

**BOOK THREE****PSALM 73 – 89****PSALM SEVENTY-THREE**

A psalm of Asaph.

- 1 *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.*
- 2 *But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.*
- 3 *For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*
- 4 *They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.*
- 5 *They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.*
- 6 *Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.*
- 7 *From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.*
- 8 *They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression.*
- 9 *Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.*
- 10 *Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.*
- 11 *They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"*
- 12 *This is what the wicked are like-- always carefree, they increase in wealth.*
- 13 *Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.*
- 14 *All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.*
- 15 *If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.*
- 16 *When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me*
- 17 *till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.*
- 18 *Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin.*
- 19 *How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!*
- 20 *As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.*
- 21 *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,*
- 22 *I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.*
- 23 *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.*
- 24 *You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.*
- 25 *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.*
- 26 *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*
- 27 *Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.*
- 28 *But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.*

This psalm is the first in a series of eleven psalms that carry the name of Asaph (Psalms 73 – 83). In the previous book, there was one, Psalm 50.

Asaph was one of the prophets who, together with Heman and Jeduthun, had been appointed to conduct the music in the temple. At the bringing over of the ark to Jerusalem, we read: "David left Asaph and his associates before the ark of the covenant of the LORD to minister there regularly, according to each day's requirements."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones published a series of sermons on this psalm under the title *Trial of Faith*. On the basis of vs. 15, ("If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have betrayed your children") he believes that Asaph presents us in this psalm, for the greater part, an unspoken prayer. He gives us a glimpse of the struggle of his soul that had never been put into words. This is an interesting and very plausible theory.

According to Lloyd Jones, the psalmist opens with a conclusion: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." It is through his inner turmoil that he has come to the conviction that God is good. He speaks from the vantage point of a victory, and from a pure heart. In the sixth beatitude, Jesus says: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."<sup>2</sup> One who had seen God wrote this psalm.

<sup>1</sup> I Chr. 16:37

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 5:8

The opening verse also contains the confession that the struggle described in this psalm was the result of an impure heart. The thoughts that went through Asaph's head were impure thoughts. Usually, when we speak of "impure thoughts" we give the term a sexual connotation. In this psalm, though, the impurity shows itself in a critical and jealous attitude, which distorts reality.

Asaph's question is never answered, but he does come to the conclusion that he had looked at reality from the wrong perspective. Seen from the right viewpoint, the questions disappear. His conclusion, therefore, is that God is good and that the condition to see this is a pure heart.

The verses 2 and 3 are a confession, not from one who fell into sin, but from one who was tempted to sin. The words "almost" and "nearly" show that the psalmist had begun to slide down, but he did not fall. The sliding and slipping of the feet presupposes that the author was walking on a path. The immediate result of sin is that progress is halted. Jealousy hinders spiritual growth. We have no business to judge and analyze the lives of other people, except in cases where this is part of our job description. A teacher, for instance, should evaluate his pupils to a certain extent, an employer his employees, and parents their children. But that is quite different from our general tendency to compare other people to ourselves. If we give in to this, we immediately use a double standard. On a moral level, we almost always consider ourselves better than others, but materially the others always seem to get better deals than we do.

The context of the psalm suggests that the use of the term "wicked" is justified. The Hebrew word is *rasha* which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* as "morally wrong; a bad person." The KJV occasionally renders it with "ungodly." The Apostle Paul tells the church in Corinth what to do with the wicked who belong to the church and those who do not belong: "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. 'Expel the wicked man from among you.'"<sup>3</sup> If Asaph had listened to the Apostle Paul, he would never have written this psalm!

The psalmist does not, however, spend much time and energy about the moral aspect of his comparison; he concentrates particularly on the material discrepancy. This lack of balance causes the tension. When, at the end of the psalm the equilibrium is reestablished, the questions have all melted away.

The fact that the comparison awakens jealousy in Asaph's heart reveals more about Asaph than about the people he judges. Deep in his heart, he harbors the notion that physical well-being and material prosperity are more important than fellowship with God. At least, that is what was in his mind when he wrote this psalm. He also supposes that spiritual fellowship ought to bring about material advantage. In vs. 13 he comes to the conclusion that his spiritual relationship with the Lord has not produced the fruits he expected: "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence."

From the description of the wicked, we understand Asaph's concept of the righteous. That which ought to have been positive is described as negative and vice versa. In Asaph's mind, the righteous should always go through life without any problems; every child of God ought always to be in perfect health. But experience teaches him that such is not the case.

We may assume that Asaph had based his conclusions upon some isolated cases only. Had he done an in depth study of a large segment of the population, he would, probably, have found that the differences between the righteous and the wicked, in the realm of physical well-being and economic prosperity, were not great. Sickness and health, poverty and riches are found among all people. Some righteous have healthy bodies. The difference among the groups lies in their reaction to well-being and prosperity, or the lack of it. A person who lives without God often has the notion that his good health is the result of his own endeavors. Before we comment on this mentality, we have to remind ourselves that Asaph fell in a trap of superficiality that believes that it would be good for a Christian to go through life without storms, or suffering, or tension. Evidently, the formation of character is not important to him. The German poet Goethe said: "A talent is formed in quietness, a character in the storms of life."

The basis of Asaph's philosophy of life is that the world of men should be either black or white: piety should immediately receive its reward and sin should be punished without delay.

The psalmist paints a vivid picture of the attitude of the wicked. They are proud people who do not recoil from violence. A member of the Jehovah Witness sect told me once that the phrase: "Therefore pride is their necklace" was a reference to the clerical white collar. The RSV renders vs. 7 with: "Their eyes swell out with fatness, their hearts overflow with follies." In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight quotes a humorous translation of vs. 7 by G. R. Driver: "They have bright little pig's eyes gleaming maliciously out of fat puffy cheeks." The problem of Asaph's generalization is that it can be applied to only a very few people, but these are Asaph's unspoken thoughts about his fellowmen. It is true that there is

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<sup>3</sup> I Cor. 5:12,13

much evil and malevolence in the world, but not all evil men look like little pigs. Some scoundrels make a very civilized impression and, on the other hand, there are righteous people, who are full of neighborly love and who, yet, have not been blessed with a handsome exterior. Asaph seems to be guilty of indulging in bad fantasies. As we said before, these verses tell us more about Asaph than about the wicked.

It remains true, of course, that, in spite of this generalization, human beings tend to oppress one another. A person who does not recognize God in his life is also arrogant in his relationship to his fellowmen.

Vs. 10 is translated in the NIV with: "Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance." The Hebrew text is difficult to render correctly and has puzzled translators. The Hebrew Interlinear Bible reads: "So shall return His people there and waters of a full (cup) (is) drained by them." The RSV renders the verse with: "Therefore the people turn and praise them; and find no fault in them."

*The Adam Clarke Commentary* comments on this verse: "There are very few verses in the Bible that have been more variously translated than this; and, like the man in the fable, they have blown the hot to cool it, and the cold to warm it. It has been translated, 'Therefore God's people fall off to them; and thence they reap no small advantage.' And, 'Therefore let his people come before them; and waters in full measure would be wrung out from them.' That is, 'Should God's people come before them, they would squeeze them to the utmost; they would wring out all the juice in their bodies.' The Chaldee has, 'Therefore, are they turned against the people of the Lord, that they may bruise and beat them with mallets; that they may pour out to them abundance of tears.' The Vulgate, 'Therefore shall my people return here, and days of abundance shall be found by them.' The Septuagint is the same. The Æthiopic, the Arabic, and the Syriac, nearly the same. The Hebrew text is ...: 'Therefore shall my people be converted, where they shall find abundance of waters.' That is, The people, seeing the iniquity of the Babylonians, and feeling their oppressive hand, shall be converted to me; and I shall bring them to their own land, where they shall find an abundance of all the necessaries of life. I believe this to be the meaning; and thus we find their afflictions were sanctified to them; for they obliged them to return to God, and then God caused them to return to their own land. The Vulgate translates..., 'abundance of waters,' by ..., 'and days of plenty;' for it has read yameey ..., days, for uwmeey, and waters. Almost all the Versions support this reading; but it is not acknowledged by any manuscript. The old Psalter is mutilated here."

TLB version of this verse sounds the most plausible with: "And so God's people are dismayed and confused and drink it all in." The underlying thought is, most likely, that people are taken in by the outward success they see and do not realize the moral implications of the methods that are used. That was how Hitler was able to sweep people off their feet with his oratory and why he had such a large following. Often people are so enthralled by the heroes they worship that they are prone to excuse their immoral conduct. At the core of the matter is judgment. If a man eliminates the Day of Judgment from his thinking the moral boundaries are gone. Dr. Mengele, the doctor of death, who decided which inmates would be sent to the gas chambers in Hitler's concentration camp Auschwitz, had convinced himself that there would be no Day of Judgment. This gave him the liberty to give free rein to his sadistic tendencies.

Most people do not realize that it would be very denigrating for man if judgment over his acts would be eliminated. If a person cannot be held responsible for his acts he loses the most essential part of his dignity.

The wicked in this psalm do not say that they are not responsible, but they believe that God is not omniscient; He does not have enough evidence at His disposal to condemn them. This theory is, if possible, even more damaging to man's status. If God is not omniscient then the knowledge of man who is created in His image has no foundation. Then there is no guarantee that man's knowledge has any intrinsic value. The basis of man's epistemology is gone. And if God's knowledge is not perfect and absolute, then there may be shortcomings in His other attributes also. This is the mistake the author Harold Kushner made in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He believes in a God who is good but who does not have the power to help people in their predicaments. There is no guarantee that a God who is not omnipotent will be perfectly good either. If God is not absolutely perfect in every respect He is not God. A person who does not reckon with a perfect God is a fool.

In the verses 13 and 14, the psalmist has come to the utmost depth of his despondency. This is the most dangerous point, both for a human being and for the devil. It is obvious that there was a strong demonic influence in the development of Asaph's thinking. Satan uses the flesh as a sounding board, and he is the one who inspired this train of thought. Here he has pushed Asaph to the edge of the abyss. At such a point a man can either fall in or step back. The devil has no power himself to throw man down. Suicide is, ultimately, man's own choice. At this point man may come to the conclusion that the thoughts he had been

thinking were not his own, but that he had been influenced by something outside himself. The devil seldom stays within his boundaries. He almost always goes too far. Here, he suggested to Asaph that holiness brings no profit.

“Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.” He says that righteousness does not always pay cash. Sometimes payment is postponed too long and, says he, “who knows whether there will be a payment?” Taken any further, we could come to the conclusion that sin is better than holiness; deceit is better than truth; hatred is better than love; death is better than life! Those conclusions follow each other in natural sequence. We find the temptation that is implicit in this psalm also described in several of the books by C. S. Lewis. His *Screwtape Letters* is based on the premise that there is demonic influence upon human thinking. This temptation of the mind is exposed by “The Green Lady” in his book *Perelandra*. In *The Silver Chair*, “the green witch” tries to intoxicate the thoughts of the children. Puddleglum’s sober minded conclusion is that, if Christian life is an illusion, the illusion is more pleasant to live with than the nihilism of the devil.

In the dialogue between God and Satan in the Book of Job, the devil tries to bring up the same thought as the one Asaph struggles with in this psalm: “Does Job fear God for nothing?”<sup>4</sup> Job’s religion had paid him handsomely, Satan insinuates. The only reason that Job seeks fellowship with God would be to prosper materially. Paul’s conclusion is: “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” To Timothy he writes: “If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”<sup>5</sup> Fellowship with God for the purpose of material gain is the worst form of prostitution that exists.

Asaph says that, not only has he not gained anything by trying to live a holy life, he has actually lost a lot in the process. We can clearly hear the devil’s sweet whisper here: “How difficult is daily life for you!” “God is always angry with you!” “How hard it is to get out of bed every day!” We can feel Asaph’s rheumatism and we can hear his bones crack. Satan has brought Asaph to the point of deep self-pity. I remember the testimony of a missionary lady at a mission’s conference. She had spent the whole year alone on a station, which had been a very discouraging experience and she had begun to pity herself. But when she realized what she was doing, she chased the devil away in the Name of Jesus; this victory made her joy in the Lord return immediately.

If impure thoughts creep into our head, the image of God becomes vague and we begin to be sorry for ourselves. We lose the concept that “Surely God is good to Israel.”

In verses 15 and 16, the psalmist begins to return to reality. He asks himself what he is doing. Asaph was a prophet, a man who received the Word of God and passed it on to others. We read about him: “David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brothers as singers to sing joyful songs, accompanied by musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals. So the Levites appointed Heman son of Joel; from his brothers, Asaph son of Berekiah; and from their brothers the Merarites, Ethan son of Kushaiah; the musicians Heman, Asaph and Ethan were to sound the bronze cymbals.”<sup>6</sup> And: “David, together with the commanders of the army (!), set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals.”<sup>7</sup> It is no wonder that Satan threw himself so violently upon such a prominent person in Israel. He was the soul of Israel’s songs of praise. The loss of his reputation would do immeasurable damage to Israel’s youth. This is the reason that he experienced such an intense crisis.

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<sup>4</sup> Job 1:9

<sup>5</sup> I Tim. 6:3-12

<sup>6</sup> I Chr. 15:16,17,19

<sup>7</sup> I Chr. 25:1

It is not clear whether vs. 16 pertains to the problem of the prosperity of the wicked or to the struggle in Asaph's own soul. It probably concerns the discrepancy between the affluence of the wicked and the poverty of the righteous, or rather, the question as to why sin is not punished without delay. God's mills turn too slowly for Asaph. As we saw before, the question is more a pretext than the contents of the problem. But Asaph does not understand this yet at this point.

The turning point of the psalm is vs. 17: "...till I entered the sanctuary of God." As a Levite, Asaph had more freedom to enter the sanctuary than the average Israelite. We read in Chronicles that he was allowed to stand before the ark: "He [king 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, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God."<sup>8</sup>

As we mentioned earlier, the presence of the Shekinah must have been a phenomenon that was observable by the human senses. Yet, the ark stood in the tabernacle and the temple without exercising any influence upon the moral conduct of the Israelites. It is, evidently, possible for man to dull his conscience, even in the very presence of God. Thus, it was possible that Judas could embezzle money while being in close relationship with the Lord Jesus. Unless the Holy Spirit dwells in our heart, the presence of God will not operate any change in us. Asaph's entering into the sanctuary had no salutary significance in itself. This is why the spiritual reality in which we live and the "confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus," as the writer to the Hebrews tells us,<sup>9</sup> is so much more glorious than anything Asaph could do. He could not go through the veil as we do. He could stand at the altar of incense with longing and rapture, but he could not go beyond that. If such a partial and incomplete approach had already had such a dramatic effect upon Asaph, what about us who can stand before the very throne of God?

Lloyd Jones draws the conclusion from this verse, among other things, that it is profitable for a person to attend church services. Seeing other people who exhibit hope in God places our problems in a different perspective, he says. This is, of course, not the most important lesson we can learn, but it is good not to overlook this aspect. Fellowship with fellow believers is a necessary supplement to our fellowship with the Lord. It makes us realize that we are not the only members of the body of Christ. We sometimes need to rediscover this. Fellowship with others, however, without a personal, intimate relationship with the Lord has no value whatsoever. That would make us like an amputated member of the body of Christ. If the life of Christ does not flow through us there will be no bond with other members either.

The awareness of God's presence immediately places Asaph's problems in the right perspective. Evidently, to begin with, Asaph began to think about the way his own life would end. Then he made a comparison between what awaited him and what was in store for the wicked. Ultimately, every man will be judged according to the measure of God's glory. Paul says: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>10</sup> If the righteous fall short, how much more the wicked! This must have been part of Asaph's meditation in the presence of God. It is the glory of God which is the measuring rod of man's conduct, and it puts everything in the right perspective. If a person goes through life without God, he has nothing left at the moment of death. I do not mean that his soul will be annihilated but the only thing left will be hopelessness and despair when all else in life falls away. But the Book of Proverbs says: "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."<sup>11</sup> For the man without God darkness will increase. Proverbs continues with: "But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble."<sup>12</sup>

As the awareness of God's presence increases (which is the essence of the psalmist's entering into the sanctuary), he understands better what is important in life and what is not. Health and prosperity have no value whatsoever without fellowship with God. Mark the end of a man's life! The way we die demonstrates how we have lived. Over against the fading away into nothingness of the wicked stands Paul's flamboyant testimony: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

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<sup>8</sup> I Chr. 16:4-6

<sup>9</sup> Heb. 10:19

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>11</sup> Prov. 4:18

<sup>12</sup> Prov. 4:19

Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."<sup>13</sup>

No doubt, Asaph did not intend to sound comical when he says: "As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies," but it does sound humorous. God, of course, does not sleep or have dreams, but the image is very suggestive. The idea that God would dream about us is an attractive anthropomorphism. We dream about what the lives of our children will be like, full of hope and anticipation of the future, and so, in Asaph's thoughts, God imagines what His children may become. The greatest disappointment to a parent is to see that his child fails in life. God expects to see the image of His Son in us. How great is His disappointment when He discovers the likeness of Satan. It is a terrible thought that God looks at some people with horror.

In verses 21 and 22, the psalmist comes to a deep confession of his guilt before God. Now that he sees reality, he wonders how it was possible that he was so foolish as to feel grieved, embittered, and senseless. Only animals are jealous of each other in such a manner. In the presence of God, the psalmist analyses himself as he was before he entered the sanctuary. His heart was grieved and his spirit embittered. Verses 21 and 22 are parallels. The bitter spirit is the same as being a brute beast. Asaph sees himself as God sees him. The implication is that if a lack of fellowship with God brings about this condition, intimacy with God will work the opposite. In the presence of God our bitterness changes into love and compassion for others. Bitterness is the predecessor of hatred, and hatred leads to murder. If, however, we have seen God's love for us in Jesus, we will be willing to give our lives for others. The Apostle John says: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers."<sup>14</sup> A sense of the presence of God should make us into people who are moved with compassion for the condition of other people. The rich and arrogant are also in need of God. When God's love flows through us it will give to us emotional equilibrium.

In vs. 18, Asaph had made the discovery that God placed the wicked on slippery ground, the same ground on which he had almost slipped himself. They fell, but he managed, by the grace of God, to keep standing. He had come to the realization of how hard it was to keep standing. Alone, he would never have managed. This perception surely modified his criticism of others.

The last part of this psalm, beginning with vs. 23, is one of the most precious parts of the whole Bible. In a vivid way, Asaph expresses what fellowship with God means to him. The "yet" with which the verse opens suggests Asaph's own amazement. He expected that God would reject him after the terrible things he had contemplated doing. He finds instead love and forgiveness. God's love for us is constant and unwavering. It has a stability, which is not subject to changes of mood. We do not always appreciate this stability. The father of the prodigal son said to his older boy: "My son, ... you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."<sup>15</sup> The younger son, who has lost everything and then found it again, knew how rich he was. The older son never realized what he possessed. Asaph understood the wonder of what he had, and he knew that he would never have to be separated from God again. This was the outcome of the temptation he had gone through. If the devil understood how useful he sometimes is, he would, probably, be less busy tempting us!

Asaph does not speak about the hereafter when he says: "I am always with you." The Interlinear Bible reads literally: "Nevertheless I {am} continually with thee." This meant that God was there, even when Asaph faced his temptation. In the Hebrew the verb "is" of "was" is, however, not used.

The phrase: "You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory" reminds us of the theme of the epistle to the Hebrews: "In bringing many sons to glory..."<sup>16</sup> The storm through which Asaph went was not only part of God's plan, it also demonstrated the need for the author of our salvation to lead us on the road to glory in order to come to our rescue. When left to himself, man will never be able to overcome temptations like Asaph faced. This is the reason God remained so close to Asaph. The testing was a part of God's holding his hand and leading him with His counsel.

We mentioned already, in connection with Asaph's description of the wicked, that we learned more about Asaph than about the godless. Asaph, also, learned more about himself than about the fate of the wicked. This was, evidently, God's intention in allowing this temptation to come to him. It is good for a

<sup>13</sup> II Tim. 4:7,8

<sup>14</sup> I John 3:16

<sup>15</sup> Luke 15:31

<sup>16</sup> Heb. 2:10<sup>a</sup>

person to come to the point where he says: “How in the world could I have thought such thoughts!” Our thoughts may be influenced, up to a certain point, by the Evil One but the thinking takes place in our own heads, and it is our own thinking. The discovery that we cannot even trust our own thoughts is shattering. We always tend to think of ourselves as being reliable, and we want God to think the same about us. We ought to pray: “God, please do not leave me to my own thoughts, because I will go wrong!”

We read in the Epistle to the Hebrews how deep the process of our sanctification goes, and what it has cost God to bring this about. “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”<sup>17</sup> Our High Priest Himself had to be made perfect through suffering, and we need His guidance on our pilgrimage to glory.

Vs. 24 reads: “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.” God’s guiding us with His counsel presupposes personal initiative and responsibility. God shows us the right way but He does not force us to walk on it. We have a free will and the choice is ours. If we allow Him to do so, He will guide us. The “counsel” also implies that it is not a matter of blind obedience. God gives us insight in the “why,” as far as our own experiences are concerned.

This verse is the clearest proof in the Old Testament that the believers did not think death was the end of everything. The Old Testament saint, not only, hoped for the resurrection of the body but he also had the certainty of entering immediately into glory at the end of his life on earth. Asaph does not even mention the process of dying in this context. At the end of the road on which God leads us, we will be taken up into glory.

Vs. 25 reveals that the essence of this glory is the person of God Himself. We often think of heaven as the place where we will be reunited with our loved ones who preceded us in death. Asaph’s ecstatic exclamation: “Whom have I in heaven but you?” does, of course, not mean that such a reunion will not take place. But it is good to remember that, unless God occupies the central place in our lives, all human relationships are without value. And we will not give this top priority to God in heaven if we have never done that on earth. This is in essence what Jesus calls “the first and greatest commandment”: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”<sup>18</sup> This love of God begins on earth. It is an act of the will as well as a choice; it involves the heart, the soul, and the mind. It is not asceticism in the common sense of the word. Paul clarifies to Timothy that forbidding marriage and enjoyment of food are things taught by demons. We read: “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”<sup>19</sup> Loving God supremely does not mean abstinence of all forms of pleasure, or even of loving others. It means that all our love and enjoyment is subjugated to our love for God. We may love everything and enjoy all that is in right relation with God. It is our love for God that gives meaning to everything else.

Our flesh and our heart will fail; we are mortal men. As we grow older, our earthly tent will be broken down slowly. But this does not have any bearing on God or on our relationship with Him. It seems, however, that this verse intends to bring out the contrast between the condition of the psalmist and the glowing health of the wicked in the verses 4 and 5. Even if our body weakens and our hearts cannot keep up any longer, this does not change the foundation of our lives.

The word “heart” occurs twice in vs. 26. Obviously, in “my heart may fail” the psalmist speaks about the organ in his chest that pumps the blood through his body, but in “God is the strength of my heart” he, evidently, speaks about the heart as the seat of his emotions. If, in the first instance, “heart” stands also for the emotions and the seat of thought, it would mean that, even if we start losing our intellectual grip on the things of life, God remains the same to us. It could also mean that our standing up or not standing up under temptation, such as Asaph faced, does not change the faithfulness of God toward us. This is expressed in the rendering by TLB: “My health fails; my spirits droop, yet God remains! He is the strength of my heart; he is mine forever!”

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<sup>17</sup> Heb. 2:10

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 22:37,38

<sup>19</sup> I Tim. 4:1-5

Asaph calls God “the strength of my heart.” The Hebrew word translated by “strength” is *tsuwr* which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* as “a cliff (or sharp rock, as compressed); generally, a rock or boulder; figuratively, a refuge...” The word is often used in the psalms as a refuge but also as a foundation. We read, for instance: “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.”<sup>20</sup> Or: “For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.”<sup>21</sup> When Asaph entered the sanctuary, he took refuge in God who was the rock for him. He is the rock that was cleft, as the hymn writers says: “Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee.” For us, New Testament Christians, this reminds us of the price that was paid at Golgotha so that, in times of temptation, we could flee to God and find rest for our souls. If our feet almost slip, God reminds us that He is the foundation of our lives.

He is also “our portion,” that is our inheritance. That is the decisive factor in the comparison with the prosperity of the wicked. For Asaph, as a Levite, this has special significance. The Levites did not receive any physical inheritance in Canaan. The Scriptures tell us: “The LORD said to Aaron, ‘You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites. I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tent of Meeting.’”<sup>22</sup> As Asaph entered the sanctuary, he immediately understood what it meant that the Lord had said: “I am your share and your inheritance,” and he realized how enormously rich he was and that, in comparison with his riches, the possessions people accumulate on earth are worthless trinkets.

Jesus said about this truth all there is to be said: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”<sup>23</sup>

The great miracle of the Bible is not that God saves us from the power of sin and death, but that He gives Himself to us as our eternal portion. Even in the very concept of an inheritance, we find a reference to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. An inheritance is only obtained in case of death. In our fellowship with the Lord, we not only receive what He possesses, but also what He is. If we are His, then He is ours. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth: “... whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”<sup>24</sup>

If, therefore, we compare the prosperity of the wicked with our immeasurable, eternal riches in Christ, jealousy on our part is absolutely out of place. Our prosperity is, ultimately, determined by the distance between God and us. The farther away from Him we are, the worse off we are. Vs. 27 says: “Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.” The Hebrew word translated with “unfaithful” is *zanah*, which *Strongs Definitions* defines: “to commit adultery (usually of the female, and less often of simple fornication, rarely of involuntary ravishment); figuratively, to commit idolatry (the Jewish people being regarded as the spouse of Jehovah).” The NKJ, therefore, translates this sentence: “You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry.” Our relationship with God ought to be characterized by the love and faithfulness in a marriage. God expects us to give Him the love that is due to Him. If we fail to do this, but give our love to someone or something else, we commit spiritual adultery.

This is the reason the Bible uses the word adultery for idol worship and greed. The Interlinear Bible reads literally: “Thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from Thee.” This implies that, originally, there was a relationship with God. When man fell into sin, he committed adultery. God had made a covenant of love with man, of which a human marriage is the image. Adam and Eve were unfaithful to God. Everyone who does not love God with his whole heart, and mind, and will commits adultery. This

<sup>20</sup> Ps. 18:2

<sup>21</sup> Ps. 27:5

<sup>22</sup> Num. 18:20,21

<sup>23</sup> Matt. 6:19-24

<sup>24</sup> I Cor. 3:22,23



makes God jealous. In connection with idol worship, God says in the Ten Commandments: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.”<sup>25</sup> The person who commits adultery destroys himself. It is a built-in law of nature that everything that is separated from its root dies. Man himself cut the tie that meant life to him. There is no need for God to destroy men.

“But as for me ...” Joshua uses the same words when he says: “But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”<sup>26</sup> But Asaph says more: “...it is good to be near God.” This speaks about the intimacy of a love relationship in which two people who love each other long to be together. In the same way there is a mutual longing for each other between God and the person who loves Him. Asaph mentions three things about his relationship with God: there is intimacy, protection, and witness. Elohim YHWH is his refuge. “I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge” means more than fleeing to God in times of need. It speaks about an exchange of vows like the pledges that are made during a wedding ceremony. Protection of the bride by the bridegroom is part of the vow. In our relationship with God, we are the female element. C. S. Lewis, in his book *That Hideous Strength*, says: “What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it.” We are “the bride of the Lamb.” Jesus protects us with His own blood. Intimacy cannot be separated from this protection.

The psalm ends as it began with the testimony of God’s goodness. Goodness is the essence of all God does. All His acts are motivated by love and goodness. A pure heart is needed to see this.

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<sup>25</sup> Ex. 20:5

<sup>26</sup> Josh. 24:15<sup>b</sup>

## PSALM SEVENTY-FOUR

*A maskil of Asaph.*

- 1** *Why have you rejected us forever, O God? Why does your anger smolder against the sheep of your pasture?*
- 2** *Remember the people you purchased of old, the tribe of your inheritance, whom you redeemed--Mount Zion, where you dwelt.*
- 3** *Turn your steps toward these everlasting ruins, all this destruction the enemy has brought on the sanctuary.*
- 4** *Your foes roared in the place where you met with us; they set up their standards as signs.*
- 5** *They behaved like men wielding axes to cut through a thicket of trees.*
- 6** *They smashed all the carved paneling with their axes and hatchets.*
- 7** *They burned your sanctuary to the ground; they defiled the dwelling place of your Name.*
- 8** *They said in their hearts, "We will crush them completely!" They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land.*
- 9** *We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be.*
- 10** *How long will the enemy mock you, O God? Will the foe revile your name forever?*
- 11** *Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them!*
- 12** *But you, O God, are my king from of old; you bring salvation upon the earth.*
- 13** *It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.*
- 14** *It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert.*
- 15** *It was you who opened up springs and streams; you dried up the ever flowing rivers.*
- 16** *The day is yours, and yours also the night; you established the sun and moon.*
- 17** *It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you made both summer and winter.*
- 18** *Remember how the enemy has mocked you, O LORD, how foolish people have reviled your name.*
- 19** *Do not hand over the life of your dove to wild beasts; do not forget the lives of your afflicted people forever.*
- 20** *Have regard for your covenant, because haunts of violence fill the dark places of the land.*
- 21** *Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace; may the poor and needy praise your name.*
- 22** *Rise up, O God, and defend your cause; remember how fools mock you all day long.*
- 23** *Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries, the uproar of your enemies, which rises continually.*

This psalm also bears the name of Asaph. It is easy to understand, however, why many commentators place the psalm during the Babylonian Captivity. It seems obvious that what we read is a clear description of the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. Yet, in our reading of Psalm 60, we saw that, during David's reign, much damage was caused by the invasion by an enemy. Those event were never recorded in the annals of Israel's history. If we take the title "a *maskil* of Asaph" (or as *The Adam Clarke Commentary* renders it: "A Psalm of Asaph, to give instruction"), seriously then this poem must deal with the attack by Edom, which is the subject of Psalm 60, or with a similar occasion.

In Asaph's days, the temple in Jerusalem did not yet exist. It is possible that Asaph was still alive when the temple was being built but this we do not know. If, however, we place this psalm in a later period, then none of the subtitles have any historical significance.

It is clear that the psalm speaks about a longer time span than one single attack. The reason for the writing of this psalm was no "hit-and-run" incident. The enemy came and caused considerable damage to the tent in which the ark had been placed. The damage was irreparable. We can image what this must have meant for the faithful ones in Israel. The tabernacle had been desecrated and, probably, idol images had been placed where the ark had stood. In the days of Samuel, when the Philistines had captured the ark and had placed it in the temple of Dagon, God had demonstrated His power over the idols, but in this case nothing happened.

Asaph is aware of the fact that there is a relationship between the attitude of the people, their relationship with God, and the revelation of God's power. He sees, therefore, in the destruction of the sanctuary not an indication that God has become weak but that He has rejected the people of Israel. He also shows insight in the meaning of, what he calls in vs. 9, "miraculous signs."

The ark and the tabernacle were images of God's revelation, pictures of a spiritual reality. The signs pointed to an actuality that lies beyond our visible world. Burning of the pictures does not diminish God, His character, or His omnipotence. But if God allows the desecration and destruction of the pictures, it means that something has gone wrong in the relationship between Him and His children.

The fact that the psalm opens with the question "why" seems to be another indication that the psalm was not written during the Babylonian captivity. None of the prophets of that time, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, asked the question as to why the temple had been destroyed.

We see in this psalm a symbolic representation of the crucifixion of our Lord. The feeling of being godforsaken and the deep darkness are, at least partly, characteristic of this psalm. The death of God's revelation on earth, which is the topic of this psalm, is a picture of Golgotha where the Lord of glory was hung on a cross of shame. The "why" of this psalm echoes the cry, "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabakhtani?"

There is a sharp contrast (or is it a paradox?) between this psalm and the beginning of Ps. 73. There, Asaph began with the conclusion: "Surely God is good to Israel." Here things have gone awry with Israel; the relationship with God still exists, they are still "the sheep of your pasture, the people you purchased of old, the tribe of your inheritance," but the wrath of God was kindled against them, apparently without reason. We find, therefore, no confession of sin in this psalm. There is a parallel with the book of Job. "Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" The question is not realistic. Absence of a confession does not always mean that there is nothing to confess. "Good People" is Harold Kushner's evaluation of himself. Yet, the Holy Spirit sometimes seem to say to us that it not always a punishment for our sins when the world around us collapses. God rarely punishes particular personal sins in that way. Jesus' death on the cross is, of course, a punishment for sin, but that punishment is on a much higher, cosmic level.

Asaph sees the destruction of God's sanctuary as a demonstration of God's wrath. Yet, the rejection of His inheritance consists more in what God inflicts upon Himself than in what He does to the people of Israel. We can, in a way, say that man identifies himself here with God. The problem here goes much deeper than it does in Ps. 73. Asaph wonders here how it is possible that the Almighty allows Himself to be treated in this way by His own creatures who have risen up against Him in revolt.

The world that collapses is the world of ultimate, eternal values. Asaph questions where man could then turn to determine the moral direction of his life. This turns out to be the contents of God's wrath, that God seemingly tells the people who want to serve Him to find their own way. Peter said once to Jesus: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."<sup>27</sup> But after having confessed this, he and the other disciples saw how the Holy One of God was seized by dirty sadistic hands and tortured until death, and they all took to flight. But then, who could know that the temple that was torn down would be rebuilt in three days? The person who sees this without understanding it becomes a prey of all sorts of guilt feelings.

But that does not matter. After all, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities."<sup>28</sup> It is true that our guilt plays an important part in all this, but not in the sense that Asaph understands it. God is in the process of resolving the problem of sin in a cosmic manner, which goes far beyond anything we can understand. It seems that, in spite of the covenant of love He made with us, He beats us and chases us away when, in reality, He is laying the foundation for our eternal salvation. Since we can only look at this matter from the underside, it is obvious that we cannot understand what goes on. Yet, Jesus, in His conversation with the two men on the road to Emmaus, had very little patience with this lack of understanding. We read: "He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!'"<sup>29</sup> They could have known, and so can we!

This psalm, therefore, is first of all a prophecy. The Holy Spirit inspired these words of Asaph's doubt and despair in a very sensitive way. The fact the Christ had to suffer these things and rise from the dead on the third day, and then enter His glory, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins has to be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem<sup>30</sup> is one of the most difficult lessons we can ever learn. The fact that Asaph did not understand that is recorded here for our consolation.

There are analogous situations also in the dispensation in which we live, which, sometimes, can mean the turning point in the lives of some people. Corrie ten Boom, for instance, received her call for world evangelization while in the Nazi concentration camp of Ravensbrück, a place where all human

<sup>27</sup> John 6:68,69

<sup>28</sup> Isa. 53:5

<sup>29</sup> Luke 24:25

<sup>30</sup> See Luke 24:26,27,45-47

values were being trampled under feet and where Jesus was daily being crucified. People in some atheistic countries must be able to identify with the despair and the hope Asaph expresses in this psalm.

Two words sum up the whole contents of this psalm: “why” in vs. 1, and “yet, or but” in vs. 12. The question “why” presupposes that creation and maintaining of creation is based upon the law of cause and effect. Without a concept of logical order the question makes no sense. If God were not a God of reason and if we were not reasonable creatures related to Him, it would be impossible that we would even look for a solution to any conflict.

The fact that the question receives no answer in this psalm does not mean that no answer exists. The word “yet” in vs. 12 indicates that Asaph has learned to live with the question. If there were no answers, there would be no questions either. This psalm deals, first of all, with an incongruity: God is the shepherd of the sheep; He is the good shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep. But the situation Asaph faces is as the one of the hired hand who abandoned the sheep and ran away.<sup>31</sup> This is exactly what Jesus said could not happen. The church, the bride, instead of being given in marriage, is being dragged away as an outcast and abandoned to a gang of rapists. At the place of God’s revelation, where He spoke to Moses, stands the enemy who roars out his blasphemous speech. It is as if the Antichrist has come and set himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God, and challenging God.<sup>32</sup> The lunacy of this world has reached its peak, and God does not do anything against it. In the mockery of Jesus, hanging on a cross, world history reached its deepest point.<sup>33</sup> But “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”<sup>34</sup> It is at this point that the powers and authorities were disarmed and made a public spectacle.<sup>35</sup> The ax that cut down the green wood brought about also Satan’s ultimate defeat; Satan cut off his own feet.

One fact that made this time the deepest point is that there are no signs, no prophets; God not only does not do anything to restrict the enemy’s power, He also does no longer speak to His children. Several times in the history of Israel, God’s revelation was no more than a memory of things past. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, Gideon could only say: “Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about...”<sup>36</sup> And when Samuel was still a young man, we read: “In those days the word of the LORD was rare.”<sup>37</sup> In most of those cases, God had ceased to speak because His children had ceased to listen. This, however, does not seem to be the case in this psalm. It is this combination of the victory of the enemy and of God’s silence that makes Asaph’s cry so heartrending.

The martyrs in heaven take up the cry “how long” in vs. 10. We read in Revelation: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”<sup>38</sup> They did not receive comfort. God answered them that things had to get worse before they could get better!

The answer is found in the context in which this scene is placed. The Lamb opened the fifth seal of the scroll that was in the hand of God. What happens is no surprise, but a part of God’s great strategy for the rooting out of evil. That is the answer that is the essence of the comfort given.

In the last verse of this stanza, vs. 11, Asaph pictures God with His hand in His bosom. In modern language we would say, He had His hands in His pockets. God’s right hand is the symbol of salvation. When Israel passed through the Red Sea, God’s right hand is mentioned four times in the song of Moses. But here, God looks more like a Napoleon with one hand on his back and one in his topcoat.

The second stanza opens with the words: “But you, O God, are my king...”; RSV: “Yet God my King...” This little word “but,” or “yet” provides the key to the understanding of the whole psalm. The possessive pronoun “my” is one of the most wonderful words in connection with Deity, and it gives a completely new meaning to this psalm. Asaph says not merely “God is King” but “God is *my* King.” The

<sup>31</sup> See John 10:10-15

<sup>32</sup> See II Thess. 2:3,4; Rev. 13:5

<sup>33</sup> See Matt. 27:39-44

<sup>34</sup> I Cor. 1:25

<sup>35</sup> See Col. 2:15

<sup>36</sup> Judg. 6:13

<sup>37</sup> I Sam. 3:1

<sup>38</sup> Rev. 6:9-11

fact that God is, in general, stronger than His enemies is not obvious at this point. But in Asaph's personal relationship to God, God is his King because Asaph acknowledges Him as such and he has surrendered himself to Him. This kind of surrender opens Asaph's eyes for the invisible world. On the level of the visible, one sees gangs of vandals who desecrate the place of God's revelation. But Asaph, like Isaiah, sees God enthroned above all this. The vandals may wreck the ornaments of the tabernacle on which the train of God's robe is draped,<sup>39</sup> but this does not shake the throne above in heaven.

Asaph draws a line from his vantage point to history, which is a very intelligent thing to do. He places the present in the right perspective. The person who knows from where he came, generally has little trouble to know where he is going. This fact provides no future for the man who believes that he descended from the apes. But if our king is the God of the history of salvation, then there is no reason for despair. God brings salvation upon the earth. The Interlinear Hebrew Bible reads literally: "working salvation in the midst of the earth." The Hebrew word *'erets* means "to be firm, the earth." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says: "The word often represents the whole surface of this planet and, together with the word 'heavens,' describes the entire physical creation and everything in it. This meaning is in its first biblical occurrence: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth' <Gen. 1:1>." The phrase could be translated: "...in the middle of the land." The examples given, however, go beyond Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The splitting open of the sea, no doubt, refers to the exodus, but the other illustrations deal with cosmic phenomena, of which we possess no historical records. We can only guess what is meant by: "It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert." Most commentators see this as a reference to mythology. It seems, however, doubtful that the inspired Word of God would occupy itself with mythological themes and treat them as if they were historical facts.

*The Tyndale Bible Commentary* believes the language to be symbolic to describe the redemption of Israel. I lean toward the theory expounded by Veliskowsky in his book *Worlds in Collision*, in which he sees Leviathan as the tail of the planet Venus which, he believes, entered our solar system as a comet, causing spectacular phenomena in the atmosphere of the earth. It is also possible that Leviathan stands here symbolically for Egypt. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* writes: "Leviathan might be intended here as a personification of the Egyptian government; and its heads, Pharaoh and his chief captains." It is clear that the psalmist speaks about awesome occurrences in nature, such as changes in the amount of water on earth, the revolutions of the sun and the moon, the earth's orbit, and the variations in the earth axle which governs the seasons. Compared to the invasion by a hostile tribe and the destruction of a building, such phenomena are events on a much higher level. Asaph understood that the destruction of the symbolic representation of God's omnipotence has no effect upon omnipotence itself. On the day the wild men were wielding axes to cut through a thicket of trees, the sun came up and went down as usual in order to prove that He who sustains all things by His powerful Word still sits on the throne.

There were, however, other results of this devastation: Israel was the instrument of God's revelation in this world, and Israel's faithfulness, or the lack of it is, of course, of great importance in connection with this revelation. The mocking by the enemy, in this case, is not based on the sinning of God's people, as in the case of David. After David's sin with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan said to him: "By doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt."<sup>40</sup> The enemy's contempt here is directed against the foolishness of the Gospel, and against a God who allows Himself to be imprisoned and crucified.

The image of the dove and the wild beasts in vs. 19 is particularly beautiful. In the Song of Solomon, the dove represents the bride.<sup>41</sup> Jesus speaks of the dove as an emblem of innocence.<sup>42</sup> This is the way, in Asaph's mind, God looks at the people He loves. How would it be possible for God to take something so tender and innocent and give it for food to wild animals? The Hebrew word *towr*, translated with "turtledove" is (according to *Strongs Definitions*) often as a term of endearment; it speaks of the blossoming love of young people, of a refreshingly happy young life. The only moment God surrendered a man who was perfect and pure to wild animals was at Golgotha. The haunts of violence of the enemy are particularly directed toward the love God is supposed to have for His children. The sadists of that time might have said to the people they tortured: "If your God is a God of love, how then is it possible for us to oppress and torture you?" This was the same kind of taunt that was launched at Jesus: "He trusts in God.

<sup>39</sup> See Isa. 6:1

<sup>40</sup> II Sam. 12:14

<sup>41</sup> See Song 2:14,5:2, 6:9

<sup>42</sup> Matt. 10:16

Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' <sup>43</sup> We know now that this kind of mockery brought on the defeat of the devil, but when Asaph wrote this poem it seemed as if evil had completely conquered good. The power of death was only broken on the third day.

In vs. 19 Asaph makes an appeal to God's love, in vs. 20 he reminds Him of His covenant, the marriage contract which God had signed with Israel and with the land. The latter verse also describes the activities of the powers of darkness: "haunts of violence," "the dark places of the land." Because the place of God's revelation was destroyed, people were disgraced or ashamed since their hope was not realized.

Vs. 22 reveals that the matter is one of justice that has to be defended in court. It seems strange that God would have to defend Himself. Asaph says that, since the Name of God had been mocked, He ought to rise up and clear Himself. The point is that God identifies Himself with His people. It was Israel who was attacked and oppressed, but Asaph is right; Jesus says: "... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."<sup>44</sup> Yet, God will not have to defend or justify Himself. In the case of God versus the enemy, God will be justified by His own creation. But in this psalm, Asaph does not speak about this ultimate rehabilitation. He does say, though, that what the enemy does to God's children, He does to God Himself. He is right: Whoever insults the image of God insults God Himself. Ultimately, that is the greatest insult man can do to himself.

We do not have to ask what this manifestation of evil means to Asaph, but what it means to God. What did God feel when the infants of Bethlehem were being massacred, and when Jesus hung on the cross? The nails of the cross pierced the Father's heart.

The tone of this psalm is best expressed in a quotation of Martin Luther, as is found in George Knight's *Commentary on the Psalms*: "I flung my sack before His door, and rubbed His ears with all His promises, so that He must hear me, if I ever were again to trust Him."

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<sup>43</sup> Matt. 27:43

<sup>44</sup> Matt. 25:40

## PSALM SEVENTY-FIVE

For the director of music. 'To the tune of "Do Not Destroy."  
A psalm of Asaph. A song.

- 1 *We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks, for your Name is near; men tell of your wonderful deeds.*
- 2 *You say, "I choose the appointed time; it is I who judge uprightly.*
- 3 *When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm. Selah*
- 4 *To the arrogant I say, 'Boast no more,' and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horns.*
- 5 *Do not lift your horns against heaven; do not speak with outstretched neck."*
- 6 *No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man.*
- 7 *But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.*
- 8 *In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.*
- 9 *As for me, I will declare this forever; I will sing praise to the God of Jacob.*
- 10 *I will cut off the horns of all the wicked, but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up.*

The subscript of this beautiful psalm ascribes the poem to Asaph without, however, mentioning any historical background. The content suggests that some political activities had taken place, on the national or international scene, in which some individuals had tried to enlarge their influence or improve their position. Some commentators see in the words "To the tune of 'Do Not Destroy' " a reference to a verse in Isaiah that reads: "This is what the LORD says: 'As when juice is still found in a cluster of grapes and men say, 'Don't destroy it, there is yet some good in it,' so will I do in behalf of my servants; I will not destroy them all.' "<sup>45</sup> They take Isaiah's quote then as a proverb or a little song, sung during the wine harvest. Asaph and Isaiah were not contemporaries; they were separated by several centuries. Whether a ditty from Asaph's time would have been able to maintain its place on the list of the "Top Ten" for two or three hundred years is, of course, questionable. If the supposition is correct that "Do Not Destroy" pertains to a popular tune about a miserable little grape, a tune to which the psalm had to be sung, it could be that the psalms speaks about a person who was passed up by someone else in his promotion, and who brings his disappointment about this to God.

We find the same subscript in Psalms 57,58, and 59. In those psalms, David found himself in narrow straits, being hunted down by Saul. There is also a certain relationship between this psalm and Psalm 73, where Asaph is jealous because of the prosperity of the wicked. Here, there is mention of people who were exalted or who exalted themselves, whilst the psalmist is left behind. This last point is not mentioned explicitly, but it is implied.

At the same time, the poem speaks about things much greater than enlargements of personal spheres of influence. The quaking of the earth and all its people places the problems on a cosmic level. But the principle is the same on the smaller and the larger scale. Both Hannah and Mary, in their respective hymns of praise, touch upon the same theme.<sup>46</sup> Hannah sings: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's; upon them he has set the world. ... those who oppose the LORD will be shattered. He will thunder against them from heaven; the LORD will judge the ends of the earth." And in Mary's Magnificat, we hear: "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty." Both hymns come from women who had met God, who lifted them up above the great and small jealousies of inter-human relations. In both cases, they were women who gave birth to a son who would change the course of history.

God's honor makes a man great, irrespective of his position in this world. In the words of Francis Schaeffer: "There Are No Little People."

The psalm begins with "We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks." The Hebrew word *yadah*, according to *Strong's Definitions*, literally means: "to use (i.e. hold out) the hand; physically, ... especially to revere or worship (with extended hands)." In the light of the theme of this psalm, this can be

<sup>45</sup> Isa. 65:8

<sup>46</sup> See I Sam. 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-56

taken as a sign of victory. We do not find any signs of jealousy of those who were better off, as in Ps. 73, but rather a celebration of God's sovereignty. In Hannah's hymn it was her pregnancy, and in Mary's the Incarnation that made the praise well up. In this psalm, we do not read whether there was a specific event that gave cause for the praise, but the outcome makes us presume that something happened to the poet that made him see human relations from the perspective of the sanctuary.

Jesus reacted in this way to the lack of understanding of His contemporaries. We read that He said: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."<sup>47</sup> If we can bring our disappointments to God with thanksgiving, jealousy will have little chance to take root in our hearts. Praise of God and thanksgiving leaves the devil without any ground to stand on.

Instead of the words "for your Name is near," the RSV reads: "we call on thy name." The Hebrew word used here is *qarob*, meaning "near." It is derived from *qarab* which is rendered in *Strong's Definitions* "to approach (causatively, bring near) for whatever purpose." So, calling upon the Name of the Lord is also a reasonable translation. The point is, of course, the experience of God's presence. In the light of God's omnipresence, it would make little sense to use those words to merely declare an objective truth. Asaph believed in the presence of the Lord on the basis of the miracles He had performed in the past. The telling of God's wonderful deeds is the testimony of history. Asaph's attitude is the opposite of Gideon's; it was Gideon who said to the Angel of the Lord: "Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?'"<sup>48</sup> Neither Asaph nor Gideon had seen those miracles himself, but Asaph believed in God's presence, while Gideon doubted. His faith was based on the Word of God.

The words in the verses 2-5, where God Himself speaks, contain, probably, a prophecy, which Asaph, or another prophet, had received. Trust in the Word of God forms a solid basis for the life of a person. The NIV translates vs. 2 with: "I choose the appointed time; it is I who judge uprightly," which is much clearer than the KJV's: "When I shall receive the congregation I will judge uprightly." The confusion stems from the different meanings of the Hebrew word *mowed*, which means, according to *Strong's Definitions*: "an appointment, i.e. a fixed time or season; specifically, a festival." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* gives a lengthy explanation of the various uses of the word as "time, place of meeting, and festival." The Dictionary says: "Of the three meanings, the appointed 'time' is most basic. The phrase 'tent of meeting' lays stress on the 'place of meeting.' The 'meeting' itself is generally associated with 'time' or 'place.' The Septuagint has the following translations of *mo'ed*: *kairos* ('time'), *eorte* ('feast; festival'). The English translators give these senses: 'congregation' (KJV, RSV, NASB, NIV); 'appointed time' (NASB); 'appointed feast' (RSV, NASB); 'set time' (RSV, NASB, NIV)."

From a theological viewpoint, one could object that "When I choose the proper time ..."<sup>49</sup> is not a fitting expression to attribute to the eternal God whose ordinances are eternal. The time God chose had already been fixed in eternity. The idea that God would be pressed for time because of man's impatience is inconceivable. Yet, the Bible teaches that Christ's return can be hastened by the preaching of the Gospel. This supposition was an important part of the theology of Dr. A. B. Simpson, based on Jesus' words: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."<sup>50</sup>

The Apostle Peter gives an excellent reason for the apparent postponement of God's judgments. He says: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."<sup>51</sup> In modern day preaching, the anticipation of God's judgment, the expectation of Christ's return, and the end of the world have almost completely receded into the background. Yet, God has set a fixed moment in time and space at which the divine court will convene and the world will be judged on the basis of God's righteousness.

Interestingly, the Apostle Paul defines the Gospel as the revelation of God's righteousness. We read in Romans: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"<sup>52</sup> In the context in which Paul puts

<sup>47</sup> Matt. 11:25,26

<sup>48</sup> Judg. 6:13

<sup>49</sup> (NKJ)

<sup>50</sup> Matt. 24:14

<sup>51</sup> II Pet. 3:9

<sup>52</sup> Rom. 1:17



it, the word righteousness means that God punished man's sin in Jesus Christ. For the person who puts his trust in Jesus, God's righteousness means forgiveness of personal sin, salvation, and rehabilitation. There is no reason to suppose that God's judging uprightly would have another meaning in this psalm. Only those who reject the Gospel will be held personally responsible for their acts.

The NIV renders vs. 3: "When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm." In the Interlinear Bible vs. 3 reads literally: "are dissolved the earth and the inhabitants thereof. I bear up the pillars of it." The KJV makes this unconditional by saying: "The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved: I bear up the pillars of it," The RSV: "When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants, it is I who keep steady its pillars," and TLB: "Though the earth shakes and all its people live in turmoil, yet its pillars are firm, for I have set them in place!" The conditional sense of "even if this would happen..." seems to make more sense.

The context of this psalm does not suggest a natural disaster, but the unstable condition of mankind. The pillars of the earth are human beings who have authority and who rule over others. We have remarked earlier that it was not in God's original plan that one man would rule over another. Adam was made lord over the animal world; he did not rule over Eve. It was only after man had fallen in sin we read that God says to Eve: "...and he will rule over you."<sup>53</sup> When the Apostle Paul says: "There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God,"<sup>54</sup> he speaks about God's accommodation to the existence of sin in the world.

All authority comes from God and is established in the invisible world. Jesus could, therefore, say to Pilate: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."<sup>55</sup> The fact that people in authority (1) do not understand this truth, (2) become drunk on their own power, and (3) misuse their power because they forget that they will have to give account of the way they used it, does, in no way, alter this truth.

The mystery consists in the fact that God allows so much freedom to those in authority. It is hard to understand the misuse of power in the world, beginning with Lamech, to the Babylonians, the Romans, the Nazis, up to the coming of the Antichrist. Our problem in understanding this is due to our limited vision of what happens in the world. We are unable to look at world events in the light of eternity.

In this psalm, Asaph finds himself lifted out above the level of the time in which he lived in order to see all human relationships in the right perspective. This explains the complete lack of jealousy on his part. Promotion or denigration are God's responsibility.

God not only states that He promotes people to power and deposes others but also that He holds those in power responsible for their acts. Those who reign, reign by the grace of God. This truth has been kept alive only in some titles that are given to monarchs, while in practice it has lost its meaning. Most people in power are too shortsighted to understand this truth, let alone live up to it. In the history of the kingdom of Israel there were only a few kings who realized that they ruled in the name of YHWH.

Commentators have discussed in depth the meaning of the admonition "do not lift up of your horns" in vs. 4. The word occurs four times in this psalm. The Hebrew word used is *qeren*, defined in *Strong's Definitions* as "a horn (as projecting); by implication, a flask, cornet; by resemblance an elephant's tooth (i.e. ivory), a corner (of the altar), a peak (of a mountain), a ray (of light); figuratively, power." This array of meanings explains the difficulty of finding the correct equivalent. In vs. 4 "Do not lift up your horns" is the parallel of "boast no more." TLB renders the verses 4 and 5 with: "I warned the proud to cease their arrogance! I told the wicked to lower their insolent gaze and to stop being stubborn and proud." The original text contains, probably, play on words, which is lost in the translation. Several images are suggested: of a bull that throws its horns in the air; of people who lift up a gourd filled with wine during a drunken brawl, of people who want to display their power and authority. *The Tyndale Commentary* quotes the NEB with: "Toss not your horn," and it speaks about "pushers in the herd." The image of man as a charging bull before God is a very vivid one. The outstretched neck, or stiff neck as the NKJV puts it, could also refer to a refusal to accept the yoke.

The exaltation from the east or the west, in vs. 6, does not come about through international pressure or global politics. East could stand for Assyria and Babylonia, although in the days of Asaph those nations had not yet demonstrated imperialistic tendencies. The desert points in the direction of Egypt. The Mediterranean Sea was in the west. The latter may refer to commerce and shipping, suggesting economic

<sup>53</sup> Gen. 3:16<sup>b</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Rom. 13:1

<sup>55</sup> John 19:11

affluence. The north is not mentioned. Some Bible scholars see in this an indication that exaltation will come from there, and that heaven should be sought in the direction of the north. The north of the universe is supposed to have a huge space that is not filled with constellations. We will have to wait till we get to heaven before we can verify this.

The meaning of vs. 6, however, is clear: human power is not determined by political and economic but by spiritual factors. This pertains, not only to the person who is spiritually minded, but also to the non-spiritual. If God is the Judge, this means that He, not only, appoints people to certain positions but also judges their lives. At this point, we find the biggest gap in man's comprehension. Many people in power act as if they will never be called to account by God, except for what is required of them by political circumstances.

Vs. 8 describes the state of intoxication in which man lives. The psalmist sees this drunkenness as the work of God who forces man to drink down the cup to its very dregs; drinking till the very bottom indicates that the person who begins to drink loses control and is unable to stop. Power enslaves man. The image of the cup that has to be drunk is used several times in Scripture.<sup>56</sup> In Revelation, the cup of wine is used as a symbol of the lust for power.<sup>57</sup> The term "the cup of God's wrath" is used several times also in Revelation.<sup>58</sup> What Asaph describes here, as an act of God, begins with man's choice. A man who reaches for power brings himself to the point of enslavement. God's wrath consists of the fact that He lets man go, after man has let go of Him.

Asaph keeps his distance from the wicked and their enslavement. The Hebrew does not have the word "this" in vs. 9. The line reads literally: "But I will declare forever!" Yet, testimonies and declarations need a subject. It is clear, however, that Asaph speaks here about the theme of the psalm. The praise in these last verses is the same as in the beginning of the psalm.

The last verse has also posed problems to Bible translators. The NIV reads: "I will cut off the horns of all the wicked," which is literally what the Hebrew says. Other translations insert the word He, for God. TLB treats it as a literal quote: " 'I will cut off the strength of evil men,' says the Lord." The RSV reads: "All the horns of the wicked he will cut off." The supposition is that mere man could not single-handedly influence world events to such a point.

The last verse could also be treated as a Messianic prophecy, but in that case the transition would be rather abrupt. We do better to leave the verse as it is. Asaph's spontaneous song of praise knocks such a huge breach in the power of the Evil One that the horns of his accomplices on earth break off because of it. Daniel sees this happen in one of his visions.<sup>59</sup> We should never underestimate the power of praise; it has a far-reaching effect, both in the invisible world as in this one. 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."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See Isa. 51:17-23; Jer. 25:15-29

<sup>57</sup> See Rev. 18:3,6

<sup>58</sup> See Rev. 14:10; 16:19; 19:15

<sup>59</sup> See Dan. 8:8

<sup>60</sup> Rev. 12:11

## PSALM SEVENTY-SIX

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

- 1 *In Judah God is known; his name is great in Israel.*
- 2 *His tent is in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion.*
- 3 *There he broke the flashing arrows, the shields and the swords, the weapons of war. Selah*
- 4 *You are resplendent with light, more majestic than mountains rich with game.*
- 5 *Valiant men lie plundered, they sleep their last sleep; not one of the warriors can lift his hands.*
- 6 *At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, both horse and chariot lie still.*
- 7 *You alone are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry?*
- 8 *From heaven you pronounced judgment, and the land feared and was quiet--*
- 9 *when you, O God, rose up to judge, to save all the afflicted of the land. Selah*
- 10 *Surely your wrath against men brings you praise, and the survivors of your wrath are restrained.*
- 11 *Make vows to the LORD your God and fulfill them; let all the neighboring lands bring gifts to the One to be feared.*
- 12 *He breaks the spirit of rulers; he is feared by the kings of the earth.*

The Septuagint has added to the subscript of this psalm the words: "Regarding the Assyrians." This could be a reference to the retreat of Sennacherib in 701 BC.<sup>61</sup> The difficulty in making this connection is that the psalm could not then be written by Asaph since he lived 300 years before that event.

*The Tyndale Commentary* divides the psalm into two parts at vs. 7: the verses 1-6 speak about a great deliverance in a local setting, and the verses 7-12 speak in cosmic terms about God's judgment over the whole world.

Verses 1-7 – Although *The Tyndale Commentary* is less categorical than George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, that commentary gives serious consideration to Sennacherib's defeat at Jerusalem. But we may leave the matter alone, since the question as to what is the historical background of this psalm has no bearing on its contents.

"In Judah God is known" sounds like "the understatement of the year." As if the subject of the psalm is God's local popularity. Asaph speaks about the Creator of heaven and earth, the almighty God. The tragedy is that the opposite is often more true: God is not known in many places. Large sections of Western Europe fall into this category and, until recently, Albania boasted of being an atheistic country. John's dictum is, unfortunately, still all too true: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."<sup>62</sup> It is a terrible thing if the world does not know its maker and redeemer, but it is wonderful if a people and a nation do know God. David exclaims: "Blessed are the people whose God is the LORD."<sup>63</sup>

It is a miracle that the infinite God limited Himself to a specific period of world history, to a small location, and to a small nation. Even more miraculous is the fact that He took upon Himself the limited form of a human being, and that the Word that created everything became flesh. The Almighty became, indeed, a national hero on a small and provincial scale, outwardly indistinguishable from any other little citizen. Solomon rightfully cried out: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you...!"<sup>64</sup> But Solomon was also, in a way, wrong, even very wrong. God not only became a human being but: "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but 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!"<sup>65</sup> "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter..."<sup>66</sup>

Vs. 2 adds another dimension to the truth Asaph proclaims: "His tent is in Salem." The Hebrew word for "tent" is *cok*, which is defined in *Strong's Definitions*: "a hut (as of entwined boughs); also a lair."

<sup>61</sup> See II Kings 18:13-19:37; Isa. ch. 36-37

<sup>62</sup> John 1:10,11

<sup>63</sup> Ps. 144:15

<sup>64</sup> I Kings 8:27

<sup>65</sup> Phil. 2:6-8

<sup>66</sup> Isa. 53:7

For this reason, *The Tyndale Commentary* gave as title to this psalm “The Lion of Judah.” In that capacity God defended the place where He had chosen to live. The psalmist does not elaborate the occasion at which God destroyed all the weapons of war. God’s power is geared toward peace. God annihilates man’s arms of destruction because He is the Prince of Peace. This is the reason that we see The Lion of Judah in Revelation as the Lamb that breaks the seals of God’s scroll.<sup>67</sup> When the Lamb opens the seals, the immediate result is that men go to war against each other. But the sword that ends all wars is the sword that comes out of the mouth of the Lord Jesus Christ. This sword is the Word of God. No human power can stand against this weapon, through which all is created and which sustains all. That is the theme of this psalm. God’s revelation means the end of all display of human power. Satan himself is powerless against the glory of the Lord, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Vs. 4 speaks about “mountains rich with game.” The KJV renders this with: “the mountains of prey.” The RSV: “the everlasting mountains.” The Hebrew word *tereph* literally means “something torn, a fragment, a fresh leaf, prey, food.” The translation “the everlasting mountains” comes from the Septuagint. The discrepancy is probably due to a copier’s mistake, which could be made because the copier supposed that the psalm dealt with the defeat of the Assyrian army.

The everlasting mountains, however, are not the hills where that army left its spoil. They are the place of God’s throne where all battles are decided in the heavenly places. That which took place on earth was a shadow cast by the events that took place in heaven. When the Prince of Assyria, or whoever the demonic power may have been, was defeated in heaven, people on earth surrendered also.

The picture shows us what man’s rebellion against the Almighty has accomplished. How could a human being, who is dependent upon God for his very breath, do something against God? Even a momentary interruption of the flow of oxygen ends the battle.

A strange touch in this psalm is that Asaph not only mentions the valiant, or stouthearted, with the horses but also the chariots that lie still, as if the chariots sleep together with the men and the horses. Evidently, the image is intended to show, more than the death of man and beast alone, the cessation of all activity. Some versions replace the word “chariot” with “rider” which is also a valid translation of the Hebrew word *rekeb*.

It is also strange that God is called “God of Jacob” in this context. This cannot be meaningless. Jacob was a deceiver who tried to make deals with God. When God identifies Himself with sinful men it does not mean, of course, that He would tolerate sin but that He forgives and extends grace. Some people have received pardon for their sins, others have refused it. For those who refuse pardon, Jesus who accepts sinners, is the greatest possible threat. Those people say 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!”<sup>68</sup>

Verses 8-11 speak about the wrath of God against all those who rebel against Him. Rebellion against God has serious moral consequences. The person who cuts himself off from God isolates himself from his fellowmen and from himself and becomes, ultimately, the victim of evil powers. God’s wrath is directed against this evil. Man without God is a sinner. No man who has separated himself from God leads a pure and clean life. He who does not love God above everything else does not love his neighbor as himself either. Consequently, man is rightfully afraid of God’s goodness, and he experiences this goodness as wrath. This is the reason that we find in the Bible such a paradoxical expression as “the wrath of the Lamb.” For that reason also the author of Hebrews says: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” and “our God is a consuming fire.”<sup>69</sup> David saw this differently when he said: “Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men.”<sup>70</sup> When we are reconciled with God, we can stand before Him.

Vs. 10 has become a favorite quotation from the KJV: “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee.” The NIV gives the phrase a different nuance with: “Surely your wrath against men brings you praise.” We may conceive that God can use evil and negative things and turn them around so that He will receive praise. Joseph’s slavery in Egypt and Paul’s imprisonment are examples. The greatest example of all is, of course, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Human wrath and rebellion constitutes no threat whatsoever to God. This seems to be the point of Jesus’ parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and

<sup>67</sup> See Rev. 5:5,6

<sup>68</sup> Rev. 6:16

<sup>69</sup> Heb. 10:31; 12:29

<sup>70</sup> II Sam. 24:14

mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”<sup>71</sup> After all, yeast represents corruption, but baked in the oven it makes delicious bread. Human wrath not only ricochets off God’s glory, it even increases the revelation of that glory. Pharaoh’s resistance against the exodus of the people of Israel is a clear illustration of this.

This does not mean that a child of God cannot be injured in a deep and painful way by the wrath and anger of man. Joseph, for instance, must have suffered immensely in his slavery and imprisonment in Egypt. The suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ has become a symbol of all suffering in this world. But the end for God’s children is glory and not perdition.

The second part of vs. 10, “and the survivors of your wrath are restrained,” is translated differently in various versions. The NKJ, for instance, reads: “with the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself”; TLB: “You will use it as an ornament!” The Hebrew word *chagar* literally means, “to gird on.” The KJV translates the word variously with: “be able to put on, be afraid, appointed, gird, restrain.” The NIV usually also renders it in the sense of tying on a belt, as in: “May it be like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt *tied* forever around him.”<sup>72</sup> We could paraphrase the sentence maybe with “God wraps man around His finger.” A Dutch poet once wrote a poem about another deceased poet and described him as a flame that, for one single moment, scorched the face of God.<sup>73</sup> The thought is as ridiculous as wanting to fly to the sun to light a match!

It is true, however, that man, being created in the image of God, can demonstrate wrath which is a reflection of the wrath of God. In fellowship with God, wrath can be a mighty weapon; but human wrath that is directed against God reduces man to the level of the ridiculous. This seems to be the theme of the last four chapters of the Book of Job. A comparison between the Creator of heaven and earth and the angry Job makes the latter comparable to an insignificant particle of dust.

Making and fulfilling vows made to God means that we surrender ourselves to Him and present our bodies to Him for His use. God does not need our possessions or us. “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us.”<sup>74</sup> We cannot give more to God than ourselves.

The last verse of this psalm makes a comparison between the kings of the earth and God. Man may bow to human authority, but all those in authority have to bow to God.

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<sup>71</sup> Matt. 13:33

<sup>72</sup> Ps. 109:19

<sup>73</sup> Herman Marsman, on Willem Kloos

<sup>74</sup> James 4:5 (NAS)

## PSALM SEVENTY-SEVEN

For the director of music. For Jeduthun. Of Asaph. A psalm.

- 1 *I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me.*
- 2 *When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.*
- 3 *I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint. Selah*
- 4 *You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.*
- 5 *I thought about the former days, the years of long ago;*
- 6 *I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired:*
- 7 *"Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?"*
- 8 *Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?*
- 9 *Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?" Selah*
- 10 *Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High."*
- 11 *I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.*
- 12 *I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.*
- 13 *Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?*
- 14 *You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.*
- 15 *With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah*
- 16 *The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed.*
- 17 *The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder; your arrows flashed back and forth.*
- 18 *Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked.*
- 19 *Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.*
- 20 *You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

As in all the other psalms of this series (Ps. 73 – 83), this psalm bears the name of Asaph. The name Jeduthun also appears in the subscript. Jeduthun was Asaph's colleague who, just like Asaph, had been appointed by David as responsible for the music in the tabernacle or the temple.<sup>75</sup> The words "For Jeduthun" could mean that Asaph composed the hymn for him, in which case it would represent an act of kindness to help a colleague who was suffering from a depression.

The psalm consists of two parts separated by a "Selah" in vs. 9. *The Tyndale Commentary* makes the division at vs. 11.

The mood of the psalm is gloomy and sad. The poet has no assurance and awareness of the presence of God. We are not told if there is a reason for this because of outward circumstances. For Jeduthun, fellowship with God, which brings a fullness of joy and satisfaction, was a thing of the past. Such swings of mood often are not related to circumstances. Gloom can be the result of a lack of activity, when nothing stimulates the mind. If this is true in this case, Jeduthun's reaction may be, in a sense, a sign of a healthy spiritual life. He may have recognized the danger of routine that would undermine the essence of fellowship with God and rob him of his joy and peace.

God is not the one who changes in the relationship we have with Him; He is not subject to mood swings; the attention He pays to us never diminishes. He always listens, and there is no need for Him to "give ear to us" as the NKJV puts it. The change and fickleness is on our side. It is ultimately the realization of God's constant love and power that brings the psalmist back to reality.

In a way, mood changes are part of our humanity. In the sinful world in which we live, that has both advantages and disadvantages. Because of a changing disposition, we experience God's faithfulness as new every morning. Jeremiah says: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."<sup>76</sup> Our awareness of God's presence is not a constant factor either. Because of this, Asaph feels the urge to call upon God with greater intensity. His attitude demonstrates a healthy hunger and thirst for fellowship.

<sup>75</sup> See I Chr. 16:41,42; 25:1-3

<sup>76</sup> Lam. 3:22,23

The NIV introduces this psalm: “I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me,” which misses the urgency of the original text which reads: “My voice unto God I cried, my voice unto God, and He gave ear unto me.” It suggests a natural function of the psalmist’s humanity. For that reason God gives man a voice. Like a flower that turns itself toward the sun, so man has a natural impulse to cry to God. That is the way we are made. It is good to cry unto God, so that we may know that God listens to us. This expresses the thirst of our soul.

There is no trace of superficiality in Asaph’s deep outpouring of his soul. If we are correct in supposing that Asaph wrote this psalm for Jeduthun, the feelings described here are Jeduthun’s. It was his duty to daily praise and glorify God, but he misses the complete satisfaction this should give him. That is why he cries out and stretches out untiring hands. He is distressed and refuses comfort, that comfort that does not measure up to his need and that does not provide the full satisfaction that only God himself can give. What an example of deep psychological insight this is! There will come a time when God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes.<sup>77</sup> We may stretch out toward that comfort, which will give us enough compensation to live on.

“I remembered you, O God, and I groaned” is the ultimate pain of our alienation. Thinking about God ought to bring about shouts of joy in everyone’s heart. Jeduthun’s spirit is parched because he is conscious of the havoc sin has wrought, not only in the world around him, but in his own relationship with God. It keeps him awake at night and it makes him pose a series of questions to himself. Those questions are the result of a comparison of the present with “the former days, the years of long ago.” This is no sentimental commemoration about “the good old days.” The topic is the history of salvation. This is evident from the second part of this psalm, where Asaph draws the same comparison, but comes to a completely different conclusion. “I remembered my songs in the night” could be interpreted as “the music is gone from my life.”

As we stated before, there is no indication as to the cause of this depression, but it is obvious that the supernatural element has vanished from Jeduthun’s life. At one moment in Israel’s history God brought them out of Egypt with an outstretched arm. A nation consisting of several millions was kept alive in an inhospitable desert. Every day they ate and drank enough in a region without water, a place where nothing grows. Jeduthun forgot that this supernatural existence failed to make any impression on most of the Israelites of that time. The Apostle Paul sums up the philosophy of life of most of the people of that time with the words: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.”<sup>78</sup>

It is possible that we experience the summit of salvation’s history without being affected by it. And if such is possible, we can also fail to understand that God is at work in the present, in which case reminiscing has little value.

The verses 7 – 9 ask six questions that are given in series of parallels. The first one is: “Will the Lord reject forever?” These words suggest a national disaster such as the Babylonian Captivity. This is the reason that some commentators place this psalm in that period, but the question could very well refer to events that happened during David’s reign which are not recorded for us. Something happened which made Jeduthun draw the conclusion that God was angry at Israel and he wonders if this condition is permanent.

There is, however, no trace of an admission of guilt in his complaint. There is nothing like Daniel’s remorse and confession at the end of the captivity, as evinced in his prayer that is recorded for us.<sup>79</sup> It sounds as if the blame is on God and not on man. It is as if God has withdrawn Himself for no reason. To put the question as Asaph puts it makes it absurd, and this line of questioning makes the answers implicit. The answer is included in the question. To answer in the positive would mean a structural change in the character of God, which would be an impossibility. If God’s unfailing love and his mercy would cease, and if His promise would fail permanently, God would cease to be God.

We feel the tension rise at the posing of these questions, until the psalmist comes to the crisis in vs. 10, which is the turning point in his thinking. The Hebrew translated in the NIV with: “To this I will appeal” is a difficult statement. The Interlinear Hebrew Bible read: “And I said this is my infirmity,” which is also the KJV’s rendering. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* has a lengthy analysis of the statement, from which we copy the following: “The Hebrew is very obscure, and has been differently translated: ... ‘And I said, Is this my weakness? Years the right hand of the Most High.’ If *challowtiy* ... comes from *chaalah*, and signifies to pray, as De Dieu has thought, then his translation may be proper: ‘To pray, this my

<sup>77</sup> See Rev. 7:17; 21:4

<sup>78</sup> I Cor. 10:7

<sup>79</sup> See Dan. Ch. 9

business; to change the right hand of the Most High.' I can do nothing else than pray; God is the Ruler of events. Mr. N. M. Berlin translates, To grieve is my portion; to change (my condition) belongs to the right hand of the Most High. Here *sh<sup>n</sup>owt*..., which we translate years, is derived from *shaanah*... to change. This latter appears to me the better translation; the sum of the meaning is, 'I am in deep distress; the Most High alone can change my condition.' " *Strongs Definitions* states that the Hebrew word *chalah* means "to be rubbed or worn; hence (figuratively) to be weak, sick, afflicted; or (causatively) to grieve, make sick; also to stroke (in flattering), entreat." A plausible, although rather modern, translation might be to use the idiom "this rubs me the wrong way." After all, if, in fact, His character had changed, what is stated goes against all we are and all God would want us to be. We all know intuitively what God ought to be like. There are enough traces of His image left in us to know this; otherwise we would not possess any concept of morality. A change in God's character would, therefore, take away all ground from under our feet. It would not only go against the very fiber of our existence and make us sick, but it would mean death for us.

I agree with *The Tyndale Commentary* that vs. 10 should be considered to be the beginning of the second part of the psalm. The suggestion that God would have changed forms the bridge between the past and the future. Because God is immutable, it makes sense to think back to what He has done in the past. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."<sup>80</sup>

In an anecdote about Martin Luther, we understand that he felt depressed. His wife entered his study and proceeded to draw the curtains. When Luther asked her why she did this, she answered: "Because God is dead." The realization that God cannot die is the best remedy against depression.

"The deeds of the Lord," which Asaph mentions are not detailed, they are merely painted with large strokes. It is not clear whether "The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed" refers to Israel's crossing of the Red Sea or to Noah's Flood. Israel's redemption from Egypt is mentioned twice (verses 15 and 20), but we are given the impression that more is meant than the exodus alone.

The psalmist's gaze roams over all God's deeds, as is observed in vs. 12: "I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds." Asaph called them "miracles" in the preceding verse, which means that they cannot be explained as natural phenomena. This does not mean that the laws of nature play no role in them. God always obeys the laws He made Himself. When we are in heaven and we understand what happens on earth, we will probably discover that what we call laws of nature are less "natural" than God's miracles. In a negative sense, for instance, the dying of man is more a miracle than the resurrection. Our perspective has been distorted by sin.

Characteristic of all God's ways is holiness. The word "holy" in the Bible is the most difficult word to understand. It defies definition. I suppose that holiness is the total of all God's attributes; the sum of the innumerable, the measure of God's infinity. If this "definition" is correct, "Your ways, O God, are holy," means that God is faithful to Himself in everything He does. We can imagine who God is when we understand what He does.

The remembrance of God's deeds brings Asaph to worship. Who is like God? It is nonsense to want to compare God to anyone else; He is the measure of all. All personalities are compared to His character, and all acts are put next to the deeds of God for comparison. For some people and for the demons, this will mean perdition, but for those whose names are written in the Book of Life, it will introduce an eternity of bliss and adoration.

The remembrance of God's deeds and the study of the history of salvation lead Asaph to ecstasy. He says to Jeduthun in his depression: "Remember what God has done and let it penetrate to you who He is." But at this point, Asaph no longer speaks to Jeduthun alone; he has begun to call upon God himself, and he has become conscious of the fact that he is in the presence of God. This is why the latter part of this psalm stands in such a contrast with the first. In the beginning, he called upon God from afar, but now he stands before God and his eyes are opened to the reality. Israel's redemption was not only a mighty deed of the past; it was the basis of the life of redemption in the present. We cannot look at God's intervention in history as single and detached events. What God did for Israel in Egypt makes the difference between life and death for Asaph and even for us. The exodus was an important stone in the foundation of the history of salvation upon which our salvation also rests.

But why are the descendants of Jacob and Joseph mentioned separately in vs. 15? *The Tyndale Commentary* suggests that the wishes of Jacob and of Joseph to be buried in Canaan are used here symbolically for the vision of the Promised Land. I like this suggestion; it elevates the exodus above a mere

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<sup>80</sup> Heb. 13:8



event of history. Most Israelites left Egypt for the wrong motives. The fact that, except for Joshua and Caleb, no one of the original people who left Egypt entered the land, is testimony to this. Those who conquered the Promised Land were the sons of Jacob and Joseph who clung to God's promises.

If, in fact, in vs. 19 the psalmist was speaking about Noah's flood instead of about the Red Sea and the River Jordan, the transition would be hard to explain. One problem, however, is that in the record of the exodus from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan, we do not read that thunder and heavy rain accompanied this. Unless the phrase "Now the Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest,"<sup>81</sup> in the Joshua account is a too modest description of, what actually amounted to, an enormous inundation. Yet, this seems to be the most logical explanation.

George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, thinks that "the mighty water" refers to the chaotic condition of the world at the beginning of creation.<sup>82</sup> But that seems somewhat farfetched.

There is a trace of humor in the mention that the water wiped out God's footprints. We need spiritual insight in order to know where God is going. Pharaoh and his army had no idea that they followed God's footsteps as they entered the Red Sea, and that was their undoing. If the waters are a picture of the powers of evil, it would be the work of the devil that God's footprints are not seen. But those who have eyes will see Him, and those who have ears will hear Him. Both *The Tyndale Commentary* and George Knight's *Commentary on the Psalms* see the last verse as anti-climactic. Knight even suggests that it may be a later addition to the psalm. I do not see any reason for such suggestions. I also do not see why the words "You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" could not be seen as the climax. The use of the word "flock" may seem somewhat derisive. But there is also a touch of complete victory in the image of a peaceful flock that is being led by a shepherd. We would have expected that the shepherd would need all his energy to keep the wild animals at a distance. The quietness of the sheep is an indication that the humdrum and threats of the Evil One are not threats at all to the Almighty. The hands of Moses and Aaron achieve the victory. Moses is the one who stood in God's presence and revealed God's law to the people, and Aaron brought the blood of the sacrifice behind the curtain, and sprinkled it upon the throne of God. Is that not climactic?

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<sup>81</sup> Josh. 3:15

<sup>82</sup> See Gen. 1:2

## PSALM SEVENTY-EIGHT

*A Maskil of Asaph.*

- 1 *O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth.*
- 2 *I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old--*
- 3 *what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.*
- 4 *We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.*
- 5 *He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children,*
- 6 *so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.*
- 7 *Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.*
- 8 *They would not be like their forefathers-- a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him.*
- 9 *The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows, turned back on the day of battle;*
- 10 *they did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by his law.*
- 11 *They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.*
- 12 *He did miracles in the sight of their fathers in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan.*
- 13 *He divided the sea and led them through; he made the water stand firm like a wall.*
- 14 *He guided them with the cloud by day and with light from the fire all night.*
- 15 *He split the rocks in the desert and gave them water as abundant as the seas;*
- 16 *he brought streams out of a rocky crag and made water flow down like rivers.*
- 17 *But they continued to sin against him, rebelling in the desert against the Most High.*
- 18 *They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved.*
- 19 *They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the desert?"*
- 20 *When he struck the rock, water gushed out, and streams flowed abundantly. But can he also give us food? Can he supply meat for his people?"*
- 21 *When the LORD heard them, he was very angry; his fire broke out against Jacob, and his wrath rose against Israel,*
- 22 *for they did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance.*
- 23 *Yet he gave a command to the skies above and opened the doors of the heavens;*
- 24 *he rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven.*
- 25 *Men ate the bread of angels; he sent them all the food they could eat.*
- 26 *He let loose the east wind from the heavens and led forth the south wind by his power.*
- 27 *He rained meat down on them like dust, flying birds like sand on the seashore.*
- 28 *He made them come down inside their camp, all around their tents.*
- 29 *They ate till they had more than enough, for he had given them what they craved.*
- 30 *But before they turned from the food they craved, even while it was still in their mouths,*
- 31 *God's anger rose against them; he put to death the sturdiest among them, cutting down the young men of Israel.*
- 32 *In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.*
- 33 *So he ended their days in futility and their years in terror.*
- 34 *Whenever God slew them, they would seek him; they eagerly turned to him again.*
- 35 *They remembered that God was their Rock, that God Most High was their Redeemer.*
- 36 *But then they would flatter him with their mouths, lying to him with their tongues;*
- 37 *their hearts were not loyal to him, they were not faithful to his covenant.*
- 38 *Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath.*
- 39 *He remembered that they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return.*
- 40 *How often they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland!*
- 41 *Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel.*
- 42 *They did not remember his power-- the day he redeemed them from the oppressor,*
- 43 *the day he displayed his miraculous signs in Egypt, his wonders in the region of Zoan.*
- 44 *He turned their rivers to blood; they could not drink from their streams.*

- 45 *He sent swarms of flies that devoured them, and frogs that devastated them.*  
 46 *He gave their crops to the grasshopper, their produce to the locust.*  
 47 *He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamore-figs with sleet.*  
 48 *He gave over their cattle to the hail, their livestock to bolts of lightning.*  
 49 *He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath, indignation and hostility-- a band of destroying angels.*  
 50 *He prepared a path for his anger; he did not spare them from death but gave them over to the plague.*  
 51 *He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, the firstfruits of manhood in the tents of Ham.*  
 52 *But he brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert.*  
 53 *He guided them safely, so they were unafraid; but the sea engulfed their enemies.*  
 54 *Thus he brought them to the border of his holy land, to the hill country his right hand had taken.*  
 55 *He drove out nations before them and allotted their lands to them as an inheritance; he settled the tribes of Israel in their homes.*  
 56 *But they put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High; they did not keep his statutes.*  
 57 *Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless, as unreliable as a faulty bow.*  
 58 *They angered him with their high places; they aroused his jealousy with their idols.*  
 59 *When God heard them, he was very angry; he rejected Israel completely.*  
 60 *He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent he had set up among men.*  
 61 *He sent [the ark off] his might into captivity, his splendor into the hands of the enemy.*  
 62 *He gave his people over to the sword; he was very angry with his inheritance.*  
 63 *Fire consumed their young men, and their maidens had no wedding songs;*  
 64 *their priests were put to the sword, and their widows could not weep.*  
 65 *Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, as a man wakes from the stupor of wine.*  
 66 *He beat back his enemies; he put them to everlasting shame.*  
 67 *Then he rejected the tents of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;*  
 68 *but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loved.*  
 69 *He built his sanctuary like the heights, like the earth that he established forever.*  
 70 *He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens;*  
 71 *from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance.*  
 72 *And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.*

After Psalm 119, this psalm is the longest in the book. George Knight calls it “picture theology.” That is an acceptable translation of the word *mashal* which is translated in vs. 2 with “parable.” *Strongs Definitions* defines it with: “superiority in mental action; properly, a pithy maxim, usually of metaphorical nature; hence, a simile (as an adage, poem, discourse).”

The psalm begins with a paraphrase of Moses’ grand discourse at the end of the desert journey: “Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.”<sup>83</sup> But Asaph places this psalm in a less cosmic setting than Moses did. He addresses his compatriots as a fellow-Israelite.

A nation loses its identity when it forgets its history. In the same way an individual will not know where he is going if he forgets where he came from. The problem with most people is that they do not know their own history, let alone learn from it. This is one of man’s great problems caused by the theory of evolution: if a man descended from the apes, he has a very bleak future. But a person who knows that God created him and redeemed him, also knows that he is headed for glory. This knowledge is an important part of our identity. Knowledge of our past and of our future, not only helps us to know where we are, but also who we are. That is why Jesus could say: “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going.”<sup>84</sup>

This psalm will gain considerable depth for us if we place it beside the place in Matthew’s Gospel where the evangelist quotes vs. 2 as a prophecy about Christ’s speaking regarding the kingdom of heaven. We read there: “Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in

<sup>83</sup> Deut. 32:1

<sup>84</sup> John 8:14

parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.’<sup>85</sup> Asaph never reached the point Christ reached, but we could say that, in this psalm, he lays the foundation for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Both Asaph and Christ speak about things since the creation of the world. Before there ever was any creation, God had worked out the plan of redemption in which man would play such an important part. Asaph also speaks about the coming of the kingdom of heaven but about an earlier stage of the kingdom. Jesus deals with the last phase of the coming of the kingdom. In Asaph’s psalm, Israel plays the leading role; in Jesus’ parables He deals mainly with the church.

Asaph never personally experienced the things he spoke about; apparently, he spoke about the things his father, who had received it from his father, told him. The written tradition must also have played an important part in this. There were probably more copies of the Pentateuch in Asaph’s day than after the captivity. (My apologies to Mr. Wellhausen). But oral tradition at that time was probably more reliable also. Man’s memory was better before illiteracy was eradicated. Perhaps we burden our brain too much by the amount of reading we do.

Asaph also does not seem to have known a generation gap. That which was transmitted from father to son had value. The contents of the message forged a strong chain, and every link was important. The gap that exists between generations has much to do with the fact that modern man has no message to pass on. The bridge between generations is formed by “the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.”

The important truth is explained in vs. 5: God reveals Himself in this world via Israel. If Israel had not existed, we would have been left in the dark regarding the truth about God. In Jesus’ words: “Salvation is from the Jews.”<sup>86</sup>

A large part of the Mosaic Law was not new; we find some of the Ten Commandments in earlier Babylonian writings. Part of the law went, probably, back to the time of Noah. The Mè tribe in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, knew most of the laws on the second tablet of the Ten Commandments long before the Gospel penetrated their area. The explanation for this knowledge must be that, being descendants of Noah, they remembered things that were common knowledge in Noah’s days.

The extraordinary feature of the revelation on Mount Sinai was not so much the contents of the law as the fact that God revealed Himself as the standard of the law. Some acts are sinful because they fall short of the glory of God. God’s character is the criterion against which our deeds are measured. If our own character reflects God’s glory, we have nothing to worry about as far as our actions are concerned. This is, at the same time, the glory and the misery of our humanity. This is the reason the law will push us toward God. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”<sup>87</sup> And: “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”<sup>88</sup> Like a negative pole of a magnet is drawn to a positive pole, so our awareness of impotence to measure up to the standard of God’s glory draws us to the God of glory. The realization that God performed unimaginably great miracles of redemption awakens in us the faith that He is also able to solve the problem of sin in our lives.

“He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel.” This is more than a poetical parallel. God showed His character of absolute holiness to Jacob, the tripper, the man who cheated his brother, his father, his uncle, and himself in order to make him realize who he was and what he had done. But to Israel, who had overcome and had received forgiveness, He gave His law, in order that it would be written in their hearts. After all, much more is involved than a group of people who migrated from Egypt to Canaan. The purpose was God’s revelation of Himself for the salvation of the world; it was light shining in the darkness. This is the reason that there is such a radical difference between this psalm and the parables in Matthew’s Gospel. Psalm 78 draws images of the reality, like the picture of a lamp; but the Man who told the parables of the kingdom of heaven was the light of the world Himself.

In verses 5 and 6, Asaph encompasses at least five generations, exclusive of himself, so more like six. What God did for his great-grandfather ought to bring him to put my trust in Him. The irony of verses 7 and 8, however, is that the forefathers themselves gave the example of how not to do it. Those who left Egypt failed miserably and all died in the desert.

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<sup>85</sup> Matt. 13:34,35

<sup>86</sup> John 4:22

<sup>87</sup> Rom. 3:20

<sup>88</sup> Gal 3:24

It is God's intention that, looking at the failures of the others, we ask ourselves the question in what respect they failed and why they failed. This would make clear to us what God's great goal is with creation as a whole and with our personal lives in particular; and it would make us search for ways to reach that goal.

The Israelites were quite willing to leave Egypt, but they were not ready to enter Canaan at any price. The slave labor made Egypt an impossible place to live; but it is doubtful that they would ever have left it if the angel of death had not "scared the daylight out of them." They did not have a clear sense of redemption and a vision of victory.

By letting His light shine upon history, God wants us to see it in the right perspective and draw the right conclusions for the present. Satan wants us to believe that "the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers"<sup>89</sup> is the same as the contents of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the reason that some people, when growing up and leaving their Christian upbringing behind, fail to seek the Lord Himself. They throw out the baby with the bath water. The men of Ephraim were well armed with bows and arrows. God had given them all they needed to enter Canaan and to subdue it. But they never looked at their armor; when they saw the enemy they ran for cover. They never counted how many arrows they had. They stated: "We saw the Nephilim there.... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them,"<sup>90</sup> never realizing how much damage grasshoppers can do to giants.

God's own diagnosis of that attitude was that they had treated Him with contempt.<sup>91</sup> There is a danger that, under the pressure of circumstances, we treat God with contempt. The Hebrew word used is *na'ats*, which means, "to scorn." The KJV sometimes translates it with "to abhor" or "to blaspheme." Imagine having to stand before the throne of God and to have to give account to Him of a life in which we scorned Him! There is no in-between stage amid faith and the distrust of scorn. The person who does not put his trust in God spurns Him. For the men of Ephraim it was not a question whether they knew God or not; they had experienced His redemption in their own bodies. They had passed through the Red Sea and had seen the dead bodies of Pharaoh and of the Egyptians wash ashore. They had been eyewitnesses to the manifestation of God on Mount Sinai, and they had responded with: "We will do everything the LORD has said."<sup>92</sup> But as soon as life had returned to normal, they had gone back, not only to their daily routine, but to their sinful nature also. Their whole journey through the wilderness had been a supernatural experience which had left them completely untouched.

According to *The Tyndale Commentary*, the name "the men of Ephraim" has a special meaning that goes beyond the designation of one particular tribe. The name Ephraim is mentioned again in vs. 67 but there it is, undoubtedly, intended in a literal sense. *The Tyndale Commentary* states: "As the largest of the breakaway tribes, their subsequent history was to make them almost a symbol of backsliding and apostasy (cf. Hos. 4-13) and this is how this name is used here. As there is no record of any special cowardice on their part (they tended in fact to be hot-tempered – Jdg. 8:1 ff.; 12:1) their desertion in battle is probably a metaphor, a powerful way of expressing the facts of the next verse and bringing out the shame of it, a shame which belongs to the whole nation." Furthermore, a footnote explains that the Hebrew word that is translated with "bow" is unclear and it may have the meaning of "shooting." The word is *qesheth* which *Strongs Definitions* defines with: "in the original sense ... of bending: a bow, for shooting (hence, figuratively, strength) or the iris." TLB renders the verse with: "The people of Ephraim, though fully armed, turned their backs and fled when the day of battle came...." Vs. 57 uses the expression: "as unreliable as a faulty bow." We are probably dealing with a play of words the meaning of which escapes us.

The inference is that Ephraim's desertion is not merely caused by fear but by unreliability. Seeing God's miracles does not necessarily change a person inwardly. Jesus' ministry is proof of this. Even after Lazarus' resurrection the tide did not turn in the Lord's favor. When Jesus hung on the cross, we read that people shouted at Him: "He saved others... but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him."<sup>93</sup> But this too was a lie. Only surrender of ourselves to the Holy Spirit achieves inner renewal. Outward circumstances may have some bearing on this renewal but they are never of decisive importance.

<sup>89</sup> See I Pet. 1:18

<sup>90</sup> Num. 13:33

<sup>91</sup> See Num. 14:23<sup>b</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Ex. 19:8

<sup>93</sup> Matt. 27:42

This proves that the resistance of man's soul has a demonic origin. And if they did not change the fathers who themselves saw the miracles, how would the children change who only knew them by hearsay? Miracles only contribute to what is already there. "Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."<sup>94</sup> The plagues of Egypt, the passage through the Red Sea, the presence of the Shekinah, and the water from the rock had left the hearts of these people untouched. Materialism played an important part in this. The historical background consisted of the events that are described in the Book of Numbers. The people had complained: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost-- also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, it was Moses who first doubted that the Lord could provide for enough meat to feed several million people in the desert. He had said: "Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!'"<sup>96</sup> As it turned out, they ate meat, not only for one day, but for one whole month.

From the perspective of our western civilization, Israel's diet in the desert was well below the acceptable minimum. Even the most spiritual minded among us would have thrown in the towel after eating nothing but manna for one month. Even eating cake can become monotonous. We should be amazed that the people had not remembered earlier the fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.

There is, however, a line between a healthy desire for food and gluttony and greed. Many people cross that line without knowing it. Paul advised Timothy against asceticism. We read: "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."<sup>97</sup> The Lord's harshest condemnation of our western culture is, probably, in the realm of our consumption of food. Not many people are able to live in moderation amidst the abundance of food and affluence of our time. Our lifestyle may be the greatest hindrance to the coming of the kingdom.

The greatest factor in Israel's apostasy in Canaan was the abundance of food. The milk and honey became their undoing. Moses predicted this when he said: "Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior."<sup>98</sup> Suffering from hunger can be a blessing. Moses had said earlier: "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."<sup>99</sup>

On the day God had made for Him, the Lord of glory entered the temple on an empty stomach.<sup>100</sup> This is recorded for us to make us feel ashamed. The Apostle Paul explains that, as a servant of the Lord, he sometimes did not eat for days. In his epistle to the Corinthians, he writes: "Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger."<sup>101</sup>

The whole section, from verses 17-31, deals with the provision of the material needs of the people. In Exodus we read about the manna for the first time, and there the provision of quail is also mentioned.<sup>102</sup> The episode described in Numbers<sup>103</sup> suggests that the provision of meat was not sustained. The Exodus account also begins with the mention of the grumbling of the people. The people were afraid they would starve to death in the desert. Only a few days after they had gone through the Red Sea, the people, all of a sudden, saw Egypt, the land where their children were murdered and where they had to perform unbearably hard slave labor, in a rosy light. As long as they were dependent for their daily rations upon the Egyptians who hated them and wanted to destroy them, they did not worry about their food and they felt safe. As soon as they became dependent upon the Lord for their daily bread, they grew scared. Yet, they knew that the

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<sup>94</sup> Mark 4:25

<sup>95</sup> Num. 11:5,6

<sup>96</sup> Num. 11:13

<sup>97</sup> I Tim. 4:3-5

<sup>98</sup> Deut. 32:15

<sup>99</sup> Deut. 8:3

<sup>100</sup> See Matt. 21:18

<sup>101</sup> II Cor. 6:4,5

<sup>102</sup> See Ex. 16:2-36

<sup>103</sup> See Num. 11

Lord had brought them out of Egypt with a “mighty hand.”<sup>104</sup> Only a few days before, they had seen “the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, [and they had said that they] feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.”<sup>105</sup> This faith did not survive the first few days of desert experience. It is a common phenomenon for those whom God redeemed, that they believe in their redemption but they do not put their trust in God for their daily needs.

The verses 12-16 mention four miracles God had performed: the plagues in Egypt, the passage through the Red Sea, the cloud of fire, and the water from the rock. These overwhelming facts of salvation ought to have given some understanding to the Israelites as to who the God they dealt with was. We all tend to draw a line between the spiritual and the material; we believe that the God who saved us does not take care of our daily needs. The Israelites could not draw this line; for them the facts of salvation were tangible realities: protection against the angel of death, passage through the sea, a visible cloud of glory, and potable clear wet water. The decisive factor was their hunger for meat. They hardly believed that God would provide for their absolute necessities, and they did not believe at all that God would bother to do something extra for them. God’s love is often demonstrated in providing for us things that we do not absolutely need. We form an image of God as someone who is severe and frugal, and we complicate this image by distrusting His goodness. Israel believed that God had ulterior motives and that those motives were impure and evil. “You have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”<sup>106</sup>

Vs. 18 describes their desire for meat, not as a seeking after God’s love, but as a tempting of God. Tempting God is a sign of distrust. We do not need proofs for that which we know to be true. The description of the way the manna descended upon the people and of the coming of the quail is very poetical, especially as far as the manna is concerned. It almost sounds like a piece of mythology: humans ate grain of heaven, bread of angels. We don’t know what manna consisted of. The Exodus account tells us: “It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey.”<sup>107</sup> Veliskowsky, in his book *Worlds in Collision*, expounds a theory that the manna was a byproduct of Venus, which entered our solar system as a comet and the tail of which swept over the earth. At any rate, it was edible and nourishing. There must have been an enormous amount of it in order to feed several million people for forty years. The fact that it did not appear on the Sabbath indicates that it was not an automatic and mechanical provision. We can hardly imagine the magnitude of this miracle. The experiences of George Mueller are dwarfed in comparison with this. How is it possible for a man to experience this and continue to worry about “What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear?”<sup>108</sup> The great lesson of the manna was “that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”<sup>109</sup> Jesus, in His great oration in John’s Gospel, explains that the manna was a representation of the incarnation and of His death on the cross.<sup>110</sup> It could also be that Jesus’ mention of eating His flesh refers to the coming of the quail.

There is no mention of what the plague was that killed the people as they ate the quail. Numbers only tells us: “But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague.”<sup>111</sup> The punishment was, in a sense, included in the answer of the prayer. “They ate till they had more than enough, for he had given them what they craved.” The emphasis in the Hebrew is upon “they”; their own craving became their undoing. By the sound of it, punishment for their evil desire was instantaneous, yet one does not become sturdy with one or two bites. The word translated with “sturdy” is *mashman*, which literally means “fat.” And “young men” is a translation of the Hebrew *bachuw*, which *Strongs Definitions* describes as “selected,” like “the fatted calf.”

The lesson to be drawn from this is more than a warning against overeating. The sin was lust, which is a form of selfishness. We have to keep our desires under the control of the Holy Spirit. This also protects our prayers. The whole episode proves how dangerous it is to pray according to our own will. This

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<sup>104</sup> See Ex. 13:16

<sup>105</sup> Ex. 14:31

<sup>106</sup> Ex. 16:3<sup>b</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Ex. 16:31

<sup>108</sup> See Matt. 6:31

<sup>109</sup> Deut. 8:3

<sup>110</sup> See John 6:22-58 (especially verses 48-51)

<sup>111</sup> Num. 11:33

is the reason Jesus clearly states: *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."*<sup>112</sup>

This also shows how dangerous it is to satisfy our hunger and thirst on a level on which we can never be fully satisfied. Isaiah says: *"Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?"*<sup>113</sup> Jesus emphasizes this truth when He says: *"Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*<sup>114</sup> And: *"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.... I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."*<sup>115</sup> Thirst will return after a drink of water and hunger will remain alive after we eat bread. The Gospel is not a smorgasbord. God wants us to understand that He wishes to satisfy us on a much deeper level of eating and drinking. The person who does not understand this *"eats and drinks judgment on himself."*<sup>116</sup>

The verses 32-37 are particularly tragic. The ending of their days in futility and their years in terror, (vs.33), undoubtedly refers to the dying in the desert of a whole generation of Israelites that refused to enter the Promised Land and to possess it. It is a terrible thing if we go through life without a goal. Israel had no longer a purpose in life when they wandered through the desert for forty years. They had become aimless tramps whose only expectation was to die. This was the result of their disobedience and lack of faith. Many people fill their lives with the wrong kind of goal. This stimulates them enough to produce the daily energy needed to stay alive. The danger, however, is that nothing remains when the goal falls away, or when it is reached. This is the reason many retired people die too soon. God should be our *"raison de vivre."* He is the goal that can never be taken away. Jesus could say at the end of His life: *"I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."*<sup>117</sup> Compare such a statement with Israel's forty-year's wandering in the desert, looking for a place to die! It is fashionable to set goals in our day, but many of those goals are an ersatz for a life of faith that is geared toward God. Self-discipline is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, not a straight jacket. If God does not reach His goal in our lives, we end our days in futility. It is quite possible to reach the goals we set for ourselves in life and yet live in vain.

Vs. 34 reads: *"Whenever God slew them, they would seek him; they eagerly turned to him again."* We would deduct from this that there was a certain sense of reality among the people during the journey in the wilderness. Death often has a salutary effect upon people.

In the verses 34-37, the psalmist probably compresses several generations into one. Those who would seek God are, probably, not the same as those who were slain. The scenes of death of the ones who had disobeyed impressed the younger ones who grew up in the desert. The meaninglessness of the years of wandering gave birth to a generation that would conquer Canaan. But the third generation that had not undergone this experience and that grew up in a land that had been given to them as a present, that ate food of fields they had not planted, and lived in cities they had not built fell back into flattering God with their mouths and lying to him with their tongue. They spoke beautiful words without meaning what they said. Thus an empty liturgy was born. God calls this *"lying."* Man can only lie to God if he first lies to himself. Nothing illustrates the devastating effects of man's fall into sin as the fact that we can deceive ourselves. The breaking off of a relationship with God means giving up the truth. This causes man to be split in two, in which one half lies to the other. This is what the Apostle Paul speaks about in Romans when he says: *"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."*<sup>118</sup>

On the other hand, it is implied that, if fellowship with God is restored, an inner healing occurs which enables us to become honest to ourselves again. This will improve our relationship with other human

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<sup>112</sup> John 15:7

<sup>113</sup> Isa. 55:2

<sup>114</sup> John 4:14

<sup>115</sup> John 6:27,35

<sup>116</sup> See I Cor. 11:29

<sup>117</sup> John 17:4,5

<sup>118</sup> Rom. 7:14-18



beings also. Shakespeare's words contain a deep truth. In *Hamlet*, Polonius says to his son Leartus: "This above all, to thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."

At least there was one generation of conquerors. One group of people had enough faith to make the walls of Jericho come down and to make the sun stand still at Gibeon. That was the generation that was born in the desert of death, the people who had learned to fear God. King Solomon was right when he said: "A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure."<sup>119</sup> But the following generation that lived under the priesthood of Phinehas lost this sense of direction their fathers had possessed. We read about them in the Book of Judges: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."<sup>120</sup>

The verses 38-64 repeat the material that was already treated in the previous stanza, although not in chronological order. The psalmist begins in the desert and backtracks to Egypt, finally ending up in Canaan. God's response to the attitude of Israel in the desert is a demonstration of His endless compassion. The NIV reads: "Yet he was merciful." The text says literally, "He, full of compassion." We feel in these verses the tension between God's holiness and His love. God's holiness demands that man who sins be destroyed. God's love takes man's weakness into account, which is why His compassion is aroused. The secret of the atonement is not revealed here. Asaph had no idea that God would take all this iniquity and load it upon Himself in order to pay for it in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. We wonder if it would have made any difference for the people who had sinned, had they known what God would do with their sins. Probably not! In our time it does not make any difference.

Human frailty is described here with the words: "He remembered that they were but flesh." The wording describes man's condition after the fall. When God created Adam and breathed the breath of life in him, man possessed the image of God in its purest form. Only after sin entered and man had died spiritually, we read that God said to Adam: "Dust you are and to dust you will return."<sup>121</sup> And here we read that man's condition awakened God's compassion. This does not imply that the person who sins would not be responsible for his acts. Vs. 40 mentions: "How often they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland!" In the repetition of this theme we find a certain amazement about the persistent character of evil. It is as if Asaph wants to ask, how is it possible that people who so clearly experienced God's power, both in Egypt as in the desert, never came to the place of surrendering themselves!

The words "rebelled," "grieved," "put to the test," and "vexed" suggest the existence of a relationship of intimacy and love. God loved those people, but, not only did they not respond to this love, they accused God of all kinds of devious motives and they spit in His face. It shows how important it is that we have the right kind of concept of God. Much of our wrong response to God's love is related to the distorted caricature that comes to mind when we think of God. How do we hardly ever see what God does for us in the right light? How is it possible that Israel, after the exodus from Egypt and the passage through the Red Sea, suspected that God had taken them to a deserted place in order to kill them? What possesses us?

The plagues of Egypt ought to have been a constant reminder to the Israelites. Asaph only mentions seven of the ten plagues. (If we take vs. 49 – "He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath, indignation and hostility" – to be a description of the darkness that covered the country, there are eight). The others are: 1. water turned into blood, 2. flies, 3. frogs, 4. locusts, 5. hail, 6. darkness, and 7. the death of the firstborn. Omitted are: the plague that killed the cattle, and the ulcers. There may be a suggestion that there were demonic powers involved. Most of the animals mentioned in the plagues here are elsewhere in the Bible symbols of demons. God's punishment upon Egypt consisted in the fact that, for a limited time, He allowed the devil a free hand. For a moment the idols of Egypt came to life. God had wanted to show Israel what the alternative to serving God was. We read: "He unleashed against them his hot anger... a band of destroying angels." The Hebrew calls them "evil angels" meaning demons. God's punishment on Egypt consisted in the fact that He withdrew His hand of protection, which left the people defenseless to the power of the Evil One. We see the same phenomenon in Revelation where the acts of the Antichrist

<sup>119</sup> Eccl. 7:1-4

<sup>120</sup> Judg. 21:25

<sup>121</sup> Gen. 3:19

become a demonstration of God's wrath over the world in the form of the seven bowls of God's wrath that are poured out over the earth.

The phrase "He did not spare their soul,"<sup>122</sup> "[He] gave them over," in vs. 50 reminds us of the same words Paul uses in Romans: "Therefore God gave them over...."<sup>123</sup> Those words prove that man is responsible for the plagues that come over him. God withdraws His protection from man because man rejects God. The Egyptians invited the plagues, not only in the way they treated the Israelites, but because Pharaoh had said to Moses: "Who is the LORD?... I do not know the LORD."<sup>124</sup> Israel's attitude did not differ from Pharaoh's in that they decided not to take God into account in their daily lives. They were, therefore, in the same danger that God would withdraw His protection from them. This, in fact, He did in some instances.

Israel had two reasons why they should have stayed close to the Lord: They had seen what happened in Egypt when man rejects God. And in the exodus from Egypt and the passage through the Red Sea, they had seen what it meant to be redeemed and protected. But against all logic, they became apostate. Even the sight of the dead bodies of Pharaoh and his soldiers on the shore of the Red Sea and the awesome spectacle of God's descending upon Mount Sinai failed to stem their apostasy.

The verses 52-54 deal with the experience of redemption, and vs. 55 speaks about the entrance into Canaan. The backsliding Asaph describes is, therefore, mainly the story we find in the Book of Judges and in the first part of I Samuel. The "faulty bow" which we mentioned earlier is, probably, an image used to depict the failure of the tribes to take possession of what God had given to them. This is the generation that was born in Canaan. They knew the history of salvation by hearsay, but they had not personally experienced any of it. They did, however, have a written record. Gideon typifies their attitude when he says to the Angel of the Lord: "Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' "<sup>125</sup> This is the reason that God reproaches them that they did not keep His statutes. Those people possessed the Pentateuch but they did not read it and did not believe it. As far as this is concerned, not much has changed over the centuries.

It has been my personal experience that, although I knew the Bible and believed in God, the reality only penetrated to me when God gave some miraculous answers to my prayers on the mission field. I felt ashamed at the realization that I could have known, but I never took it seriously. Gideon had more than an oral tradition, but he had never taken the trouble to delve into the Pentateuch. Illiteracy may have been less common in that time than it is generally supposed. Otherwise, it would have been of little use for Moses to have written down the laws. It is possible that literacy diminished rapidly after people entered Canaan. The Book of Judges makes us suspect that there was a great decline, not only in the spiritual domain, but also socially. The devil has tried in every century to keep people from reading the Bible. As a result of the loss of vision, large pockets of Canaanites were left in peace, which caused the Israelites to fall into idolatry within a short time. There is a direct link between the "faulty bow" and the building of "their high places" and "their idols."

The verses 59-64, probably, describe the events of the first few chapters of I Samuel when the Philistines captured the ark and the priests Hophni and Phinehas were killed in battle. The Bible does not tell us why David only brought the ark over to Jerusalem and never showed any concern for the rest of the tabernacle in Shiloh. It could be that the desecration of Shiloh by the Philistines had something to do with this. The tabernacle was still in existence at Gibeon in Solomon's days, and the king brought a large sacrifice to the Lord at that place.<sup>126</sup>

The verses 65-72 contain one of the most amazing prophecies in the Bible. At first glance, it seems as if Asaph gives exaggerated praise to David at his ascension to the throne. The psalm may have been written for this occasion, but the meaning of the words far surpasses this historical event. If these verses dealt with nothing else than David's ascension to the throne, we could read nothing else in them but a glorification of a human being and effort to butter up the new king. The coming of David meant the birth of a vision. David was the only man in Old Testament history who clearly understood that he was king in a theocracy. The bringing over of the ark to Jerusalem symbolizes this. During Saul's reign, for instance, nobody cared about the law or about the presence of God. Samuel was a Maverick in his day. With David,

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<sup>122</sup> NKJV

<sup>123</sup> See Rom 1:24, 26, 28

<sup>124</sup> Ex. 5:2

<sup>125</sup> Judg. 6:13

<sup>126</sup> See I Chr. 1:3-6

the respect for God's revelation was restored. Asaph represents this spiritual revival as a waking up by God from His sleep. God intervened in the history of Israel. Once again there came a supernatural element into the daily life of the nation.

The way Asaph describes this revival is rather humorous. He reverses the roles, as if God woke up, whilst, in reality, it was an awakening of men. God had not been drunk and awoke "as a man wakes from the stupor of wine," but human beings came to a new awareness of reality. The NIV renders vs. 65 with: "Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, as a man wakes from the stupor of wine." But most other versions read, as does the NKJ, "Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, like a mighty man who shouts because of wine." The Hebrew word translated with "wakes from" is *ranan*. *Strongs Definitions* define it with: "to creak (or emit a stridulous sound), i.e. to shout (usually for joy)." As such it is used in most instances in the Old Testament. But *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Dictionary* gives the alternate meaning of "to overcome; or to be overcome." The intent seems to be more of being stimulated by wine than of waking up from a stupor. The psalmist wants to convey the idea that God wakes up and becomes excited. This seems like a strange concept of the character of God. When we think of God as being active instead of passive, we believe that He acts only with constraint and dignity. The Holy Spirit, however, ascribes enthusiasm and excitement to God. Evidently, God wants us to revise our notion of Him. We probably understand so little about the character of God because we know and understand ourselves so little. The fact that we were created in the image of God means that God resembles us more than we think.

The object of God's enthusiasm is His Son Jesus Christ and His incarnation. This is the topic in these last verses: the birth and ascension to the throne of Jesus.

KJV renders vs. 66 with the rather humorous words: "And he smote his enemies in the hinder parts," as if God spans the enemy's behind. Most other translations use the more dignified phrase: "He beat back his enemies." It is not a struggle between opponents of equal strength. The enemy is being put to shame, and a rear-end spanking may be a good way to express the embarrassment. More is intended than a war between humans and national pride as the result of victory. When Jesus died on the cross He embarrassed His opponent. In Paul's words: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."<sup>127</sup> Satan's shame was exposed in the nakedness of Jesus on the cross. For this reason we never have to feel ashamed again before God.

For centuries, Ephraim must have profited from the good reputation Joseph had had. After all, it had been through Joseph that the nation of Israel was kept alive. Yet, in the end, God chose Judah. The only good thing Judah ever did was give himself as surety for his brother.<sup>128</sup> We read nowhere in the Bible that Ephraim considered himself to be the nucleus of the nation of Israel, but this could very well have been the case. Joseph played a most important role in Israel's history. This was the result of his fellowship with God, his obedience, and his integrity. Ephraim may have fallen into the trap of boasting in the part his ancestor played without demonstrating the same qualities Joseph possessed and without recognizing the hand of God in history. Throughout Israel's history we can discern a line of constant friction and rivalry between Ephraim and Judah which, eventually, ended in the splitting up of the kingdom after Solomon's death. But things had not yet come that far when Asaph composed this psalm. Joseph's image had changed from the personification of love for God, of faithfulness, and of forgiveness, to a symbol of unfaithfulness and unreliability of Joseph's offspring. In this psalm, Ephraim represents all those who follow God only from afar, who are called Israelites without really belonging to Israel.

God's choice of Judah was, of course, no impulse. When Jacob blessed Judah, he had said: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."<sup>129</sup> God had already revealed that He chose Judah over Joseph when Israel was still in Egypt, and when Judah and Joseph were both still alive.

The election of Zion had never been revealed before. God had revealed to Moses that He would choose a place where the ark would come to rest, but no one knew that place until David's time.<sup>130</sup> God made a double choice: a place – Zion, and a man – David. Jesus explains that, in reality, there was only one choice. He presented Himself as the real temple. We read in John's Gospel: "Jesus answered them, '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

<sup>127</sup> Col. 2:15

<sup>128</sup> See Gen. 44:18-34

<sup>129</sup> Gen. 49:10

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Deut. 12:5-7 with I Chr. 21:28-22:1

body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.”<sup>131</sup> The real place of God’s revelation is a person: Jesus Christ. This is the reason Zion is represented as the highest place on earth, as the eternal mountain. As such we see Him appear in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream as “a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”<sup>132</sup>

God’s choice of David represents God’s greatest choice. David was undoubtedly an exceptional person, but his life was not blameless. He was a weak human being who, sometimes, fell into grave sin. From a humble beginning he came to great power, and he became a great king, the greatest king Israel ever knew. He was a great statesman, poet, and musician, but he was a sinner. His Son, however, was eternally perfect. He is the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, God to be praised eternally. David’s greatest importance was the fact that he became the father of Jesus Christ. David may have had an upright heart, and he may have been a good leader, but his Son is the Holy One, the all wise and Almighty.

We have to observe the relationship between the moral weakness of the people and God’s choice of David. The background of God’s choice of David is the complaint we read in the Book of Judges: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”<sup>133</sup> God’s answer to this moral decline is the person of Jesus Christ. He is: “The way and the truth and the life.”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> John 2:19-22

<sup>132</sup> Dan. 2:35

<sup>133</sup> Judg. 21:25

<sup>134</sup> John 14:6

**PSALM SEVENTY-NINE**

A psalm of Asaph.

- 1** *O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.*
- 2** *They have given the dead bodies of your servants as food to the birds of the air, the flesh of your saints to the beasts of the earth.*
- 3** *They have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there is no one to bury the dead.*
- 4** *We are objects of reproach to our neighbors, of scorn and derision to those around us.*
- 5** *How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? How long will your jealousy burn like fire?*
- 6** *Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name;*
- 7** *for they have devoured Jacob and destroyed his homeland.*
- 8** *Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers; may your mercy come quickly to meet us, for we are in desperate need.*
- 9** *Help us, O God our Savior, for the glory of your name; deliver us and forgive our sins for your name's sake.*
- 10** *Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.*
- 11** *May the groans of the prisoners come before you; by the strength of your arm preserve those condemned to die.*
- 12** *Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the reproach they have hurled at you, O Lord.*
- 13** *Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.*

Most commentators agree that this psalm was written at the occasion of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. The problem then is that the name Asaph has no historical significance. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* tries to circumvent this difficulty by ascribing this psalm to another Asaph, who happened to have the same name as the Asaph who lived in David's time. We read: "The title, A Psalm of Asaph, must be understood as either applying to a person of the name of Asaph who lived under the captivity; or else to the family of Asaph; or to a band of singers still bearing the name of that Asaph who flourished in the days of David; for most undoubtedly the Psalm was composed during the Babylonian captivity, when the city of Jerusalem lay in heaps, the temple was defiled, and the people were in a state of captivity. David could not be its author. Some think it was composed by Jeremiah; and it is certain that <Psa. 79:6-7> is exactly the same with <Jer. 10:25>: 'Pour out thy fury upon the pagan that know thee not, and upon the families that call not on thy name: for they have eaten up Jacob, and devoured him, and consumed him; and have made his habitation desolate.' " It is also quite possible that Jeremiah quoted a psalm from the days of David. It is difficult to refute something that cannot be proven.

The solution lies in the meaning of the word "temple" in vs. 1. The temple was not constructed until the days of Solomon. It is possible that Asaph was still alive at that time, but the temple was never destroyed during Solomon's reign. The Hebrew word, translated with "temple" is *heykal*, which literally means "a large public building, such as a palace or temple." It is, therefore, possible that the destruction that is the topic of this psalm was an event similar to the one described in Psalm 60. For this reason we are not willing to give up the historicity of the name Asaph. But such technicalities ought not to keep us from the contents of this psalm.

Reading this impressive dirge, I can hear the beautiful tune to which this psalm is set in the Dutch version that was sung in the church in which I grew up in the Netherlands. The psalm bemoans the destruction of that which is the best and the rape of that which is most intimate: God's revelation of Himself to man, and His fellowship with us. The pigs are trampling the pearls under their feet. World history is full of examples of devastation of that which gives purpose and meaning to human life. The Babylonians and the Nazis murdered Jewish babies, but the deepest point of world history was when He, of whom the temple was a shadow, was destroyed. This psalm is a prophecy of the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The opening chorus of Bach's St. Matthew's Passion can be sung here: "Come, you daughters, help me lament. Behold...the Bridegroom. Behold Him...like a lamb...Behold His patience. Behold our guilt. Behold Him, out of love and graciousness, Himself carrying the wood of the Cross."

The psalmist does not say that the Evil One gained the victory over God. God is still enthroned in the center of the universe. The destruction takes place on earth, in the world, which consists of shadows of the heavenly reality. It concerns people who have been attacked in their fellowship with God. Words such as “your inheritance,” “your holy temple,” “your servants,” and “your saints” speak of people who represented God on earth. This is one of the reasons that I do not believe that this psalm deals with the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. At that time, the Jews themselves had defiled Jerusalem and the temple, not by heathen nations. According to Ezekiel’s prophecy, God had left the temple.<sup>135</sup> The Shekinah had moved from the temple to the Mount of Olives outside the city, just as Jesus would leave the temple and sit down on the Mount of Olives to utter His prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem centuries later.<sup>136</sup> Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the empty hull of the temple, and the city he burned had spewed out its inhabitants.

That is not the defilement this psalm speaks about. Here it is the place which was defiled where the living God revealed Himself, and people who served and loved God were being killed. This has happened countless times in world history. The climax was Golgotha, but ever since that day, persecution and violation of that which is holy has not ceased. Most of the Lord’s Apostles met with a violent death. In Revelation, John sees the souls of those who had been slain because of the Word of God under the altar and they are told that they are not the last ones to be killed in persecution.<sup>137</sup>

The question as to why this has to happen is never fully and directly answered in Scripture. The Apostle Peter sheds some light on one aspect of the problem of pain. He says: “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.” The Greek says literally “this is grace with God.” But Peter speaks more about the “how” than about the “why” of our suffering for the Lord. The German philosopher Nietzsche said that if man understood the “why” of a matter, he could also bear the “how.”

In this psalm also, the real reason for suffering remains hidden. The deepest complaint that can ever be uttered is: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>138</sup> The only insight we have is that the question is a result of sin that came into the world. With God there are no questions. Our turning to God is the answer to all our questions.

The opening words of this Psalm, “O God” are the most important words in the whole Psalm. The prophet Habakkuk enters deeper into the problem when he says: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”<sup>139</sup> God’s answer to him is: “The righteous will live by his faith.”<sup>140</sup> And Habakkuk reacts to this by exclaiming: “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”<sup>141</sup> The difference is in the character of God. The New Testament makes clear that evil does not come forth from God, but that God allows evil to exist in order to achieve certain results in the lives of the believer.

The psalmist does not place the things that happen against the background of God’s grace. He sees it all as a demonstration of God’s wrath. Vs.5: “How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?” Nowhere does the psalmist state that what happened was the result of Israel’s sin, but this statement comes close to it. In vs. 8 he says: “Do not hold against us the sins of the fathers,” but that is not the same as a confession of personal guilt. Asaph sees the things that happened as a demonstration of God’s anger, but he asks that God direct His anger, not towards Israel but to the nations that attacked Israel.

If it is true that God was in the process of purifying the believers, the word “wrath” seems to be out of place. Then Asaph showed the same tendency as Job who could not make a difference between what God was doing and that which was the work of Satan. His prayer of revenge also sounds strange to us. Israel ought to have been a nation of priests. The loss of this vision accounted for their perishing. Since they were unwilling to be the mediators between God and the world, God surrendered them to the power of the world. This is the reason that this prayer for revenge is out-of-place.

<sup>135</sup> See Ezek. 9:3; 10:4,18,19; 11:22,23

<sup>136</sup> See Matt. 24:1-3

<sup>137</sup> Rev. 6:9-11

<sup>138</sup> Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46

<sup>139</sup> Hab. 1:13

<sup>140</sup> Hab. 2:4<sup>b</sup>

<sup>141</sup> Hab. 3:17,18

The prophet Jeremiah used the same words as Asaph: “Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the peoples who do not call on your name. For they have devoured Jacob; they have devoured him completely and destroyed his homeland,”<sup>142</sup> but in the context in which he placed them they may refer to Israel itself. Revelation mentions the seven bowls of God’s wrath,<sup>143</sup> which are poured out over the nations of the world. What is called God’s wrath there is, in reality, what man does to himself and what the demonic powers he called upon do to him.

Vs. 8 can be seen as a confession of sin, but it is not an admission of personal responsibility. The prophet Daniel identified himself with the sins of the preceding generations,<sup>144</sup> but Asaph seems to keep his distance from the ancestors. He may have thought of what God said in the Ten Commandments: “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.”<sup>145</sup> It is true that, in the days of David, Israel was still suffering from the sinful acts Saul had committed. If this psalm dates from that time, these words are clear.

But then, in vs. 9, the psalmist prays for the forgiveness of his own sin. The basis upon which pardon is asked for is the character of God, the glory of His Name. Not only ought Israel to have given a clear demonstration of the Name of YHWH, but if God would abandon Israel, the heathen nations could have found reason to believe that the existence of Israel’s God was a myth. Israel knew from experience that God was sensitive to this kind of argumentation. Moses’ prayer of intercession must have been Asaph’s model.<sup>146</sup> The contents of each prayer ought to be: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.”<sup>147</sup> It must be the purpose of all our prayers to seek the glory of God’s Name. It is also the guarantee for the answer to our prayers. We have to test our motives to see if we really seek the holiness of God when we pray, or whether we are after our own gain. Our prayers can condemn us.

It seems strange to us that God’s Name would be hallowed in the wrath over the spilled blood of His servants. Our concept of wrath and revenge does not rhyme with the goodness of God. We tend to see revenge as an indication of evil and sadism, something that belongs rather in the realm of the devil than being an element of God’s righteousness. What we think to be revenge is often a caricature of righteousness. This is the reason that the Bible warns us that wrath and vengeance belong to God. We read: “‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”<sup>148</sup>

Revenge meant three things to Asaph: 1. Freedom for the prisoners, 2. Life for those who were condemned to die, and 3. An inner sense of remorse, an overwhelming feeling of shame in the hearts of the neighbors. This last matter would be caused by the realization that they had not merely acted wrongly toward fellow humans but toward God Himself. This must be the meaning of the phrase “the reproach they have hurled at you, O Lord.”

Jesus says that the Holy Spirit convicts people of the sin of unbelief. We read in John’s Gospel: “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.”<sup>149</sup> People will discover that what they did to men, they actually did to God. In one of the parables Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”<sup>150</sup> This is the essence of God’s wrath, by which man will condemn himself when he stands before the judgment seat of God. Image what it would be for a Hitler or a Stalin to stand before the blinding light of God’s glory and see replayed before them scenes from Nazi concentration camps and the Russians Gulag. When the Apostle John saw Jesus in His glory, he fell at his feet as though dead.<sup>151</sup> If these things happen to the tree that is green, what will happen when it is dry? The content of wrath is quite different from what we think it to be. There may even still be hope in it. A realistic evaluation of our own life while we are still on earth opens the door to conversion and renewal. “Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever; from generation to generation we will

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<sup>142</sup> Jer. 10:25

<sup>143</sup> See Rev. 15:4; ch. 16

<sup>144</sup> See Dan. 9:1-19

<sup>145</sup> Ex. 20:5,6

<sup>146</sup> See Num. 14:13-19

<sup>147</sup> Matt. 6:9

<sup>148</sup> See Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30

<sup>149</sup> John 16:8,9

<sup>150</sup> Matt. 25:40

<sup>151</sup> See Rev. 1:17

recount your praise.” The psalm opens with a city in ruin and ends with a pastoral symphony. Where the sheep are grazing the Good Shepherd cannot be far away. This opens the perspective of love that gives His life for the salvation of the sheep.



**PSALM EIGHTY**

For the director of music. To the tune of: "The Lilies of the Covenant," Of Asaph.  
A Psalm.

- 1 Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth**
- 2 before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.**
- 3 Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.**
- 4 O LORD God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?**
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.**
- 6 You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.**
- 7 Restore us, O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.**
- 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.**
- 9 You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.**
- 10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.**
- 11 It sent out its boughs to the Sea, its shoots as far as the River.**
- 12 Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes?**
- 13 Boars from the forest ravage it and the creatures of the field feed on it.**
- 14 Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine,**
- 15 the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself.**
- 16 Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish.**
- 17 Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself.**
- 18 Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name.**
- 19 Restore us, O LORD God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.**

The Septuagint has, as an addition to the title of this psalm, the words: "A psalm concerning the Assyrian." This is the reason that *The Tyndale Commentary* considers this psalm to be the reaction of the people in Jerusalem to the fall of Samaria and the subsequent captivity that began somewhere between 734 and 722 BC. The problem would then again be the same as in the preceding psalms that the designation "Of Asaph" cannot be taken literally. *The Tyndale Commentary*, therefore, believes that "Asaph" stands for a group of singers of the clan of Asaph. The problem then seems to be that, if Samaria has fallen and its population had been carried away in captivity, God could hardly be addressed as the "Shepherd of Israel, who leads Joseph like a flock."

This psalm sounds almost like a continuation of the previous one. Asaph had ended that one with the image of the shepherd, and this psalm opens with the same figure. This first picture is followed by one of a vineyard. Beginning with vs. 8 and through the end of the psalm, this symbol is portrayed in great detail. Isaiah uses the same picture,<sup>152</sup> and some of his verses are almost identical to this psalm. Ezekiel uses the image in a different form as a single vine.<sup>153</sup> Jesus completes the image in His last words spoken to His disciples before His death. In John's Gospel we read: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."<sup>154</sup> The image of the shepherd and the sheep precedes that of the vine. The first image speaks of man's salvation and God's care of him, the second of the fruit man must bear. The first could be described as God's responsibility toward man, the second as our responsibility toward God. Those two themes form the core of the whole psalm.

<sup>152</sup> See Isa. 5:1-7

<sup>153</sup> See Ezek. ch. 15 and 17

<sup>154</sup> John 15:1-8

We take the premise that this psalm was written when Israel was still one nation, consisting of twelve tribes, and that it was written on the occasion of an historical event that is unknown to us. In Jacob's blessing of Joseph, both images, the shepherd and the vine, are present. We read there: "Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall. With bitterness archers attacked him; they shot at him with hostility. But his bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the Almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lies below, blessings of the breast and womb. Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers."<sup>155</sup>

The title "Shepherd of Israel" implies a confession of human weakness and a tendency of sheep to go astray. David's Twenty-third Psalm is a typical illustration of such a confession. But it also implies a deep trust that God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Asaph appeals to the shekinah glory. He realizes that God's presence above the cover of the ark is an image of His real glory in heaven. This is what Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John have seen of the throne of God. In Asaph's prayer, we see the double aspect of God's glory which, at the same time, saves and judges. The fact that we fall short of the glory of God makes us to be sheep in need of salvation. But it is also God's glory, which saves us.

The words "make your face shine upon us" make us think of the priestly blessing: "the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you."<sup>156</sup> It is a prayer for God to reveal Himself to man. The Book of Proverbs says: "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law."<sup>157</sup> The prayer: "Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" forms the refrains in the verses 3, 7 and 19. The revelation of God's glory does not save man automatically. Without openness on the side of man and without surrender to God, God's presence will not make any difference to man's lost condition. It is not God who will have to waken His might, as Asaph states, but man who has to wake up. This is the reason that God allows emergencies in our life, because the good and easy life lulls us to sleep. Crisis situations shake us up, and we learn to pray in times of need.

The psalmist prays for the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, that is the sons of Rachel. He prays for their salvation and restoration. We saw before that Ephraim and Manasseh had become symbols of sedition, which resulted in the splitting up of the kingdom after the death of Solomon. It is quite possible that, in Asaph's days, the fissures were already visible. In praying: "Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved," Asaph identified himself with those who were in the process of falling away and he asked for unity.

If this is true, it indicates that the political breaking up of the kingdom was the result of a spiritual process of separation. Fellowship with the Lord promotes unity among people. A break-up of harmony can always be traced to a deviation from the basics. Before King Jeroboam built the altars in Bethel and Dan, he had already broken with God's revelation of Himself.<sup>158</sup> Reading the story of the confusion of languages at the building of the tower of Babel,<sup>159</sup> we get the impression that this was an immediate result of God's supernatural intervention. It is more logical to assume that the estrangement that occurred among the people was a natural and progressive result of their revolt against God. Only the Holy Spirit makes people one. As the body decays when the spirit leaves, so division occurs when the Holy Spirit is not present. God Himself testified that absolute unity enlarges the frontiers of possibility. We read that He said at the construction of the Tower of Babel: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."<sup>160</sup> If, as Christians, we would only be "one people," speaking "the same language" what would God be able to achieve with us!

The unity Asaph prayed for was never achieved. His prayer was not answered. This was probably for the same reason mentioned by the writer to the Hebrews: "None of them received what had been

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<sup>155</sup> Gen. 49:22-26

<sup>156</sup> Num. 6:25

<sup>157</sup> Prov. 29:18

<sup>158</sup> See I Kings 12:26-30

<sup>159</sup> See Gen. 11:1-9

<sup>160</sup> Gen. 11:6

promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”<sup>161</sup>

Vs. 4 gives us the impression that Asaph was not the only one who had prayed this prayer. There must have been many people in David’s day who carried this burden on their hearts. For centuries, Jerusalem had been a wedge between the north and the south. The fact that this stronghold had remained in the hands of the Jebusites for such a long time had hindered considerably the communications between the two parts of the nation. After David’s capture of the city, and after the ark had been brought in, the city had become a bridge. But the division remained under the surface. The presence of the Lord, of which the ark was the symbol, formed the basis for the unity. But surrender and obedience to the Lord must be exercised for unity to become a reality. This lack of solidarity led to sorrow and crumbling of the defense against enemy attacks.

Starting with vs. 8, the image of the vine becomes the main theme of the psalm. Asaph had, undoubtedly, an historical event in mind that was expressed in this image of destruction, but we do not know what it was. The exodus is metaphorically represented as the transplanting of a vine from Egypt to Canaan. We saw before that the vine emphasizes bearing fruit. Although this is implied, it is not expressly mentioned. In this psalm the fact is highlighted that God withdrew His protection from the vine, which resulted in its being ravaged and destroyed. This central truth is expressed in vs. 12: “Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes?” As mentioned before, most commentators take this to be a picture of the fall of Samaria. But it seems that the allegory gives little reason for this assumption. There is no known instance in which Israel fulfilled its function as a vine where the blessing of Abraham reached out so that “the mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its boughs to the Sea, its shoots as far as the River,” while, at the same time, God abandoned Israel.

This is the reason that I believe that these verses are, in the first place, a prophecy of the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew applies Hosea’s words, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son”<sup>162</sup> to the return of the young Jesus from Egypt, without making any apologies. Why would we not be allowed then to do the same with this psalm and see in the transplanting of the vine the return of Jesus to Israel and in the breaking down of the wall to His death on the cross? The “Why” in vs. 12 is then the same “why” as in “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” This impression is reinforced by the fact that Asaph speaks of Israel as one person: “the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself.” And the prayer is “Revive us.” The RSV reads: “Give us life.” The Hebrew word *chayah* means, “to live,” or “make live.” This means, “Make us rise from the dead.” I am quite aware of the fact that Asaph freely uses poetical language here, but I do not doubt either that the Holy Spirit uses this double meaning to express a deeper truth.

Added to this is the fact that Jesus identified Himself with the vine. In John’s Gospel He says: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener... I am the vine; you are the branches.”<sup>163</sup> Jesus’ statement answers Asaph’s complaint, as well as the accusation of Isaiah. How can a redeemed person bear fruit to the Father’s glory? The psalm forces us to consider this question and to apply the principle to our lives. In His suffering and death, Jesus took our failures upon Himself, so that, in His resurrection, we might enter into a life of fruit bearing.

An interesting technical point is that the middle Hebrew letter in the word “forest” in vs. 13 is *ya’ar*. In the Masoretic text, this is the middle letter of the whole Book of Psalms. So we are right in the middle of our study in vs. 13.

The prayer “Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved” occurs three times in this psalm,<sup>164</sup> but there is a crescendo in the way God is addressed. In vs. 3 it is “O God,” in vs. 7 “O God Almighty,” and in vs. 19 “O Lord God Almighty.” It is as if in the singing of this psalm, Asaph is drawn closer to God and learns to know Him better. The words “Restore us” mean more than a return to a previous condition. The Holy Spirit does not want us to return to a point in time after the fall when our circumstances were more advantageous to us. Even more is meant than Adam’s condition before the fall. God envisions a new creation. This psalm deals mainly with suffering and destruction which are results of

<sup>161</sup> Heb. 11:39,40

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Hosea 11:1 and Matt. 2:15

<sup>163</sup> John 15:1, 5

<sup>164</sup> vs. 3,7, and 19

sin. But when God makes His face shine upon us, and makes us partake in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are “a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> II Cor. 5:17

## PSALM EIGHTY-ONE

*For the director of music. According to gittith.  
Of Asaph.*

- 1 Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob!**
- 2 Begin the music, strike the tambourine, play the melodious harp and lyre.**
- 3 Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast;**
- 4 this is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob.**
- 5 He established it as a statute for Joseph when he went out against Egypt, where we heard a language we did not understand.**
- 6 He says, "I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket.**
- 7 In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah**
- 8 "Hear, O my people, and I will warn you-- if you would but listen to me, O Israel!**
- 9 You shall have no foreign god among you; you shall not bow down to an alien god.**
- 10 I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.**
- 11 "But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me.**
- 12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.**
- 13 "If my people would but listen to me, if Israel would follow my ways,**
- 14 how quickly would I subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes!**
- 15 Those who hate the LORD would cringe before him, and their punishment would last forever.**
- 16 But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."**

This psalm is divided in two, but the question is where to draw the line of separation. This depends on our interpretation of the statement in vs. 5: "we heard a language we did not understand." The KJV renders this with: "I heard a language that I understood not." *The Adam Clarke Commentary* remarks: "This passage is difficult. Who heard? And what was heard? All the versions, except the Chaldee, read the pronoun in the third person, instead of the first. 'He heard a language that he understood not.' And to the Versions Kennicott reforms the text, s<sup>a</sup> pat lo' yaadah yisma'; 'a language which he did not understand he heard.' But what was that language? Some say the Egyptian; others, who take Joseph to signify the children of Israel in general, say it was the declaration of God by Moses, that Yahweh was the true God, that he would deliver their shoulder from their burdens, and their hands from the pots-- the moulds and furnaces in which they formed and baked their brick."

In the first part, it is man who speaks, Asaph; in the second God speaks directly to men. Then there is also the division according to the subject of the psalm. The first section deals with redemption and the celebration of deliverance. In the second segment, God scolds the people He redeemed. The psalm, therefore, sounds a twofold tone: there is first, the festive character of the music, and second, the earnestness of the reproach.

*The Tyndale Commentary* believes that this psalm was written on the occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles. It seems more logical, however, to interpret this psalm in the light of the Feast of Trumpets, which inaugurated the new civil year on the first day of the seventh month. That is the traditional interpretation of that feast, although the Bible nowhere states this clearly.

This psalm shows a great resemblance to Ps. 95. It calls for ecstasy of singing and shouting before God. The word translated with "sing" is *ranan*, which means "to shout – usually for joy." It is an expression of intense joy. "Shout aloud" is the translation of the Hebrew word *ruwa`* which *Strongs Definitions* describes with "to split the ears." It indicates the way in which man disregards all conventions and freely expresses praise. A strong sense of the presence of the Lord is needed to come to this kind of utterance. The elders in Revelation were so inspired by the vision of God that they cast their crowns before the throne.<sup>166</sup> In heaven, this kind of spontaneous singing and shouting is uninterrupted. The word "uninterrupted" is, of course, a term that only fits in our time-bound world. Eternity and interruption do not go together. While on earth, man has to break through the thick crust of unreality caused by the presence of sin before he can be fully aware of God's presence and glorious character. This is the reason God ordained times of celebration, as vs. 4 says about the feast: "this is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of

<sup>166</sup> See Rev. 4:10 (NKJV)

Jacob.” If we would only depend on spontaneous expressions, we would never come to praising God and shouting for joy.

This means that God expects us to work ourselves up and get in the mood. We have to resist the influence of outward circumstances that are against us; we have to swim upstream and, by an act of the will, say to God: “I praise you, and I thank you.” Our mood will not be able to keep on resisting our will, and this will lead to spontaneity.

In vs. 1 God is called “our strength,” and “the God of Jacob.” Calling God “our strength” implies a confession of our own weakness. And calling God “the God of Jacob” refers to God’s love for a man whose life has been changed and renewed. Jacob had been a deceiver. The Apostle Paul says: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>167</sup> In the same context Paul uses the words “powerless,” “ungodly,” and “enemies” to describe our previous condition. Such we were when God loved us.

Everybody can shout. Since we have breath and a voice, we can produce sound. Not everyone can sing or strike the tambourine, and for playing the harp and lyre, one needs skill. We have to praise God with our skills.

As mentioned above, we assume that sounding the *showphar*, that is the ram’s horn or trumpet, at the New Moon, refers to the Feast of Trumpets which was regulated in Leviticus.<sup>168</sup> This was an annual celebration, which acquired special significance when it introduced the Sabbath Year, every seventh year, and the Year of Jubilee, every fiftieth year. These feasts were a picture of the eternal redemption God would bring about for all of His creation. They were pointers to the time when “He who [is] seated on the throne [will say], ‘I am making everything new!’”<sup>169</sup> This lends to the sounding of the ram’s horn, an eschatological character. The celebration draws man’s gaze from the present to the future. It makes him realize that the present is temporal, that a new heaven and a new earth are coming. We have to interpret our redemption in the present in this light and in the context of this hope. Without hope for the future, we cannot celebrate the victories of the present. This was even truer for Israel than for us, because their redemption consisted of a shadow of the reality to come. The exodus from Egypt was, after all, an outward manifestation of the inner deliverance that is ours.

Vs. 5 states that the feast is a commemoration of the time God “went out against Egypt.” God’s actions against Egypt consisted of the Ten Plagues and of the destruction of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea. Our joy in the Lord is a weapon God uses against the enemy. Nehemiah said to the people of Israel: “The joy of the LORD is your strength.”<sup>170</sup> The word strength in Hebrew is *ma’owz*, which means “a fortified place,” or “a defense.” It is a place of refuge in which we can hide. Our joy serves, not only the purpose of building us up and encouraging us, but it contributes also to the defeat of the enemy. The devil can easily hide behind our grief, but he cannot resist our joy in the Lord. This is the reason that the Apostle Paul can say: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.”<sup>171</sup> Our joy is part of our testimony.

*The Tyndale Commentary* believes that the declaration: “we heard a language we did not understand” refers to God’s revelation of Himself on Mount Sinai. Man had never heard such words before; it was a completely new sound. But the reaction could also be taken to pertain to the fact that Israel lived in Egypt as foreigners. The problem is not obvious in the NIV which changes the “I heard a language I did not understand” in vs. 5, (NKJ, and most other versions), to “we heard a language we did not understand.” The “I” in vs. 5 is obviously not the same “I” as in vs. 6: “I removed the burden from their shoulders.” If we assume the “I heard a language I did not understand” refers to God, we have the problem that we ascribe ignorance to the omniscient God, unless we interpret the declaration in the same way as in Jesus’ words: “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”<sup>172</sup> But such an interpretation does not fit the context here. Some versions use a colon to indicate that the unknown language is the message God sends to His people. The NAS, for instance, reads: “I heard a language that I did not know: ‘I relieved his shoulder of the burden.’”

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<sup>167</sup> Rom. 5:8

<sup>168</sup> See Lev. 23:23-25

<sup>169</sup> Rev. 21:5

<sup>170</sup> Neh. 8:10

<sup>171</sup> Phil. 3:1

<sup>172</sup> Matt. 7:23

The content of God's revelation is, first of all, redemption from slavery. In the spiritual realm this means deliverance from the power of sin. This is the message Jesus preached, when He said: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free... I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."<sup>173</sup>

The distress in vs. 8 may refer to Israel's cry for help in Egypt, or to their panic when they stood before the Red Sea and the Egyptians pursued them.<sup>174</sup> The latter would be a more logical interpretation in view of chronology.

Israel's deliverance from slavery is painted in a vivid manner: "I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket." The NIV changed the original word order. The Hebrew Interlinear Bible reads: "I removed from the burden his shoulder," which sounds like a reversal of what really happened. The Holy Spirit seems to say that God does not remove the burden but the shoulder. This indicates the way in which God pulls us out from under the power of sin. Removal of the shoulder happens when we die, and death frees us from the burden. Without a shoulder burdens can no longer be carried. On the other hand, Jesus invites us to take up and carry His burden. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."<sup>175</sup> In that case God creates new shoulders for us. Or rather, we can say that Christ's yoke forms us in such a way that we are made fit for the task.

God's answer out of the thundercloud, undoubtedly, refers to God's revelation of Himself on Mount Sinai. According to what Moses had told Pharaoh, the main reason for Israel's leaving Egypt was this encounter with God in the desert. The command had been: "Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert."<sup>176</sup> This focus is often lost when we look at Israel's disobedience and the protracted journey through the wilderness.

The testing at the waters of Meribah is mentioned here as a part of the redemption process. The implication of this is that both the deliverance from fear and the testing of faith are part of the course God takes in leading His sons to glory. These are also facets of redemption, as well as God's revelation of Himself.

The verses 8-16 belong to the most heartrending portions of Scripture. Behind those words, we can see the depth and breadth of God's love for His people. He had redeemed men from an inhuman condition in order to make them human beings with dignity. Jeremiah's words are applicable here: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."<sup>177</sup> God expected the people He had saved and redeemed to turn to Him and to surrender to Him in love, but they refused. Man has it in his power to say "no" to God. The Bible does not recognize the Calvinistic concept of "irresistible grace." These verses deal with this tragedy that a person who experienced redemption rejects God. The Bible allows us a glance into God's hurting heart. Redemption ought to be followed by surrender and obedience.

We are shown the difference between the God who is the source of all life and the devil, who infiltrated Israel under the guise of idols. The idol is a product of human hands. In idolatry, man worships something that is lower than he is. An idol image is nothing in itself, but behind each one hides a demon. It is the devil's intention to destroy man. Jesus says about him: "He was a murderer from the beginning."<sup>178</sup> How terrible it must be for God to see that man He created and whom He loves become a prey of demonic powers to which he gives himself by his own choice! For this reason we read this heartbreaking plea: "Hear, O my people, and I will warn you-- if you would but listen to me, O Israel!" God speaks thus to the people He redeemed because He wants to lead them to glory.

The last line of vs. 10 is one of the gems in the Bible: "Open wide your mouth and I will fill it." God promises that He will completely satisfy us if we open ourselves up for Him. The image makes us think of a nest with young birds, waiting with stretched-open beaks for their mother to satisfy their hunger. A lack of happiness is never due to God's unwillingness, but always to our lack of desire. Idolatry, in whatever form or shape it may present itself, always dulls man's appetite.

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<sup>173</sup> John 8:31-36

<sup>174</sup> See Ex. 14:9-18

<sup>175</sup> Matt. 11:28-30

<sup>176</sup> Ex. 5:1

<sup>177</sup> Jer. 31:3

<sup>178</sup> John 8:44

Every newborn creature knows hunger; it is inherent in each living being that comes into this world. One of the few things a baby can do is drink. God does not ask us to do something we are unable to do. He asks that we do that for which we were made, that we be creatures who hunger for their Creator. In this verse, God reveals Himself to us as our mother, demonstrating love, tenderness, nourishment and all maternal attributes. He invites us to enter into a life-giving intimacy with Himself. Why are there so few satisfied people in this world? If we know how to get satisfaction on the natural level of this world, why not in the spiritual realm? God says: "I brought you out of Egypt; allow me now to feed you." During the journey through the desert, God fed His people with natural food. But He also made them fast from time to time in order to make them understand that material things were an image of a spiritual reality. Physical hunger points to spiritual hunger. Moses expresses this with the words: "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."<sup>179</sup>

The primary purpose of our redemption is that we learn how to feed ourselves. The Apostle Peter says: "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation."<sup>180</sup> The KJV uses the words "the sincere milk of the word." The context of the psalm indicates that satisfaction is the result of listening and of obeying. Satisfaction is a byproduct of obedience. The result of disobedience, however, is much more than merely dissatisfaction. God let Israel go her own way. He never forces a person to obey Him. The outcome of disobedience is that man gets bogged down in his life. This often opens the way for demonic influences. It is said that volunteers populate both heaven and hell. All this is the result of the fact that we bear God's image. Like God, we possess personality, which means that we have the right to place ourselves under God's protection, but also that we can withdraw from it. We have used the picture of a marriage before. A wife is protected by her husband, but this protection is part of a relationship, which is characterized by mutual love, surrender, and submission.

The Apostle Paul explains what happens when man withdraws himself from God's protection. We read in Romans: "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done."<sup>181</sup> But God does not easily withdraw His protecting hand from His people. The complaint in vs. 13 proves this: "If my people would but listen to me, if Israel would follow my ways." Because God had concentrated all His love upon His Israel, as well as upon each individual member of the nation, it broke His heart that they did not want to listen.

God has a plan for each person on earth. The tragedy is that most people never arrive at the point in their lives where they ask what God's will for their lives is. It is even more tragic to see God's way and then reject it. Israel knew exactly what God had in mind for them but they decided collectively to go their own way. The choice factor is very important in this matter. God forces no one to follow His way because He wants our obedience to be voluntary, based on love and surrender to Him.

This shows us at the same time how we have to walk in God's way. Paul explains this in Ephesians: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."<sup>182</sup> The key to seeing the way and walking in it is Jesus Christ. The way is called "good works." Jesus also calls Himself "The Way." "I am the way and the truth and the life."<sup>183</sup> In light of the above, we can state that Jesus is God's plan for our lives and that our obedience is in Him. We can achieve God's goal with our lives only if we are "in Him." God's great goal in this world is for Jesus to bring many sons to glory.<sup>184</sup> This means for each individual person a specific way of life to live, a particular task to perform, and a personal experience.

The last three verses deal with the blessing that follows obedience. The first blessing is sharing in God's victory over the enemy. For Israel this meant the subjugation of the inhabitants of Canaan and immunity to attacking hordes from the outside. For us it means power over the Evil One and his henchmen, and over the whole kingdom of darkness. In Matthew's Gospel we read: "He... gave them authority to

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<sup>179</sup> Deut. 8:3

<sup>180</sup> I Pet. 2:2

<sup>181</sup> Rom. 1:24, 26, 28

<sup>182</sup> Eph. 2:10

<sup>183</sup> John 14:6

<sup>184</sup> See Heb. 2:10



drive out evil spirits.”<sup>185</sup> And Paul states: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”<sup>186</sup> Our obedience to God will bring the enemy down.

Obedience also means satisfaction. There is, obviously, a difference between the satisfaction of vs. 10 and vs. 16. Vs. 10 mentions no food, but it is clear that it describes the feeding of the immature. God feeds those who cannot feed themselves. In the last verse, we see a person who eats the bread he baked himself. Honey from the rock is nourishment that comes from an inhospitable place. But it is also true that without flowers there is no honey. This latter picture speaks of the satisfaction of the adult.

In conclusion, we can say that the verses depict the joy of redemption which results in obedience to God. This obedience manifests itself in a total satisfaction on every level, in victory, and in growing up to maturity. This completes the circle of joy.

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<sup>185</sup> Matt. 10:1

<sup>186</sup> Rom. 16:20

## PSALM EIGHTY-TWO

A psalm of Asaph.

- 1 *God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgment among the "gods":*
- 2 *"How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Selah*
- 3 *Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.*
- 4 *Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*
- 5 *"They know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.*
- 6 *"I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of the Most High.'*
- 7 *But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler."*
- 8 *Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance.*

There are some problems in this psalm that do not appear on the surface. The first one is the meaning of the word "gods." The Interlinear Bible reads literally: "Elohim stands in the congregations of El; among the elohim He judges." Bible scholars don't agree about the meaning of the last *elohim*, whether this refers to angels or to human beings.

*The Adam Clarke Commentary* remarks: "The Hebrew should be translated, 'God standeth in the assembly of God.' God is among his people; and he presides especially in those courts of justice which himself has established. The Court of King's Bench is properly the place where the king presides, and where he is supposed to be always present. But the kings of England seldom make their appearance there. King James I sometimes attended: at such times it might be said, 'The king is in the king's court.' I believe the case above to be similar. Judges! beware what you do! God is in his court, and in the midst (of the assembly) God will judge."

*The Brown-Driver-Briggs' Definition* defines the word '*elohiym*' as: "rulers, judges, divine ones, angels, or gods."

Whatever the grammatical shades of meaning may imply, it seems logical that the phrase, in the context of this psalm, refers to human judges who are not judging according to the rules of justice. It doesn't seem logical to assume that the fate of the poor and the orphans should be in the hands of supernatural beings. The Bible teaches nowhere that God's angels pronounce judgment over humans on earth. Injustice comes from the devil, and why would God address demons in this psalm? There is no doubt that the term *elohim* is sometimes used for humans. In the statement: "Then his master must take him before the judges," the word *elohim* is used for judges.<sup>187</sup> And Jesus' quote of this psalm in John's Gospel would make no sense if "gods" did not refer to humans. We read there: "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-- what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am Gods Son'?'<sup>188</sup> To whom else would the Word of God have come? King Jehoshaphat referred indirectly to this psalm when he gave instructions to the judges in the reorganization of the judicial system in Judah. He said: "Consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for man but for the LORD, who is with you whenever you give a verdict."<sup>189</sup>

The use of the word *elohim* in reference to men has far reaching implications. It indicates how seriously the Bible holds to the fact that man was created in God's image and likeness. The maintenance of justice is one of the characteristics of God's being; justice is a divine attribute. Justice is the factor that places events, acts, and intentions in the light of God's glory.

Asaph states that God stands in the Supreme Court of the whole world. Justice cannot be based upon public opinion. Right or wrong is not determined by a majority of votes. Mankind consists of individuals who are fallible and who have broken the bond with God. Right and wrong do not exist by the good graces of democracy. The Bible therefore warns: "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong."<sup>190</sup> The definition of that which is right is the result of a comparison with the character of God. Judges are accountable to God for the verdicts they give. The judges in this psalm had not taken God into account.

<sup>187</sup> See Ex. 21:6

<sup>188</sup> John 10:34-36

<sup>189</sup> II Chr. 19:6

<sup>190</sup> Ex. 23:2

God always presides in the assembly of the judges. If the judges are realists, they will take God as the standard of their judgments.

It happens sometimes that judges pronounce right verdicts from wrong motives. Jesus told the parable of a unrighteous judge who did not want to take the case of a widow.<sup>191</sup> We read: “Finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’ ” The point that is made in this psalm is that God not only evaluates the verdicts but also the motives that lead to the verdicts. King Jehoshaphat told the judges he had appointed: “Consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for man but for the LORD, who is with you whenever you give a verdict.”<sup>192</sup>

This principle is valid not only for the meting out of justice but for all our acts. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” And to the Colossians, he wrote: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”<sup>193</sup> It ought to be the goal of our life to please God.

Before sin entered the world there was no injustice and courts of law were unnecessary. Administration of justice is, therefore, an accommodation to the condition of sin that governs human relations. Before the fall, man had no authority over his fellowmen either. Adam and Eve were directly responsible to God. We seldom realize how drastically the coming of sin changed our human relationships. God does not ignore the reality of sin. He creates vehicles and organs that adapt to this reality and that promote healing. God wants judges to apply justice in a sick and torn world. This means implementing the principles of God’s character to a sinful society. This is clearly an emergency measure. But if justice is no longer administered, the bottom has fallen out from under society, and man becomes a helpless victim of demonic powers.

Application of justice also contains a reminder that God will make all things new. The Apostle Peter says: “But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”<sup>194</sup>

Another result of the coming of sin into the world is the fact that there are the weak and fatherless, the poor and oppressed, the weak and needy. The justice mentioned in the psalm is obviously social justice. Murder and theft are not excluded, but this psalm deals mainly with matters that do not oppose the letter of the law yet leave the innocent party bereft. The weak and fatherless do not have the means to defend themselves against organizations or corporations that gobble up others within the boundaries of the law. God opposes this kind of injustice.

Obviously, the line of separation does not run always between poor and rich. This is not a class struggle. God wants justice to be supplemented with mercy. It is not only a matter of not accepting bribes, but justice has to be applied within the framework of brotherly love.

A question arises in vs. 5, “They know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.” Does “they” refer to the judges or to the victims? It seems more logical to apply it to the judges. A judge who does not reckon with God in his verdicts has no basis upon which justice rests. *The Tyndale Commentary* states that most commentaries assert that God, (or Asaph), speaks about the judges, but the author of *The Tyndale Commentary* believes that the victims of injustice are meant here.

Vs. 6 is the verse that Jesus quotes in defending Himself against the accusations of the Jews that He is a mere man but makes Himself God. We read in John’s Gospel: “Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, ‘I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?’ ‘We are not stoning you for any of these,’ replied the Jews, ‘but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.’ 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-- what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, ‘*I am God’s Son*’ ? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.’ ”<sup>195</sup> I understand Jesus’ argumentation to mean the following: If God calls men to whom His Word has come ‘gods’, then how

<sup>191</sup> See Luke 18:2-5

<sup>192</sup> II Chr. 19:6

<sup>193</sup> Col. 3:23

<sup>194</sup> II Pet. 3:13

<sup>195</sup> John 10:31-38

much more is the Messiah, the man whom God sent into the world, God. In the context of this psalm, the verse has a negative connotation. In Jesus' quote it becomes positive. The words "You are gods" are an expression of the image of God in man. Jesus' words "to whom the word of God came" probably refer to the creation of Adam. We read in the Genesis account: "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."<sup>196</sup> God breathed His Spirit into Adam. The Hebrew word *neshamah* can be translated with "breath" or with "spirit." In this psalm, however, the tragedy of Adam's death is repeated. In Hebrew, the statement, "You will die like mere men" reads literally "you will die like Adam." In the parallel phrase, Adam is given the title of "ruler" or "prince."

We may not use these verses as a basis for a doctrine about original sin, as if we would not all be included in Adam's death. The point here is a comparison. We could say that Adam's death becomes a picture of the "second death." Men who have misused the dignity God gave them to build themselves up will completely lose the image of God that is in them at the final and eternal separation from God. This is God's verdict upon those who pass on unjust verdicts.

The psalm concludes with a look at the end time when God will judge every man. The NIV reads: "For all the nations are your inheritance." The Interlinear Bible says literally: "For Thou shalt inherit all nations." Other translations are "For to thee belong all the nations!" (RSV), and "For all of it belongs to you. All nations are in your hands" (TLB). There is no need to remind God that the whole earth belongs to Him. But man tends to forget this fact. This is the reason that injustice flourishes on earth. The person who knows that he does not belong to himself will exercise justice. How much more ought we to do this when we know that we have been bought and paid for by the blood of Jesus!

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<sup>196</sup> Gen. 2:7

**PSALM EIGHTY-THREE**

A song. A psalm of Asaph.

- 1 O God, do not keep silent; be not quiet, O God, be not still.**
- 2 See how your enemies are astir, how your foes rear their heads.**
- 3 With cunning they conspire against your people; they plot against those you cherish.**
- 4 "Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation, that the name of Israel be remembered no more."**
- 5 With one mind they plot together; they form an alliance against you--**
- 6 the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, of Moab and the Hagrites,**
- 7 Gebal, Ammon and Amalek, Philistia, with the people of Tyre.**
- 8 Even Assyria has joined them to lend strength to the descendants of Lot. Selah**
- 9 Do to them as you did to Midian, as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon,**
- 10 who perished at Endor and became like refuse on the ground.**
- 11 Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,**
- 12 who said, "Let us take possession of the pasturelands of God."**
- 13 Make them like tumbleweed, O my God, like chaff before the wind.**
- 14 As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze,**
- 15 so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm.**
- 16 Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O LORD.**
- 17 May they ever be ashamed and dismayed; may they perish in disgrace.**
- 18 Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD-- that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.**

This psalm is the last one in the Book of Psalms that bears the name of Asaph.<sup>197</sup> We don't know for which occasion the psalm was written, so it is useless to speculate about this. There are several other psalms in the series in which Asaph voices the same thought as if God were a passive observer of events. In this case, however, there is no mention of Israel's sin. In this psalm, Israel is portrayed as God's people, who are under His protection. The enemy who has attacked Israel has, at the same time, attacked God. Not only Israel's existence is at stake, but also God's honor and testimony. Those who hate Israel hate God also. God appears to remain silent and inactive in the face of this threat. He looks on and does nothing.

It seems as if little has changed in world history. Other nations have always considered Israel to be an intruder in the land of Canaan. Even during Israel's captivity there were periods when some tried to exterminate the Jewish people, as is evinced in the story of Esther.<sup>198</sup> The period between Haman and Hitler has been marked by a sad series of pogroms. Central in this is the endeavor to cut off the Anointed One, as we see in Daniel's prophecy,<sup>199</sup> meaning the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the battle against Him who crushes the head of the serpent.<sup>200</sup> Behind the scene stands the archenemy of whom all haters of Jews are merely pawns in a chess game.

The opponents are mostly related to the nation of Israel. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau. The Ishmaelites were Abraham's descendants, and several of the Canaanite tribes descended from the incestuous relationship the daughters of Lot had had with their own father.<sup>201</sup> Esau had been a man without any spiritual inclinations. Ishmael had been begotten by Abraham "in the flesh," and the fatherhood of Lot needs no further comment. As far as the progeny of those nations is concerned, there was an overwhelming evidence of sinful stains. Satan had found a very fertile ground among those nations. He manipulated those peoples for his own ends. His final goal was the destruction of Israel but harassment of God. As he understood enough of God's plan with Adam to try to make Adam fall into sin, so he saw the importance of Israel and, consequently, he tried to exterminate the people.

God's reaction to this is incomprehensible for man. The Apostle Paul calls this the foolishness of the cross.<sup>202</sup> Even Satan did not understand God's strategy, which was his undoing. When God's own Son

<sup>197</sup> See Ps. 50; 73-83

<sup>198</sup> See Esther ch. 3

<sup>199</sup> Dan. 9:26

<sup>200</sup> Gen. 3:15

<sup>201</sup> See Gen. 19:37,38

<sup>202</sup> See I Cor. 1:18-29

was mocked and crushed, God kept silent and remained inactive. He did not even answer the cry: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" Israel's experience, as described in this psalm, is therefore an image of the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. This psalm contains a prophecy. God's inactivity is intentional and strategic. This strategy leads to a complete victory over evil. Man's problem is that the process takes too much time. We think that God ought to complete His business within the scope of one human lifetime. We understand very little of the perspective of things from the viewpoint of eternity.

The prayer for revenge, as we read this in verses 9-18, is not what it seems to be at first sight. Asaph does not pray for the extermination of the enemies. He asks that their faces will be covered with shame "so that men will seek your name, O LORD" (vs. 16). A feeling of shame is the most hopeful and salutary reaction a person can have when confronted with his sin. It is an indication of an awakened conscience. A man whose conscience is seared will not be able to feel ashamed. Without a feeling of shame, there is no possibility of conversion. And if, as a reaction to feeling ashamed, people begin to seek the Name of the YHWH, forgiveness of sin, renewal, and rehabilitation are not far behind. Asaph demonstrates deep spiritual insight in praying this prayer for his enemies.

The examples mentioned in the preceding verses show the same kind of insight. Jael, the wife of Heber, killed Sisera, Jabin's general, with a tent peg.<sup>203</sup> Oreb and Zeeb were two kings whom Gideon killed after he dispersed their army with his gang of 300 men armed with jars, torches, and trumpets.<sup>204</sup> Both examples illustrate the principle of victory of the strong by the weak. God uses weak men, whom He makes strong in an apparent defeat, in order to defeat that which is strong. This is the principle that is expounded in this psalm. The enemy here is a man who sold himself to do evil, but for whom the hope of conversion is never excluded. Behind this human being stands the archenemy, the prince of darkness, who will be conquered in the same fashion, but without the possibility of salvation.

The goal of victory is the honor of God. Man never occupies a prominent place in this psalm. Even in the attacks upon Israel and in the efforts to exterminate the nation, the limelight falls upon God. God is the enemy's real target, not man who is under God's protection. The issue in the final victory, therefore, is not primarily the salvation of man, but the manifestation of God's glory. How wonderful this is that the devil cannot attack us because of what we are, but because he hates the glory of God that is within us! How good it is when we understand what is at stake, and why we experience that which befalls us!

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<sup>203</sup> See Judges 4:9,21

<sup>204</sup> See Judges 7:25

## PSALM EIGHTY-FOUR

For the director of music. According to *gittith*. Of the sons of Korah.  
A psalm.

- 1 *How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!*
- 2 *My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.*
- 3 *Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young-- a place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.*
- 4 *Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah*
- 5 *Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.*
- 6 *As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.*
- 7 *They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.*
- 8 *Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob. Selah*
- 9 *Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one.*
- 10 *Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*
- 11 *For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.*
- 12 *LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you.*

This psalm is one of my favorites, which I have committed to memory. Together with Psalms 42-29, 85, 87, and 88, it is composed by the Sons of Korah. The meaning of the term *gittith* is uncertain. According to *Strongs Definitions* it means a Gittite harp. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* states that, in some contexts, the term has been taken to mean “To the conqueror, concerning the wine-presses,” but the Chaldee interpretation is: “to be sung upon the harp, which he brought out of Gath.” This would connect the word *gittith* to the Philistine city of Gath. Those who hold to the wine-press interpretation suppose that there is a connection with the grape harvest; they also believe that the psalm could either be seen as a song to be sung at the Feast of Tabernacles, or that it was composed at the occasion of the transfer of the ark from the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite to Jerusalem.<sup>205</sup> It is easy to get lost in this labyrinth of interpretations.

As we saw in connection with Psalm 42, the sons of Korah were the descendants of Korah who rebelled against Moses and descended alive into the kingdom of death. The story is found in the Book of Numbers.<sup>206</sup> David had appointed them as gatekeepers.<sup>207</sup> They were not professional musicians like Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun. As amateur musicians they have made important contributions to the praise literature.

As in Psalm 42, this psalm expresses a longing for God. The psalmist is far from the place of God’s revelation and, consequently, he is also, symbolically out of fellowship with God. The theme of this psalm strongly resembles that of Psalm 42, but there is no despair or sense of being forsaken here. There is the same kind of longing, but there is no doubt in the mind of the psalmist whether God will hear his prayers or not. This difference gives a deeper and richer tone to this psalm. One would think that the psalmist is an older man who may have had a long series of experiences of fellowship with God he can fall back on. There seems to be more faith in this psalm than in Psalm 42, but that does not diminish the intensity of the longing.

If the yearning of the psalmist were merely a kind of homesickness, we would say that he idealizes the place, but one can hardly exaggerate the impression the glory of God makes on a place. This impression is a mixture of idyllic beauty and great power. The Interlinear Hebrew-Aramaic Old Testament renders vs. 1: “How lovely your dwellings, O Jehovah of hosts.” The Hebrew word for “lovely” is *yedyd*, which *Strongs Definitions* defines as “loved.” It is love that makes a place lovely. It is the presence of God, which gives loveliness to a place. In my memory, I can never separate the place of my conversion from the

<sup>205</sup> See II Sam. 6:11

<sup>206</sup> See Num. 16

<sup>207</sup> See I Chr. 26:1,2

experience of joy of my first encounter with the Lord, which turned my life around. This is good. It is the opposite of being influenced by one's surrounding. Moses discovered that God conveyed His character to the place where He revealed Himself, when he stood at the burning bush and God said to him: "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."<sup>208</sup>

The use of the word "lovely" indicates that the love of God has made a deep impression upon the psalmist. The presence of the sparrow and the swallow with a nest full of little ones illustrates God's tender love. God is *Yahweh t'abaa'owt*, the Lord of hosts, the commander-in-chief of the heavenly armies, the Lord Almighty. But might is not the same as brute force. God's might manifests itself in tender compassion over a nest of little birds. Albert Schweitzer was not too far off the mark with his "respect for life." God is concerned when two sparrows, sold for a penny, fall to the ground.<sup>209</sup> We live in a world where, not only birds are sold, but their necks are wrung and where bodies and souls of men are being bought and sold.<sup>210</sup> But God's revelation of Himself gives back value, honor, and rights to every living thing.

One can dwell in Jerusalem and yet be far from the loveliness of God. It is the contrast between what we believe to be a disparity between the might of the Lord of hosts and the loveliness of His dwelling place that gives to the image that is used here such a wonderful radiance. And the place the psalmist describes is in itself only an image of the heavenly reality. If the picture is that glorious, what will the reality be? A Dutch poet, speaking about the beauty of the autumn leaves, wrote: "If the portals are made of gold, what will the halls be like?"

The intensity of the psalmist's longing is expressed on two levels and in three different ways. The two levels are the image and reality, or the outside and the inside, the place and the person, the courts and the living God. And the longing is expressed in the three parts of which man is made: spirit, soul, and body. The psalmist does not use those very words, but that should not confuse us. The Bible interchanges the words "spirit" and "soul" for the organ of fellowship with God. It is the spirit of this son of Korah that yearns for God.

It seems that the term "courts" speaks of a certain restriction. The courts of the Lord is not the same as the Holy of Holiest where the glory of God resided. The psalmist wants to say that perfect fellowship with God is not yet possible. Man's spirit cannot yet be perfectly united with God. Even in the dispensation in which we live at present, being filled with the Holy Spirit is an earnest, a promise of things to come. This yearning constitutes a form of praise. Our soul, that is our mind, our emotions, and our will cry out to the living God if we intensely yearn for spiritual fellowship with God.

The Hebrew word translated with "cry" is *ranan*, which according to *Strongs Definitions*, means: "to shout (usually for joy)." The RSV renders vs. 2 with: "My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." Our bodies will follow also. Even our physical deterioration can be an expression of this longing for complete fellowship with God. We can praise God in our growing older.

The title "living God" expresses more than a contrast between God and the idols. This appellation is found twelve times in the Old Testament and eight times in the New Testament. Jesus testifies to the fact that God "has life in Himself."<sup>211</sup> He is not dependent on life outside Himself as all created beings are. Therefore, the fact that He is the living God sets Him apart, not only from the dead idols, but from all other living beings. David says of God: "For with you is the fountain of life."<sup>212</sup> Our relationship with God gives life, not only in the physical sense, but particularly spiritually. This is what makes the yearning of the psalmist so intense. The Apostle Paul spoke a great truth: "For in him we live and move and have our being."<sup>213</sup> But there is a difference between a conscious and voluntary living in God by an act of our will, and by the surrender of ourselves to Him, and a mechanical, forced, involuntary existence in Him. When we "sing for joy to the living God," we throw ourselves in the waters of salvation and let ourselves be carried away by the current.

Vs. 3 depicts, in the first place, God's eye for details and the tenderness with which He cares for His creatures. Birds are a beautiful part of God's creation. They may be on a lower level of creation, but there is something in birds that always makes me jealous. As a human being, I am less colorful, I cannot sing as they do, and I cannot fly. A world without birds would be a poorer world. The island of Irian Jaya,

<sup>208</sup> Ex. 3:5

<sup>209</sup> See Matt. 10:29

<sup>210</sup> See Rev. 18:13

<sup>211</sup> See John 5:26

<sup>212</sup> Ps. 36:9

<sup>213</sup> Acts 17:28



Indonesia, where we worked as missionaries was a paradise of birds, and the habitat of the bird of paradise! But birds are also more vulnerable than men. In the words of Jesus: “They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”<sup>214</sup> In God’s courts, they are under God’s special protection. The thought behind this is, of course, that we, as human beings, are worth more than the birds. This is the reason Jesus says in the same breath: “Are you not much more valuable than they?” Yet at the same time, the birds make their nests in the temple while man is far from the presence of God.

We find the same paradox in vs. 3 as in vs. 1, where the loveliness of God’s dwelling place is contrasted with God’s power as the supreme commander of the heavenly armies. Here, the fluttering birds and the nest with young with their beaks stretched open are contrasted to God’s omnipotence. The paradox, however, is inside us. When we think of generals, we have in mind pictures of armies that carry out wars of destruction. A general is an officer of death. *Yahweh ts<sup>a</sup>ba’oowt* is God, the Lord of life.

Yet, death is present in the picture in the form of the altar. The NIV uses the word “altar” but all other translations use the plural, indicating that both the burnt offering and the incense offering are meant. The term “altar” is used to designate the whole temple. From the perspective of the psalmist, one approaches God only via the altar. There is a world of significance in this image. The altar symbolizes pardon, substitution, surrender, love, and praise. It is a wise swallow that puts its young at such a place! If all human beings would rear their children at the same place, we would live in a different world. We may be more valuable than the sparrows and the swallows, but in this respect they have the edge over us.

If man would follow the example of the birds, a great horizon would open up, as becomes clear in the following verses. Birds don’t praise the Lord in the same conscious way humans can do. There is with the birds no involvement of the will and personality as with man. The transition from the birds to the humans is expressed in the words “my King and my God.” Thomas echoed those words in his confession before the risen Christ when he exclaims: “My Lord and my God!”<sup>215</sup> If birds could talk, they would not be able to utter more than: “My Creator!” But man, who possesses personality, who is created in God’s image and likeness, can confess God as his King.

So much more has taken place between God and man than between God and the birds. This is the reason birds don’t dwell in God’s house in the same way men do. The psalmist finds himself far from the sanctuary in Jerusalem, and he thinks of all those who are in God’s presence: birds and men, the small and the great. We see a parallel situation in Jesus’ parable of *The Prodigal Son*, where the boy comes to his senses and says: “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!”<sup>216</sup> This makes him start out on a pilgrimage to his home.

We don’t know the reason for which the psalmist is far away. When man is not close to God there is always sin involved. Sin means separation, and there is no approach without confession. It could be that there is a confession implied in vs. 4 in the word “Selah.” It is true that confession is not identical to praise, but there is always a connection between the two. For sinful man, one is not possible without the other. We cannot praise God if we act as if nothing has happened. In Revelation, praise is always interspersed with references to Christ’s sacrifice for our sins.

The verses 5-7 give a description of people who dwell in God’s house. When we include vs. 4, there are seven characteristics:

1. Men praise God;
2. God is the source of their strength;
3. They follow God’s way;
4. They bring about chances where they pass;
5. The Holy Spirit works through them;
6. Their strength increases as they progress;
7. They appear before God.

In a literal sense it would be impossible to dwell in God’s house and, at the same time, be on the way to appear before God. But from the aspect of a spiritual experience, the sequence is quite correct. The verses describe a pilgrimage, which begins and ends with God. And God accompanies the pilgrim during his journey. There is a world of spiritual truth in the phrase: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you.” Most older versions read: “Blesses is the man...” The Hebrew word is *'adam* which, according to *Strong’s Definitions*, is: “a human being (an individual or the species, mankind, etc.)” The plural may be used to

<sup>214</sup> Matt. 6:26

<sup>215</sup> John 20:28

<sup>216</sup> Luke 15:17

indicate that no one has any strength apart from God. The blessing consists in the realization of the source of strength. A man who thinks he is strong apart from God deceives himself. The Book of Proverbs interprets this verse well by saying: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."<sup>217</sup> Awareness of the source of strength is of little value if there is no application of this comprehension in daily life. If we know that God is the source of our strength and we do not draw from that source, our faith has little merit. Isaiah describes how it works: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."<sup>218</sup> Often people fail to avail themselves of the riches and abundance God has put at their disposal. Corrie ten Boom once said: "Many people have given everything to God, but they haven't taken everything from Him."

The clause "who have set their hearts on pilgrimage" is open to various translations. The Hebrew text says literally: "The highways are in his heart." The KJV's rendering is rather unclear with: "in whose heart are the ways of them." A little clearer is the RSV with: "in whose heart are the highways to Zion," or the paraphrase of TLB: "who want above all else to follow your steps." It is not easy to determine what the writer intended to say. *The Adam Clarke Commentary* observes about "[In whose heart are the ways of them]": "This is no sense. The original, however, is obscure: *m<sup>c</sup>ilowt... bibaabaam...*, 'the high ways are in their hearts;' that is, the roads winding to thy temple. Perhaps there is a reference here to the high roads leading to the cities of refuge. We wish to escape from the hands and dominion of these murderers, and the roads that lead to Jerusalem and the temple we think on with delight; our hearts are with them, we long to be traveling on them."

The context suggests that a pilgrimage to Jerusalem is intended. The psalmist indicates that such an intended journey has moral consequences. There is a parallel between the road our feet travel and the path that is in our heart. If we are really marching to Zion, our intentions will be manifested in our integrity. We cannot reach God via devious ways. The psalmist may also have intended to say that the real pilgrimage is more a journey of the heart than of the feet. It is true that a physical journey to Jerusalem has no value if our heart is not involved in it. This should not become an excuse to neglect spiritual meetings and church services. Such a danger is especially acute in our dispensation in which worship is no longer bound to geographical places such as Jerusalem or Samaria, but where we worship in spirit and in truth.<sup>219</sup>

There is a clear parallel between our strength being in God and the making of a spiritual pilgrimage. The condition of our heart is not something we can work ourselves up to. The longing for fellowship with God is God's present to us. Worship is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. This fact ought to take the wind out of our over-spiritual sails! It is the strength which is in God that straightens out the winding roads and devious paths in our heart, and that draws us to Him, making us experience genuine fellowship with Him.

The result of this relationship to God is a change in relationship to our fellowmen. Vs. 6 expresses this with the image: "As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs." The question arises, of course, where is the Valley of Baca, and what does it mean? Some versions translate Baca with "mulberry tree." *The Adam Clarke Commentary* remarks: "[Passing through the valley of Baca make it a well] Instead of Baakaa'..., a mulberry-tree, seven MSS. have bekeh..., mourning. I believe Baca to be the same here as Bochim, <Judg. 2:1-5>, called The Valley of Weeping. Though they pass through this barren and desert place, they would not fear evil, knowing that thou wouldst supply all their wants; and even in the sandy desert cause them to find pools of water, in consequence of which they shall advance with renewed strength, and shall meet with the God of Israel in Zion."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds: " 'The valley of Baca'-- i. e., the vale of tears. A valley is an emblem of a sunken condition, such as was David's when suddenly cast down from the height of prosperity by the rebellion of his son Absalom. The old translators generally translate [Baakaa'..., as if it were baakaah..., 'the valley of weeping.' The Hebrew form, however, usually means a mulberry tree (<2 Sam. 5:23-24> and margin, here). Celsus, in his 'Sacred Botany,' takes it a balsam shrub. The berry when pressed yields a juice like a tear-drop, whence it derives its name: the Latin bacca, a berry, may be akin to Baca. Still 'the valley of tree' will mean 'the valley of the tear-tree' or 'shrub.' But the probable sense is 'the valley of weeping' [the Hebrew letter 'aleph (') standing instead of the Hebrew letter he (h) at

<sup>217</sup> Prov. 3:5

<sup>218</sup> Isa. 40:29-31

<sup>219</sup> John 4:23,24

the end]. Some think that the Baca grows only in dry places, and that the valley of Baca means a dry and parched valley; but there is no proof that this Baca tree grows only in dry places. The antithesis, however, to 'make it a well,' implies that the valley of Baca is regarded as a dry place spiritually."

Whether Baca is in fact a topographical area or not is of little importance to the meaning of the text. The intent is, obviously, a dry and dead place. The vegetation is an indication that Baca is arid and sad, an image of human suffering, and an existence without hope. It is a place of "weeping willows." The valley is not without potential but there is no water. The passing through of a person who knows fellowship with God changes this condition. A Christian is a blessing for those who dwell in the Valley of Baca. Not only does his coming through make springs erupt from the ground, but there is an affirmation from above: "the autumn rains also cover it with pools." The Holy Spirit testifies to the reality of his fellowship with God. A person who drinks produces living water. Jesus 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."<sup>220</sup> It could be that Jesus had this verse in mind when He pronounced these words.

The immediate question is, of course, who is equal to this task? We know that, unless our strength is in God, the hearts of men will not be changed by our behavior. The Holy Spirit, therefore, shows Himself immediately present in order to confirm this promise. This is what is meant by the image of the autumn rains. What beautiful poetry this is! "The autumn rains also cover it with pools."

However imperfect our fellowship with God may be, and in spite of the fact that we are still underway ourselves, our lives will have a far-reaching effect upon the world in which we live. It is like the water that trickled from under the threshold of the temple in Ezekiel's vision. It began with a trickle and it became a river that brought healing to the Dead Sea.<sup>221</sup> Even a limited experience of fellowship with God can bring about immeasurable blessing.

The picture also speaks of joy. Whatever the meaning of the name may be, Baca symbolizes sadness. The trees that grew there produced either balsam which was used in the embalming of the dead or teardrops. Springs and pools of water are images of joy.

As Christians pass on blessing they themselves are stimulated. Their going "from strength to strength," as vs. 7 calls it, is closely connected to the experience of passing through the Valley of Baca. There is a fine line of danger that can easily be crossed between progressing from strength to strength and the building up of our own ego. We have to allow the searching eye of the Holy Spirit to check us constantly, in order to keep us from straying from the narrow path. On the other hand, we ought not to allow ourselves to be robbed of the blessing we receive when we pass on the blessing by an excess of introspection. God's Word promises us that there is such a thing as going from strength to strength. That which begins hesitatingly as an attempt of fellowshiping with God draws us closer to Him, and instead of a diminishing of strength there is a growing intimacy and an increasing spiritual energy.

The psalmist speaks, first of all, about pilgrims who are on their way to Jerusalem, who get "their second wind" as they approach the goal. But reality is greater than the image. In this life, we pass through the Valley of Baca as we are en route to that perfect fellowship with God, of which Revelation says: "His servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."<sup>222</sup> This vision ought to increase our energy more than the seeing of Jerusalem could have for the approaching pilgrims.

"From strength to strength" also speaks of spiritual growth. The Almighty does not increase in strength, but our capacity to increase in His strength is made possible by the increase of our faith in Him. The Apostle Paul testifies to this increase in strength in a paradoxical way. He says: "But he [Christ] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."<sup>223</sup> The power of Christ reveals itself only in our weakness. Going from strength to strength, therefore, depends on an increasing awareness of our dependence upon God. The people who are making the pilgrimage here are people whose strength is in God, which means that they are weak in themselves. Increase of deep fellowship with God always goes together with a decrease of ourselves. For this reason we always have to ask ourselves the question: "Where am I? How do I live? Do I dwell in God's house and is my strength in Him?"

Appearing before God in Zion also implies more than a mere arrival in Jerusalem. It means, in the first place, that we seek God at the place of His revelation, which is in Christ. Jesus says: "No one comes to

<sup>220</sup> John 7:37,38

<sup>221</sup> See Ezek. 47:1-12

<sup>222</sup> Rev. 22:3,4

<sup>223</sup> II Cor. 12:9

the Father except through me.”<sup>224</sup> This implies that we are placed on the basis of the atonement. This makes our appearing before God much more real and profound than anything the Old Testament pilgrim could ever experience. “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.”<sup>225</sup>

The second part of the psalm emphasizes more the moral character of the pilgrimage than the physical aspect of it. The verses 8-12 elaborate upon the yearning for God that was expressed in vs. 2. Evidently, the psalmist knows something about dwelling in God’s house, yet, he doesn’t include himself in the group that he described in the previous verses. He also does not consider himself to be one who has already reached the goal. Paul’s words in Philippians are applicable here: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”<sup>226</sup>

The subject of the prayer of the sons of Korah is: “one day in your courts...” A tiny bit of glory is better than an abundance of all else. Satan placed this choice before Jesus of “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.”<sup>227</sup> Christ chose to be hungry instead and to feed Himself with the Word of God, rather than be filled with that kind of satisfaction. The fullness of heavenly glory awaits us, but in this life we have to be satisfied with small glimpses. God shows us enough to whet our appetite and to keep us hungry, so we will keep on “straining toward what is ahead.” We should not be discouraged because we cannot be fully satisfied in the present. The Lord promises us peace, and there will be moments of joy when our prayers are being answered, but the complete inheritance of uninterrupted fellowship and complete joy awaits us above.

Interestingly, in vs. 8 God is called the “God of Jacob.” God is also the God of those who have not yet wrestled at Peniel, and have been blessed by Him there when they asked for pardon for their sins. The very name “Jacob” implies a confession of deceit. This confession is an important factor in the context of this psalm. After all, the distance between God and us is related to our reliability or the lack of it. The psalmist speaks here as a man whose strength is not yet completely in God.

The question arises, of course, who the “anointed one” is in vs. 9. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit points here literally to the only anointed one the Bible has ever known: our Lord Jesus Christ. The Hebrew word used here is *mashiyach*, which is defined in *Strongs Definitions* with “anointed; usually a consecrated person (as a king, priest, or saint); specifically, the Messiah.” The spiritual interpretation of vs. 9 is that God looks upon us with favor in His Son, that is “in Christ.” The basis of our appearance before Him is that Jesus took our place. This is the reason the psalmist addresses Him as “our shield.” Every prayer goes up to God under the cover of the Person and the work of Jesus Christ. We pray: “In Jesus’ Name.”

This, of course, does not answer the question whom the psalmist had in mind when he wrote this psalm. If we knew for certain that the psalmist had been anointed, the problem would be solved. TLB renders the verse with: “O God, our Defender and our Shield, have mercy on the one you have anointed as your king,” obviously speaking about David or one of his descendants. The whole psalm does, however, not read as merely a prayer for the king. If the sons of Korah pray here specifically for the high priest who entered the sanctuary in their behalf, then the verse becomes very meaningful. Then we find here another picture of a spiritual reality in which the ministry of Jesus Christ is pictured in a substitutionary way.

In the following verses, the psalmist gives two reasons why God should listen to his prayer. In the Hebrew text, both the verses 10 and 11 open with the word *kīy*, a prepositional prefix which most of the older versions render with “for”: “For a day in Your courts is better than...,” and “For the LORD God is a sun and shield.”<sup>228</sup> As we saw above, the psalmist is convinced that a glimpse of God’s glory is infinitely better than any abundance of what the devil has to offer. The Prodigal Son in Jesus’ parable made this discovery when he came to his senses.<sup>229</sup> And Peter’s confession says basically the same: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> John 14:6<sup>b</sup>

<sup>225</sup> Heb. 10:19

<sup>226</sup> Phil. 3:12-14

<sup>227</sup> See Matt. 4:8

<sup>228</sup> (NKJ, RSV, and others)

<sup>229</sup> See Luke 15:11-19

<sup>230</sup> John 6:68

The second reason given, in vs. 11, is the grace and honor God bestows upon man. This is expressed in the images of the sun and the shield. Honor is parallel with the sun and God's grace, in the NIV rendered with "favor," with the shield. God bestows His glory upon us, as the sun gives us light and heat. But the sun is actually too much for man if there is no protection, just as God's glory is more than we can behold and stay alive. God said to Moses: "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."<sup>231</sup> This is the reason God's grace has to cover us. God is both our glory and the shield that protects us against too much of His glory.

God bestows honor upon us. There is probably no truth which is more difficult for us to grasp than this that God honors us. Yet Jesus says clearly: "My Father will honor the one who serves me."<sup>232</sup> If we think that this is self-explanatory, we will never receive that honor. We don't need much self-knowledge to understand that God's honoring of us is something quite unexpected and unique. In that respect, grace is an extension of glory; without grace our honor would be impossible. Without God's grace, God's glory would consume us. It is only through God's grace that His glory can be bestowed upon us, and that glory can become an integral part of our being.

How great is this shield that covers us! God's grace does not only mean the forgiveness of our sins, but also the fact that God took our place in the punishment for our sins. When we cast only a superficial glance at this "blameless walk" with which this verse ends, we cannot see how this fits in with God's grace, unless we see it as the fruit of grace. The intent is not that we have to be blameless before God will bother with us; we are made blameless through His grace.

The strange fact is that God rewards us for something that He Himself has bestowed upon us. God gives us "good things" for which we have to be grateful. This corresponds with James' pronouncement 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."<sup>233</sup> In some instances, this means that there are things we have to refuse because we understand that they do not come from God. James' words acquired a new meaning for me once, when I lay sick in bed with amoebic dysentery. I understood that my sickness was not part of God's good and perfect gifts to me, and the Lord gave me faith to refuse it and to be healed.

Jesus confirms that God gives good gifts to His children. In Matthew's Gospel we read: "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"<sup>234</sup> In Luke's version of Jesus' statement we read: "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"<sup>235</sup> We may, therefore, read vs. 11 of this psalm: "The Holy Spirit does He not withhold from those whose walk is blameless." God does not merely give us "good things," He gives us Himself. If the only thing we want is health, riches, and power, instead of the Lord Himself, we are indeed poor people. The subtle, or maybe not so subtle, danger of wrong motives is clearly present here. The Apostle Paul puts it clearly by saying: "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?"<sup>236</sup> And to the church in Corinth he writes: "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future-- all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."<sup>237</sup> If our goal is the Lord Himself we are on safe grounds. Then we can also understand that sometimes "good things" can come to us in unpleasant disguises. And sometimes God will withhold "good things" from us to give us better things.

Three times in this psalm the words *Yahweh ts<sup>a</sup>baawt* are used. The NIV renders these with, LORD Almighty. Most other translations use the term LORD of hosts. *Tsaba'* means literally: a mass of persons, an army. Hosts, therefore, is a good rendering of the word. God is the supreme commander of the greatest army in heaven and earth. When we think of a war, our thoughts go, usually, first toward the devil. But the real troops belong to God. It is good to keep these things in perspective.

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<sup>231</sup> Ex. 33:20

<sup>232</sup> John 12:26

<sup>233</sup> James 1:17

<sup>234</sup> Matt. 7:9-11

<sup>235</sup> Luke 11:13

<sup>236</sup> Rom. 8:32

<sup>237</sup> I Cor. 3:21-23

To call upon God as our supreme commander also implies that we are part of His army, that we are on His side, and that we owe Him absolute obedience. We know that cause for which we stand. The man who sees himself in this position is blessed.

The word “blessed” is also used three times in this Psalm.

- Blessed are those who dwell in your house.
- Blessed are those whose strength is in you.
- LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you.

If we see these three sentences in connection with God’s army, we may say that, dwelling in God’s house is tantamount to belonging to His battalion; having our strength in Him is equivalent to wearing His uniform, and trusting in Him means that we count, not because of what we are in ourselves, but because of our relationship with God’s army. In New Testament terms this means that we have taken up our position in Jesus Christ.

## PSALM EIGHTY-FIVE

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

- 1** *You showed favor to your land, O LORD; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.*
- 2** *You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins. Selah*
- 3** *You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger.*
- 4** *Restore us again, O God our Savior, and put away your displeasure toward us.*
- 5** *Will you be angry with us forever? Will you prolong your anger through all generations?*
- 6** *Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*
- 7** *Show us your unfailing love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation.*
- 8** *I will listen to what God the LORD will say; he promises peace to his people, his saints-- but let them not return to folly.*
- 9** *Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.*
- 10** *Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.*
- 11** *Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.*
- 12** *The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.*
- 13** *Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.*

As *The Tyndale Commentary* remarks, this psalm makes most sense if we place the verses 1-3 in the past, the verses 4-8 in the present, and 9-13 in the future. The psalmist does not position this psalm against a historical background and, consequently, we can only guess what the circumstances may have been.

The basis of this psalm is the relationship between the country of Israel and the people of Israel. The verses 1 and 2 speak in the same breath about “your land” and “your people.” Such a relationship is established elsewhere in Scripture also. In Leviticus, we read: “Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out.”<sup>238</sup> It sounds as if there is a mystical tie between land and people. It is true that people develop a historical consciousness about the place in which they live. A man puts his roots down in the ground where his ancestors lived in almost the same way as a tree. In the case of Israel, this consciousness was particularly strong because God had pledged Himself to the land through His promise to Abraham, and He had chosen the place where His Son would be born and live as a man.

The relationship between man and soil goes back to the time of the creation of man. The Genesis account states: “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground.”<sup>239</sup> Man’s first task was to take care of the garden from which soil he had been taken. The punishment for Adam’s sin affected, first of all, the ground. God said to Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you.”<sup>240</sup> When God took away Adam’s crown, the earth suffered. Consequently, when God shows favor to the land, it is because He restored His relationship with the people who inhabit the land.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight sees in this a return from the Babylonian Captivity. But if the first stanza is taken as a memorial of what God did in the past, this psalm must have been written years after the return of Israel from Babylon. It seems safer to suppose that the psalmist refers to an earlier period in Israel’s history, when God sent a revival among the people and healed the land. This historical event becomes then the basis for the psalmist’s confidence that God will again do something similar.

The first stanza mentions three factors that contribute to the restoration:

1. The favor God shows to the land
2. The forgiveness of the people’s iniquity, and
3. The setting aside of God’s wrath.

The Hebrew word used for “show favor” is *ratsah*, which means “to be pleased with; specifically, to satisfy a debt.” God is satisfied because the debt is paid. It refers to the atonement for the sins of the people. It is not a matter of God switching from one bad mood to a good one, but of expiation of the iniquity of the land through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The death of our Lord Jesus Christ results in the fact that: “The

<sup>238</sup> Lev. 20:22

<sup>239</sup> Gen. 2:7

<sup>240</sup> Gen. 3:17

wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.” And “The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>241</sup> “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.”<sup>242</sup> Some of the “Common Grace,” to use a term coined by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, was seen from time to time in Israel’s early history, whenever the people took seriously the fact that their sins had been covered by the blood of a sacrificial animal. There were times of relief, as in the days of Gideon, Samuel, David, and Solomon.

Before sins could be forgiven, they had to be covered, as stated in vs. 2. The Hebrew word used here is *kacah* which means “to fill up hollows; by implication, to cover.” This does not convey the same meaning as in the New Testament, where the sins are washed in the blood of the Lamb.<sup>243</sup>

God’s wrath and anger are not emotional outbursts; they are a constant, eternal attribute of the same kind as God’s love. This is what the Apostle Paul means when he writes to the Romans: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”<sup>244</sup> The Greek grammar conveys the idea of a continuous action. God’s wrath is always and continuously revealed against godlessness and wickedness. It is impossible for God to overlook evil.

The prayer in verses 4-6 is the part around which this psalm evolves. The psalmist prays for a restoration of fellowship with God. In the first stanza, he explained that God had restored fellowships before and, on that basis, he trusts that He will do it again. Previous experiences are often a solid ground for the exercise of faith.

This is the reason the psalmist calls God here “God of our salvation.” The NIV renders this with “God our Savior.” God is the source of our salvation. Our salvation depends solely on the character of God. Intimacy is impossible if one party despises the other. Yet, God cannot bear the stench of our sins. God’s repugnance of us is not, as human dislike often is, a whimsical reaction without legal basis. God can only obliterate His aversion of us on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in our behalf. Instead of people who spread a repulsive odor, we become people who emit the aroma of Christ. As the Apostle Paul says: “We are to God the aroma of Christ.”<sup>245</sup>

“Will you not revive us again” in vs. 6 stands for more than a return of vitality, or even for a restoration of fellowship with God. In the light of the New Testament, we understand that this pertains to life out of death. A person who is dead in sin needs to be raised from the dead in order to return to God. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead opened this door for us. It is unlikely that the psalmist would have been able to think this through. But the Holy Spirit applies the word “revive” here literally. The joy of our fellowship with the Lord is based upon our participating in the resurrection of Jesus. God has granted to us this unending love and this salvation for which the psalmist prays here.

Vs. 8 paints a graphic picture of how the psalmist, as a prophet, sets his heart on hearing the voice of God. He realizes that he has come to the point where God will reveal Himself to him. The Bible often encourages this kind of close attention to what God is going to say. The phrase: “He who has ears, let him hear”<sup>246</sup> is one of Jesus’ favorite expressions. If we want to have fellowship with God, we have to use our ears. These verses also express the truth that man lives by the Word of God. “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”<sup>247</sup> When a man can no longer hear the voice of God, all restraint is gone. Then our evil desires get the better of us. If we hear God’s voice and we obey it, we will experience peace and love.

The Hebrew word translated with “saint” is *chaciyd*, which means a kind or pious person. The KJV translates it sometimes with “a godly man.” It means, obviously, a person who is the object of God’s love. Daniel was addressed by the angel with the words “you who are highly esteemed.”<sup>248</sup> The NKJ renders the phrase with: “man greatly beloved.” Such words accentuate the contrast between sainthood and folly and give it a more distressing character. It is, obviously, possible to see God’s glory and yet choose folly.

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<sup>241</sup> Isa. 11:6,9

<sup>242</sup> Isa. 35:1 (KJV)

<sup>243</sup> See Rev. 1:5 (NKJV)

<sup>244</sup> Rom. 1:18

<sup>245</sup> II Cor. 2:15

<sup>246</sup> See Matt. 13:9,43; Rev. 2:7,11,17,29;3:6,13,22;13:9

<sup>247</sup> Prov. 29:18 (KJV)

<sup>248</sup> Dan. 10:11,19



The psalmist does not give a literal rendering of that which he heard God speak. The idyll described in verses 9-13 is a lovely pastoral symphony which is unparalleled in world literature. TLB gives the following beautiful rendering of these verses:

Surely his salvation is near to those who reverence him;  
our land will be filled with his glory.  
Mercy and truth have met together. Grim justice and peace have kissed!  
Truth rises from the earth, and righteousness smiles down from heaven.  
Yes, the Lord pours down his blessings on the land, and it yields its bountiful crops.  
Justice goes before him to make a pathway for his steps.

Salvation is that redemption which frees from the curse Adam brought upon this world. "Surely" indicates an established fact. God's deliverance stands at the beginning of everything. We are saved from perdition but we are still living in a world which is lost. The salvation which saves us is always near. "For in him we live and move and have our being."<sup>249</sup> Because His salvation is near, His glory is also present.

The psalmist refers probably to the Shekinah which was above the cover of the ark, the mercy-seat. But his words also call up the picture of Isaiah's vision in which the seraphs call to each other: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."<sup>250</sup> Salvation and glory go together. Without salvation man cannot see the glory of God. To the unredeemed person nature is full of contradictions. We need redeemed eyes to see God's glory.

The verses also play the music of a new age to come. For as long as this world is full of sinful men who practice injustice, love and faithfulness will not meet together, nor will righteousness and peace kiss each other. This will happen only when Jesus Christ reigns as king on earth.

It is marvelous that the psalmist sees such images when he longs for the restoration of Israel. He does not merely ask for the return of a certain group of people to a certain place where they can live happily ever after, but he sees his people for what they really are: inseparably united to the revelation of God's glory and to all the spiritual values that emanate from that fact. The only necessary thing is that there is a group of people who genuinely fear Him.

In verses 10 and 11, God's attributes are personified. The Hebrew word translated "love," or "mercy" is *checed*, which is often rendered in the KJV "lovingkindness." Love and faithfulness, of course, cannot exist separately. They are inseparably united in God. These attributes are not only represented as persons, but also their relationship to each other is expressed in terms of human relationships. When God created man, He endued him with personality so that he could enter into a personal and intimate relationship with his fellowmen. The philosopher Martin Buber expresses this in his poetical book *I and Thou*. "Meeting together" can take place on various levels. Most of our human encounters remain superficial. Even the intimacy of a marriage relationship is only a vague representation of what God intended interhuman relationships to be before sin entered the world. The meeting of love and faithfulness in this psalm indicates what an intimate encounter can be. God's love and God's faithfulness meet together on this earth, when people fear God.

Righteousness and peace kiss each other, demonstrating a relationship of love. The order of priority indicated here is not haphazard. Throughout the Bible, this order is maintained: first righteousness; then peace. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states about Melchizedek: "First, his name means 'king of righteousness'; then also, 'king of Salem' means 'king of peace.'<sup>251</sup> There can be no peace where righteousness has not come first. Here the two embrace. Peace at any price is no peace. "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other." What a wonderful meeting this is. The four meet on earth, and they perform the most perfect square dance ever seen.

In vs. 11 heaven and earth connect with each other. Could this representation be a reference to the incarnation? When Jesus was born and lived on our planet, when He ministered, died and rose from the dead, the Father looked on and showed His approval. In the field of Ephrathah, the angels sang. When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan the Father spoke and said: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."<sup>252</sup> The same voice sounded on the Mount of Transfiguration and said: "This is my Son,

<sup>249</sup> Acts 17:28

<sup>250</sup> Isa. 6:3

<sup>251</sup> Heb. 7:2

<sup>252</sup> Matt. 3:17

whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”<sup>253</sup> And in John’s Gospel, the Father answers Jesus’ prayer: “Father, glorify your name!” with: “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.”<sup>254</sup> The Incarnate Word of God is called “Faithfulness” in vs. 11. The Hebrew word is *’emeth*, which is defined in Strong’s Definitions with: “stability..., certainty, truth, trustworthiness.” The same idea is conveyed in John’s vision of Christ in Revelation. We read: “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True.”<sup>255</sup> Faithfulness means perseverance in love. It is a character trait that particularly demonstrates itself in adverse circumstances. Faithfulness sees through the appearance of things to the object of its real love. We use the word faithful often in connection with a marriage relationship. Jesus was faithful to the Father and to His righteousness. In the previous verse, peace was linked together with righteousness. Here we see how this peace is realized through the faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we are made righteous.

In the last two verses, the land and man are mentioned again in connection with each other, as was the case in the beginning of the psalm. The good which God gives, the harvest which the land yields, and the righteousness that goes before God are completely different entities. Yet, they are mentioned here as if they belong to the same category. The psalmist wants to confirm that they do belong together. Man and earth and God are inseparable. We have seen earlier that the terms “good things” and “Holy Spirit” are used synonymously.<sup>256</sup> We may do the same here. God gives His Spirit to this world, and He causes the earth to yield its harvest, not only in the material sense of the word, but also spiritually.

We find a promise in this verse that, if righteousness reigns on earth the feeding of the world population will never be a problem. The Club of Rome may not be aware of this promise. We understand that righteousness will go before God only if there are people who carry it before God.

The last sentence of the psalm is unclear in Hebrew. The phrase reads literally: “Righteousness before him shall go, and shall set in the way of his steps.” The rendering of the KJV may be preferable here: “Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps.”

*The Adam Clarke Commentary* says about this verse: “[Righteousness shall go before him] Perhaps this verse may receive its best solution from <Rom. 4:25>: ‘Whom God hath set for a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his RIGHTEOUSNESS for the remission of sins that are past.’ This term the apostle uses to point out God’s method of justifying or saving mankind. And this, in the preaching of the pure Gospel, is ever going before to point out the Lord Jesus, and the redemption that is in his blood. And thus going before him, the sinner, who feels his need of salvation, is set-- in the way of his steps; as Bartimeus sat by the way-side begging, by which way Jesus walked; and when he came where he was, heard his prayer, and restored him his sight. Or, righteousness-- the pure and holy law of God, must be proclaimed as broken by sinners, and calling aloud for vengeance, before they can see and feel their need of Christ crucified. By the preaching of the law they are prepared to receive the grace of the Gospel.”

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<sup>253</sup> Matt. 17:5

<sup>254</sup> See John 12:28

<sup>255</sup> Rev. 19:11

<sup>256</sup> See Ps. 84:11; Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13

## PSALM EIGHTY-SIX

A Psalm of David

- 1 *Hear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.*  
 2 *Guard my life, for I am devoted to you. You are my God; save your servant who trusts in you.*  
 3 *Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I call to you all day long.*  
 4 *Bring joy to your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.*  
 5 *You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.*  
 6 *Hear my prayer, O LORD; listen to my cry for mercy.*  
 7 *In the day of my trouble I will call to you, for you will answer me.*  
 8 *Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord; no deeds can compare with yours.*  
 9 *All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name.*  
 10 *For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.*  
 11 *Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.*  
 12 *I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.*  
 13 *For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths of the grave.*  
 14 *The arrogant are attacking me, O God; a band of ruthless men seeks my life-- men without regard for you.*  
 15 *But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.*  
 16 *Turn to me and have mercy on me; grant your strength to your servant and save the son of your maidservant.*  
 17 *Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you, O LORD, have helped me and comforted me.*

Reading this psalm, I remember the beautiful almost Gregorian tune to which it was sung in the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands where I grew up.

George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, makes some very interesting remarks about this psalm. Firstly, he remarks that almost every line in this psalm is a quote from another psalm or from a verse from the Pentateuch. The original part of the psalm is the way in which the author made the psalm into one single poem. But Knight does not say anything about the fact that the psalm bears the name of David.

Secondly, he gives a very clear outline for the division of the psalm:

- |      |                           |           |
|------|---------------------------|-----------|
| I.   | I search for God.         | vs. 1-7   |
| II.  | I have found Him.         | vs. 8-10  |
| III. | Teach me Thy way, O Lord. | vs. 11-13 |
| IV.  | My creed.                 | vs. 14-17 |

**I. I search for God.** vs. 1-7

The opening words, in the NIV rendered with “hear,” and in most other versions with “bend thine ear” are translations of the Hebrew *natah* and *'ozen*, “to bend away” and “the ear.” The expression is found in several psalms.<sup>257</sup> “I am poor and needy” is also found in other parts of the Book of Psalms.<sup>258</sup> “Guard my life, for I am devoted to you. You are my God; save your servant who trusts in you” may be a reference to “The LORD redeems his servants; no one will be condemned who takes refuge in him” found in Psalm 34.<sup>259</sup> These examples are ample proof that Knight is right.

In the first four verses, the psalmist uses the word “for” five times giving God five reasons why God should save him from his trouble. There is an ascending line in David’s argumentation, which is interesting to follow. David finds the first reason in himself and he concludes with the reasons he finds in God. He concludes by saying: “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.” That is the end of his argumentation, because at this point the light breaks through for him.

<sup>257</sup> See Ps. 17:6; 31:2; 71:2; 88:2, and 102:2

<sup>258</sup> See Ps. 40:17; 70:5 and 109:22

<sup>259</sup> Ps. 34:22

Our misery is no reason in itself why God should save us, as is suggested in the first verse; nor is the devotion in vs. 2 sufficient reason. When David progresses from misery to faith, from looking to himself to looking to God, he takes the first step in the right direction. It is, of course, not true that God would be insensitive to our misery, but if we bring that before Him as an incentive for our salvation, we are merely looking at ourselves, which attitude has many pitfalls. Salvation consists in forgetting about ourselves and our devotion and losing ourselves in Him. As the bride in Solomon's Song said: "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me."<sup>260</sup>

In the prayer of vs. 3 and in the lifting up of the soul in vs. 4, David's ego begins already to move to a second place. This is the reason that we see mercy and joy breaking through in David's consciousness.

We know nothing of the circumstances under which David wrote this poem. He does not state clearly from what he has to be delivered. But the fact that in vs. 2 he calls himself "your servant who trusts in you" points to a particular condition. The word "servant" presupposes surrender and obedience to God's will. It speaks of a working relationship. So the deliverance is probably connected to the work of the Lord in which he is engaged. If we run into trouble because we are doing the will of the Lord we should never doubt God's willingness to save us. The Apostle Paul gives as a testimony about Epaphroditus, "he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me."<sup>261</sup>

It is also important to be constantly in prayer, as David when he says: "I call to you all day long." This indicates the right spirit of prayer.

The lifting up of the soul in vs. 4 can be seen as a wave offering before the Lord. In some cases, the priest would take part of the sacrifice and wave it before the Lord. This is what David does here with his own life. In the ritual of sacrifices, the part that was waved before the Lord was then given to man. At Aaron's consecration, the Lord said to Moses: "After you take the breast of the ram for Aaron's ordination, wave it before the LORD as a wave offering, and it will be your share."<sup>262</sup> The same expression is used for the contributions the people brought for the construction of the tabernacle. We read: "All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewelry of all kinds: brooches, earrings, rings and ornaments. They all presented their gold as a wave offering to the LORD."<sup>263</sup>

The wave offering is recognition of God's property rights. Lifting up our soul before the Lord redefines our relationship to God. It expresses an awareness of the fact that our lives are borrowed, and that God has a claim on us. It also expresses our willingness to dedicate our lives to Him. Both facets are important.

In Jesus' "Parable of the Vineyard,"<sup>264</sup> there was no misunderstanding on the side of the tenants as to whose property it was. The point of the parable was their unwillingness to honor the agreement and act according to their promise. They pushed their obstinacy to the extreme to give to God what belonged to Him. If there is willingness to surrender, deep joy will immediately descend upon our soul. The result of "I lift up my soul" will always be "joy to your servant." Lifting up our soul to the Lord can be a turning point in our life. I experienced this when I told the Lord during a mission convention that He could send me wherever He wanted.

As was stated before, the recognition in vs. 5 that God is forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to Him, is the real basis for the answer to our prayers. It is clear that God's desire to forgive is related to His goodness, but this does not mean that He can overlook sin. Without the payment for our sins by the blood of Christ, forgiveness would be impossible. The very fact that David speaks about forgiveness implies a confession of guilt. He acknowledges that, in his present condition, he is unacceptable before God. Our sin has effectively blocked the entrance into God's presence. It is impossible to enter without first obtaining forgiveness. God loves to forgive. The father of the prodigal son is clearly modeled upon the attitude of God.<sup>265</sup> I will remember for the rest of my life that, at my conversion, God impressed upon me the thought that He was unwilling to any longer talk about my sins.

It is on the basis of forgiveness that we may call to God for the rest of our lives and experience His goodness. This basis will never change, but there will be moments which David calls "the day of my trouble." It is true that trouble teaches us to pray, but prayer that is born from trouble is often short-lived.

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<sup>260</sup> Song 7:10

<sup>261</sup> Phil. 2:30

<sup>262</sup> Ex. 29:26; Lev. 8:29

<sup>263</sup> Ex. 35:22

<sup>264</sup> Matt. 21:33-41

<sup>265</sup> See Luke 15:20-24

There is no substitute for a life of prayer. Yet, the very fact that trouble stimulates prayer is probably the main reason God allows trouble to come.

**II. I have found Him.** vs. 8-10

The devil was probably the first one who conceived the thought of wanting to compare God to others. This thought is expressed in Isaiah's prophecy: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'"<sup>266</sup> The psalmist does not explain what is meant with the term "gods." The Hebrew word used here is *elohim* which, besides being used for God Himself, in some cases is rendered with angels or worldly powers, or idols. But the word is rarely used for idols, except maybe in I Chronicles: "For all the gods of the nations are idols."<sup>267</sup> It is obvious that there is no basis for a comparison even between dead idols and the Living God. It is also difficult to place living, created beings, such as angels next to God who is the source of all life. And, in Paul's words: "What fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?"<sup>268</sup> The Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth is incomparable!

David uses the word '*Adonay*' which means "the Lord." The greatest thing that can happen to man is to meet God. God is incomparable in His being and character. He is "the Most High."

God is also incomparable in His acts. The Apostle John says: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."<sup>269</sup> Everything owes its existence to Him. The context of this psalm, however, points more in the direction of God's intervention in creation than to His acts of creation. The fact that all nations will come and worship before the Lord indicates that such is not yet the case. Something will happen, something God brings about, which will cause man to change his mind and which will make him turn towards God. From our vantage point in history, we can see that God created this possibility of change in the coming of Jesus Christ. How marvelously deep is God's plan of redemption!

Reading these verses, we would expect some overwhelming and undeniable demonstration of majesty which could not possibly be ignored by anyone in the world. But such a thing never happened. God chose individuals who, from a worldly viewpoint, had little influence, and He made them witnesses of the facts of salvation. Their witness was also given to people who were not influential in the world. The only important person in the eyes of the world, who was ever converted to Christianity was the Roman emperor Constantine. But his conversion may have done more harm than good to the church of Jesus Christ.

All of this is hard to understand. It appears that God is not only bent on His own honor but also on the honor of mankind. This is the very reason He chooses men to be His co-workers. Jesus Christ is, obviously, unwilling to do it all alone. It is God's mockery with all human politics and philosophy which will result in all nations coming before the Lord of all the earth to bow down before Him and worship Him.

Vs. 10 says that God is the God of miracles. This brings us to the question, "what are miracles?" The Hebrew word used is *pala'* which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* with "to separate, i.e. distinguish (literally or figuratively); by implication, to be (causatively, make) great, difficult, wonderful." *The Tyndale Commentary* says that this word is often used for wonders of redemption, as in Ps. 78 where we read: "We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them. In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe."<sup>270</sup>

*Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines: "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>."

<sup>266</sup> Isa. 14:13,14

<sup>267</sup> I Chr. 16:26

<sup>268</sup> II Cor. 6:14,15

<sup>269</sup> John 1:3

<sup>270</sup> Ps. 78:4,11,32

So the “marvelous deeds” appear to be God’s intervention in the laws of creation for the benefit of man. The most spectacular of those interventions is found in Joshua’s account of the standing still of the sun in order to give Israel the chance to conquer the kings of Canaan.<sup>271</sup> The greatest of all miracles is, of course, the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ. David found Him, of whom Isaiah said: “Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.”<sup>272</sup>

### III. Teach me your way, O LORD. vs. 11-13

Being taught God’s way is connected to the truth of the preceding verses. David may never forget that God performs miracles for people who need salvation. It is easy to forget this truth in a world where man’s spirit is numbed by the pollution of sin. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Silver Chair*, accentuates this truth very clearly. Bible study and practicing “quiet time” are needed in order to “remember the signs.” Those were the words of Aslan to Jill and Grub who were sent to Narnia in order to free the captured prince.

Learning God’s way also has a moral side. It is a prayer for wisdom to know what to do in practical situations, and to obey in such a way that our acts become a testimony that shows the presence of God. Walking in God’s truth is the opposite of walking in the way of lies. Walking in lies can be a rather complicated matter. A man who does not live in fellowship with God is a deceiver who is also deceived himself. When Adam and Eve accepted the Satan’s lie, they entered a world of unreality. Their fear of God testifies to this. The very thought that they would be able to hide from God was an illusion. The fact that they were ashamed because they were naked also proves that they had lost their sense of reality. The first man deceived, first of all, himself. Separation from God resulted in a separation between two fellow human beings, but even more, it caused an inner separation in man himself. Adam’s soul was unhinged. He lost the equilibrium between his mind and his emotions, between his soul and his body. A return to God’s truth will immediately start a process of healing. Walking in the truth always results in an undivided heart. God’s Spirit will put the pieces back together and make the cracks fuse again.

Without the ministry of the Holy Spirit there can be no walking in God’s truth. This presupposes obedience. It is this truth that liberates. Jesus explained this to the Jews of His time. We read in John’s Gospel: “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ They answered him, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’ Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’”<sup>273</sup> Obedience brings forth understanding and understanding leads to freedom. This is the result of our communion with the Son.

Occasionally, man may achieve by himself a certain state of equilibrium in which the shattered piece of his life begin to fuse together, although they won’t make a perfect fit. In such a case the Word of God will have to break them apart again in order to join them back in perfect harmony. This, I believe, is the meaning of what the author of the Hebrew Epistle says: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”<sup>274</sup> Just as much as “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,” so it is also the basis of our inner harmony.

The verses 12 and 13 give a deeply moving testimony. Deliverance from the depth of the grave makes us think of the resurrection. “The depths of the grave” says more than that David was dying and was healed at the last moment. The KJV speaks of “the lowest hell.” David’s song of praise is a celebration of victory over the powers of darkness that were at work in his body. Everyone who experiences such a victory will identify with this song.

God is addressed here as *Adonai, Elohim*. He is the Lord of creation. “With all my heart” stands for the whole of man. It expresses the harmony God had created originally in man. And the song of praise

<sup>271</sup> See Josh. 10:12-14

<sup>272</sup> Isa. 64:4

<sup>273</sup> John 8:31-36

<sup>274</sup> Heb. 4:12

is a song that will last through eternity. The fact that God raises the dead is the fruit of His lovingkindness. “God... is not the God of the dead but of the living”<sup>275</sup> because He is a good God.

**IV. My creed.** vs. 14-17

This part is probably the weakest point in George Knight’s division of this psalm. The verses sound more like a prayer than a creed. In a sense, every prayer is a credo, but this was not what Knight had in mind. David sees himself anew surrounded by enemies. Strangely enough, David does not ask for a complete change of circumstances but for “a sign of your goodness.” The point is not that David finds himself so much surrounded by darkness that he sees no light at the end of the tunnel, but that his enemies don’t see a way out. David does not ask God to change his circumstances but to open the eyes of the ones who are attacking him so that they will be put to shame. David’s prayer is, in fact, a prayer of intercession for his enemies for the purpose of their conversion. In doing so, he anticipates Jesus’ advice: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”<sup>276</sup> David understands that the hateful attitude of his enemies is the result of their wrong vision of God. They never understood that God is “a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” His prayer is that God will put David as an example to them. What this sign is David asks for is made clear in vs. 17 – it is grace and strength. David calls himself “the son of your maidservant.” The greatest sign God can give in the lives of His servants is power in weakness. The Apostle Paul understood this best when he said: “But he [God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”<sup>277</sup> Calling himself “the son of your maidservant” means that David considered himself to be born as God’s slave. To an Old Testament Jew this concept needed no clarification.

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<sup>275</sup> Matt. 22:32

<sup>276</sup> Luke 6:27,28

<sup>277</sup> II Cor. 12:9,10

## PSALM EIGHTY-SEVEN

Of the sons of Korah. A psalm. A song.

- 1 *He has set his foundation on the holy mountain;*
- 2 *the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.*
- 3 *Glorious things are said of you, O city of God: Selah*
- 4 *"I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me-- Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush-- and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'"*
- 5 *Indeed, of Zion it will be said, "This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her."*
- 6 *The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: "This one was born in Zion." Selah*
- 7 *As they make music they will sing, "All my fountains are in you."*

This psalm is undoubtedly one little jewel in the Book of Psalms. The sons of Korah translated God's plan of salvation into poetry and music. The vision expressed in this psalm far surpasses any tendency to glorify the capital of a nation in a nationalistic fashion. The place mentioned here is the place of God's revelation in this world, as was foretold by Moses.<sup>278</sup> The Zion mentioned in this psalm is more than the threshing floor of Araunah which David designated as the place where the temple should be built.<sup>279</sup> The psalmist recognizes, though, that the place on earth is a shadow of the heavenly reality.

We find the same kind of vision in other parts of the Bible. The Apostle Paul, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, says: "The Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother."<sup>280</sup>

When this psalm was written, Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed. There was not even any threat of destruction yet. The image is still pure and whole. We could say that the psalm pictures Zion as God sees it.

*The Tyndale Commentary* says about this psalm: "In its enigmatic, staccato phrases this remarkable psalm speaks of Zion as the destined metropolis of Jew and Gentile alike." Seen in the light of the whole of biblical revelation, not much of the enigma remains. But it is true that the psalmist uses short and broken sentences and that he rather hints at certain thoughts than elaborates upon them.

"He has set his foundation on the holy mountain" suggests more than meets the eye. The place that was chosen for the construction of the temple was, undoubtedly, sanctified by the Shekinah glory. But it seems that "the holy mountain" refers, first of all, to heaven, rather than to a place on earth. The topic is the revelation of God Himself. God chose more than a place; He chose a people to reveal His presence in this world. A living stone is more than a stone, and a spiritual temple is more than a building. The spiritual temple is in heaven. It is, therefore, true that a spiritual building has its foundations in heaven. We know the saying that "good marriages are made in heaven." This is the reason we see, at the end of God's revelation, the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, descending from heaven.<sup>281</sup> How great and wonderful is the panorama the sons of Korah paint here for us! Mount Zion is not of this world, and yet there is a Mount Zion on earth on which stands the Lamb of God.<sup>282</sup>

In the St. Bavo cathedral in the Belgian city Ghent, there is a medieval painting by the brothers Van Eyck, entitled *The Adoration of the Lamb*. One of the fascinating aspects of this masterpiece is that the setting is a common meadow with an altar such as can be found in any Roman Catholic church. This everyday decorum gives this painting an ethereal character. Our problem with daily life is often that we do not recognize the things that surround us as having their origin in heaven.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight sees in this psalm the song of pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. The psalm shows us Zion from two different viewpoints: God's perspective and man's. When the two perspectives fuse together a sense of great depth is achieved. We see the real Zion of which Zion on earth is a portrayal.

"The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob" represents divine predestination. God chose Israel to reveal Himself to the world and He chose Zion as the place of this

<sup>278</sup> See Deut. 12:5-7

<sup>279</sup> I Chr. 22:28-23:1

<sup>280</sup> Cf. Isa. 54:1 with Gal. 4:21-31

<sup>281</sup> Rev. 21:2

<sup>282</sup> See Rev. 14:1



revelation. The reason for choosing Zion was that it was the dwelling place of David. We read in II Samuel: "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."<sup>283</sup> Having conquered the fortress, David proceeded to capture the city of Jerusalem. The fact that David was "a man after God's own heart"<sup>284</sup> is probably the main reason that Zion occupies such an important place in Scripture. God's love for the place cannot be detached from the love He has for His Son.

The object of God's love was, ultimately, not David, but Jesus. God loves us because of His Son, and He sets us apart and calls us by His grace in order to reveal his Son in us so that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "[we] might preach him among the Gentiles."<sup>285</sup> In the same way the glory of God that fills the New Jerusalem will be meant to illuminate the nations of this world. We read in Revelation: "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."<sup>286</sup> The revelation of God's glory in us always keeps pace with our vision and our zeal for missions. Proof of this is found in the mention in this psalm of the pagan nations.

Zion itself will deny that glorious things can be said of her. Paul characterizes the church of Jesus Christ as: "Not many... wise by human standards; not many... influential; not many... of noble birth."<sup>287</sup> And it is good for the church to keep this in mind. In his book *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers says: "We want to be conscious saints and unconscious sinners. God makes us unconscious saints and conscious sinners." We can leave it up to God to say glorious things of us. If we become proud of our church or our organization we are in danger of losing the glory.

God's testimony about Zion, in vs. 3, makes it the center of world evangelism. According to *The Tyndale Commentary*, God's voice sounds like an official proclamation: "I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me-- Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush-- and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.' " Rahab is originally the name of a monster, but Isaiah applies it to Egypt.<sup>288</sup> As such it is also used in other psalms.<sup>289</sup> In Emmanuel Veliskovsky's book *Worlds in Collision*, Rahab is the name used for the monstrous phenomenon of the tail of the comet Venus which swept through the atmosphere and orbit of the Planet Earth. In the context of this psalm, however, Rahab is, undoubtedly, a nickname for Egypt.

One of the salutary effects of the Diaspora and of the Babylonian captivity was that the Egyptians and Babylonians came in touch with the Gospel of the Old Testament. Daniel's testimony to Nebuchadnezzar and to Darius<sup>290</sup> was probably not an exception. Among the Philistines, Israel's archenemies, in Tyre, the land of Israel's business relations, and in Ethiopia, for Israel the end of the earth, people were born again because of the testimony of pious Jews. They testified to their jailers (in Egypt and Babylon) and to everyone who wanted to hear. Those are the "glorious thing" that can be said of Zion. This shows the other side of the coin from Jonah's story; it is the lesser known side of the coin. The encounter with God in Zion makes the Babylonian, the Philistine, and the other foreigner into a new man. In most cases, those people did not go to Zion, but Zion came to them.

The new birth which is mentioned here is, in the first place, a prophecy about the time when people would be renewed by looking at the cross of Jesus Christ and by the coming of the Holy Spirit. One becomes a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, of which Zion is the capital, through conversion, confession of sin, and forgiveness by the blood of Jesus, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. All men become brothers in Christ, not through the experience of a mythical joy as is Schiller's *Ode to Joy* and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Our joy is derived from the fact that "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> II Sam. 5:7,9

<sup>284</sup> See I Sam. 13:14

<sup>285</sup> See Gal. 1:15,16

<sup>286</sup> Rev. 21:23,24

<sup>287</sup> I Cor. 1:26

<sup>288</sup> See Isa. 30:7

<sup>289</sup> See Ps. 89:10

<sup>290</sup> See Dan. ch. 4 and 6

<sup>291</sup> Phil. 3:20

As long as Zion on earth is the center of world evangelism “the Most High himself will establish her.” When the church of Jesus Christ ceases to love and obey her Lord, the candlestick will be removed from its place, as was the case in the church of Ephesus.<sup>292</sup> At that point the church ceases to be the church.

In several places in Scripture, we can see samples of God’s method of bookkeeping. In this psalm we see how God registers the names of the people who are born again. Isaiah uses even stronger language: “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.”<sup>293</sup> Jesus confirms this by saying to His disciples: “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”<sup>294</sup> In Revelation, “The Book of Life” is mentioned several times.<sup>295</sup> Sometimes it is called: “the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”<sup>296</sup> This expression also indicates how the name of a person is recorded in this book, that is because the person accepts Jesus’ death as a payment for his sins. I believe that we have enough proof to say that the devil generally does not care about the name of people; he only goes by numbers. But he knows a few Christians by name. We read in Acts that a demon says to the sons of Sceva: “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?”<sup>297</sup> This story led one Christian brother to pray once: “Lord, let my name be known in hell.” It is the greatest compliment to our victorious living, if the devil knows us by name. To God we are never mere numbers; He knows where we were born.

This assurance causes, not only the sons of Korah, but all the inhabitants of Zion to sing and dance. “Singers and dancers alike say, ‘All my springs are in you.’”<sup>298</sup> This includes representatives from every nation, tribe, people, and language. We don’t see many dancing Christians in this world. This is due to the fact that not many recognize that they are born in Zion. When a person lives abroad and begins to forget his motherland, he becomes a poor individual. How can we be marching to Zion if we do not remember Zion? The memory of being forgiven, the overwhelming discovery of the Lord’s love for us which we made at the being of our spiritual journey, should never grow dim.

“As they make music they will sing, ‘All my fountains are in you.’” This excludes the possibility of finding our full satisfaction elsewhere. The only place to meet the Lord is in Zion. Only there can we have fellowship with God and with one another, and only there we will all our needs be met, and will we be fully satisfied. This will never become a perfect experience as long as we are on this earth. The psalm is, therefore, a prophetic pointer to the time when we shall see His face and He will wipe away all tears from our eyes.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> See Rev. 2:5

<sup>293</sup> Isa. 49:16

<sup>294</sup> Luke 10:20<sup>b</sup>

<sup>295</sup> See Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27

<sup>296</sup> Rev. 13:8

<sup>297</sup> Acts 19: 15

<sup>298</sup> (RSV)

<sup>299</sup> Rev. 22:4; 21:4

## PSALM EIGHTY-EIGHT

A song. A psalm of the Sons of Korah. For the director of music.  
According to mahalath leannoth. A maskil of Heman the Ezrahite.

- 1 *O LORD, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you.*
- 2 *May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry.*
- 3 *For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave.*
- 4 *I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like a man without strength.*
- 5 *I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.*
- 6 *You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.*
- 7 *Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. Selah*
- 8 *You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape;*
- 9 *my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, O LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you.*
- 10 *Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Selah*
- 11 *Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?*
- 12 *Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?*
- 13 *But I cry to you for help, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.*
- 14 *Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?*
- 15 *From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered your terrors and am in despair.*
- 16 *Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me.*
- 17 *All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me.*
- 18 *You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.*

This saddest of all the psalms in the hymnbook is the last one in the series of psalm by the sons of Korah. The author is Heman, the Ezrahite, who was a man of legendary wisdom, surpassed only by King Solomon.<sup>300</sup> In The Book of Chronicles, he is the first one mentioned as one of the singers of David.<sup>301</sup>

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight suggests a theory that Heman was a “Christian Existentialist.” He bases this upon vs. 5 in the KJV: “Free among the dead....” There seems to be little reason to approach this psalm in such a super modern way.

The key to the understanding of this psalm is probably found in the Hebrew word *anah maskil*, which can be translated with “an instructive poem for the purpose of humbling.” The sadness of this psalm has a purpose, namely to teach the hearer (or reader) humility. Or, maybe even more, to show how the intent of Heman’s painful experiences which are described in this psalm, led him to humility.

The psalm is written in a minor key. No light shows at the end of the tunnel. The only positive feature is the fact that Heman calls upon God in his time of need. This calling upon God is the result of suffering. Maybe we can better say that God calls Heman in the midst of his pain. In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis says: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, He talks to us in our conscience, but He shouts to us in our pain.”

One of the important features of this *maskil* is the total absence of the hope of the resurrection. Death is presented to us as the finale. The verses 10-12 could be taken as a twilight hope in the sense of “would it yet be possible that God would perform the miracle of resurrection?” But that word is found nowhere. In this way the writer creates the same effect that Solomon does in Ecclesiastes, when he suggests that death is better than life. We read: “A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart.”<sup>302</sup>

Putting the problem in such a way provokes an existentialistic reaction. Have we given up already? We question the truth of a statement of a Dutch poet who wrote: “Joined to the unresisting is the

<sup>300</sup> See I Kings 4:30,31

<sup>301</sup> See I Chr. 6:33

<sup>302</sup> Eccl. 7:1-3

heart that did not resist. One begins by accepting life and ends by accepting death!" I prefer the attitude of another Dutch atheist who poked fun at a newspaper advertisement announcing the death of a loved one with the words: "We rest in the Lord's will." His answer was that he had never seen an obituary that read: "We won't put up with this." In this way we may read Heman's psalm, as if he says to God: "Is this your last word?"

Quite in opposition to this is the attitude of Johan Sebastian Bach, who wrote the cantata "Come Sweet Death." Heman wrote this psalm as a one living among the dead, for he was still alive. But death was already in him. Vs. 4 says: "I am counted among those who go down to the pit." The Apostle Paul uses the same words but in a completely different way, when he says: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."<sup>303</sup> Strangely enough both Heman and Paul say completely opposite things, yet they use the same words. Paul sees himself as counted among the dead as a way that leads to resurrection; Heman utters a cry of despair. Yet, the Holy Spirit inspired both. When we surrender to God's will, He wants us to completely accept the consequences of our death. The only possibility to really die inwardly is if we die without hope of a resurrection. This may be the deepest lesson of this psalm: it shows us the way to true humility.

Strangely enough, the psalm opens with the words: "O LORD, the God who saves me," calling upon YHWH as "the God of my salvation."<sup>304</sup> The Hebrew words are *Yahweh Eloheey, Yashuw' atii.* That is the real breakthrough of light in this psalm. It is the guarantee of hope. God is not the God of the dead but of the living.<sup>305</sup> However hopeless the contents of this psalm may be, it is framed in hope.

The psalm also accentuates the real character of death. It may be true that, for us, death is the entrance into life, but death itself does not glorify God. There is nothing beautiful or dignified or sacred in the separation of the soul from the body. Death is the most stubborn enemy of life. Death will resist God till the very last, which is the reason it is called "the last enemy."<sup>306</sup> If a man dies in dignity, it is because of the image of God in him, not because of death's character. Death is an expression of the wrath of God. The Apostle Paul calls death "the wages of sin."<sup>307</sup>

It is the wrath of God that sets Heman apart as a living person among the dead. The double tension in the psalm is that Heman is alive but is counted among the dead, and that God is the God of his salvation but also the God of wrath. In both cases we are faced with extremes that cannot be reconciled except in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These tensions also have a twofold effect upon Heman's relationships. His relationship with God has reached the breaking point and his relationship with his fellow human beings is completely destroyed. Isolation and repulsion are keywords to describe his human relationships. "You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them." All of this points prophetically toward the suffering of Christ. Or better said, these elements of human suffering culminated in Jesus' loneliness and isolation. Our Lord looked in vain for human fellowship and sympathy and at the deepest point He cried out: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"<sup>308</sup>

*The Adam Clarke Commentary* gives the following interesting comment on the title of this psalm. "Perhaps the title of this Psalm, which is difficult enough, might be thus translated: 'A Poem to be sung to the conqueror, by the sons of Korah, responsively, in behalf of a distressed person; to give instruction to Heman the Ezrahite.' "

About vs. 5, "I am set apart with the dead," the Commentary says: "[Free among the dead]... I rather think, means stripped among the dead. Both <Ps. 88:4-5> seem to allude to a field of battle: the slain and the wounded, are found scattered over the plain; the spoilers come among them, and strip, not only the dead, but those also who appear to be mortally wounded, and cannot recover, and are so feeble as not to be able to resist. Hence, the psalmist says, 'I am counted with them that go down into the pit; I am as a man that hath no strength, <Ps. 88:4>. And I am stripped among the dead, like the mortally wounded... that lie in the grave. 'Free among the dead,... has been applied by the fathers to our Lord's voluntary death: all others were obliged to die; he alone gave up his life, and could take it again, <John 10:18>. He went into

<sup>303</sup> II Cor. 4:10

<sup>304</sup> NKJ

<sup>305</sup> Matt. 22:32

<sup>306</sup> See I Cor. 15:26

<sup>307</sup> Rom. 6:23

<sup>308</sup> Matt. 27:46

the grave, and came out when he chose. The dead are bound in the grave; he was free, and not obliged to continue in that state as they were.”

“Who are cut off from your care” would then mean “taken off the list.” The names of the ones fallen in battle were taken off the list that was in the hand of the general. The dead were no longer part of the army. This interpretation of the text is quite plausible, and it paints a very vivid picture before our eyes. This is, probably, not literally the experience of the psalmist but he uses the image to illustrate his spiritual condition. To him, life had been reduced to the most basic question: “to be or not to be.” He is uncertain about the outcome of it all.

I don’t know what else can be said about this psalm. Vs. 15 has the rather puzzling phrase: “From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death.” The psalmist is evidently speaking about more than one catastrophic experience; his is a congenital condition. In this psalm, Heman gives a description of man’s sinful nature and he draw the ultimate conclusions from this. Sin has been with us since we were born, and has kept us from entering into a meaningful relationship with our fellowmen. A lack of intimacy with God leads, in the last resort, to death.

It would be a sad task to analyze this psalm verse by verse. The best way seems to be, as we have done, to approach it from different angles. The poem extinguishes itself as a candle that burns itself out in the night and leaves us in the dark, alone with “the God of our salvation.” This is the road to humility.

## PSALM EIGHTY-NINE

A *maskil* of Ethan the Ezrahite.

- 1 *I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations.*
- 2 *I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself.*
- 3 *You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant,*
- 4 *'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.'" Selah*
- 5 *The heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.*
- 6 *For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings?*
- 7 *In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared; he is more awesome than all who surround him.*
- 8 *O LORD God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O LORD, and your faithfulness surrounds you.*
- 9 *You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them.*
- 10 *You crushed Rahab like one of the slain; with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.*
- 11 *The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth; you founded the world and all that is in it.*
- 12 *You created the north and the south; Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name.*
- 13 *Your arm is endued with power; your hand is strong, your right hand exalted.*
- 14 *Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.*
- 15 *Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD.*
- 16 *They rejoice in your name all day long; they exult in your righteousness.*
- 17 *For you are their glory and strength, and by your favor you exalt our horn.*
- 18 *Indeed, our shield belongs to the LORD, our king to the Holy One of Israel.*
- 19 *Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said: "I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have exalted a young man from among the people.*
- 20 *I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him.*
- 21 *My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him.*
- 22 *No enemy will subject him to tribute; no wicked man will oppress him.*
- 23 *I will crush his foes before him and strike down his adversaries.*
- 24 *My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted.*
- 25 *I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers.*
- 26 *He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.'*
- 27 *I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth.*
- 28 *I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail.*
- 29 *I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure.*
- 30 *"If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes,*
- 31 *if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands,*
- 32 *I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging;*
- 33 *but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness.*
- 34 *I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered.*
- 35 *Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness-- and I will not lie to David--*
- 36 *that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun;*
- 37 *it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky." Selah*
- 38 *But you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your anointed one.*
- 39 *You have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust.*
- 40 *You have broken through all his walls and reduced his strongholds to ruins.*
- 41 *All who pass by have plundered him; he has become the scorn of his neighbors.*
- 42 *You have exalted the right hand of his foes; you have made all his enemies rejoice.*
- 43 *You have turned back the edge of his sword and have not supported him in battle.*
- 44 *You have put an end to his splendor and cast his throne to the ground.*
- 45 *You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with a mantle of shame. Selah*
- 46 *How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?*

**47 Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility you have created all men!**  
**48 What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave? Selah**  
**49 O Lord, where is your former great love, which in your faithfulness you swore to David?**  
**50 Remember, Lord, how your servant has been mocked, how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,**  
**51 the taunts with which your enemies have mocked, O LORD, with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one.**  
**52 Praise be to the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.**

The title of this great psalm indicates that the poem is from the hand of Ethan the Ezrahite. *The Tyndale Commentary* says about Ethan: "Ethan is probably identical with Jeduthun, who founded one of the three choirs (cf. I Chr. 15:19; 2 Chr. 5:12). Ethan shared with Heman a reputation for wisdom, and membership of the same Judahite clan." A comparison between the two Scripture verses in the quote would, indeed, lead to such a conclusion.

A problem in this psalm is the sharp contrast between its two halves, the verses 1-37 and 38-51. It has been supposed that the second part is an addition from a later period. It makes quite a difference in the interpretation whether we consider this psalm as one whole or as two separate psalms. As long as we do not have a clear indication that we are dealing with two separate poems, we have to assume that the psalm forms a complete unit.

There is also no reason to place this psalm in the period after the fall of Jerusalem. It is true that Jerusalem was not destroyed in David's time, but we have learned from Psalm Sixty that the city had been attacked and that the Bible does not furnish us with any details about this. The psalm cannot have been written before David conceived the plan for the construction of the temple, because Nathan's prophecy forms the basis for the entire psalm. God ordered Nathan to pass on the following revelation to David: "I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."<sup>309</sup>

We note, however, that God's promise to David is depicted before us with heavier lines than in the original prophecy by Nathan and it is placed in a much wider setting. The way Ethan presents it sounds hyperbolic and this was probably done intentionally. But seen from the historical perspective, which is ours, we can say that Ethan's vision had a fulfillment. The main theme of the psalm revolves about one person with whom Israel as a nation is closely connected in everything he experiences. We understand that the Holy Spirit speaks here about our Lord Jesus Christ. In the light of the New Testament, therefore, we can interpret the second part of this psalm as a prophecy about the crucifixion at Golgotha where the real temple was destroyed.

The strange thing in this psalm is that the "but" in vs. 38 (in the statement: "But you have rejected") does, in no way, subtract anything from the positive aspect of God's promise in the first part of the psalm. Actually, the word "but" doesn't even appear in the Hebrew text. The psalmist doesn't understand how the promise can be reconciled with the destruction, but he understands that this does not take away anything of God's truth and faithfulness. The core of this psalm is, what the Apostle Paul calls, the foolishness of the message of the cross.<sup>310</sup> As was the case in the previous psalm, so here, the missing link is the resurrection from the dead. This resurrection is the topic of this ode of joy in the first part of the

<sup>309</sup> II Sam. 7:8-16

<sup>310</sup> See I Cor. 1:18

psalm, although Ethan may not have been aware of this himself. It would be impossible to “sing of the LORD’s great love forever” without resurrection from the dead!

Verses 1-2: The person who speaks in these verses has eternal life. The words “forever” and “all generations” testify to this. It must have been a strange experience for Ethan to say those words. He was, after all, a mortal human being. The affirmation: “With my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations” indicates that it was not his intention that persons, other than himself would perpetuate the song of praise after he was gone. Ethan reached beyond the boundaries of his own life on earth, and he placed himself among the multitude no one can count which cries in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”<sup>311</sup> It is amazing what praise does to the person who praises God. Ethan knew that “God was not the God of the dead but of the living,”<sup>312</sup> and he knew that, consequently, he himself was an eternal being.

The Hebrew word in vs. 1 translated with “great love” is *cheched*, which is defined by *Strongs Definitions* with “kindness,” or “beauty.” The word “love” in vs. 2 is the same. The KJV uses the word “mercies,” and sometimes translates *cheched* with “lovingkindness.” God’s lovingkindness and faithfulness are eternal attributes. It is important that the psalm opens with this statement. It proves that the paradox between the two sections of the psalm is no accident. Ethan wants us to understand that things that seem contradictory in God’s dealings with us have to be seen in the light of His lovingkindness and faithfulness. Those characteristics ought to govern our thinking about God. We should never allow ourselves to be deceived by the outward appearance of things. And we should not allow our mental picture of God to be influenced by the things we cannot understand about Him.

Abraham did not doubt God’s faithfulness when he placed Isaac on the altar. From our perspective, we know that the cross of Christ in no way compromised God’s reliability. Consequently, we can say that the second part of this psalm confirms God’s faithfulness.

In the verses 3 and 4 God is speaking personally. The words are not a literal quote of Nathan’s prophecy to David,<sup>313</sup> but they are closely related to it. Nathan’s prophecy does not mention God’s oath. Obviously, the words of this psalm go beyond what Nathan had said. There is no contradiction between the two messages, but Ethan’s words go deeper. The covenant mentioned here is the same as the one referred to by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews when he says: “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep...”<sup>314</sup> It is the covenant that was made between the Father and the Son before the creation of the world. The one who, in a physical sense, occupied the throne of David was King Jehoiachin. God ordered the prophet Jeremiah to prophesy about him: “Is this man Jehoiachin a despised, broken pot, an object no one wants? Why will he and his children be hurled out, cast into a land they do not know? O land, land, land, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the LORD says: ‘Record this man as if childless, a man who will not prosper in his lifetime, for none of his offspring will prosper, none will sit on the throne of David or rule anymore in Judah.’”<sup>315</sup> Both for the kings and the priests of Israel can be said that “death prevented them from continuing in office.”<sup>316</sup> But the angel Gabriel told 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.”<sup>317</sup> It is also clear from Ezekiel’s prophecy that David was not personally the fulfillment of the prophecy but only a type of the one who was to come. We read that God promised the restoration of Israel with the words: “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.”<sup>318</sup> This makes us conclude that this psalm should be read as a messianic prophecy.

David reacted with humility to Nathan’s prophecy by saying: “Who am I, O Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?”<sup>319</sup> In vs. 5 of this psalm we read the reaction of “the assembly of the holy ones: “The heavens praise your wonders, O LORD, your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.”

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<sup>311</sup> Rev. 7:9,10

<sup>312</sup> Matt. 22:32

<sup>313</sup> See II Sam. 7:5-16

<sup>314</sup> Heb. 13:20

<sup>315</sup> Jer. 22:28-30

<sup>316</sup> See Heb. 7:23

<sup>317</sup> Luke 1:32,33

<sup>318</sup> Ezek. 34:23

<sup>319</sup> II Sam. 7:18



A sober look at the facts reveals that the sitting of a son of David upon the throne of Israel could hardly be considered a supernatural miracle. But if we look at the Incarnation of the Word of God, we understand why the heavenly host of angels in Ephrathah rejoiced saying: "Glory to God in the highest."<sup>320</sup>

All this emphasizes the paradox of God's revelation of Himself. The omnipotence of the Most High reveals itself in such a way that we easily pass over it without realizing the miraculous aspect of it. But the Holy Spirit reveals here to Ethan the importance of God's non-dramatic acts as seen in the light of eternity. Only "the holy ones" have some insight into these mysteries. For the rest of humanity the gospel of Jesus Christ is weak and foolish. God's uniqueness among all the other heavenly beings does not demonstrate itself in thunder and lightning but in the ordinary, unremarkable things of everyday life. Only the holy ones do not despise the day of small things,<sup>321</sup> like the birth of a child.

The tone in the verses 6 and 7 is again general. The phrase, "the heavenly beings" is elsewhere translated with "the sons of the mighty." The Hebrew text reads *ben 'eelym*, which means "sons of el." The word *elohim* is derived from the word *'el*. In the context, it could mean the powerful ones, both in heaven and on earth. No created being can be compared to the eternal God.

In the verses 8-51, God is again the person addressed. Particularly in the verses 8-18, the address takes on the form of worship, emphasizing God's power and faithfulness. The Hebrew word for faithfulness is *'emuwnah*, which occurs seven times, indicating the theme of this psalm.

In the second part of the psalm, it seems as if God is unfaithful to His promise. The title given to this psalm in one Dutch translation is: "Where is the LORD's faithfulness to David?" But vs. 8 states clearly: "You are mighty, O LORD, and your faithfulness surrounds you." The psalmist must have been allowed to cast a glance in heaven, like the vision John received in Revelation,<sup>322</sup> and he discovered that faithfulness was the most prominent of God's attributes. We have to remember that the psalm comes to us as a prophecy; it is the Word of God in the form of a promise. It is not about things that happened on earth which guaranteed the promise. To the contrary! The little word "but" in vs. 38 indicates that facts point in a different direction than the Word of God. For man who has only an earthly perspective to go by, this evokes an unbearable tension.

There is no apparent connection between God's faithfulness and His rule over the surging sea. In the context, the sea is probably more than a body of water on our globe. The mountain of the waves suggests a challenge to God that is related to the tension between God's invisible promises and the visible circumstances that seem to contradict those promises. It is quite possible that the surging sea and Rahab are images of the insurrection of nations and individuals. "Rahab" is sometimes used in the Bible as a nickname for Egypt. It is also possible that a natural occurrence is meant here. Veliskovsky, in his book *Worlds in Collision*, believes that Rahab was the name given to the dragon-like phenomenon that appeared in the sky when the tail of the comet Venus swept through the atmosphere of the earth. In either case, the powers of darkness that try to obstruct the fulfillment of the prophetic word are meant. Vs. 9 was also literally fulfilled when Jesus stilled the storm on the Lake of Gennesaret.<sup>323</sup> It is quite possible that the crushing of Rahab and the scattering of the enemy constitute a reference to the exodus from Egypt.

Anyhow, whether in the narrower context of Israel's redemption as a nation, or on the great scale of God's cosmic plan of salvation, the point is that the Almighty God is reliable. The context of this psalm seems to point more in the direction of the cosmic scale. That is the background against which the throne of David is placed here. Much more is involved than a royal rule over a small nation. That nation is the guardian of God's revelation. God had revealed Himself to them, and through them He reveals Himself to the world. This is what makes the oath to David so overwhelmingly important. This emphasis on God's omnipotence also makes the apparent contradiction between both parts of the psalm so distressing. It would be inconceivable that such a God would not keep His promises.

The emphasis is not only on God's power, but also on His righteousness. Beginning with vs. 38, we find a description of deeds of unrighteousness. That which happens cannot be reconciled with God's character, yet it happens! God is a God of victory, but what happens is a defeat. How could any human being understand that this defeat would be the actual victory over the Evil One?

Vs. 15 remains, therefore, true: "Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD." The NKJ renders the statement: "Blessed are the people who know

<sup>320</sup> Luke 2:14

<sup>321</sup> See Zech. 4:10

<sup>322</sup> See Rev. ch. 4

<sup>323</sup> See Matt. 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25

the joyful sound!” The Berkley Version translates the beatitude with: “Blessed are the people, who recognize the festal call.” This is identical to the RSV’s rendering: “Blessed are the people who know the festal shout.” TLB says: “Blessed are those who hear the joyful blast of the trumpet.” The joyful sound is the shout of victory in battle. This victory is won through an apparent defeat. The joyful sound is, first of all, a shout of victory, like the Song of Moses at the border of the Red Sea. This joy and victory is closely related to our fellowship with God, with the walking in the light of His presence.

This joy should fit somewhere in the context of this psalm. The theme is God’s promises to David. Kingship, the authority of one man over another, is not part of God’s original plan of creation. Adam was king of creation, which is nature, the animal world, he was not the king of Eve. The rule of one man over another was the result of the fall. If sin had not entered the world, there would be no kings sitting on thrones. Man is created to rule over that which is lower in rank than he is, not over that which is equal to him. In this psalm, both the king and the whole nation are mentioned. If the people really knew the joyful sound and walked in the light of God’s presence, the king would be unnecessary. That is why Paul says that Christ will submit Himself to the Father when God has become “all in all.” We read: “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.”<sup>324</sup> This is why this beatitude of vs. 15 is more a wish than the statement of a fact. In the same vein Moses spoke: “I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”<sup>325</sup> Maybe we should read: “I wish the whole nation would acclaim you and walk in the light of your presence, O LORD.”

We may say that the blast of the trumpet, the joyful sound is the announcement of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The psalm speaks about the One who will sit on David’s throne forever. And He does this “on the basis of the power of an indestructible life,” to use the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>326</sup> Just as Jesus is priest forever, so He is the eternal king. The people who acclaim Him, those who know the joyful sound, are those who partake in the resurrection life of Jesus. This victorious life is the basis on which we may walk in the light of God’s presence.

The phrase “the light of your presence” is 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.”<sup>327</sup> It suggests the presence of the Shekinah.

The Apostle John has much to say about light in his First Epistle. We read: “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” And: “Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.”<sup>328</sup> Walking in the light cannot be separated from loving one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

“They rejoice in your name all day long; they exult in your righteousness.” This is seldom seen on earth. Ecstasy in God’s presence is a rare phenomenon in this “valley of tears” through which we pass on this earth. But the realization of the power of Christ’s resurrection is not common either; and the two are closely connected. These verses demonstrate the powerful effect praise can have. Much of our rejoicing is blurred because of the propaganda of the enemy who tries to brainwash us. Often, we will have to sing praises, acting against our better judgment, in order to break through the mist that surrounds us. Rejoicing in the Name of our Lord should always be the goal upon which we keep our eyes and mind fixed. If we do this, our walk through life will be enlightened considerably.

We note that the emphasis in these verses is not upon man but upon God. It is the light of His presence, His Name, and His righteousness. Our joy is a byproduct. The importance is not our feeling but the person of God. It is God’s victory in which we share. We are being clothed with the righteousness of

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<sup>324</sup> I Cor. 15:28

<sup>325</sup> Num. 11:29

<sup>326</sup> See Heb. 7:16

<sup>327</sup> Num. 6:24-26

<sup>328</sup> I John 1:5-7; 2:8-11

our Lord Jesus Christ. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”<sup>329</sup>

*The Tyndale Commentary* sees in these verses the cortege of the Ark of the Covenant, as when Israel fought the Philistines and the ark was brought unto the battlefield.<sup>330</sup> The scene of the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem in the early days of David’s reign seems a better background. We read: “David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.”<sup>331</sup>

The last line of vs. 16, “They exult in your righteousness,” comprises the confession that our own righteousness is insufficient. It is remarkable that, in this stage of the history of revelation, the psalmist is already conscious of the fact that man was saved and lived by a righteousness which was not his own. There are more traces of this knowledge in the Old Testament but one has to search for them. In God’s dealing with Abraham, we read: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”<sup>332</sup> This classic example became an important statement in Paul’s argumentation about justification by faith. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Gospel,<sup>333</sup> which saves our life and makes us honorable, first of all in the eyes of God, but ultimately also before our fellowmen.

According to verses 18 and 19 the king exemplifies the honor of his people. Undoubtedly, the Holy Spirit intends to say more with these words than only that David was such an exceptional person. Our shield, our protection, our exaltation, our defense, our beauty is in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. The important thing is that we walk in accordance with this reality.

The verses 19-37 contain a lengthy description of the prophecy by Nathan about the house of David, as found in the Book of Second Samuel.<sup>334</sup> There is also a reference to David’s anointing by Samuel.<sup>335</sup> It is interesting to see how reluctant Samuel was to go and anoint David. God’s great plan of salvation did, initially, not appear so attractive. God had chosen David before anyone was aware of this. Long before David was anointed we read that Samuel announced to Saul: “The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people.”<sup>336</sup> This reminds me of an incident that happened to me, shortly after my conversion in Holland. At the place where I had found the Lord, I met an American pastor who was very warm and kind to me because I reminded him of his own son he had left behind in the United States. God must have had similar feelings about David; he reminded Him of His own Son. This was the reason for the favor God showed him in such abundance. The prophecy of these verses, therefore, had a double fulfillment. The actual “dauphin” for the throne is Jesus Christ and the image of Christ is reflected in Solomon and his sons. Jesus is the actual servant who was anointed; He is the Christ. This also explains the clause in the verses 30-34 about the punishment for the sons who forsake the law. Vs. 19 states that God had revealed in a vision to His faithful people His choice of David. There is no further explanation as to who those faithful ones are. Supposedly, the whole nation of Israel is meant. Like Gideon, David is addressed here as a warrior.<sup>337</sup> In doing so, God reaches forward to the future, as we know it. As far as we know, David had not performed any heroic acts before he was anointed. It is the Holy Spirit who frees a man from fear and gives him courage. The strength of the Lion of Judah is the fruit of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. It is the prophetic word that takes a weak human being and makes him a hero. The angel who touched Daniel said to him: “Do not be afraid, O man highly esteemed, . . . Peace! Be strong now; be strong.”<sup>338</sup> Not only was David an image of the Lord Jesus but Jesus’ courage streamed from Jesus to David. The reality influenced the shadow.

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<sup>329</sup> II Cor. 5:21

<sup>330</sup> See I Sam. 5:4,5

<sup>331</sup> II Sam. 6:12-15

<sup>332</sup> Gen. 15:6

<sup>333</sup> See Rom. 1:17

<sup>334</sup> II Sam. 7:4-16

<sup>335</sup> See I Sam. 16:1-13

<sup>336</sup> I Sam. 13:14

<sup>337</sup> cf. Judg. 6:12

<sup>338</sup> Dan. 10:19

David's courage is also related to his obedience and surrender to the Lord. This is implied in the term "servant." David served God and this became the reason for his greatness and honor. Jesus says: "My Father will honor the one who serves me."<sup>339</sup>

The most important feature is, of course, the anointing by the Holy Spirit, as symbolized in the anointing with the sacred oil (vs. 20). When Samuel anointed David, we read: "From that day on the Spirit of the LORD came upon David in power."<sup>340</sup> The oil is called "sacred" because it could only be used for the purpose of symbolizing the Holy Spirit. It was strictly forbidden to use the oil in any other way. God had said to Moses: "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."<sup>341</sup> The Holy Spirit does not want to have anything to do with "the flesh."

Often in the Bible "the hand of God" is mentioned in connection with judgment over evil and redemption from the power of evil, as in "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him."<sup>342</sup> And: "Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand."<sup>343</sup> It also stands for protection, as in the case of Ezra: "The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him."<sup>344</sup> "The arm" expresses the same idea, but in an even more powerful way, as in: "Is the LORD's arm too short?"<sup>345</sup> God said to Moses: "Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.'<sup>346</sup> And in the great truth: "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."<sup>347</sup> All this strengthening and protection of David is implied in vs. 21, where we read: "My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him." The source of David's strength is in the Name of the Lord. Vs. 24 reads: "My faithful love will be with him, and through my name his horn will be exalted." The word translated with "love" is the Hebrew *chesed*, the love of God's covenant. Literally it means that God's character is projected upon man.

The essence of the power that is mentioned here is a moral strength. David is threatened by immorality in the largest sense of the word. It is not merely a matter of sexual sin. David's sexual life had certainly not been above reproach. This proves all the clearer that, in the person of David, we can only see a shadow of reality. The only Person who was filled with the Spirit of holiness is our Lord Jesus Christ. In the words of the Apostle Paul, he was the one "who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord."<sup>348</sup> In Him the Name of God was fully exalted.

The setting of David's hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers speaks symbolically of the boundaries of the Promised Land as God had shown them to Joshua: "Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates-- all the Hittite country-- to the Great Sea on the west."<sup>349</sup> The "Great Sea" is undoubtedly the Mediterranean Sea, and the eastern border was the Euphrates and Tigris delta. In the prayer of blessing for King Solomon, however, it is said: "He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."<sup>350</sup> It is God's intention that the rule of peace of His anointed king will stretch out over all the earth.

The following verses also speak clearly of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, the ruler of the kings of the earth. "He will call out to me, 'You are my Father.'" Jesus is the first person in the Bible who

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<sup>339</sup> John 12:26

<sup>340</sup> I Sam. 16:13

<sup>341</sup> Ex. 30:32,33

<sup>342</sup> Ex. 3:19

<sup>343</sup> Ex. 13:3

<sup>344</sup> Ezra 7:6

<sup>345</sup> Num. 11:23

<sup>346</sup> Ex. 6:5,6

<sup>347</sup> Deut. 33:27

<sup>348</sup> Rom. 1:4

<sup>349</sup> Josh 1:4

<sup>350</sup> Ps. 72:8

openly called God His Father. The Jews of His time concluded from this that Jesus made Himself equal with God. In John's Gospel we read: "For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."<sup>351</sup> Their observation is interesting in the light of this psalm. The son of David had the right to call God his Father on the basis of this psalm, which implied that he was equal with God. Jesus based His authority on the Old Testament prophecies.

Being appointed as God's "firstborn" implies more than a physical order of birth and the rights to the inheritance that came with this. It is in Scripture also a reference to the resurrection from the dead. In Revelation, John calls Jesus: "the firstborn from the dead."<sup>352</sup> The Apostle Paul shed new light on this as he interpreted the second Psalm and defined the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Speaking in the synagogue of Antioch, he said: "And we declare to you glad tidings-- that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'"<sup>353</sup> Jesus' kingship is based on the resurrection life He possesses.

The covenant is the eternal covenant mentioned by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>354</sup> It is eternal, not only in the sense that it will never end, but also that it has no beginning in our time. It was concluded before the foundation of the world. David can hardly have understood the covenant to mean more than that his offspring would always be sitting on the throne of Israel. But the Holy Spirit says much more than that. In Jesus Christ, David's descendants have grown into "a great multitude that no one could count."<sup>355</sup> And it is through "God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness [that we] reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."<sup>356</sup>

It is clear that the verses 30-32 cannot be applied to the Messiah. Here David's physical descendants are meant. The books of Kings and Chronicles gives us a sad report of men who sat on the throne of Israel and forsook the law. This, however, did not influence the messianic covenant God had made with David. Man's unfaithfulness does not annul God's faithfulness. God's oath to David gave legality and vitality to the theocracy. The object was not only people who sat on a throne, but the throne itself and everything it stands for. David was one of the few kings of Israel who realized that he reigned "by the grace of God." This means that he recognized that God had entrusted this rule to him and that he had to give account to God. Most of his posterity ruled as if God had very little to do with their kingship. God's oath to David implied that God is the one who sits on the throne, and that there will always be people who acknowledge this fact. For us, it means that the man Jesus Christ reigns over our lives with the authority God has given Him.

Whatever the situation on earth may be and however much people on earth will understand or not understand of the facts, nothing changes of the reality of the Kingdom of God. The psalmist draws a comparison between this order and the order of creation. "His line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky." Just as the earth exists in its relationship with the sun and the moon, so man exists in a spiritual sense in his relationship to the Father and the Son.

The word "But" in vs. 38 is the most important word in the psalm. In the Hebrew text it is suggested by the context rather than explicitly stated. Yet everything hinges on the contrast between the two sections that are linked by this short word. If the second part of the psalm were a later addition, as some commentators suggest, then the whole psalm would become a mockery. If we do not accept the fact that the "but" of vs. 38 is an integral part of the original poem, it would be impossible to take the psalm seriously. The question is, to what does the rejection and spurning of the anointed one refer? The psalm itself gives us no indication which would allow us to place it against a particular historical background. It is not strictly necessary to place the writing of the psalm in period of the Babylonian captivity. Our objection to such a late date is that the subscript "A maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite" would not have any historical value. It is not imperative to see in the breaking through all his walls and the reducing of his strongholds to ruins a literal destruction of the city of Jerusalem. The language could very well be taken as

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<sup>351</sup> John 5:18

<sup>352</sup> Rev. 1:5

<sup>353</sup> Acts 13:32,33 (NKJ)

<sup>354</sup> See Heb. 13:20

<sup>355</sup> Rev. 7:9

<sup>356</sup> Rom. 5:17

a description of a moral and spiritual breakdown. The loss of the theocratic vision under Solomon, the first of David's descendants to sit on the throne of David, would be enough for a spiritually minded person to utter such words of despair. The decline started early in Solomon's reign. The first indication is in the construction of the temple and the palace. We read: "In the eleventh year in the month of Bul, the eighth month, the temple was finished in all its details according to its specifications. He had spent seven years building it. It took Solomon thirteen years, however, to complete the construction of his palace."<sup>357</sup> The royal palace must have been almost twice as large as the temple, which is an indication of the priorities of the king's reign.

Undoubtedly though, the main lesson the Holy Spirit teaches us in these verses is the rejection of Jesus Christ. Daniel prophesied: "After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing."<sup>358</sup> The core of the Gospel is incomprehensible to the human mind. Even from the perspective of the resurrection, it passes our understanding that God would need the cross to fulfill His promise to David. David's descendant would sit upon the throne throughout eternity, not in spite of the fact that He died, but because of it. The way in which this was brought about is still to this day repulsive and horrible to us. The cross proved how deeply man had fallen in order to be able to do such a thing to a fellow human being. The only begotten of the Father, the Son of His love, the one in whom He was well pleased, was forsaken and rejected by God. The cross is foolishness, but it is God's foolishness.

We find the picture of the broken wall and the trampling down of the vineyard also in Isaiah.<sup>359</sup> This psalm does not specifically mention a vineyard. The breaking of the wall and the ruining of the stronghold speak of the destruction of a city. But it is clear that the army that destroyed the city would also do the plunder and not leave that to "all who pass by." The point is that man has withdrawn himself from God's protection. Or, in the case of Jesus Christ being forsaken by God, it meant that God withdrew His hand of protection from His Son. This is the meaning of Jesus' cry: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"<sup>360</sup> At that time the demons were unrestrained. Jesus himself had said: "This is your hour – when darkness reigns."<sup>361</sup>

"You have turned back the edge of his sword and have not supported him in battle. You have put an end to his splendor and cast his throne to the ground," gives us a description of the end result of sin in all of its nakedness. Before man fell into sin, he was clothed in glory, he ruled over creation and was full of vitality. The Genesis account tells us: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."<sup>362</sup> Man's relationships were unrestrained. David would have known that it was impossible for one of his descendants to sit upon his throne eternally in a world in which all relationships were diseased by sin. For David himself, his kingdom was not glorious and his crown was not absolute. He did not remain young, and there were many things in his life for which he must have felt shame. How could the house God would build for him rest upon such a foundation? It would have to collapse sooner or later. This collapse is what God permitted here; but why? It was so that man would gain a better understanding of the awfulness of sin and realize how deeply sin had penetrated human life. The cross of Christ demonstrates what sin actually is.

The psalmist builds his case on the supposition that God would be able to use the material at hand to build the house of David. This assumption was more than merely naïve, it was shortsighted and foolish. The little word "but" reveals this. What he should have said is "because of this very reason!" Eternal mansions are built with eternal material. All things temporal will burn. Resurrection into incorruptibility would be impossible without the death of the corruptible.

What is so incomprehensible is that God, in Jesus Christ, inflicts this shame and destruction upon Himself! Jesus told the Jews of His time: "Destroy this temple...."<sup>363</sup> In the verses 38-45 we read about the destruction of this temple, the house of God, the house of David. God wants His children to share in His suffering. The Apostle Paul said to the Christians in Philippi: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him."<sup>364</sup> That was the reason that God tested Abraham in the sacrifice of Isaac. His relationship with God was such that God wanted him to experience

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<sup>357</sup> I Kings 6:38-7:1

<sup>358</sup> Dan. 9:26

<sup>359</sup> See Isa. 5:1-7

<sup>360</sup> Matt. 27:46

<sup>361</sup> Luke 22:52

<sup>362</sup> Gen. 2:25

<sup>363</sup> John 2:19

<sup>364</sup> Phil. 1:29

what it felt like to have to sacrifice one's only son. As God's chosen nation, Israel was given a taste of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

The last section of this psalm (vs. 46-51), tells the story of one person. This is the lowest point of world history. The full weight of God's wrath and curse on sin falls upon the Messiah. Man who is created in God's image has to die here and return to dust. The Messiah shares in the fate of all of mankind. Seemingly, nothing remains of God's promise to David, which was confirmed with an oath. As God's promise to Abraham that he would have a son seemed to die as Abraham's own body slowly died, so God's promise to David died here. When Jesus died He took the mantle of shame upon Himself in order to clothe us with honor.

It seems as if there is no connection between the two part of this psalm. The verses 36 and 37 speak of a throne that is established forever, but the verses 46-51 deal with death and the shame of death: the death of one man, or rather the sharing of the one man in the death that is the fate of all men. All this is heavy with significance. In the light of what we know now about the shame, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, this is no longer a problem. We understand what the Holy Spirit is saying in this psalm, but we also understand that the person who wrote this poem could not have comprehended what happened. He saw the destruction as opposed to the promise of God, not as a part of it. This lack of understanding is demonstrated in words like: "Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility you have created all men!" God never created anyone for futility. Man brought futility upon himself through sin.

Ethan says that God's promise does not fit the visible reality. The very fact that he wrote this psalm indicates his belief that this ought not to be so. But he never comes to the point of asking himself if his view of reality is correct. His question: "How long, O LORD?" indicates though that he does not consider the existing situation to be permanent. Ethan wanted to see the change and solution in his lifetime. It takes too long for him and life is too short. He asks the question: "What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave?"

Seeing death and being saved from the power of Sheol is, however, not the same, even though the two are used as parallels in the same phrase. Jesus' death brought about a separation of the two. In the words of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."<sup>365</sup> We may have to die, but we are no longer subjected to the power of death. This is the reason that God's great love for us in the present is so much more wonderful than it ever was before. This deliverance from the fear of death is the essence of God's oath to David.

It becomes more and more clear to Ethan that the circumstances may have changed but God has not changed. His use of the word "faithfulness" (literally "truth") in vs. 49 prove this. The verses 50 and 51 alternate between "your servant" and "your anointed one." One man is representative of the whole nation. The Hebrew word for "taunts" is difficult to translate. The word is *charaph*, which, according to *Strongs Definitions*, means: "to pull off, i.e. (by implication) to expose (as by stripping)." Vs. 50 is variously rendered with: "Remember, Lord, the reproach of Your servants" (NKJ). "Remember, O Lord, how thy servant is scorned" (RSV). "Lord, see how all the people are despising me" (TLB). It is true that the Messiah was despised and taunted, but at the same time He took upon Himself the shame that was upon man who had fallen in sin. Man, as bearer of the image of God, is honorable. All shame and scorn is derived from his rebellion against his Maker and originates with the devil. The world population still mocks every step of God's anointed one, not only of the Messiah but of all who "walk the Jesus' Way," but only Christ bore the taunts of the world population in His bosom and took this to the cross.

Thus ends this Third Book of Psalms. It does not sound like a victory, yet it is the ultimate defeat of the devil. The Second Book ended with the prayer for the king: "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."<sup>366</sup> This Third Book concludes with his victory through death. The tone of Ps. 89 resembles the theme of Ps. 41.

The doxology with which this book ends is the shortest in the whole Book of Psalms: "Praise be to the LORD forever! Amen and Amen."

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<sup>365</sup> Heb. 2:14,15

<sup>366</sup> Ps. 72:17