creation in Jesus Christ is that “all the ends of the earth will fear him.” The Apostle Paul describes the result of his own conversion with the words: “And they praised God because of me.”⁴⁹⁸ Something similar is embodied in the fear of the Lord in the last verse of this psalm. The eyes of people will be opened to the awesomeness of what God does in the lives of men, something more majestic than His work in the natural world. The new creation is greater than the first. “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.”⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁶ Rom. 5:18,19

⁴⁹⁷ See Eph. 1:3

⁴⁹⁸ Gal. 1:24

⁴⁹⁹ II Cor. 4:6

PSALM SIXTY-EIGHT

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm. A song.

- 1 May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him.*
- 2 As smoke is blown away by the wind, may you blow them away; as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God.*
- 3 But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful.*
- 4 Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds-- his name is the LORD-- and rejoice before him.*
- 5 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.*
- 6 God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.*
- 7 When you went out before your people, O God, when you marched through the wasteland, Selah*
- 8 the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel.*
- 9 You gave abundant showers, O God; you refreshed your weary inheritance.*
- 10 Your people settled in it, and from your bounty, O God, you provided for the poor.*
- 11 The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it:*
- 12 "Kings and armies flee in haste; in the camps men divide the plunder.*
- 13 Even while you sleep among the campfires, the wings of [my] dove are sheathed with silver, its feathers with shining gold."*
- 14 When the Almighty scattered the kings in the land, it was like snow fallen on Zalmon.*
- 15 The mountains of Bashan are majestic mountains; rugged are the mountains of Bashan.*
- 16 Why gaze in envy, O rugged mountains, at the mountain where God chooses to reign, where the LORD himself will dwell forever?*
- 17 The chariots of God are tens of thousands and thousands of thousands; the Lord [has come] from Sinai into his sanctuary.*
- 18 When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train; you received gifts from men, even from the rebellious-- that you, O LORD God, might dwell there.*
- 19 Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. Selah*
- 20 Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death.*
- 21 Surely God will crush the heads of his enemies, the hairy crowns of those who go on in their sins.*
- 22 The Lord says, "I will bring them from Bashan; I will bring them from the depths of the sea,*
- 23 that you may plunge your feet in the blood of your foes, while the tongues of your dogs have their share."*
- 24 Your procession has come into view, O God, the procession of my God and King into the sanctuary.*
- 25 In front are the singers, after them the musicians; with them are the maidens playing tambourines.*
- 26 Praise God in the great congregation; praise the LORD in the assembly of Israel.*
- 27 There is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them, there the great throng of Judah's princes, and there the princes of Zebulun and of Naphtali.*
- 28 Summon your power, O God; show us your strength, O God, as you have done before.*
- 29 Because of your temple at Jerusalem kings will bring you gifts.*
- 30 Rebuke the beast among the reeds, the herd of bulls among the calves of the nations. Humbled, may it bring bars of silver. Scatter the nations who delight in war.*
- 31 Envoys will come from Egypt; Cush will submit herself to God.*
- 32 Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth, sing praise to the Lord, Selah*
- 33 to him who rides the ancient skies above, who thunders with mighty voice.*
- 34 Proclaim the power of God, whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the skies.*
- 35 You are awesome, O God, in your sanctuary; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people. Praise be to God!*

According to the subscript, the psalm is of the hand of David. There is no indication about the circumstances under which he may have written. In the first stanza there is mention of the fatherless, the widows, and the lonely. If this suggests that David identifies with that group of people, it could mean that he thinks back to the time he first fled from King Saul. But then there is the solemn procession to the

temple in Jerusalem described in the third stanza, which does not fit in that period. When David fled from Saul, Jerusalem was still a Jebusite stronghold. The second stanza goes back to the desert journey, Israel's stay at the foot of Mount Sinai, their arrival at the borders of Canaan where Og, the King of Bashan, was defeated.⁵⁰⁰ But this retrospective view gives us little help to determine the point of departure of this psalm. It is meant as a help to give perspective to a certain point in time.

David wrote a song of victory and he placed this triumph in the framework of God's omnipotence. Every human conquest falls back upon God's great defeat of His enemies. The climax of God's victory is the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross of Golgotha. For those who reached forward to this event, or for us who fall back upon it, every enemy melts away as wax before the sun. It always comes down to: "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb."⁵⁰¹ In that sense we can say that every time God arises, His enemies are scattered.

The term "arise" is a unique anthropomorphism. God, being a Spirit, has no bodily movements like man. The image is, however, clear enough. In most visions in the Bible, God is seen as sitting on His throne.⁵⁰² With Adam in paradise, God walked.⁵⁰³ In the story of Abraham, God comes walking by in such a human fashion that Abraham does not recognize Him as God.⁵⁰⁴ The greatest deviation from the image of God sitting on the throne we see as He takes shape in Mary's womb and is born in this world as a human baby. He became man and lived among us. Here anthropomorphism ends.

The purpose of God's rising up is to intervene in time and space to overcome the opposition that gathered against Him once for all. Who are these enemies? Their names are not mentioned, but we know who inspires them. The devil is behind all human conspiracy against God.

The opening verses call up images of the building of the tower of Babel, when men conspired to penetrate heaven. The record of this event in Genesis⁵⁰⁵ sounds rather primitive to our modern ears. This may be due to the fact that someone who did not understand what the issue was wrote the account. Most people tend to think that our modern civilization is in fact the product of an evolution from the primitive to the sophisticated. Darwin has influenced our thinking at this point, even if we reject his theory. It could very well be, however, that human civilization before the flood and immediately afterward was much more highly developed than we suspect, and that post-diluvian man had come to the point where he dabbled in space traffic and inter-planetary communication. This, of course, cannot be proven. Whatever the case, God's arising caused the disintegration of human unity and resulted in the spreading out of the human race over the entire surface of the earth.

There are humans and spiritual beings, demons, who hate God and who rise up against Him. It becomes immediately clear that they are no match against the Almighty. There occurs, instantaneously, a spiritual disintegration. The being scattered, the flight, the being blown away by the wind, and the melting like wax are, first of all, images of a spiritual process. Since God is the measure of good and evil, man can never stand up against God on a moral level. If man drops the ultimate moral standard, he cuts himself off from life itself. God is the source of all life. This is the truth proclaimed in this psalm. It is not a matter of one group winning over another one, but of the victory of God's absolute goodness over all that is not absolutely good. We should not be misled by the fact that this truth is expressed in pictures that are abhorrent to us: wars and slaughter of human beings.

In contrast to those who are being scattered when God arises, we see "the righteous." Their righteousness is derived from God. Their sins have been atoned for and their lives have been renewed by the presence of God within them. The fact that God intervenes causes them to be happy and joyful. David encourages them to give vent to their joy. The NIV renders vs. 4 with: "Extol him who rides on the clouds." The Hebrew word translated with "clouds" is *'arabah* which literally means "desert." The ASV renders it: "Cast up a highway for him that rideth through the deserts." Praise to God by the righteous opens a way for Him to be on the level on which they live. God comes to us where we are. Not many live on mountaintops. God also comes to the deep valleys in which we live. Our song of praise opens the way for Him. Elsewhere in the psalms we read: "He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may

⁵⁰⁰ See Num. 21

⁵⁰¹ Rev. 12:11

⁵⁰² See Rev. 4:2

⁵⁰³ See Gen. 3:8

⁵⁰⁴ See Gen. 18:1-5 etc.

⁵⁰⁵ Gen. 11:1-11

show him the salvation of God.”⁵⁰⁶ Thanksgiving and praise have to precede the change in our circumstances. The classical example is the hymn singing of Paul and Silas in the prison in Philippi before the earthquake unshackled them.⁵⁰⁷

The Tyndale Commentary supposes that this psalm was written on the occasion of the bringing of the ark from the house of Obed-Edom to Zion.⁵⁰⁸ This supposition is based upon what is recorded in Numbers: “Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, ‘Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you.’”⁵⁰⁹ If this supposition is accurate, the commentary draws the correct conclusion that this psalm marks the end of a journey which began hundreds of years earlier in the desert.

It is hard for us to visualize a journey of more than one thousand years; that is the journey of man, not of God. It took God, so to speak, one thousand years before He found a man who was sufficiently concerned about the ark to bring it to a central place in Israel. The arrival of the ark in Jerusalem does not mean that God has arrived but that man has come to the place where he is supposed to be. God has achieved His goal with man.

We wonder how it is possible that it took one millenium before such a man as David arose. There had been pious, righteous people who loved God and who knew Him, but who did not have the vision David had. There also was no real interest about the ark among the people of Israel.

We find two kinds of people described in this psalm: God’s enemies and the righteous. Most people do not fit completely in either category. But how can a man fall in between? The Lord will spit out of His mouth those who are neither hot nor cold.⁵¹⁰ Those who do not rejoice, like the righteous, in the fact that God occupies the central place and is seated on the throne, will be blown away by the wind and melt away like wax.

It is also difficult for us to imagine for us what it would have been like for the faithful Israelite to see the ark being brought to Mount Zion. We read about David: “David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might.”⁵¹¹ For David, it was such a moving and joyful occasion that he could not control his emotions.

The journey of the ark began in the desert. The moving of the ark there was an occasion of great joy. This is evinced in Moses’ words: “Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you.”⁵¹² Moses had called that desert: “The vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions.”⁵¹³ It was a place where man actually should have perished, a hard and cruel world, a place of fatherless and widows, of lonely people and prisoners. It is touching to see what difference the presence of God’s glory made in that place. The snakes and scorpions were not exterminated, but they were kept at a distance. When, at one time, Israel withdrew from God’s protection, God Himself became a curse for them in the form of the brass snake, in order to save them from the curse they had called upon themselves.⁵¹⁴ That is the meaning of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”⁵¹⁵ And the Apostle Paul clarifies the same by saying: “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.’”⁵¹⁶

Some children will become orphans, and widows will be robbed, but God will be at their side as their defender. The verse: “God sets the lonely in families” has become my personal experience when, after the death of my parents a Christian family took me in their home. The righteous has always ample reason to rejoice and praise the Lord in the desert of his life. The desert may be inside us, but God leads us out of our bondage. He leads the prisoners, those who were slaves in Egypt, to Canaan, the land of freedom and

⁵⁰⁶ Ps. 50:23

⁵⁰⁷ See Acts 16:25,26

⁵⁰⁸ See II Sam. 6:12-15

⁵⁰⁹ Num. 10:35

⁵¹⁰ See Rev. 3:16

⁵¹¹ II Sam. 6:14

⁵¹² Num. 10:35

⁵¹³ Deut. 8:15

⁵¹⁴ See Num. 21:4-9

⁵¹⁵ John 3:14,15

⁵¹⁶ Gal. 3:13

abundance. The key to this liberty is obedience. Those who are rebellious will remain in the desert and never experience liberation.

In the second part of the psalm, we find quotations from the Song of Deborah. Verses 7 and 8, for instance, are almost literally copied: “When you went out before your people, O God, when you marched through the wasteland, Selah, the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel.” And: “O LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the land of Edom, the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water. The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai, before the LORD, the God of Israel.”⁵¹⁷ Deborah also speaks of the journey through the wilderness. This suggests that the basis for the conquest of Canaan is God’s revelation of Himself on Mount Sinai. Deborah makes the connection between the march of the Lord and the victory over Sisera, and David picks up the theme as the ark reaches its destination.

God not only revealed Himself on Mount Sinai where the law was born but also in the rain that poured down from the heavens, which is probably an image of the manna that came down, and in the shaking of the earth during the judgment over Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. God’s glory is revealed in those three events: the daily provision for physical needs, the judgment of sin, and the giving of the law.

In the previous stanza, the intimate, personal needs of the human being were being alleviated by God’s presence. David does not follow a specific chronological order. He takes some random examples of the reality of God’s presence among men. There is both personal relief and victory over a national enemy. The quotation from Deborah’s hymn serves a double purpose. It emphasizes both Israel’s conquest of Canaan as well as the failures of the nation. Jabin and Sisera terrorized the land of Israel because God did no longer occupy the first place among the nation. The way God gave deliverance was by means of a weak woman: Jael killed the mighty general with a tent peg. This illustrates the truth the Apostle Paul expounds: “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”⁵¹⁸ At the conquest of Canaan God did things in which the whole cosmos was involved (the sun stood still in answer to Joshua’s prayer⁵¹⁹), but He also gave the land back to His people by means of a tent peg. This represents not only the proclamation of God’s mighty Word but also the silent, innocuous way in which the helpless receive help.

Vs. 13: “Even while you sleep among the campfires, the wings of [my] dove are sheathed with silver, its feathers with shining gold,” poses a challenge to Bible translators. The Hebrew word translated “campfires” used by the NIV is *shaphath*, defined by Strongs with “a (double) stall (for cattle).” The KJV translates it with “pots.” Other versions use the word “sheepfolds”: “Though you lie down among the sheepfolds” (NKJ). The lying down among the campfires (or among the sheepfolds) is, obviously, a reference to Deborah’s reproach to Reuben: “Why did you stay among the campfires to hear the whistling for the flocks? In the districts of Reuben there was much searching of heart.”⁵²⁰ But the whole picture seems to speak more about a flock of pigeons with white feathers, lying among the sheepfolds, than of human beings. The sun shines upon those feathers, giving an impression of silver and gold. And when they are suddenly scared and fly away, dropping some of their feathers in their confusion, they give the impression of snow coming down. This does not clarify the meaning of the image either. The picture may want to express the condition of people who repose in inert satisfaction who prefer peace at any cost, and who are suddenly disturbed by the victory of the Lord. This would point to Jesus’ words: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”⁵²¹ There should be peace among Christians, but it is impossible that the ark of the Lord would reach its destination, that God would sit on the throne of the universe, without causing violent opposition by those who hate Him. The devil will never be ready to surrender; therefore a compromise is out of the question. The peace-loving attitude of Reuben, therefore, is out of place. There are powers in the face of which we should never lay down our arms.

Victory belongs to the Lord. The only thing David did was to give the ark its rightful place; the rest was a natural result of this. Giving priority to God was the all-consuming passion of David’s life. This is obvious from his subsequent efforts to prepare for the building of the temple. Solomon carried out the actual building, but he did not maintain his father’s vision. He later managed, in one way or another, to

⁵¹⁷ Judg. 5:4,5

⁵¹⁸ I Cor. 1:27

⁵¹⁹ See Josh. 10:12-14

⁵²⁰ Judges 5:16

⁵²¹ Matt. 10:34

occupy the central place himself. God will never push us aside. We have to understand the importance of this; God will only be predominant in our lives if we surrender to Him.

The geographical indications in this psalm are not easily verifiable. Zalmon means "Black Mountain." *The Tyndale Commentary* believes that this is Jebel Druze at the border of Bashan.

The NIV calls the mountains of Bashan "majestic," other translations speak of "a mountain of God" (NKJ). The mountains of Bashan must have been more impressive than Mount Zion, which was actually nothing more than a hill. As we said earlier, the mention of Bashan may refer also to the victory over Og, recorded in Numbers.⁵²² God did not choose the impressive summits of Bashan's mountains but the hill of Zion. This confirms the principle, which Paul expresses with: "Not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."⁵²³ This victory of the weak over the strong is ultimately symbolized in John's vision of the Lamb standing on Mount Zion. We read: "Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads."⁵²⁴ The Lamb and Mount Zion belong together.

David states an eternal principle when he says in vs. 16: "Why gaze in envy, O rugged mountains, at the mountain where God chooses to reign, where the LORD himself will dwell forever?" God's identification with that which is weak shows, of course, no inherent weakness in God. If God conquers the world with His weakness what will happen when He reveals His omnipotence? David proclaims that, in terms of weaponry, God has millions of tanks and missiles at His disposal. During a summit meeting in World War II Stalin, speaking about the pope, posed the foolish question to Churchill: "How many divisions does he have?" The question was absurd unless Stalin wanted to voice his doubt about the spiritual status of the Roman Catholic Church, which is unlikely.

There is no contradiction between God's unbelievably superior might and His election of Mount Zion. The choosing of that which is weak places the common belief about that which is strong and wise in the right light. What God chooses is not really weak; it only seems to be so. And that which the world calls strong is not really strong either.

David also understands that what we see on earth is not the reality of things. The ark was an image of a heavenly spiritual substance. Moses had made the tabernacle and its furnishings according to the pattern shown him on the mountain. We read that God said to him: "Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you." And: "See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."⁵²⁵ The reality is the sanctuary in heaven. That which God revealed of Himself to Moses and to Israel on Mount Sinai was temporal. The glory in which He entered afterwards is eternal. "The Lord [has come] from Sinai into his sanctuary." Those words can also be taken as a prophecy about the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is in that context that Paul quotes this psalm in his epistle to the Ephesians: "This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.'⁵²⁶ The difference between the quote and the original is, undoubtedly, due to the fact that Paul uses the Septuagint version.

The ascension is the triumphant part of the victory over death. The usual interpretation of the leading away of the captives is that the gates of Hades, the kingdom of death, were opened to free the prisoners inside. David seems to speak about people who were led into captivity by God and who had to pay tribute to Him. Paul speaks about people whom Satan had held captive and who are liberated by the resurrection and ascension of Christ. They are exonerated and rehabilitated to be incorporated into the body of Christ and to function as its members. The exodus from Egypt foreshadowed that condition, when Israel received gifts from the Egyptians. The statement: "you received gifts from men, even from the rebellious" may very well apply to Israel's exodus from Egypt. The gifts the Egyptians gave to the Israelites were considered to be gifts given to God who, in turn, gave them to His people to use. In that sense, David and Paul do not contradict each other.

⁵²² See Num. 21

⁵²³ I Cor. 1:26-29

⁵²⁴ Rev. 14:1

⁵²⁵ Ex. 25:9,40

⁵²⁶ See Eph. 4:8

The captives, at any rate, are the ones who are liberated. God does not hold men captive; that is the work of the devil. The hymn writer says: "Make me a captive, Lord, and then I will be free." God's captives live with Him in His sanctuary.

The verses 19 and 20 state briefly what the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews describes in detail, when he speaks of Christ as our High Priest who intercedes for us in the sanctuary in heaven. We read: "But 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. Such a high priest meets our need-- one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens."⁵²⁷ Through His ministry of intercession Jesus brings many sons to glory. David expresses this with the words: "Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. Selah. Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death," or, as the KJV renders it: "Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation. Selah. He that is our God is the God of salvation; and unto GOD the Lord belong the issues from death."

The NIV reads: "Our God is a God who saves." The KJV renders this with: "the God of our salvation." The Hebrew gives this as one name: *'Eel P'mowshaa `owt*. Salvation cannot be separated from the person of God. He not merely gives salvation; He is our salvation. We will experience salvation in the measure in which we have fellowship with Him. God carries us through life. Moses says: "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."⁵²⁸ This realization will alleviate much needless tension in our lives.

When I was a child, we used to sing this psalm in its rhymed version in the Christian Reformed Church. I always felt a deep emotion at the words: "Praise be to God with deep awe; He overwhelms us daily with the proofs of His grace. This God is our salvation. Who would not want to praise His majesty with reference? Redemption is of the Lord. Out of His goodness He gives us, without measure, eternal life and salvation. At the approach of death, He can, and wants to, and shall give complete deliverance."

"From the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death" does not mean that we shall not die. The escape from death is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ which guarantees our own resurrection. The central thought in these verses is fellowship with God. Salvation, escape from death, and resurrection are byproducts of this fellowship. Salvation and eternal life would have no meaning apart from God.

Verses 21-23 are not the kind of poetry that is easily appreciated: God crushing the heads of His enemies, feet plunged in the blood of foes, and blood being licked up by dogs! We have to remember the fact that the enemies are, first of all, demonic powers. In the first prophecy of the Bible, when God says to the serpent: "He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel,"⁵²⁹ we have no problem accepting the image. But in this context the picture is less appealing. It is probably on purpose that the picture is painted in colors that are repulsive to us, so that we would feel aversion. We see the same in Revelation where the last war of history is described in such revolting terms: "And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.' Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."⁵³⁰ Yet, God is not bloodthirsty. War is a human invention. Hatred and murder come from the devil and his demons. In verses 21-23 of this psalm, we see the end result of the actions of man who has withdrawn himself from God's protection and has opened himself to Satan.

It is difficult to determine the meaning of: "The Lord says, 'I will bring them from Bashan; I will bring them from the depths of the sea.'" It probably contains a prophecy about the return of Israel from the Babylonian captivity and the rehabilitation of God's people. What the world has done to God's children in the form of persecutions and pogroms of Israel and Christians is an indescribable crime. All this horror will come to an end when the last enemy has been conquered and when God will rule indisputably as king. It is

⁵²⁷ Heb. 7:24-26

⁵²⁸ Deut. 33:27

⁵²⁹ Gen. 3:15

⁵³⁰ Rev. 19:17-21

also possible that the quotation stands for the chasing of the enemy out of his hiding places. That would better fit the context. *The Tyndale Commentary* draws a line of comparison with a prophecy by Amos, which reads: “Though they dig down to the depths of the grave, from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down.”⁵³¹ The NEB renders “Bashan” with the word “serpent.” This is based on the supposition that the Hebrew word should be read differently. If that is correct, there would be a reference here to the kingdom of darkness.

Verses 24-29 describe the festive procession with the ark up front, followed by choirs and orchestras and the dignitaries of Israel. The picture is taken at the end of the parade when the ark has reached its destination. The temple had not been built yet, but, in a sense, it existed already and David saw it with the eye of his spirit. The temple in Jerusalem was, after all, an image of the eternal temple in heaven. The fact that the temple had not yet been constructed in David’s days and, yet is referred to in this psalm is, in the eyes of most Bible commentators, proof that the psalm cannot have been written by David.

The composition of the cortege is described in detail in the book of First Chronicles.⁵³² The NIV renders vs. 26^b with: “Praise the LORD in the assembly of Israel.” The Hebrew word translated “assembly” is *maqowr*, which *Strongs Definitions* defines as “something dug, i.e. a (general) source (of water, even when naturally flowing; also of tears, blood... figuratively, of happiness, wisdom, progeny).” Most translations read therefore: “Bless... the Lord, from the fountain of Israel” (NKJ), or: “the LORD, O you who are of Israel’s fountain!” (RSV). God calls Himself “the spring of living water.” In Jeremiah we read that God says: “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”⁵³³ Jesus, also, presents Himself as the giver of the Holy Spirit with the words: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” John adds to this: “By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”⁵³⁴ Obviously, this psalm speaks about more than the placing of a golden box in a tent.

The event was a deeply personal experience for David. He calls God “my God and king,” and he sees God’s entering into His sanctuary as God’s ascension on the throne of his own heart.

The only Hebrew music that is left us is the post-exile music and the music of the Diaspora which is all in a minor key. David’s hymn of praise must have been written in a major key, which we know no longer. The opening chorus of Bach’s Christmas Oratorio comes, probably, closest to it. This psalm describes the highlight of Israel’s Old Testament history. Here the goal of the exodus and of the conquest of Canaan was reached. From that moment on there was a place on earth where man could meet God.

The fact that Israel gave God the central place in their midst immediately elevated the nation to a higher level of dignity and authority. The youngest of the tribes acquired a royal status. David still honors the tribe of Benjamin because they produced Saul. The fact that Saul became a failure does not diminish this honor. Those who place God on the throne become themselves kings. Authority comes from God, and God bestows royal authority to the person who submits to Him. Exercise of power takes place in fellowship with Him. Otherwise the prayer: “Summon your power, O God; show us your strength, O God, as you have done before,” would make little sense.

People from all over the world come to honor God because of what He has done in the midst of Israel. “Because of your temple at Jerusalem kings will bring you gifts.” When David attacked the Jebusites and conquered Jerusalem, he, obviously, envisioned the transfer of the ark and the building of the temple.

“The beast among the reeds” are images of the world powers of David’s day. The Hebrew in this verse is hard to translate. The Hebrew Interlinear Bible says literally: “the company of the spearmen.” More literal even would be “that which is alive in the reeds.” *The Tyndale Commentary* believes that the crocodile or hippopotamus may be intended, which could be taken as a symbol for Egypt. “The herd of bulls among the calves of the nations,” obviously, represents the world leaders and the world population. The tone of this verse is mocking. The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament translates vs. 30: “Rebuke the beasts of the reeds, the company of the bulls with the calves of the peoples trampling down with pieces of silver. He scatters the peoples war who delight in.” Most versions take the pieces of silver to be a tax levied from the nations that were subdued, others consider it to be a sacrifice brought to God.

⁵³¹ Amos 9:2

⁵³² See I Chr. 15:16-28

⁵³³ Jer. 2:13

⁵³⁴ John 7:37-39

The people in question have resisted God's rule; they are being scattered. In the verses 31 and 32 the people who are represented by Egypt and Cush are willing to place themselves under God's protection. David does not speak out of chauvinism here. The placement of the ark at the central location of the nation opens his eyes for the worldwide task of Israel to be a kingdom of priests. This is not a statement that shows imperialistic tendencies either. David has no plans to conquer and subdue Egypt or Cush; he has a vision in which he sees these nation stretch out for God. The implication is that the testimony of God's revelation of Himself would, in no way, be obscured by Israel's behavior.

The peoples of this world who have submitted themselves to God are encouraged to sing praise to the Lord. This recommendation is followed by the meaningful word "Selah," suggesting a pause in the music and reflection on what was said. The fact that the powers-that-be of this world would come before God and praise Him needs an intermezzo.

The next verse suggests that this "Selah" is answered by a peal of thunder. In the biblical account of the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, we do not read anything about a thunderstorm,⁵³⁵ but vs. 33 of this psalm suggests that there was an audible reaction from heaven when the ark was brought over, similar to the answer the Father gave to Jesus in John's Gospel. We read there that Jesus spoke: " 'Father, glorify your name!' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him."⁵³⁶ This thunder is described as God's riding the skies in His wagon, or the galloping of His horses. It is quite likely that God reacted in heaven when the ark arrived in Jerusalem. We can imagine how impressive the moment must have been: the ark at the head of the procession, followed by the choir and orchestra and the solemn train of princes of Israel closing the ranks, and the peals of thunder from above. Thunder is an integral part of the manifestation of God's glory. In Revelation, we read several times that thunderclaps accompanied the revelation of God's majesty.⁵³⁷

Obviously, as human beings we cannot add anything to God's glory. When we proclaim the power of God, we simply state a fact. When we sin, we deny the reality of God's power. The sinner believes that he can sin and get away with it. A sense of reality is an antidote to sin.

The word "awesome" is the translation of the Hebrew word *yare'*, which *Strongs Definitions* translates with: "to fear, to revere, to frighten." It has a similar meaning as what the writer to the Hebrews expresses when he says: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁵³⁸ Unless our intimate relationship with God stands against this background it has little or no value. An example of a reverse situation is the fact that the name of Eva Braun has become known in world history because she was Adolph Hitler's girlfriend. If Eva had carried on an affair with someone else, the world would never have known her name. The fact that God is the Almighty One, that it is a dreadful thing to fall into His hands if we oppose Him, gives such a deep glow and beauty to His love for us. Intimate fellowship with the Almighty makes us more than conquerors. The fact that His power becomes manifest in our weakness does not change the essence of this.

⁵³⁵ See II Sam. ch. 6

⁵³⁶ John 12:28,29

⁵³⁷ See Rev. 4:5;8:5;11:19;16:18

⁵³⁸ Heb. 10:31

PSALM SIXTY-NINE

For the director of music. To the tune of "Lilies." Of David.

- 1 *Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.*
- 2 *I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.*
- 3 *I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God.*
- 4 *Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me. I am forced to restore what I did not steal.*
- 5 *You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you.*
- 6 *May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the LORD Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel.*
- 7 *For I endure scorn for your sake, and shame covers my face.*
- 8 *I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons;*
- 9 *for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.*
- 10 *When I weep and fast, I must endure scorn;*
- 11 *when I put on sackcloth, people make sport of me.*
- 12 *Those who sit at the gate mock me, and I am the song of the drunkards.*
- 13 *But I pray to you, O LORD, in the time of your favor; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation.*
- 14 *Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters.*
- 15 *Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me.*
- 16 *Answer me, O LORD, out of the goodness of your love; in your great mercy turn to me.*
- 17 *Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.*
- 18 *Come near and rescue me; redeem me because of my foes.*
- 19 *You know how I am scorned, disgraced and shamed; all my enemies are before you.*
- 20 *Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none.*
- 21 *They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.*
- 22 *May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap.*
- 23 *May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever.*
- 24 *Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them.*
- 25 *May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents.*
- 26 *For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt.*
- 27 *Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation.*
- 28 *May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.*
- 29 *I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me.*
- 30 *I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving.*
- 31 *This will please the LORD more than an ox, more than a bull with its horns and hoofs.*
- 32 *The poor will see and be glad-- you who seek God, may your hearts live!*
- 33 *The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.*
- 34 *Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and all that move in them,*
- 35 *for God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah. Then people will settle there and possess it;*
- 36 *the children of his servants will inherit it, and those who love his name will dwell there.*

In more than one respect, this psalm presents us with difficulties. The circumstances under which it was written are not specified. Vs. 5 suggests that a major moral failure may be the basis for the pressure, tension, and despair to which David has fallen prey. At the same time, we see shadows of Christ's suffering in the psalm. Several verses, such as vs. 9, 21, and 25, are quoted in the New Testament. But the poem seems to sway back and forth between suffering because of David's own sin and the innocent suffering of the Messiah. Then there is the cry for vengeance that seems to be so contrary to the message of the Bible as a whole.

The psalm opens with the prayer of a drowning man: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck" (literally: up to my soul). David has lost his footing and is sinking away in the mud. There

is, probably, no more poignant image of man's desperate condition. The words picture the opposite of David's testimony in another psalm: "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."⁵³⁹

Theologians used to speak about "a leap of faith," as if believing was similar to jumping in the dark. The leap in the dark in this psalm is inevitable for David but faith seems to have little to do with it. What else can a man do who has lost the ground under his feet than sink in the mud? The only positive part of the picture is that David calls to God: "Save me, o God." But his prayer weakens after that. Vs. 3 states: "I am worn out calling for help." Yet, Paul's words in Romans stand: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."⁵⁴⁰

There is a great difference between David's actual condition and the way he feels about himself. Not everyone who thinks he is drowning is in reality losing his life. Our feelings do not always correctly represent the reality of our situation. Depression has often little connection with reality. If we feel as if we are sinking and our cry to God seems to remain unanswered, we do well to ask ourselves if we really are where we think we are.

David mentions two reasons for his despair: the hatred of those who surround him, and his own guilt feelings. The hatred could be Saul's. "I am forced to restore what I did not steal" could then pertain to David's claim to the throne. If, however, the psalm was written during David's flight from Absalom, "my folly," or "my foolishness" would refer to his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. David was aware of the fact that his sin had done great damage to his testimony. Nathan had said to David: "You have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme."⁵⁴¹ In this prayer, David may have tried to limit the consequences of his sin. It is true that every sin we commit against our fellowmen constitutes a sin against God Himself. If we fall, others will blaspheme God whom we claim to represent. In the third psalm, which was written during David's flight from Absalom, David seems to have come into the clear as far as his guilt feelings are concerned. We read there: "But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head."⁵⁴² In this psalm, David still wrestles with the problem of his testimony.

It is true that David's sin caused immense damage to the cause of the kingdom of heaven. It could be that this thought is the actual theme of this psalm. The waters that came up to the neck would then stand for David's despair because of his lost testimony. The devil is very clever in manipulating such guilt feelings. Besides gaining the victory over feelings of guilt regarding sins that have been forgiven, we have to learn to overcome Satan. We read in Revelation: "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."⁵⁴³ We have to learn that our wrong steps become God's steppingstones on the path of grace. We best learn to understand God's love in the forgiveness of our sins.

It seems to be a large step from the "because of me" in vs. 6 to the "for your sake" in vs. 7. The words in vs. 7 are those of one who is innocent. They constitute, primarily, a prophecy about the sufferings of Christ. As people who have been forgiven we are partakers of Christ's suffering. God never promises that we shall be kept from being subjected by a barrage of slander and mockery. But if the blood of Jesus has washed our sins away, slander will no longer touch open wounds in us. We learn to partake of the "disgrace for the sake of Christ." We read about Moses: "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward."⁵⁴⁴ There is, of course, a danger that we would deceive ourselves; our heart is deceitful. A complete confession of sins is the best guarantee against such deceit. I know very few people who fell into sin to the point that their testimony was shattered whose failure became the basis of a total renewal. This is especially true if their fall was preceded by a period of relatively intimate fellowship with the Lord. David's testimony is, therefore, unique. It was only after his sin with Bathsheba that he made serious plans for the preparation of the building of the temple. The fact that Solomon, who was David's and Bathsheba's son, carried out the building plans proves how absolute was the forgiveness and rehabilitation God gave to David. That which

⁵³⁹ Ps. 40:2

⁵⁴⁰ Rom. 10:13

⁵⁴¹ II Sam. 12:14 (NKJ)

⁵⁴² Ps. 3:3

⁵⁴³ Rev. 12:11

⁵⁴⁴ Heb. 11:26

remained of the disgrace because of David, therefore, becomes the disgrace for the sake of Christ. The words: “zeal for your house consumes me” fit very well in this context.

It is quite possible that the words: “You have shed much blood and have fought many wars,”⁵⁴⁵ were not only God’s words but that the people of David’s day also said: “How is it possible for someone who spilt so much blood, and who has committed such sinful acts, to build a temple for God?” This, probably, made David’s desire to build a house for YHWH such a consuming passion.

Vs. 9, which reads: “For zeal for your house consumes me” has become so well-known, mainly because of John’s quotation at Jesus’ cleansing of the temple: “His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’”⁵⁴⁶ Jesus Himself was quite aware of the temporal character of the temple, as only an image of God’s presence in this world. He speaks about His own body as God’s temple. We read in John’s Gospel that Jesus told the Jews: “ ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ The Jews replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body.”⁵⁴⁷ Yet, He treated the picture of the heavenly reality with the greatest respect, as is evident from the two incidences of the cleansing of the temple.⁵⁴⁸ From John’s Gospel we understand that Jesus’ attack upon the materialism that had pervaded the ritual of the temple service was the beginning of the resistance against Him which, eventually, brought Him to the cross. David’s experience reflects some of the depth of the attack of derision and ridicule Satan and his vassals would launch against Jesus Christ later.

In verses 13-22, David continues his description of suffering and searching for God. Jesus could have prayed these words while hanging on the cross, but we have no proof that He did. The words: “But I pray to you, O LORD, in the time of your favor; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation” give evidence of a complete surrender to God’s will. David, positively, leaves the moment of salvation in God’s hand. The word “favor,” or “acceptable” means literally “the time of your delight”; it expresses a deep confidence in God’s goodness. The stanza is interlaced with words like “great love,” or “mercy,” “sure salvation” (literally “abundance of salvation”), “great mercy.” This section repeats the thoughts that are expounded in the first five verses, but the hope for salvation is more intense and the trust in God is deeper. The scorn, disgrace, and shame are still present and so are the enemies, but the tone is one of confidence, based upon God’s character. Even though the situation has not changed, help is on the way.

Vs. 20 is deeply moving: “Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none.” David expected expressions of pity and compassion; he thought he was dealing with people like himself. It turns out that he was surrounded by a band of sadists who found pleasure in the suffering of others. It is hard to imagine that a human being can sink to such a depth; yet, this world is full of sadists.

The reference to drinking vinegar in vs. 21 can be seen as a prophecy about Jesus’ thirst on the cross. Yet, none of the three Gospels that record the incident quote this verse. Only John remarks that Jesus’ thirst was a fulfillment of Scripture. We read: “Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty.’ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips.”⁵⁴⁹

Verses 22-28 form a difficult part of this psalm, because they sound like a cry for vengeance upon the ones who persecute David. Some commentators emphasize the contrast between David’s lust for revenge and Jesus’ prayer at the crucifixion: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”⁵⁵⁰ The problem is that such a comparison throws a doubtful light upon the inspiration of Scripture.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary remarks about this: “The execrations here and in the following verses should be read in the future tense, because they are predictive; and not in the imperative mood, as if they were the offspring of the psalmist’s resentment: ‘Their table SHALL become a snare;-- their eyes SHALL be darkened;-- thou WILT pour out thine indignation upon them;-- thy wrathful anger SHALL take hold of them;-- their habitation SHALL be desolate,-- and none SHALL dwell in their tents.’ The psalmist prophesies that the evils which they had inflicted on the Israelites should be visited on themselves; that as

⁵⁴⁵ See I Chr. 22:8

⁵⁴⁶ John 2:17

⁵⁴⁷ John 2:19-21

⁵⁴⁸ See John 2:13-22; Mark 11:15-18

⁵⁴⁹ John 19:28,29

⁵⁵⁰ Luke 23:34

they had made them eat, drink, labour, and suffer, so God should in his judgment treat them.” But The Hebrew Interlinear Bible renders the verses as a wish.

The question is, does a man have the right to pray God to do such things to his fellowmen? Using the power of God to destroy others reeks of black magic. We do find instances in the New Testament, however, of this kind of retribution. Paul calls down a curse upon a sorcerer. We read in Acts: “But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ‘You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun.’ Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand.”⁵⁵¹ And he writes to Timothy: “... Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.”⁵⁵² In Paul’s cases, however, the purpose is, obviously, that people would be saved. At least, that seems to be the case in the letter to Timothy.

David asks for eternal condemnation for those people: “May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.” We should, however, be careful not to attribute the same meaning to these words as to what we read in Revelation where John writes: “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”⁵⁵³ David, probably, envisions here not more than the cessation of physical life; but this does not change the problem. If, however, no eternal punishment is intended the difficulty comes to stand in a different light. David could, maybe, speak here more in the spirit of Paul, when the latter advised the church in Corinth to hand someone over to Satan, “so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”⁵⁵⁴ That would seem to be a satisfactory explanation of this difficult question. The fact that Peter quotes vs. 25: “May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents,” in connection with Judas’ betrayal of Jesus does not necessarily influence the above interpretation. Peter’s quote was not a plea for revenge; he merely stated a fact.

We can also see a connection between David’s suffering in vs. 29, (I am in pain and distress; may your salvation, O God, protect me) and the preceding malediction. Could it be that this was David’s way to demonstrate his own vulnerability? Maybe the fate of those who hated him did not leave him untouched. If we see those verses from that angle, there would be less thirst for blood in them than seems to be on the surface.

The jubilation of verses 30-33 stands in stark contrast with the rest of the psalm, particularly with the preceding stanza. David does not give us any reason for this abrupt transition. He probably had an encounter with the Lord, and his tears had been wiped away. In response he wants to put himself on the altar as a burnt sacrifice. The mention of the horns and the hoofs of the bull speak of the complete consummation by fire of the sacrificial animal. This burnt offering is identified here with the song of praise. It is obvious that the words of praise are not to be separated from the act of surrender. The burnt sacrifice stands for the complete and irrevocable surrender to the will of God as an expression of love. This is made possible because the reason for the complaint, which is the main theme of this psalm, has been taken away. This means that the enemy is conquered. The feeling of shame, the scorn, and the guilt feeling have all been eliminated and the cry for revenge has become obsolete. We do not know what has happened, but the abrupt change in tone suggests that circumstances have changed drastically for David.

In the verses 32 and 33 David’s experience is made a comfort for “the poor.” The KJV renders it “humble,” the RSV with “depressed.” The Hebrew word is *anaw*, which is defined in Strongs Definitions as: “humble; poor; meek.” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about this word: “*Anaw* appears almost exclusively in poetical passages and describes the intended outcome of affliction from God, namely ‘humility.’ In its first appearance the word depicts the objective condition as well as the subjective stance of Moses. He was entirely dependent on God and saw that he was: ‘Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth’ <Num. 12:3>.” These people see David’s deliverance from guilt and oppression, they do not see his burnt offering. The emphasis is upon what God has done, not upon man’s achievements. Meekness is a condition of the heart that recognizes God’s hand in

⁵⁵¹ Acts 13:8-11

⁵⁵² I Tim. 1:20

⁵⁵³ Rev. 20:15

⁵⁵⁴ See I Cor. 5:4,5

the lives of others. Without meekness our eyes are closed to such things. Meekness is the correct reaction of man upon the difficult circumstances in which God places him. Meekness is a requirement in the search for God.

David speaks about people who are poor and captive. The physical aspect of captivity is the least important in this context. David says to those people: "Look at me! There is hope!" Poverty and captivity also describe the persecution of the believer.

Beginning with vs. 34 through the end, the psalm acquires a cosmic character. Heaven and earth, as well as the seas, are called upon to strengthen the choir of human praise. The mention of the salvation of Zion and the rebuilding of the cities of Judah is, for most commentators, a reason to place the psalm as a whole in the period during the Babylonian captivity or shortly afterward. Some consider these last verses to be a later addition. We beg to differ with these opinions. We often find with David a vision that far surpassed the physical circumstances of his time. The fact that there were cities in Judah and that the Israelites lived there, does not mean that they had really taken possession of the Promised Land. David makes a distinction between the image and the reality it represents. He knows who the real enemy is and what constitutes the real victory. Obedience to God and the love of His Name are the criteria for the possession of the land. This has little to do with the place of residence or with physical descent. In these last verses David opens a perspective that elevates this psalm above the realm of a personal complaint.

PSALM SEVENTY

For the director of music. Of David. A petition.

- 1 Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me.**
2 May those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace.
3 May those who say to me, "Aha! Aha!" turn back because of their shame.
4 But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, "Let God be exalted!"
5 Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay.

This psalm is almost word-for-word a copy of Ps. 40:13-17, on which we wrote a commentary earlier. The fact that there are other duplicates of psalms, such as Ps. 14 and Ps. 53, reinforces the theory that there were originally different collections of psalms, which were independent of each other. The five books of psalms we have presently in our Bible confirm this.

The tone of Ps. 70 seems more urgent than does the stanza of Ps. 40, because some sentences are condensed.

The subscript in the NIV calls it "a petition." The Hebrew word is *zakar*, which means: "to mark (so as to be recognized), i.e. to remember; by implication, to mention." The KJV renders it with "to bring to remembrance." The Amplified Bible says: "to bring to remembrance *or* make memorial." The Good News Bible gives as title: "A Prayer for Help," with a footnote: "Hebrew Title: A psalm by David; a lament."

There may also be a reference to that part of the grain offering which is called the memorial sacrifice, about which we read: "The priest shall take a handful of the fine flour and oil, together with all the incense, and burn this as a memorial portion on the altar, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD."⁵⁵⁵ It could be that the psalm was David's prayer at the occasion of the bringing of this sacrifice. That would put this prayer against a strange background. The grain offering emphasizes man's relationship with God as a creature with the Creator. It symbolizes Jesus' act of surrender of His body to the Father who had created it. The grain offering serves to remind man of his origin and his identity.

David calls upon God for help because God created him. There used to be a Dutch comic strip, entitled *Pa Pinkelman*. The character would get into all kinds of trouble. At some points the author would introduce himself in the story, and Pa Pinkelman would go to him to ask for advice. This is an appropriate illustration of what David did here.

In this psalm there are people and powers who intend to kill David, and others who mock him; mockery is also a form of murder. David needed both life and respect. Man cannot live without some honor and respect, as he cannot live without oxygen. In this psalm, David surrenders himself to God, his Creator; he lays himself on the altar and cries for help. "Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me." This is lacking in Ps. 40.

The words "make haste" occur twice in this psalm. Haste is a typical human concept; it is related to time and the use we make of it. We feel that unpleasant situations last longer than pleasant ones. Enjoyable experiences seem to take up less time. Haste presupposes a shortening of time, especially in connection with bad conditions. Time cannot be long or short for God. What the psalmist wants to say is that he is eager to experience God's presence. The call for God to make haste means that David says to God: "Show me that you are with me." God is omnipresent; we cannot, therefore, interpret this request as an objective statement, as if there would be a moment when God were not there, although such may seem to be the case.

The psalm, therefore, speaks about a change in man's experience, not about a change in God's behavior. There never was a moment when God was not there and when He did not protect David. There also never was a time when God was not exalted. This prayer was answered the moment David's eyes were opened for the reality of God. The realization: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of

⁵⁵⁵ Lev. 2:2

it,” as Jacob experienced at Bethel,⁵⁵⁶ may not always be a salutary experience for everybody. Paul says that our spreading of the aroma of Christ may be for some “a smell of death.”⁵⁵⁷

It is interesting to see that David believes people to be ashamed before God. It implies that people generally know what they ought to have done, and standing before God they will condemn themselves. On the other hand, for those who love God it will be a source of great joy to discover that they are in God and God is in them. That is the essence of David’s prayer.

⁵⁵⁶ See Gen. 28:16

⁵⁵⁷ II Cor. 2:16

PSALM SEVENTY-ONE

- 1 *In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame.*
- 2 *Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness; turn your ear to me and save me.*
- 3 *Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress.*
- 4 *Deliver me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of evil and cruel men.*
- 5 *For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth.*
- 6 *From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you.*
- 7 *I have become like a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge.*
- 8 *My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long.*
- 9 *Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone.*
- 10 *For my enemies speak against me; those who wait to kill me conspire together.*
- 11 *They say, "God has forsaken him; pursue him and seize him, for no one will rescue him."*
- 12 *Be not far from me, O God; come quickly, O my God, to help me.*
- 13 *May my accusers perish in shame; may those who want to harm me be covered with scorn and disgrace.*
- 14 *But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.*
- 15 *My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long, though I know not its measure.*
- 16 *I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, O Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone.*
- 17 *Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.*
- 18 *Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.*
- 19 *Your righteousness reaches to the skies, O God, you who have done great things. Who, O God, is like you?*
- 20 *Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.*
- 21 *You will increase my honor and comfort me once again.*
- 22 *I will praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praise to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.*
- 23 *My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you-- I, whom you have redeemed.*
- 24 *My tongue will tell of your righteous acts all day long, for those who wanted to harm me have been put to shame and confusion.*

There is no subscript above this psalm, so we do not know who the author is. The first three verses are a duplicate of Ps. 31:1-3, but this does not necessarily mean that David is the author of this psalm. The psalm was, obviously, written by an old man whose earthly tent was being destroyed, as the Apostle Paul puts it.⁵⁵⁸ The conversational tone of the psalm reminds one of Elsie McKay's book *Green Winter*, in which the author describes the conversation an elderly lady carries on with God. Monologues with God can be very refreshing to read. Older people often fall into the habit of talking to themselves. Taking God as a sounding board in such discussions can be a healing experience. Prayer is often nothing more than talking to oneself in front of God.

The topic of this psalm is mainly the perils of aging. The enemies who were always there in youth are still present. The devil does not age or get tired as humans do. In vs. 4 he is represented as a single person. The author is worried about the fact that he may deteriorate to the point that he becomes an easy prey to the enemy. There is in aging a danger that, when we decline physically, our emotional and spiritual life suffers to the point that we become hard to live with. George Mueller's prayer was that God would keep him from turning into and sour old man at the end of his life. This may be the point of the psalmist's prayer here. The painful part of aging is not that we are unable to do all we used to do but that we become less able to defend ourselves and we cannot keep ourselves under control any longer. What comes out is, of

⁵⁵⁸ See II Cor. 5:1

course, what has always been within. We can trust ourselves even less when we get older than in our younger years. It becomes, therefore, more urgent to trust that Lord in old age than when we were young.

It is a blessing if we can look back upon a life lived with the Lord. It is better to be converted at the end of one's life than not to be converted at all, but the smarting and painful memories of years lost remain. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote: "It is not that we have to die, but how we have lived, that gives to the bitterness of death such a bitter taste." We have a rich heritage if we can look back upon a life full of adventures of faith.

There is a suggestion that the mother of the psalmist may have been a believer. If we drink the love of God with our mother's milk, we will find it more natural to walk with God as we grow up. The psalmist's testimony is that there have been moments in his life which, according to the opinion of others, could only be explained supernaturally. In vs. 7 he says: "I have become like a portent to many." The KJV renders this with: "I am as a wonder unto many." The Hebrew word is *mowpheth*, which, according to *Strongs Definitions*, means "a miracle; by implication, a token or omen." A Christian's life ought always to be lived on a supernatural plane. If Christ lives within us, the Holy Spirit is the power source and mainspring of our existence. Unfortunately, in the lives of most of God's children there are only a few moments that would fall in the category of the supernatural. Very few Christians live consistently on the highest plain. The danger increases as we grow older and we begin to live with the memories of great moments, and our lives begin to slide from the level of the supernatural to a daily life that knows little or no fellowship with God. As the number of our years increases, it is important to pray that God will do more for us than just keep memories of good times alive. Physical, or even mental, deterioration does not mean that we have to experience spiritual regression also. There are people whose mental abilities decrease as they grow older but who never lose the sense of God's presence in their lives.

The key to constant fellowship with God is praise. The author of this psalm learned in his youth to praise God, and he never ceased doing this, as he grew older. It is, of course, impossible to think that God would leave him, just because he is old. We can, therefore, hardly interpret the text differently than to see in it that the psalmist is afraid to lose the experience of God's presence, because he is too preoccupied with his physical problems.

The Apostle Paul indicates the road to victory over the depressions of old age, when he writes to the Corinthians: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 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. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."⁵⁵⁹

In the second stanza of this psalm, the verses 12-16, the psalmist wants to take sweet revenge upon his enemies. He asks God to make them feel ashamed; this in contrast to the opening prayer for himself: "let me never be put to shame." Shame is a form of self-condemnation, which can have salutary results. Someone who feels shame is within reach of God's grace, and not far from the Kingdom of Heaven. The enemy in the first verses may have been the devil, but in these verses the author, obviously, speaks about human beings. The devil cannot feel shame.

For the psalmist, the antidote to scorn and disgrace is praise and a testimony of God's grace. The proclamation of God's righteousness presumes a rejection of one's own righteousness. We have already seen this in connection with Ps. 31. The righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that covers us.

Righteousness is a beautiful word in this context. The author shows that the misery of this world is the result of unrighteousness; that is the abandoning of God's standards, the severing of the bond with God. If we no longer compare our acts with the character of God, we finish with unrighteousness. The reintroduction of the comparison brings about the shame the previous verses spoke about. The psalmist

⁵⁵⁹ II Cor. 4:16-5:8

himself received forgiveness for the things about which he felt shame. That is the reason he finds himself covered with God's righteousness and being kept from disgrace.

In the last stanza (vs. 17-24), the author repeats what he said earlier, using different words. At the same time he opens a new perspective by looking beyond the grave and the resurrection from the dead. He does not use the word resurrection, but what else can he mean with: "from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up"? The Hebrew word translated with "depth" is *tehowm*, which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* with "an abyss (as a surging mass of water), especially the deep (the main sea or the subterranean water-supply)." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about it: "The word has special reference to the deep floods or sources of water. Sailors in the midst of a violent storm 'mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths' <Ps. 107:26>. This is hyperbolic or exaggerated poetical talk, but it presents the 'depths' as the opposite of the heavens or skies. This emphasis is especially prominent in the Song of Moses, where the word represents the ever-existing (but not eternal), ever-threatening, and perilous 'deep,' not simply an element of nature but a dangerous element: 'The depths have covered them: they sank into the bottom as a stone' <Exod. 15:5>. On the other hand, in such contexts *tehom* may mean no more than 'deep water' into which heavy objects quickly sink."

Before the psalmist mentions the resurrection, he first stresses another facet of his testimony. He asks God to slow down the deterioration of old age until he has completed giving the testimony about God's intervention in his life to his own generation and the next one. He is, obviously, not overly concerned about the "generation gap." A generation gap usually comes about when serving God is being reduced to a meaningless ritual. Older people who have a living relationship with the Lord usually have a strong attraction to the younger generation. The fact that the psalmist himself began living with the Lord when he was still young adds a strong point.

The content of his testimony given in condensed form in vs. 19 is: "Your righteousness reaches to the skies. O God, you who have done great things. Who, O God, is like you?" The key word is "righteousness." Measureless righteousness is characteristic of all God's acts. Unrighteousness does not originate with God and every demonstration of unrighteousness is temporal. The psalmist was, of course, not familiar with God's greatest act of righteousness; he cannot have known anything about Jesus' death on the cross. He only knew the principle of atonement as expressed in the images of animals that died in order to save man. And he had no inkling of the greatest victory over death. Yet, in the twilight of his knowledge, he discovers that God is incomparable. How much more can we see of God's character, we who have seen the complete picture! The ultimate thing is to know God.

Looking back over his troubled life, the psalmist sees, on the one hand, the great things God has done and, on the other hand, the many anxieties and afflictions he experienced. He has lived a stormy life. Most people who have seen God at work in their lives do. The greatest affliction was still ahead for the psalmist, but he had enough evidence at his disposal to come to the conclusion that, after his death, God would raise him up. He shows deep insight into the character of God with the inference that, in Jesus' words: "God... is not the God of the dead but of the living."⁵⁶⁰

It seems strange and contrary to elementary humility that the psalmist prays for an increase in honor. But Jesus also prayed: "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."⁵⁶¹ The word that parallels honor in this verse is comfort. God comforts man with honor and majesty. We hesitate to ask for this, though. Actually, it is not necessary to pray for this; Jesus promises: "My Father will honor the one who serves me."⁵⁶² But it is good for a man not to linger too long at this promise while living on this earth. But the hope of a crown can, sometimes, be an effective weapon when Satan attacks us. The venue for receiving a crown is always our willingness to give it up, as did the elders in Revelation. The Apostle John records for us: "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 you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'⁵⁶³ Our motives in praying for an increase in honor and majesty are decisive. The more we receive the more we can give back. This is what the psalmist intends to say in these last verses. Increase in the glory God gives to him will increase his song of praise. In his mind

⁵⁶⁰ Matt. 22:32

⁵⁶¹ John 17:1

⁵⁶² John 12:26

⁵⁶³ Rev. 4:9-11

he is already playing the lyre and he sings. The theme of his song is God's faithfulness, His holiness, and God's redemption of his soul. God's righteousness is the decisive factor in the victory over the enemy.

The psalm opened with the psalmist taking refuge, and with a prayer never to be put to shame; it ends with a crown and a song of praise. In the words of the Apostle Peter: "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶⁴ I Pet. 2:6

PSALM SEVENTY-TWO

Of Solomon.

- 1 Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.**
- 2 He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.**
- 3 The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness.**
- 4 He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor.**
- 5 He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations.**
- 6 He will be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth.**
- 7 In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more.**
- 8 He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.**
- 9 The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust.**
- 10 The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts.**
- 11 All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.**
- 12 For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help.**
- 13 He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death.**
- 14 He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight.**
- 15 Long may he live! May gold from Sheba be given him. May people ever pray for him and bless him all day long.**
- 16 Let grain abound throughout the land; on the tops of the hills may it sway. Let its fruit flourish like Lebanon; let it thrive like the grass of the field.**
- 17 May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed.**
- 18 Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds.**
- 19 Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.**
- 20 This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.**

I cannot read this psalm without hearing that magnificent music to which this poem was sung in the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands. The melody has the ancient beauty of a Gregorian chant.

This psalm is the last one of the second collection of psalm in the book, comprising the psalms 42-72; it bears the name of Solomon. Some commentators believe that the subscript should read "For Solomon" instead of "Of Solomon." *Adam Clarke's Commentary* says: "The title li-Sh^a lomoh..., we translate, A Psalm for Solomon. The Chaldee says, 'By the hand of Solomon, spoken prophetically.' The Syriac, 'A Psalm of David, when he had constituted Solomon king.' All the other versions attribute it to Solomon himself. But in the conclusion of the Psalm it appears to be attributed to David. 'The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.' It is most probably a Psalm of David, composed in his last days, when he had set this beloved son on the throne of the kingdom. 'Then,' says Calmet, 'transported with joy and gratitude, he addressed this Psalm to God, in which he prays him to pour out his blessings on the young king, and upon the people. He then, wrapped up in a divine enthusiasm, ascends to a higher subject; and sings the glory of the Messiah, and the magnificence of his reign. Hence, it is that we may see in this Psalm a great number of expressions which cannot relate to Solomon, unless in a hyperbolic and figurative sense; but, applied to Christ, they are literally and rigorously exact.' " It could, however, also be that Solomon wrote the psalm, either for himself, or for his son Rehoboam.

In general, the psalm is considered to be messianic psalm, describing the person of Jesus Christ. In order to study the psalm, however, it seems better to read it, initially, as a prayer of Solomon for himself. The poem could be based on Solomon's dream at Gibeon.⁵⁶⁵ There he had asked the Lord for wisdom to rule the nation of Israel. Here he prays for a sense of justice and compassion. Those elements are also a demonstration of wisdom. In all of this, of course, Solomon was a clear picture of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁶⁵ See I Kings 3:5-14

Wisdom is a purely divine attribute. The devil has knowledge and he is sly, but he possesses no wisdom. Wisdom is related to justice and love. We could write as subtitle above this psalm: "A Prayer for Wisdom."

The first thing Solomon asks for in this prayer is justice and righteousness. The very fact that he prays for those things proves that he realized that they can only be obtained from God. He asks for God's justice and righteousness. Outside God there is no justice or righteousness, because they are expressions of God's character. Justice and righteousness are means to be used by man to carry out the task he received as bearer of the image of God. Originally, in the mandate God gave to Adam this did not include ruling over fellow human beings. Authority of one man over another is an accommodation to sin in which man and creation have fallen. A prayer for justice and righteousness implies, therefore, that the whole of creation will be brought back into a living relationship with God. This prayer rose up to God out of a world that is disrupted by sin. Solomon says to God: "What can I do to help this situation?"

As king over Israel, God's chosen people, Solomon occupied an unusual position. We tend to think that this prayer has little or no connection with us and the world we live in. What would we be able to accomplish to change the world? Yet, God made us to be kings and priests in Jesus Christ. We may have little or no input in political decisions, as Solomon had, but God wants us to influence the world in which we live. When D. L. Moody heard someone say: "There is no limit to what God do with a man who is fully dedicated to Him," he responded by saying: "By the grace of God, I will be that man!" In that sense this psalm is applicable to each one of us. If we surrender to God in perfect obedience, His justice and righteousness will influence the world through us. We can apply this in a practical way in certain situations by asking: "What would Jesus do?"

Justice and righteousness begin at home. God's righteousness has to be reflected, first of all, in our personal conduct; otherwise there can be no question of influencing others. A corrupt government official ought to be a contradiction in terms. The point of Jesus' parables in Matthew 13 is that the Word of God is sown in a man's heart and bears fruit. Then man, who is transformed by that Word, is sown himself into the world in order to influence the world by being what he ought to be. It is the Word of God in us that applies justice and exercises righteousness. No one can do that in his own strength. Solomon says here in other words that if God does not give him justice and righteousness he will not be able to be a good king over Israel.

It seems strange that, in this context, he speaks of "your afflicted ones," or "your poor" as the NKJV renders it. We tend to think that what the poor need first of all is help on a social level. But Solomon touches the heart of the matter by stating that the poor are, primarily, in need of justice and righteousness. Their condition, after all, is due to the injustice in the world.

The immediate result of the exercise of justice is that the mountains will be covered with prosperity or peace. The Hebrew word used here is *shalom*. The first suggestion in this verse is that there is a relationship between the land and its inhabitants. God says that if the people sin, the land they live on will vomit them out.⁵⁶⁶ In this psalm the land embraces its population. Peace lies upon the tops of the mountains like a cloud coverage or like a blanket of snow. The Bible teaches that there is a fixed sequence of, first, righteousness then peace. As the author of the Hebrew epistle says about Melchizedek: "First, his name means 'king of righteousness'; then also, 'king of Salem' means 'king of peace.'⁵⁶⁷ Peace that is not founded on righteousness is a false peace. We see this ascending line: righteousness on the hills and peace covering the top of the high mountains. This peace has moral contents: it means both the absence of war, as well as prosperity and physical health. It is *shalom*!

But we should not lose ourselves in a utopia. Sin has not yet been eliminated lock, stock, and barrel. The land is still crawling with oppressors that have to be crushed. Behind the scenes is the roaring lion, that wants to murder men, and tear them to pieces. This psalm, therefore, is, more than anything else, a cry for the coming of the Messiah.

In the first verse, God was addressed; in vs. 4 it is the king. Sun and moon are recurring figures in this psalm. The moon is mentioned again in vs. 7, and the sun in vs. 17. We find in these figures a suggestion of, both eternity, as well as the limitations of time. "He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon," refers to time without end, as does "through all generations." But "till the moon is no more" points in the opposite direction.

The NIV renders vs. 5 with: "He will endure as long as the sun..." The NKJ and most older versions read here: "They shall fear You as long as the sun and moon endure...." The Hebrew word *yare'* is

⁵⁶⁶ See Lev. 18:25; 20:22

⁵⁶⁷ Heb. 7:2

defined by *Strongs Definitions* with: “to fear; ... to revere.” This kind of fear falls under the same category as the fear of God. It is not fright, but reverence. The image here points to the reality of Christ. The rain in vs. 6 has to be seen against the background of an arid country. Moses uses the same image in his farewell speech: “Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.”⁵⁶⁸ So: “He will be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth,” probably, refers to the speaking of the king. It would be a very appropriate picture of the Sermon on the Mount of our Lord Jesus Christ. The result is a great flourish of righteousness personified in the lives of people who are called “the righteous.” The result of the speaking of God’s Word is the transformation of human lives. Personal sanctification also means the end of interpersonal conflicts. A person who has made his peace with God and who lives in harmony with himself will also love his brothers and sisters.

The rule of the king, which is described in the verses 8-11, therefore, is not colonialism or imperialism, but it is the result of voluntary obedience of people who, on the basis of love, place themselves under the authority of Christ. The seas are, probably, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and the river is the Euphrates. They represent the whole world. It is not clear why the desert tribes are put on the same line with the enemies. *The Tyndale Commentary* thinks that the desert tribes are nonhuman beings. The Hebrew word *tsiyiy* means, according to *Strongs Definitions*: “a desert-dweller, i.e. nomad or wild beast.” The phrase is not meant to be flattery; it could be portraying demons. Tarshish, Sheba, and Seba are, probably, references to the ends of the earth as known at that time. The crux of this stanza is formulated in vs. 11 where all the kings and nations bow down before the great king, the Messiah, to serve Him. Some, like the demonic powers, do it grudgingly, others wholeheartedly, bringing presents.

The second part of this psalm, beginning with vs. 12, emphasizes the compassion and deep emotional tenderness of the king. He is not someone who “is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.” The author of the Hebrew epistle says about Christ: “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.”⁵⁶⁹ The little word “for” links this stanza with the previous one. The help the king offers to the poor is stimulated by both his compassion and his power. The Apostle Paul establishes the relationship between the obedience to death of our Lord Jesus Christ and His exaltation. He says: “He humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.”⁵⁷⁰ Christ humbled Himself to show His love for the afflicted and the lost.

The afflicted, or the poor, are, of course, not only, and not even primarily, the poor in the material sense of the word, but “the poor in spirit.” They are the people who confess their sins and appear before God as beggars. The help that the king tenders is put in a legal framework. The person who cannot afford to pay for a good lawyer receives legal assistance from God’s advocate, the Paraclete.⁵⁷¹

Solomon was, in his time, the highest court of justice. In our modern age, it would be impossible for the same person to be, at the same time, the defense lawyer and the judge. In that event court cases would be won before they began. Yet, such is the case in God’s dispensation for us. Paul emphasizes this when he says: “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.”⁵⁷²

All of this proves that the forgiveness of our sins is, basically, a legal problem. It is a very comforting thought to realize that the One who has compassion with us is also the One who has the power to do something about it. In one of Winston Churchill’s books: *The History of the Second World War*, entitled *Their Finest Hour*, he describes a visit to one of the bombed out quarters of London. He is deeply moved by the sight of the suffering people, and he says that it was good he had the authority to do something for the ones that were hit so hard. The hymn writer says: “What His love wants to accomplish is not denied by His power.”

⁵⁶⁸ Deut. 32:2

⁵⁶⁹ Heb. 4:15

⁵⁷⁰ Phil. 2:8,9

⁵⁷¹ See John 14:16

⁵⁷² Rom. 8:31-34

Salvation does not always come in the form we would like. The phrase: “for precious is their blood in his sight,” can be taken in two ways. It can mean that human life is precious to God and that He does not lightly allow His children to be put in a situation of danger. It also means that, if a person dies for the sake of the kingdom, it weighs heavily with the Lord. The psalmist says elsewhere: “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.”⁵⁷³ There is more at stake than our staying alive or not. Sometimes we are saved through death. Solomon did not undergo death in behalf of his subject, as Jesus Christ, our Lord, did. In that respect reality is much greater than the image in this psalm.

Vs. 15 speaks about eternal life, which, at that time, was still out of man’s reach. The longing for eternal life was expressed in pleas such as: “O king, live forever!”⁵⁷⁴ But no one would have considered taking those words literally in that period. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that Jesus became High Priest “on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.” We read: “And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”⁵⁷⁵ Our king passed through death and can never die again. For people who are still destined to die and for whom death is still the last enemy, the assurance that the risen Lord is our king is the greatest comfort that can be imagined.

Glory is represented with the image of gold. The gold of Sheba must have been the highest quality of gold in Solomon’s days. But if glory has to be imported from another country, it has little significance. We see, however, in Revelation that man adds to God’s existing glory; as for instance in: “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.”⁵⁷⁶ We may not understand how this is possible, but this is what the Bible says. As human beings we usually do not consider ourselves to possess glory. But how could we bring the gold of Sheba unless we are sitting on a gold mine? Evidently, God’s glory awakens in us the glory that has been dormant within us since creation, and which was rendered inactive by sin. Where else does that crown come from, the one we will cast at His feet? Eternity will have more than one surprise for us. One of the surprises will be what we find in ourselves.

Another of these surprises will be the prayers we send up for our Lord. Vs. 15 reads: “May people ever pray for him and bless him all day long.” We thought He would pray for us! Evidently, prayer is reciprocal! C. S. Lewis, in his Narnia book *The Silver Chair* captures this mystery when Aslan says to Eustace: “Let us be kind to one another!” This implies that it also has to come from our side! The same truth is valid for the blessing. This is expressed in the blessing the priest pronounced on the people in the Old Testament: “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.”⁵⁷⁷ The writer to the Hebrews explains that “the lesser person is blessed by the greater.”⁵⁷⁸ The pronouncing of a blessing elevates one person above the other. How then can a man bless God? Yet the Apostle Paul says: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”⁵⁷⁹ This reversal of roles opens a wellspring of riches for us. Man can, of course, never be more than God, but God’s blessing promotes us to a level of equality with Him, which is an overwhelming thought. It is also a dangerous thought, which may have been the cause of the fall of Lucifer, who was not careful enough in dealing with this principle. This may be the reason why, at the end of times, Jesus Himself will subject Himself to the Father, as the Apostle Paul says: “When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.”⁵⁸⁰ This will be the essence of all glory: “God all in all.” This touches upon the mystery of all mysteries. The more we give up, the more we receive.

It could be that in the prayer: “Let grain abound throughout the land; on the tops of the hills may it sway,” what is meant is not grain but people. The swaying harvest is then an image of a great increase of population, both in the countryside as well as in the cities. The Old Testament saw in families with a great

⁵⁷³ Ps. 116:15

⁵⁷⁴ Dan. 2:4

⁵⁷⁵ Heb. 7:15-17

⁵⁷⁶ Rev. 1:5,6. See also ch. 4:11; 5:12

⁵⁷⁷ Num. 6:24-26

⁵⁷⁸ See Heb. 7:7

⁵⁷⁹ Eph. 1:3 (NKJ)

⁵⁸⁰ I Cor. 15:28

number of children an expression of God's blessing. The next verse continues this thought. The name of the man who dies without children is forgotten. The remembrance of the name of an ancestor was seen in ancient Egypt as proof that the person continued to live after his death. It could be that the Jewish philosophy of life was also influenced by this belief. The Holy Spirit, however, uses the words: "May his name endure forever" as a prophecy about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Name of Jesus has to be made known over the whole world; in the words of Paul: "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."⁵⁸¹ Those are the truth expressed in these verses.

The doxology of the verses 18 and 19: "Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen" ends the second section of the Book of Psalms, which began with Ps. 42. This is the most elaborate doxology used to close any section of the book, except for Ps. 150, which, as a whole, can be considered to be a doxology. The other doxologies are: "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen." in Ps. 41:13; "Praise be to the LORD forever! Amen and Amen." in Ps. 89:52, which is the shortest of all, and "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, 'Amen!' Praise the LORD." in Ps. 106:48.

In these verses God is addressed as LORD, YHWH, Elohim, the Elohim of Israel. He is the God of self-revelation, the God of the covenant, and the God of redemption; the God who calls Himself: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."⁵⁸² Not only does God give His Name to people but He takes their name as His own!

The surprise in this doxology is the phrase: "who alone does marvelous deeds." The devil can also perform miracles. The psalmist, obviously, defines "marvelous deeds" as acts of God for the redemption and healing of man. They stand for healing of the results of sin. They are not merely a suspension of the laws of nature but God's intervention in a sinful world. God's marvelous deeds prove that we do not live in a closed system in this world.

The Hebrew word used is *pala'*. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says about this word: "Pala' is used primarily with God as its subject, expressing actions that are beyond the bounds of human powers or expectations. This idea is well expressed by the psalmist: 'This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes' <Ps. 118:23>. Deliverance from Egypt was the result of God's wondrous acts: 'And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in [it]...' <Exod. 3:20>. Praise is constantly due God for all His wonderful deeds <Ps. 9:1>. At the same time, God does not require anything of His people that is too hard for them <Deut. 30:11>. Although something may appear impossible to man, it still is within God's power: 'If it be marvelous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvelous in mine eyes? saith the Lord of hosts' <Zech. 8:6>."

The psalmist does not specify the "marvelous deeds." But an Israelite did not have far to go to find illustrations. The ten plagues that accompanied the exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea, the journey through the desert, and the entrance into Canaan are monuments of God's deeds in the history of the world. For us, God's marvelous deeds in this context are shadows of the facts of salvation in Christ, to which we owe our redemption and rehabilitation.

This doxology also tells us that the life of a child of God is not dull and boring. A relationship with God imparts to our lives a supernatural character. It makes life full of surprises. One never knows when God will act. Our life with Him is unpredictable. The life of a Christian is, "qua character," not a normal life in the accepted sense of the word.

Vs. 19 speaks of the glory of God's Name and of His glory on earth. The Name of the Lord stands for who He is: His being, His character. At various places in the Scriptures, we read that God is being praised by the heavenly beings. Isaiah describes how the Seraphs are calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."⁵⁸³ Ezekiel does not mention voices as he describes the same kind of vision Isaiah had.⁵⁸⁴ The Apostle John recites in detail the uninterrupted praise that rises up before God in heaven.⁵⁸⁵ When the psalmist prays: "Praise be to his glorious name forever" he

⁵⁸¹ Phil. 2:9-11

⁵⁸² Ex. 3:6

⁵⁸³ Isa. 6:3

⁵⁸⁴ See Ezek. 1:1-28

⁵⁸⁵ See Rev. 4:8-11; 5:9-14

does not ask for something new. His intention is to demonstrate that praise of God ought not to be exclusively the task of angels and archangels but that humans should participate in this also. His prayer is akin to the “hallowed be Your name” in the “Our Father.”⁵⁸⁶

The main point is man’s awareness of the character and glory of God and his reaction to this discovery in praise and adoration. The tragedy of this world is that man has become deaf and blind to the reality of God. “Praise be to his glorious name forever” is, in the first place, a prayer for healing. We all have to come to the discovery Jacob made when, at Bethel, he confessed: “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”⁵⁸⁷

“Amen and Amen” is the great and final confirmation of the above. Our Lord Jesus Christ uses these words several times in John’s Gospel.⁵⁸⁸ The NIV renders the words with “I tell you the truth.” The KJV says: “Verily, verily.” In the use of everyday language this comes closest to the pronouncement of an oath.

⁵⁸⁶ See Matt. 6:9

⁵⁸⁷ Gen. 28:16

⁵⁸⁸ See John 1:51;3:3,5,11;5:19,24,25;6:26,32,47,53;
8:34,51,58;10:1,7;12:24;13:16,20,21,38;14:12;16:20,23, and 21:18.