

BOOK V

PSALMS 107-150

PSALM ONE HUNDRED SEVEN

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.
- 2 Let the redeemed of the LORD say this--those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
- 3 those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south.
- 4 Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle.
- 5 They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away.
- 6 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.
- 7 He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.
- 8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,
- 9 for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.
- 10 Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains,
- 11 for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High.
- 12 So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help.
- 13 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.
- 14 He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains.
- 15 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men,
- 16 for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.
- 17 Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.
- 18 They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death.
- 19 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.
- 20 He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.
- 21 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.
- 22 Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy.
- 23 Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters.
- 24 They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep.
- 25 For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves.
- 26 They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away.
- 27 They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end.
- 28 Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress.
- 29 He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed.
- 30 They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.
- 31 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.
- 32 Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders.
- 33 He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground,
- 34 and fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who lived there.
- 35 He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs;
- 36 there he brought the hungry to live, and they founded a city where they could settle.
- 37 They sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest;
- 38 he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased, and he did not let their herds diminish.
- 39 Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled by oppression, calamity and sorrow;
- 40 he who pours contempt on nobles made them wander in a trackless waste.
- 41 But he lifted the needy out of their affliction and increased their families like flocks.
- 42 The upright see and rejoice, but all the wicked shut their mouths.
- 43 Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD.

This psalm, like the previous one, opens with a song of praise. The words “give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever” was part of the temple liturgy.¹ There are other similarities between

¹ See I Chr. 16:41^b

this psalm and Psalm 106. This psalm answers the prayer, “Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from the nations”² in the verses 2 and 3: “Let the redeemed of the LORD say this--those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south.”

The psalm can be clearly divided into six stanzas:

1. Introduction – verses 1-3
2. The wanderers – verses 4-9
3. The depressed – verses 10-16
4. The sick – verses 17-22
5. The seafarers – verses 23-32
6. Conclusion – verses 33-43

The main theme of the psalm is, obviously, in four stanzas that depict the particular personal experiences of God’s redemption in times of need.

The Tyndale Commentary observes: “In most modern versions, each of the next four stanzas has the same kind of opening (‘Some wandered...’, ‘Some sat in darkness...’, etc.), as though we were following the fortunes of different groups. This is inaccurate, and obscures the probability that the four scenes are four ways of looking at the same reality, namely the disastrous situation from which Israel has now been rescued. As that situation is analogous to the plight of all sinners, the psalm can be appreciated directly, not only through the eyes of Israel.” Most commentators consider the psalm to be of the post-captivity period. The date of the psalm, however, has little bearing on its contents. The important thing is that the four stanzas depict the effect of sin upon the human race. The psalm also contains a prophecy about the *ekklesia* which God redeemed from the power of the devil and gathered from all the nations of the world.

Those who are addressed have experienced God’s goodness and love in a deeply personal way. The NIV renders the Hebrew literally with: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.” The Hebrew word for “good,” *towb*, is defined by Strong’s as “good in the widest sense.” The word “love” is the translation of the Hebrew *cheved* which is God’s covenant-love. The KJV often renders it with “lovingkindness.” The ones who are addressed in this psalm are “the redeemed of the Lord.” Their redemption is defined in terms of being “redeemed from the hand of the foe, [and being] gathered from the lands.” The word “foe” is singular, which indicates that more is intended than mere human enemies. It is Satan who stands behind all human hostility. Every person who does not live in fellowship with God is subject to attacks by the power of darkness. The Apostle Peter says so beautifully that God has “called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light.”³

The problem of pain is presented in this psalm in its most elementary form. The fact that man is responsible for the sins he commits is never mentioned directly. Our lost condition consists in our being in the power of the enemy and redemption means being called by God for fellowship with Him.

The following stanzas describe how deep the damage is in our personal lives that is caused by our separation from God. There is, first of all, the wandering in a desert wasteland, unable to find the way to the city. It is bad enough to lose one’s way, but losing the way in the desert is life threatening. It means certain death from lack of water. It is obvious that the psalmist does not describe a physical experience but the spiritual condition of a person who dies from thirst because of loneliness. Man needs fellowship with God and with his fellowmen. Living in a city is, in itself, no guarantee against loneliness. When Adam separated himself from God, he encapsulated himself in aloneness. Living in a city may only be a picture of what man thinks will take care of his needs. But being redeemed from the hand of the foe reestablishes the bond of love and intimacy between people. This is implied in the phrase: “those he gathered from the lands.”

The hunger and thirst of the soul is much more intense than any physical deprivation. The psalmist emphasizes the fact that loneliness causes distress and love relieves it. When we experience God’s love for us it releases in us love for others. The Apostle John says: “We love because he first loved us.”⁴

The psalm does not promise us an immediate and complete realization of this fellowship in love. Vs. 7 speaks of being led by a straight way to a city. As long as we live on this earth we will be on the road. At best, we will get a foretaste of things to come. Like Abraham, we are looking forward. The author of the Hebrew Epistle writes: “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign

² See Ps. 106:47

³ I Peter 2:9

⁴ I John 4:19

country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”⁵ As was the case with Abraham, the expectation of where we are going determines our vision of the present in which we live.

Praising God’s lovingkindness is our occupation while we are on the road. Obviously, our faith, that is the confidence that God’s promises are true, plays a significant role in this. The quenching of our thirst and the stilling of our hunger consists in the discovery that our lives are geared toward the true goal. The despair of being lost is fed by the realization that life has no goal or meaning. We usually buckle, not only because of the oppression of the soul, but because of confusion. God’s redemption leads us in the direction in which our lives should go and that, in itself, is a part of our spiritual and emotional healing.

The following stanza (the verses 10-16) deals with people who are bound with iron chains. Their imprisonment is, obviously, not physical but inward; they are not internally free. Sin not only separates man from God and man from man but it also isolates man from himself. Sin breaks our inner harmony. The devil exploits this condition, of course, but that does not seem to be the topic of these verses. The paranoia of these people is the result of their lack of fellowship with God. The psalmist digs deeper into the problem in these verses than in the previous stanza. Communion with God brings healing on a deeper level. The chains represent man’s rebellion to the Word of God. “They had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High.” The psalmist doesn’t give us any specific examples. His analysis can be applied to the sin of Eve and Adam as well as to any other crime man commits. Man harms himself when he disobeys God’s Word. On the other hand, obedience is the key to inner freedom. 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.’”⁶ The NKJV renders this with: “If you abide in My word...” “To abide in” is identical with “to obey.” Our inner dichotomy causes us to stumble and the person who stumbles ceases to progress. Progress, therefore, depends on obedience and inner harmony.

The change in condition in these verses occurs when these people cry unto the Lord. There was no other helper. Man cannot help himself in this condition. These verses demonstrate that the “suffering in iron chains” and the humiliation to which these people were subjected, as a result of their rebellion against the Word of God, was also an act of God. Suffering is not only an automatic result of man’s break with God, it is also a consequence of God’s intervention. “So he subjected them to bitter labor,” or as the NKJV puts it: “Therefore He brought down their heart with labor.” When God does this to man, He has their salvation in mind. It is not an act of revenge on the part of God. God wants man to call upon Him in his low condition so He can save him from his distress. The breaking of the chains, the deliverance from despair, and the being brought out from darkness and gloom are only possible if man is willing to be saved.

Man’s prison is described here as “gates of bronze” and “bars of iron.” Man is no match for such bonds. In Isaiah’s prophecy, the prophet uses the same expression, referring to God’s Word to King Cyrus: “I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.”⁷ In that context, the subject is the victories God gave to Cyrus in order to open the way for Israel to return from captivity. This similarity of expressions could be a hidden reference to the captivity.

The following stanzas (the verses 17-22) deal with the sick. There is no reason to interpret these verses as a figure of speech. There is mention of physical suffering, lack of appetite, and being close to death. The cause of this sickness is described as following “rebellious ways” and “iniquities.” In a general sense, sickness is always a result of sin but this does not mean that every incident of sickness can always be linked to a specific personal sin. Such is certainly not the general rule. But even when such is the case, we read in these verses that there is salvation and healing with the Lord. The first result is deliverance from distress. The Hebrew word is *metsuwqah* or *metsuqah* which means “narrowness,” or figuratively “trouble.” The KJV translates it sometimes with “anguish.” Anguish or fear is the single factor that binds these stanzas together. In the verses 6, 13, 19, and 28 we read: “And he delivered them from their distress.” “Anguish” or “angst” would be a more modern translation of this condition.

⁵ Heb. 11:9,10

⁶ John 8:31-36

⁷ Isa. 45:2

God did not create man for angst or “narrowness.” Narrowness refers to circumstances; fear or panic describes man’s reaction to those circumstances. Fear is incapacitating. It may be extreme from a linguistic viewpoint to translate *metsuqah* with “angst” but the word seems quite fitting in this context. Man who knows no fellowship with God lives in angst.

Vs. 20, “He sent forth his word and healed them,” could be seen as a prophecy about the coming of Jesus Christ. The coming of the Word of God brings healing. Matthew describes this so beautifully in the following scene: “When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases.’”⁸ The psalmist cannot have known how literally true his words were that God’s Word would become flesh. Neither could he have understood how much our healing would cost God in that God Himself would carry our diseases. This is the essence of the Gospel message. For this reason it is appropriate that those who are healed to bring a thank offering, as is prescribed in Leviticus.⁹ The thank offering had to be eaten on the day it was brought. The sacrifice was a tangible form of gratitude, expressing obedience and surrender which has to be renewed daily. The healing of the whole man also produces “songs of joy.” Man experiences personally deliverance from sickness and death.

The fourth stanza describes a personal experience which was least typical of the average Israelites. The Israelites were not known to be seafarers. The Massorete text places this stanza in parentheses, which means that it could be a later addition to the text. Some commentators interpret the sea as an allegory of the captivity. The story of Jonah, however, would indicate that the Israelites were more involved in seafaring than we know. King Solomon built ships as did Jehoshaphat who was, however, less successful.¹⁰ Seafaring was, obviously, not completely foreign to Israel. Some Israelites must have experienced storms at sea, either on their own ships or on those belonging to other nations.

The background of this stanza differs from the others in that the emphasis is not upon man’s sin but on the disturbance of the equilibrium in creation of which man becomes the victim. Man at sea is a toy of the elements. It could be that the average Israelite felt that going to sea meant going beyond the boundaries God had set for His people, the sea not being part of the Promised Land. The sailor could then only blame himself for the distress he experienced in the midst of the storm. This would establish a link with the preceding stanzas in which man’s sins found him out. The stanza, however, does not give us any indication that such is the case.

The strange part in these verses is that the storm is represented as “the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep.” Yet, before the fall, there were, obviously, no hurricanes or other forms of natural disaster. The disturbance of nature’s equilibrium is the result of man’s break with God. The earth, over which man was set to reign, has become enemy territory to him. Man perishes in the creation God had prepared for him. Jesus’ rebuking of the storm bears this out. We read in Mark’s Gospel: “He [Jesus] got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.”¹¹ A Dutch poet, P. C. Boutens, has written a beautiful little poem entitled “Christ in Scheveningen.” The poem says that all the fishermen in the little fishing village of Scheveningen are Christians because they all came to know the Lord during the storms on the North Sea. This seems to be similar to what the poet wants to convey in this stanza. As the writer to the Hebrews says: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”¹² We live in a hostile world and, unless God stretches out His protecting hand over us, we will all perish.

This stanza can be placed next to the first (if we don’t count the introduction as a stanza). There are similarities and differences. Both describe a journey in a hostile environment. There is a goal to be reached: a city or a haven. In both cases, man is not able to reach his goal in his own power. In the first stanza, the hostile element is a lack of water; in the second it is the fact that there is too much of it. In the latter stanza there is also no loneliness. The sailors are all “in the same boat.” The boat was too small and the people were too many for comfort. They cling to each other.

Although storms are man’s enemy, they are also a demonstration of God’s power. The towering waves and the depth of the ocean speak of God’s majesty. Mere man is no match for this. Man, who is

⁸ Matt. 8:16,17

⁹ See Lev. ch. 3 and 7:11-21

¹⁰ See I Kings 9:26-28; 10:22; 22:49

¹¹ Mark 4:39

¹² Heb. 10:31

tossed around by a storm at sea, is a helpless little creature. His head and his stomach abandon him. Luke's account of Paul's journey to Rome is a unique illustration of these verses.¹³ Even if the psalmist intended the storm to be an allegory, this does not exclude a literal interpretation. The storm is stilled in answer to prayer. These verses could be seen as a prophecy of Jesus' stilling of the storm in the Gospels.¹⁴

We wondered about the fact that the storm was classified among "the works of the LORD." But the storm had not come up yet in vs. 24. There are other manifestations of God's glory that are not visible on land, even when there is no storm.

Vs. 32, "Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders" is a parallel to vs. 22, "Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy." These verses belong together with the verses 8 and 15. The thank offering is an expression of gratitude to God. In vs. 32, the sailors are asked to give their testimony in front of other believers.

The comparatively primitive conditions of seafaring of that time give a depth to these verses that they no longer have for modern man. We have acquired an arrogant Titanic mentality, as if we are unsinkable. We ought to realize though that, in spite of our superior modern techniques, we are still the toys of God's elements, unless we place ourselves specifically under his protection.

The last stanza (the verses 33-43) give the impression of not belonging to the rest of this psalm. These verses do not contain testimonies of personal experiences. Yet, there is a clear connection between this stanza and the preceding verses. There is mention of the desert in which people were lost, and there is also a city in which people dwell. God reverses the roles, both the roles of nature and of men. And man bears responsibility for these reversals. The land dries out "because of the wickedness of those who lived there." Man has demonstrated a lack of ecological responsibility. If man does not look at this world as God's world, he treats nature without respect and ends up in a world that is uninhabitable. There are various ways in which a land can spew out its inhabitants.

On the other hand, God pours out His goodness over the desert so that there is an abundance of water. The question there is what man does with the riches God gives to him. The implication of vs. 39 is, obviously, that oppression, calamity, and sorrow are the results of man's moral failure.

In the verses 40 and 41 we can hear echoes of some New Testament sounds as, for instance, Mary's Magnificat: "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,"¹⁵ or of Paul's words to the Corinthians: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-and the things that are not-to nullify the things that are."¹⁶ That which is here expressed in images of social relationships has actually a deep spiritual undertone. This separation between social and spiritual is, actually, a modern phenomenon that did not exist in ancient times. The noblemen in the Bible were supposed to possess spiritual nobility and poverty was seen as the result of the absence of God's blessing because of man's immoral life. These verses do not speak of a class struggle à la Marx but of men who prove that they are not living worthy of the place and call God had given them. This is the reason they end up in shame and find themselves in the desert from which others in the first stanza had been saved. Now the circle is complete. The social problems are there, but the separation we make does not exist. In the same way, we cannot say that the rich man and Lazarus in Jesus' parable¹⁷ were lost or saved, respectively, on the basis of their riches or poverty. James condemns the wealthy people of his time, not because they possess money, but because they use their position to commit injustice. We read: "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on

¹³ See Acts 27:14-44

¹⁴ See Matt. 8:23-27; Mark 8:35-41; Luke 8:22-25.

¹⁵ Luke 1:51-53

¹⁶ I Cor. 1:25-28

¹⁷ See Luke 16:19-31

earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.”¹⁸ The contrast is, as vs. 42 expresses it, between the upright and the wicked.

The last verse of this psalm poses a problem. In this world, the wicked are not always punished instantaneously, and justice is seldom vindicated. The complaints of the prophets, such as Asaph’s in Psalm 73 and Habakkuk’s cry, seem to be more appropriate. Habakkuk wrote: “O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. 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? You have made men like fish in the sea, like sea creatures that have no ruler. The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?”¹⁹ We relate better to this kind of testimony. But little is visible in this world of “the great love of the LORD,” or of the making right of social injustice. This kind of reasoning, however, does not go below the surface of things. The testimony of Asaph and Habakkuk prove that there is rarely an instant retribution but God deals with man in a more profound and everlasting way. Ultimately, no one gets away with his sins.

¹⁸ James 5:1-6

¹⁹ Hab. 1:12-17

PSALM ONE HUNDRED EIGHT

A song. A psalm of David.

- 1 My heart is steadfast, O God; I will sing and make music with all my soul.*
- 2 Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn.*
- 3 I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples.*
- 4 For great is your love, higher than the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies.*
- 5 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, and let your glory be over all the earth.*
- 6 Save us and help us with your right hand, that those you love may be delivered.*
- 7 God has spoken from his sanctuary: "In triumph I will parcel out Shechem and measure off the Valley of Succoth.*
- 8 Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet, Judah my scepter.*
- 9 Moab is my washbasin, upon Edom I toss my sandal; over Philistia I shout in triumph."*
- 10 Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom?*
- 11 Is it not you, O God, you who have rejected us and no longer go out with our armies?*
- 12 Give us aid against the enemy, for the help of man is worthless.*
- 13 With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies.*

This psalm is more than a mere combination of two existing portions of psalms. It is true that the verses 1-5 are identical with Ps. 58:7-11 and the verses 6-13 with Ps. 60:6-13 but, this psalm is more than the sum of two parts only.

Most commentators suppose that some editor in later times rediscovered the two psalms and combined the two parts because he felt that they fitted together and were applicable to the actuality of his day. George Knight places this theoretical event in or after the Babylonian captivity. There is, however, no reason why David himself could not have rearranged his own material and used his own words in a different combination. Since we commented already on the two psalms that form the basis of this rearrangement, it not necessary to examine the text anew. David wrote Ps. 57 before his ascension to the throne. The subscript reads: "When he had fled from Saul into the cave." Ps. 60 was written on the occasion of a series of military victories, after the counterattack of the Edomites. The first part deals with the realization of God's protection and the second with the certainty of God's victory.

The value of this psalm must be found in the combination of those two truths. Both parts were written on the occasion of an enemy attack. Saul wanted to kill the one man, David, and the Edomites wanted to annihilate Israel as a nation. The combination presents the enemy on a personal and on a national level. It also highlights God's protection against the enemy on both levels. David, probably, wanted to make clear that, in both cases, he was facing the same enemy. The evil power of darkness that prompted Saul to murder David is the same that inspired the nation of Edom. In both cases, God's protection was sufficient. There exists a supernatural protection against a supernatural enemy. David was never allowed to see the realization of his vision of the conquest of Edom. The fortress Petra did not fall until the days of Nebuchadnezzar. As far as we are concerned "the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."²⁰ But it is also true for us in our time that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."²¹

This psalm demonstrates the growing of a vision: from personal safety to the victory of a whole nation. Already we find some traces of this vision the first time David spoke to King Saul before killing Goliath. He said: "Your servant has been keeping his fathers sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."²²

God's protection of the individual and of the nation as a whole did not result in inactivity. When David fled from Saul, he actively pursued a gorilla campaign against the Philistines.

²⁰ I Peter 5:8

²¹ Rom. 16:20

²² I Sam. 17:34-37

The verses 10-13 speak of a plan for the conquest of Petra. This plan demonstrates an attitude that ought to typify our position against the adversary. The New Testament encourages us to resist the roaring lion, standing firm in the faith.²³ If we concentrate merely on our own safety, our attitude will have a paralyzing effect upon the accomplishment of our task.

Finally, this psalm demonstrates that there is a connection between what God does for the individual and what He does for a whole nation. God deals with me, not merely as one individual, but as a member of the body. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as a purely personal experience. In Paul's words: "None of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone."²⁴

²³ See I Peter 5:9

²⁴ Rom. 14:7

PSALM 109

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

- 1 O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent,*
- 2 for wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues.*
- 3 With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause.*
- 4 In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer.*
- 5 They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship.*
- 6 Appoint an evil man to oppose him; let an accuser stand at his right hand.*
- 7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him.*
- 8 May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.*
- 9 May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.*
- 10 May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes.*
- 11 May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.*
- 12 May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children.*
- 13 May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation.*
- 14 May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.*
- 15 May their sins always remain before the LORD, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth.*
- 16 For he never thought of doing a kindness, but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted.*
- 17 He loved to pronounce a curse-- may it come on him; he found no pleasure in blessing-- may it be far from him.*
- 18 He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil.*
- 19 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt tied forever around him.*
- 20 May this be the LORD's payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil of me.*
- 21 But you, O Sovereign LORD, deal well with me for your name's sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.*
- 22 For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me.*
- 23 I fade away like an evening shadow; I am shaken off like a locust.*
- 24 My knees give way from fasting; my body is thin and gaunt.*
- 25 I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads.*
- 26 Help me, O LORD my God; save me in accordance with your love.*
- 27 Let them know that it is your hand, that you, O LORD, have done it.*
- 28 They may curse, but you will bless; when they attack they will be put to shame, but your servant will rejoice.*
- 29 My accusers will be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.*
- 30 With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD; in the great throng I will praise him.*
- 31 For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him.*

The Tyndale Commentary gives an excellent and very eloquent introduction to the "Psalms of Vengeance,"²⁵ from which we quote a few excerpts: "It is only fair to point out that the words wrung from these sufferers as they plead their case are a measure of the deeds which provoked them. Those deeds were not wrung from anyone: they were the brutal response to love (109:4) and to pathetic weakness (137). To say that they were inexcusable is as inadequate as it is true. It needs saying with passion. Here we should notice that invective has its own rhetoric, in which horror may be piled on horror more to express the speaker's sense of outrage than to spell out the penalties he literally intends. ... This brings us close to the heart of the matter, which is that the psalms have among other roles in Scripture one which is peculiarly their own: to touch and kindle us rather than simply to address us. The passages on which we may be tempted to sit in judgment have the shocking immediacy of a scream, to startle us into feeling something of the desperation which produced them. This is revelation in a mode more indirect but more intimate than

²⁵ Vol. I, pages 25-32

most other forms. Without it we should have less embarrassment but still less conception of the 'dark places of the earth' which are 'full of the habitations of cruelty', a cruelty which can bring faithful men to breaking-point. ... If these passages in the psalms open our eyes to the depths and just deserts of evil, and to the dangers of borrowing its weapons, they have done their work. To say that theirs is not the last word on the subject is no reproach: more work first needed to be done. That work and final word belonged to Christ, and we are its inheritors. ... The gospel, to be sure, radically redirects our concern, as we shall emphasize, but it does so partly by introducing the new situation created by the cross, and partly by clarifying what was barely visible at an earlier stage: the life to come. To get fully in tune with the psalmists on this issue we should have to suspend our consciousness of having a gospel to impart (which affects our attitude to fellow-sinners) and our assurance of a final righting of wrongs (which affects our attitude to present anomalies). Without these certainties, only a cynic could feel no impatience to see justice triumphant and evil men broken; and these authors were no cynics. It would be better, in fact, to speak of their attuning our ears to the gospel than of our adjusting to their situation, for we cannot truly hear its answers until we have felt the force of their questions."

In our understanding of this psalm much depends on our interpretation of vs. 20, "May this be the LORD's payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil of me." The Hebrew word translated with "reward" or "payment" is *pe'ullah* which literally means "work." The KJV renders it various with "labour, reward, wages, work." In II Chronicles it is once rendered with "work" in the verse: "Be ye strong therefore, and let not your hands be weak: for your work shall be rewarded."²⁶ The phrase could be translated as: "This is the work of those who hate the Lord." "My accusers" would then be Satan.

This rendering could be strengthened by dividing the psalm into two parts, one in which accusers is used in the plural (the verses 2-5) and the other which uses the singular (the verses 6-19). This would suggest that the first section represents what David says about his enemies, and the second quotes of what the enemies say about him. The curses would then come out of the mouth of the enemy; they are not David's own words. This would make the tone of the psalm more palatable to us. *The Tyndale Commentary* objects that this would make Peter's quotation of vs. 8 in Acts²⁷ one that was taken out of context. That, however, is a problem we often encounter in the New Testament.

The above-mentioned thought that puts the curse in the mouth of David's enemies is borrowed from *The Laymen's Bible Commentary*. That Commentary emphasizes that their conclusion is not based on theological but on grammatical grounds. The door of escape this would open in this psalm, however, does not eliminate the occurrence of curses in other psalms. So the problem remains.

On the other hand, the contrast between the passive, submissive tone of the verses 1-6 and 21-31 is difficult to reconcile with the drawn out imprecation of the verses 6-20, unless they came from two different mouths. We will, therefore, hold to the supposition that, in the verses 6-20, David quotes the curses with which his enemies denounced him. This makes the first stanza a commentary on the second.

The first striking feature of this psalm is the way David addresses God: "O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent." Most other translations stick closer to the Hebrew which reads: "O God of my praise; hold not thy peace." The NKJV renders it with: "Do not keep silent, O God of my praise!" Those words clearly depict the kind of relationship David daily experienced with God. They also painfully accentuate the contrasts of this psalm. David's concept of God was clear enough that he was able to praise and worship Him. This also gave him insight in what man, who is created in God's image and likeness, ought to be. Yet, this is the kind of man that turned against David and cursed him. It has been suggested that David had Shimei in mind when he wrote this psalm. Shimei cursed David as he returned to Jerusalem after his flight for Absalom.²⁸ Such a historical setting for this psalm is quite plausible but it cannot be proven.

David casts his burden upon God. "Do not remain silent" means that he leaves it to God to answer his accusers. He doesn't want to take his own defense. This attitude is right and fitting for every believer. This also makes it much less likely that the verses 6-20 would represent what David said. The person who asks God not to be silent silences himself. It reminds us of Jesus' silence before the Sanhedrin,²⁹ before Pilate,³⁰ and before King Herod.³¹

²⁶ II Chr. 15:7 (KJV)

²⁷ See Acts 1:20

²⁸ See II Sam. 16:5-9

²⁹ See Matt. 26:63; 27:12

³⁰ See Matt. 27:14

³¹ See Luke 23:9

David's prayer also implies that God had remained silent thus far. We do not read in this psalm that God answers David either. David, undoubtedly, anticipated here that God would speak to him and that this subjective experience would cause a dramatic change in his circumstances. God's Word had come to David in various ways. God had spoken to him directly in the past. He had received God's message via prophets, or by means of the Urim and the Thummim. The author of Hebrews writes: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." Modern man does not believe that God speaks any longer, or he doesn't believe in a God who can speak. Only those who have heard God speak in Jesus Christ can hear the other sounds of God's Word.

But the only words David hears in this psalm is the slander of his enemies. These enemies are called "the wicked" which is a translation of the Hebrew *rasha*, which, literally, means a bad, morally wrong, person. The KJV sometimes uses the word "ungodly" which is not the equivalent of the modern atheist. If it is true that the verses 6-20 are the words that came out of their mouths, we see that they even refer to God from time to time.³² Their godlessness is not a matter of theological convictions but of the practice of their daily lives.

The first thing we learn in this psalm is that God is the God of praise. As such we see Him in John's vision in Revelation, where John sees Him sitting on the throne of the universe and receiving day and night the praise given by the four archangels and the twenty-four elders. They worship Him constantly because of the holiness of His character and because He is the Creator of all that exists.

The second lesson we learn is that God is not silent. When Isaiah sees God, he hears His voice that had, evidently, been calling for volunteers for some time.³³ The fact that most people never hear God's voice is due to their not being tuned in. Like a radio receiver, the soul has to be on the right wavelength, and the setting often needs finer tuning to enable a person to hear the voice of the Lord clearly. There are thousands of factors that can make us lose the right frequency. For David, it was the attack on his character that made him lose the voice of God. Nothing can be as detrimental to our fellowship with God than paying attention to the criticism of our fellowmen. The criterion of our life ought to be, not what others say about us, but what God thinks of us.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."³⁴ And: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."³⁵

What David's enemies said about him was based on hatred. Truth should always be spoken in love. What David heard was the opposite of truth spoken in love. This slander was broadcasted intentionally, which means that it was inspired by the devil. Jesus calls the devil "a murderer from the beginning" and "the father of lies."³⁶ Every lie that is told with the intention to kill people originates from the devil. This does not mean, however, that men are not involved.

Hate often finds rich soil in the love of others. David confessed that he loved his enemies, but their reaction to David's acts of love was lies and hatred. The curse of the verses 6-20 could hardly have come from someone who confesses to love his enemies. If this were the case, the lie would be on David's side. David also confessed to pray for his enemies. He demonstrated to possess the spirit of the New Testament as Jesus expounds this in the Sermon on the Mount. David's attitude toward his foes had been irreproachable. The only fault we can find in David in this regard is that he expected that his attitude of love and forbearing would have an immediate result. Our love for our enemies and our intercessory prayer for them ought to be unconditional. If David had never reacted to the hatred of these men, this psalm would never have been written.

³² See *i.e.* the verses 14, 15

³³ See Isa. 6:1-8

³⁴ I Cor. 4:3-5

³⁵ Gal. 1:10

³⁶ See John 8:44

If we take the words in the verses 6-20 to be the sayings of David's enemies, there is little value in analyzing them. There are, however, two general observations we can make: The first is that vs. 8³⁷ is quoted by Peter in the Book of Acts.³⁷ The second is that the verses have a religious overtone.

The first question we should ask ourselves in connection with the passage in Acts³⁸ in which the quotation is found is whether Peter's actions were correct. Theologians have expressed doubt about the validity of the election of Matthias as a replacement for Judas. The Book of Acts seems to indicate that the Apostle Paul rather than Matthias, became the one who took Judas' place. It could be that Peter's initiative was premature. In that case, the fact that vs. 8 of this psalm was attributed by Peter to the Holy Spirit may have been a lack of spiritual discernment. After all, the incident took place before the Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost. In his book *The Acts of the Apostles*, G. Campbell Morgan suggests that Matthias' election had been a mistake.

Then there is the religious tone of the verses. The verses 6 and 7 place us in a courtroom situation in which the judge is a godless person. The unspoken thought is the acknowledgment that, if God is recognized as the Supreme Being, absolute justice is guaranteed. There is a hidden compliment in the fact that David's enemies want him to stand court before a bench of crooked judges. It means that, if honest judges with high moral standards judged David, he would be found "not guilty."

Then there is the mention of prayer. David's enemies do not want to keep him from fellowship with God, but they hope that this fellowship will be corrupted. In this, they demonstrate a measure of spiritual insight. The ones who pronounce the curse understand that prayer is a very delicate matter that can easily degenerate. They also understand that a person will be able to stand as long as his prayer life is not affected.

Vs. 14 reads: "May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out." This phrase may be the strongest evidence that David's enemies spoke these words. They refer to the first of 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."³⁹ The context of the commandment is idolatry, which is occultism. People who have studied occultism say that demons can stay in a family for generations, and that there remains a bond with previous generations unless, at conversion, a person specifically breaks the chain of demonic influence in the power of God. In wishing that David would be bothered by the demons of his ancestors, his enemies show that they have insight in the workings of the occult.

Vs. 16 contains a self-condemnation. It is understood that man ought to show love to the poor, the needy, and the brokenhearted. This kind of love is denied David. We know of no example in David's life in which he cursed his enemies. His attitude toward King Saul, for instance, is a classic illustration of repaying evil with good.

It is clear, however, that the curse that was pronounced over David affected him deeply. He confessed to being wounded in his soul and it caused him to feel physically ill. David wrestled with the problem that he knew people's opinion about him, but he wasn't sure what God thought of him. In other psalms he expressed confidence that God is a shield that protected him.⁴⁰ In this psalm, this conviction is absent. This sense of insecurity can be traced to a lack of awareness of cleansing. As New Testament Christians, we can hardly understand the difference between the cleansing of our conscience by the blood of Jesus and the covering of sin in the Old Testament by the blood of a sacrificial animal. The believing Jew was never quite able to overcome the gnawing of his conscience.

David's appeal to the Name and goodness of God is deeply moving. God's Name represents all the perfection of His eternal being. David knew who God was, but he had difficulty in seeing how God's greatness and goodness could be applied to him. The difference between what man tried to do to him and God's reality was so great that it became painful. Normally, the love of God reaches us via other human beings. It is miracles in itself that, sometimes, we can experience God's love in spite of what men do to us. It takes spiritual maturity to discern this.

In the last stanza, David prays for more than his own justification. He prays, in a sense, for the conversion of his enemies. Because, if man becomes ashamed of his conduct, it means that he has begun to measure himself with God's measurements. David does not merely ask that God rehabilitates him but that

³⁷ See Acts 1:20

³⁸ See Acts 1:15-26

³⁹ Ex. 20:5

⁴⁰ See Ps. 3:3

He does it in such a way that his enemies will understand that there has been a divine intervention in his life upon which the curse bounces off. A Christian never needs to be afraid of curses or of magic used against him.

The psalm ends on a triumphant note that still rings clearly throughout the ages. Reading vs. 31, we think of “the accuser of the brethren”⁴¹ who stands behind every curse man pronounces upon others. The prophet Zechariah saw “Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him.”⁴² No one ever put it more powerfully than the Apostle Paul did when he wrote: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns?”⁴³ David had never read Paul’s words but he understood the truth of them intuitively through the Holy Spirit.

⁴¹ See Rev. 12:10

⁴² Zech. 3:1

⁴³ Rom. 8:33,34

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TEN

Of David. A psalm.

- 1** *The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."*
- 2** *The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies.*
- 3** *Your troops will be willing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth.*
- 4** *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."*
- 5** *The Lord is at your right hand; he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.*
- 6** *He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.*
- 7** *He will drink from a brook beside the way; therefore he will lift up his head.*

This psalm is one of the cornerstones of New Testament theology. As such, it is one of the most important psalms in the book. It is the psalm that is most often quoted in the New Testament. Jesus quotes vs. 1 in Matthew's Gospel and parallel sections.⁴⁴ Peter quotes the same verse in his sermon on the day of Pentecost.⁴⁵ The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews quotes verse 1 and 4 a total of six times.⁴⁶

In the *Word Biblical Commentary*, we find a whole catalogue of interpretations of this psalm and a large variety of opinions on the background and the date. "Efforts to date it have ranged from the Davidic period right down to the Maccabean." Some commentators see the psalm as an ode written for the occasion of the ascension to the throne of David after the conquest of Jerusalem; others think it was composed for Josiah's coronation. One problem is that the psalm gives us no direct clue that enables us to link it to any particular historic event. It seems that the commentators could have saved themselves a lot of ink.

We do injustice to the interpretation of the psalm if we take it out of its Biblical context. The New Testament interpretation of its prophecy should not be seen as an afterthought. It is a vital part of the message of the Bible as a whole. We cannot isolate this psalm without violating the inspiration of the Scriptures.

The Tyndale Commentary correctly points out that Jesus' quotation of this psalm is a clear confirmation of David's authorship. Jesus introduced His quote by saying: "David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared..."⁴⁷ Jesus' argument with the Scribes and Pharisees stands and falls with a literal interpretation of these words. It also is not possible to put the words of this psalm in the mouth of a court-prophet, as some commentators want to do.

A literal rendering of "The LORD says to my Lord" is "An oracle to my Lord." The Interlinear Hebrew/English Bible reads: "A statement of Jehovah." Some translations use the word "oracle." The verse speaks about the Word of YHWH to the Messiah. Much more is at stake than the celebration of the coronation of a human king to the throne of Israel. The words are almost a parody on the opening words of Psalm 36:1, "An oracle is within my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked." The Hebrew uses the same word *ne'um* "an oracle" in that verse. The Hebrew reads: "A statement of Jehovah to my Adonay." The word *Adonay* is usually used only for God alone, according to *Strong's Concordance*. This makes the application of this verse to the Messiah conclusive. The conclusion is inescapable in Jesus' argument with the Jews in Mark's Gospel. We read: "While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, 'How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: 'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' ' David himself calls him 'Lord.' ' How then can he be his son?' "⁴⁸ None of the Scribes tried to refute Jesus on the point that the psalm applied to the Messiah.

In this psalm, the Christ is presented as both King and Priest, a combination of offices which was impossible in the Old Testament. The Old Testament pattern was that the tribe of Levi provided the priests and the kings were from the tribe of Judah. God had said to Moses: "Have Aaron your brother brought to

⁴⁴ Matt. 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42,43

⁴⁵ Acts 2:34,35

⁴⁶ See Heb. 1:13; 5:6,10;6:20;7:17,21

⁴⁷ Mark 12:36

⁴⁸ Mark 12:35-37

you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests.”⁴⁹ And Jacob had prophesied: “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.”⁵⁰

A strange feature in the opening theme of this psalm is that the roles are reversed. The reason for the coming of the Messiah is the subjection of God’s enemies to His authority. The Apostle Paul speaks about this saying: “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he ‘has put everything under his feet.’ Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 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.”⁵¹ In this psalm, it is God, the Father, who makes the enemies the footstool of the Son. We also should not forget that the scene that is depicted for us in this psalm is actually one that occurred after the crucifixion and the resurrection. In this psalm, the key is already in Jesus’ hands. The actual victory had already been won.

No other psalm so clearly illustrates the principle of the unity of interpretation of the Scriptures as this psalm. If we leave the Incarnation out of the picture there is nothing left of this psalm. The whole depth of it disappears if we see in it nothing more than the words of a court-prophet at the occasion of the ascension to the throne by one of David’s descendants.

The psalm allows us a glance in the heavenly glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is seated with the Father on the throne of the universe. Every earthly ascension to the throne and all human authority are a vague replica (in most cases a corrupted one) of this heavenly reality. This is the only true and real authority that exists. Stephen was given a glimpse of this at the moment of his death. We read in Acts: “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.”⁵² The Lord also opened this perspective to us when He said to the church in Laodicea: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”⁵³ The above quotations demonstrate how closely we are involved in this psalm.

This psalm is, in the first place, an invitation to occupy the place that God has prepared for man. The term *Adonay* is reserved mainly for God, but it is also used for man; and in this case it is applied to the man Jesus Christ. He occupies this place as representative of the whole human race. God is prepared to share His glory with us all. That is the intent implied in Jesus’ address to the church of Laodicea. We are *Destined for the Throne*.

The reversal of the roles, which we mentioned earlier, implies that the victory over the enemy is the result, not of our own efforts, but of the power of God. Man is the instrument used by God’s hand. The Apostle Paul declares this very precisely in his Epistle to the Romans: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”⁵⁴ “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”⁵⁵ Those are also Paul’s words.

The oldest prophecy in the Bible foretells that a descendant of Eve would crush Satan’s head.⁵⁶ In this psalm we see the enemy made a footstool for His feet. This is the victory of light over darkness.

We should always bear in mind, when reading this psalm, that, although the images are borrowed from human warfare in which men are slaughtered and cruelty is rampant, the subject is a spiritual struggle. John paints a similar picture in Revelation where we read: “And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, ‘Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.’ Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and

⁴⁹ Ex. 28:1

⁵⁰ Gen. 49:10

⁵¹ I Cor. 15:24-28

⁵² Acts 7:55

⁵³ Rev. 3:21

⁵⁴ Rom. 16:20

⁵⁵ Eph. 6:12

⁵⁶ Gen. 3:15

with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.”⁵⁷ This image is borrowed from a battlefield on earth. It is a gruesome scene with rotting corpses that are being eaten by vultures. But those who are killed are victims of the Word of God, of the sword that comes from the mouth of Jesus Christ. Those are not physical dead bodies but spiritual cadavers.

Zion is the place of God’s revelation of Himself on earth. It is the place where the ark stood with the cover on which atonement was made. It was the place of which God had said to Moses: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”⁵⁸ It is the place from which the Lord will extend his mighty scepter and from which he will rule in the midst of his enemies. The victory is the triumph of God’s revelation over His enemies through people He has called and chosen and empowered with His Spirit.

Vs. 3 is one of the problem verses in the Bible as far as translation is concerned. *The Tyndale Commentary* writes the following about it: “Almost every word of this verse is rendered differently in different translations, but the general picture emerges (except when the text is amended) of a host of volunteers rallying to their leader in a holy war. In the first line there is a touch of the Song of Deborah, when ‘the people offered themselves willingly’ (Jdg. 5:2); but the expression is even bolder here: lit. your people (will be) freewill offerings,’ a way of speaking which anticipates the Pauline picture of ‘a living sacrifice’ or of a life poured out ‘as a libation’ (Rom. 12:1; Phil. 2:17; cf. 2 Cor 8:3,5).

On the day you lead your host could also mean ‘on the day of your power’; it is the word used for ‘might’ or ‘force of arm’ in Zech. 4:6, and it corresponds well to ‘the day of his wrath’ in vs. 5.

Upon the holy mountains is the reading of several MMS and of Symmachus and Jerome, but the standard Hebrew text has ‘in the beauties (or, splendors) of holiness’, supported by LXX, Vulgate....

Like dew your youth will come to you interprets *youth* collectively (cf. TEV), and assumes that the letter *k* (=‘like’) has been omitted after a word which ends in *k* (‘to you’), which is a common copying error. This gives the picture of a splendid army suddenly and silently mobilized. But the Hebrew makes sense as it stands, *i.e.* ‘You have the dew of your youth’ (cf. AV, RV). *I.e.*, this king ever keeps the first freshness of the dawn of life, unlike those whose love is ‘like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away’ (Ho. 6:4).

To sum up: this verse (as I see it) pictures the Messiah going forth in primal vigor, holiness and glory, at the head of a host which is as dedicated as those early Israelites who ‘jeopardized their lives to the death.’ (Jdg. 5:18). The Christian can identify such an army with the overcomers portrayed in Revelation 12:11, little as he may recognize himself and his fellow in either picture.” Thus far I have quoted Derek Kidner in *The Tyndale Commentary*.

According to the Hebrew Interlinear Bible the text says literally: “your people (shall be) willing in the day of your might, in the majesty of holiness from the womb of the dawn to you the dew of your youth.”

The **KJV** translates the verse with: “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of youth.”

The Berkeley Version: “Thy people will offer themselves freely in the day of Thy power. In consecrated array at early dawn, Thine is the flower of Thy young men.”

TLB: “In that day of your power your people shall come to you willingly, dressed in holy altar robes. And your strength shall be renewed day by day like morning dew.”

RSV: “Your people will offer themselves freely on the day you lead your host upon the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning like dew your youth will come to you.”

NEB: “At birth you were endowed with the princely gifts and resplendent in holiness. You have shone with the dew of youth since your mother bore you.”

The Jerusalem Bible: “Royal dignity was yours from the day you were born, on the holy mountains, royal from the womb, from the dawn of your early days.”

The above confusion indicates that one cannot say with certainty whether there is an army of volunteers or that the verse speaks exclusively about the Messiah and His holiness. It seems more logical to suppose that all the sublime qualities mentioned here pertain to the one person who is the subject of the

⁵⁷ Rev. 19:17-21

⁵⁸ Ex. 25:22

psalm. On earth, He was the living, holy, sacrifice pleasing to God par excellence. All human surrender is based upon and modeled after His obedience and surrender. His holiness is the white robe with which everyone who acknowledges His atoning death is clothed. He “has become for us wisdom from God-- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”⁵⁹

It is in answer to this surrender that God replies with the oracle: “Sit at my right hand...”

The second stanza, the verses 4-7, deals with the priesthood of the Messiah. Both the kingship and the priesthood were given to Jesus Christ at His resurrection. They are functions He exercises in the present dispensation in which we live. The writer to the Hebrews makes this clear in the sequence of the two quotations from Psalm Two and Psalm One Hundred Ten. We read: “So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’”⁶⁰ And he says in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”⁶¹ Paul’s use of Psalm Two proves that the quotation pertains to Christ’s resurrection. In his sermon in the Asian city of Antioch, he said: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’”⁶² The KJV makes the interpretation of the Apostle and the author of the Hebrew Epistle clearer to understand with: “Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.” In a sense the KJV was good enough for the Apostle Paul!

This priesthood and Jesus’ present intercession for us in heaven is another facet of the victory of which this psalm speaks. Without Jesus’ constant intercession, our sanctification, which is the prerequisite for seeing God, would be an unreachable goal. We find nowhere in the New Testament a clearer analysis of the psalm than in the Epistle to the Hebrews. We would do this psalm an injustice if we left the lessons of Hebrews out of our study of this psalm. The kingship of the Messiah brings about the victory over the enemies that surround us; the priesthood brings about the victory over the enemy within us. The two are inseparably united.

The combination of the two offices also gives us a deeper insight in the character of the enemy and of the victory. The character of the enemy is revolt against God and self-preservation. The victory is won through obedience and self-denial. Those latter characteristics are, first of all, found in Jesus Christ, “the author of [our] salvation,” and, subsequently, in the “many sons [He brings] to glory.”⁶³ Through the obedience and self-surrender of our Lord Jesus Christ, the devil was given the decisive blow. Satan is powerless in the face of self-surrender. The evil power of Haman was broken when Queen Esther came to the point where she said: “If I perish, I perish.”⁶⁴ And in Revelation, we read that Satan is vanquished by those who do “not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”⁶⁵ This disposition in God’s children is only possible through the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without His intercession for us, on the basis of the atonement, we would all sink into the bogs of egoism and rebellion. Through Jesus’ death on the cross we have received pardon for our sins; through His resurrection we have received new life; and through His intercession we are being sanctified.

The oath that precedes the inauguration to the priesthood proves how solid this foundation is. God swore an oath that He would exalt above all else His Son who had lowered Himself to the deepest depth. Paul writes to the Philippians: “[Jesus] Who, 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! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”⁶⁶ “The name that is above every name” comprises His priesthood. Even in this, particularly in this, the Lord has us on His mind. Without self-denial there would be no glory. Self-denial is the pivot of glory. We read in Revelation:

⁵⁹ I Cor. 1:30

⁶⁰ Ps. 2:7

⁶¹ Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5:5,6

⁶² Acts 13:32, 33

⁶³ See Heb. 2:10

⁶⁴ Esther 4:16

⁶⁵ Rev. 12:11

⁶⁶ Phil. 2:6-11

“The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne....”⁶⁷

The mention of the oath is one of the marvelous examples of prophetic utterances. The Bible does not record this oath for us. The oath must be related to “the eternal covenant” mentioned in Hebrews. We read there: “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....”⁶⁸ There was, obviously, a covenant between the Father and the Son made before the creation of time in which the Son, not only promised the Father obedience unto death and the Father pledged His resurrection, but in which also the eternal priesthood was established. This makes prayer and intercession and victory over self-preservation through self-denial, eternal principles. The oath God swore by Himself, according to the author of the Hebrew Epistle, proves that those principles are part of God’s holy being.⁶⁹ The priesthood, which is of such vital importance for our life on earth, is also an expression of God’s character. The fact that it is eternal is an indication that it will be just as important to us in heaven as it is on earth. Obviously, our heavenly glory is also conditional upon Jesus’ priesthood.

Then there is the mysterious figure of Melchizedek of whom we know nothing except for what is said about him in the Genesis record, where we read: “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.’”⁷⁰ Nothing more can be said about him than what we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews.⁷¹

The fact that the Bible presents Abraham and the people of Israel as the ones elected by God to proclaim His revelation in the world may tend to make us believe that Israel and God’s revelation are identical, as if there were never any revelation to others. Yet Abraham was not the only believer in God when he arrived in Canaan. Lot’s faith in God did not amount to much and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were certainly no examples of faith, but the fact that the king of Salem was a “priest of God Most High” makes us understand that there must have been other true believers at that time. This misunderstanding becomes stronger when the Ark of the Covenant was made, the tabernacle was erected, and the Levitical priesthood was inaugurated. We tend to think that Aaron could have said: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”⁷² The prophecy in this psalm breaks through this kind of misapprehension. We hear from no one less than King David himself that the real priesthood belonged to Melchizedek. This is proof that God loves the world and all its inhabitants.

The verses 5 and 6 belong to those parts of Scripture against which modern theologians register serious objections. The vivid description of a battlefield on which dead bodies are piled up and skulls of men are crushed is not appealing. There is, indeed, nothing romantic in the picture. In an earlier reference to a similar description in Revelation, we remarked that the language is metaphoric. The image may not be inviting but that does not change the spiritual reality that is depicted. The point is victory through the priesthood; it is about moral judgments and about atonement. Triumph of light over darkness is portrayed in images that are borrowed from the darkness. The remarkable fact is that often those people who reject the light protest the loudest against these verses!

Vs. 7 is probably the most amazing verse in this psalm. It is the very earthbound picture of an army general who pushes his troops to the limit of their endurance and who becomes himself exhausted by thirst. Does David suggest here that the intercessory prayer of our heavenly high priest is exhausting and that it demands an ultimate effort? The answer is probably “yes” and “no.” There is, most likely, never any exhaustion in heaven as we know it on earth. But there is, undoubtedly, an ultimate effort and total involvement. Without drinking from the brook, that is without the fullness of the Holy Spirit, such an endeavor would be impossible.

This psalm is unique in the whole Book of Psalms because of its peculiar character. It may be that an ascension to the throne of an earthly king prompted the writing but the poem has become a shadow of a heavenly reality. The real scene plays in heaven. The fact that we mortals are allowed a glance into such a reality ought to leave us speechless.

⁶⁷ Rev. 4:10

⁶⁸ Heb. 13:20

⁶⁹ See Heb. 6:13

⁷⁰ Gen. 14:18-20

⁷¹ See Heb. 7:1-10

⁷² See John 14:6^b

PSALM ONE HUNDRED ELEVEN

1 Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

2 Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them.

3 Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever.

4 He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate.

5 He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever.

6 He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations.

7 The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

8 They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness.

9 He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever--holy and awesome is his name.

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

Unfortunately, with the exception of TLB, all English versions translate *Hallelujah* with "Praise the LORD." The word is well known enough to be left untranslated. This psalm is the first in a series of three "Hallelujah Psalms." All three have, not only the opening word in common but also, in general terms, the theme. The three psalms place different accents on the acts of God, but the main theme in all three is the same. In the first psalm God's greatness is demonstrated in the fact that He gave Israel the Promised Land to live in and that He gave "them the lands of other nations."⁷³ Or, as the KJV renders it: "that he may give them the heritage of the heathen." In the following psalm, the subject is the moral character of the people who inhabit the Promised Land. And in the last of the series God shows His greatness in restoring fallen man.

We could say that, chronologically, the psalms are in a reversed order. In Ps. 111, God has, in principle, reached His goal with man whom He created and who had fallen away from Him. The psalm opens with the loudest of the three Hallelujahs. The psalmist has come to the deepest acknowledgment of God's greatness. He also realizes that this is the beginning of wisdom for him as is stated in vs. 10.

The tone of the psalm is meditative. Only one concrete example of God's great acts is mentioned: Israel's entry into Canaan. This does not suggest that it is the only illustration available but, rather, that there is such an abundance of proofs that further mention is not necessary. It is left up to the hearer to search further. Unprejudiced investigation will lead to insight into the greatness of God's character, and that is the beginning of all human wisdom. We may draw the lesson that scientific research, whatever its field may be, can never be done apart from the person of God.

The psalmist explains that there is no true knowledge without glory, justice, grace, compassion, truth, sincerity, and holiness. One cannot study geology, astrology, or anthropology without giving credit to theology. The fact that, in our time, theology has become the most corrupt of all fields of knowledge, accounts for the phenomenon that other sciences have deviated from their purely scientific bases. The psalmist wants to avoid adverse result by going to "the council of the upright." It is not true that those who believe in God commit intellectual suicide. The unbelievers are the ones who kill themselves. Intellectual suicide is a contradiction in terms because in order to commit it one has to possess intellect.

According to Dr. Kidner, in *The Tyndale Commentary*, the words "The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein"⁷⁴ are "well chosen to grace the entrance of the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, the scene of some fundamental physical discoveries." Those who possess the intellect and brain-power to do scientific research ought to praise God more than anyone else. It is true, however, that the church of Jesus Christ consists mainly of "not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth,"⁷⁵ but that doesn't mean that such was God's original intent. The royal wedding banquet in Jesus' parable was originally not intended for those who loitered at the street corners either.⁷⁶ In the same vein, the *Hallelujah* in this psalm belongs primarily to the intelligentsia.

⁷³ Vs. 6

⁷⁴ KJV

⁷⁵ See I Cor. 1:26

⁷⁶ See Matt. 22:1-14

The fact that the *Hallelujah* of this psalm is spoken “in the council of the upright and in the assembly” does not mean that there is no place for praise in our personal lives. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: “Company is that intimate word *sôd*, which has the connotation of a circle of friends or advisers.... But the wider word, congregation, precludes any idea of a narrow clique; the two terms together describe the people of God in their breadth... and in their close ties of fellowship.” Praise requires interaction. On the one hand, love and unity is a prerequisite for praise, on the other hand, praise draws people to one another. The true church of Jesus Christ which builds itself up and strengthens itself practices praise. *Hallelujah* is the keyword to the functioning of the body of Christ.

It is self-evident that praise is an emotional experience. “With all my heart” pertains, primarily, to the emotions. But pondering the works of the Lord involves the head. Even the will is involved, as is evident from the fact that man delights in God’s works. Clearly, the whole person is involved in this *Hallelujah*. True praise always appeals to our emotions, our intellect, and our will.

In the verses 3-9 the psalmist enters into an analysis of the works of the Lord without going into detail. He draws the image of God’s deeds with broad strokes, more in colors than in lines. The acts of God are, first of all, an expression of His glory. In Isaiah’s vision of God, the seraphs mention glory as a parallel to holiness. We read there: “And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’”⁷⁷ Everything that is said in this psalm about God’s deeds also expresses His holiness. This realization ought to determine our attitude because we understand who the One is who stands behind these deeds.

Glory is also inseparably connected to God’s righteousness which is the eternal measure of all God’s deeds. His righteousness is the objective norm that governs the universe; it is the essence of God’s character. For man, all expressions of personality are subjective; God is never subjective; He is the source of all objectivity. The Apostle Paul says that “in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.”⁷⁸ We tend to associate righteousness with sin; punishment of sin is the result of God’s righteousness. Righteousness is a judicial term. If God’s righteousness is revealed in the Gospel, it means that our sins were punished in Jesus Christ. This righteousness is an eternal righteousness; it endures forever.

The Psalmist says: “He has caused his wonders to be remembered.” God erected a monument of grace and compassion in this world. This speaks not, primarily, of the creation of the universe, as does vs. 2, but of the demonstration of God’s grace and compassion toward fallen man. As we said earlier, this monument is not drawn for us in clear and heavy lines. There is, what amounts to, a rough sketch of the conquest of Canaan but this only gives a vague impression of what is meant. The phrase: “He provides food for those who fear him” can pertain to the wilderness journey. The exodus from Egypt and the occupation of Canaan are the greatest fact of salvation that are documented in the Old Testament. It gives us the clearest Old Testament picture of man’s salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament gives us only illustrations of grace and compassion. The real grace came through Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John states: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”⁷⁹ Christ is the reality of which the Old Testament monument is the shadow.

The importance of vs. 5 is that it connects God’s eternal covenant with provisions for temporal needs. As we suggested above, “He provides food...” probably refers to the manna that God provided in the desert. The Interlinear Hebrew Bible puts the phrase in the past tense: “He hath given...” God does not always provide for all our needs; sometimes He makes us fast. Moses said, therefore: “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.”⁸⁰ So, this verse speaks about a certain incident in which God provided and He did this on the basis of a judicially binding relationship in which He entered with man, that is the covenant He remembers forever. God is like a husband who gives his wife money to buy certain things, because he is her husband. The encouragement of this verse is that God is not too great for our incidental needs.

In vs. 6 the order is reversed. Vs. 5 first mentioned the fact and then the principle behind it. Here the principle comes first: the power of His works of which the conquest of Canaan is an illustration. The occupation of Canaan was accompanied by the greatest miracle recorded in the Old Testament, the standing still of the sun. The Book of Joshua records this for us: “On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to

⁷⁷ Isa. 6:3

⁷⁸ Rom. 1:17

⁷⁹ John 1:17

⁸⁰ Deut. 8:3

Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: 'O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.' So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!"⁸¹ This miracle has only been surpassed by the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead. It is beyond doubt that the conquest of Canaan was an act of God's judgment upon the nations who had filled the measure of their sins to the brim. The supernatural phenomena that accompanied Israel's military campaign prove that theirs was not an act of human imperialism. Israel was God's instrument of judgment.

The following verses, 7 and 8, confirm this. The psalmist justifies God's mandate to Israel as an expression of faithfulness, justice, trustworthiness, and uprightness. We are not told whether or how God had warned the Canaanites, but this, undoubtedly, must have been done.

The psalm repeatedly states that there exist absolute standards of justice and truth. Those are not norms that change from age to age. We were saved on the basis of those norms and we are being led to conformity to those norms. The beginning and end of our salvation is the knowledge of God. Jesus said: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."⁸² This psalm presents various proofs that God's Name is holy and awesome.

This brings us to the last verse. This was the point the psalmist wanted to lead us to all along. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." The same words can be found in the Book of Job and in Proverbs.⁸³ When man ate the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, he separated true knowledge from fellowship with God. Man is the only "animal" that possesses knowledge and is able to work with it. This ability is connected to our gift of speech. Animals possess knowledge but they are unable to put it to work and to express it. God has created man and endowed him with the gift of knowledge, thought, expression, and application. One of the most fatal facets of the fall is that knowledge became independent from God and began to live a life of its own. It became a form of cancer for man. My brother-in-law told me once that he didn't believe in God because he was an intellectual.

It is obvious that the word "fear," in the context of this psalm, is not related to "being afraid." The Hebrew word *yir'ah* can mean both "fear" as well as "reverence." "The reverence of the LORD..." would have been a clearer translation. Sin has made man lose his sense of reality. When a person reverences God, he returns to reality. Fear is the attitude of a bad conscience. Reverence is the reaction of a heart that is cleansed from sin. The step that follows reverence is fellowship. The Apostle John says in his epistle: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."⁸⁴ Perfect love is God's love. God's love takes away the element of angst from the word *yir'ah* which makes the reverence stronger. Without love, our intellect does not function well. Wisdom and insight are fruits that grow in fellowship with God.

The psalmist says: "All who follow his precepts have good understanding." This requires exercise. Wisdom is never delivered in a package. Man has to apply himself to fellowship with God in order to become wise. The real exercise of knowledge consists of "[Loving] the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."⁸⁵

The psalm opened with *Hallelujah* and ends with "To him belongs eternal praise" or "His praise endures forever."⁸⁶ In between lies man's spiritual and mental exploration. God's praise endures forever, not only on the basis of His own glory but also because of what He does in and through man.

This psalm is an acrostic psalm that follows the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

⁸¹ Josh. 10:12-14

⁸² John 17:3

⁸³ See Job 28:28 and Prov. 1:7

⁸⁴ I John 4:18

⁸⁵ Mark 12:30

⁸⁶ NKJV

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWELVE

- 1 Praise the LORD. Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands.**
- 2 His children will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.**
- 3 Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever.**
- 4 Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man.**
- 5 Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely, who conducts his affairs with justice.**
- 6 Surely he will never be shaken; a righteous man will be remembered forever.**
- 7 He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD.**
- 8 His heart is secure, he will have no fear; in the end he will look in triumph on his foes.**
- 9 He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor, his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be lifted high in honor.**
- 10 The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.**

There is no doubt that but this psalm and the preceding one belong together. They both follow the Hebrew alphabet and this psalm begins where the previous one left off. The fear of the Lord forms the bridge. As we mentioned in connection with Psalm 111, the emphasis in this psalm is upon the moral character of the person who lives in fellowship with God.

George Knight, who, in my opinion, misses the point in his commentary on this psalm, remarks, correctly, that the parallel in vs. 1 throws a clear light on the meaning of the word “fear.” It means an intensive, passionate respect which gives man the desire to obey with all his heart. There is a clear parallel between this psalm and Psalm One. There the righteous is contrasted with the wicked and the comparison is developed consistently. In this psalm, the wicked is barely mentioned.

The Hebrew word for “blessed,” *'esher* is the equivalent of the Greek *makarios*. It is a word with a loaded meaning, an ejaculation: “how happy!”

The fear of YHWH cannot be separated from obedience. It is not a forced obedience as of a person who faces an overwhelming force before which he has to bow the head but it is obedience out of love, which begins in the heart. It is the obedience of which Jesus says: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.”⁸⁷ And the Apostle John writes: “This is love for God: to obey his commands.”⁸⁸ This natural, spontaneous, and wholehearted obedience is only possible if the Holy Spirit fills our lives.

The first place where a man’s influence is felt is in his family. Our children are exposed to all kinds of influences. Parents cannot always be blamed when children take the wrong road. And we cannot take any credit either when our children follow the right path. There is a sense in which the conduct of our children is beyond our control. We do have influence upon the lives of others but there is a limit to that influence. If we try to influence too much, the effect is usually the opposite of what we want to achieve. In the opening verses, the Lord promises that, if we obey Him wholeheartedly, He will take care that our children experience the wholesome consequences. This promise releases the tension for us and gives us a solid basis for our intercessory prayers.

God’s promise here emphasizes the importance of the family. God considers the family as a unity, not merely as a group of people who are related to each other and who each can go their own way. The authority of the head of the family is a decisive factor in the conduct of its members. The importance of the family is obvious from God’s soliloquy: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”⁸⁹

In the Old Testament, blessings are usually expressed in terms of material prosperity. We know that material affluence is not the essence of blessing, although it may be part of it. The core of all blessing is righteousness. The phrase “His righteousness endures forever” is found twice in this psalm. In vs. 3, righteousness is mentioned in the context of the blessing God gives to man; in vs. 9 it is in connection with the blessing a person is to his fellowmen. The premise of the New Testament is that there is no righteousness outside God. Man cannot produce righteousness by himself; God imputes it to him. The New

⁸⁷ John 14:23

⁸⁸ I John 5:3

⁸⁹ Gen. 18:17-19

Testament theology of righteousness is based on the Old Testament verse: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”⁹⁰ This righteousness of God will clothe us as a white garment if we “fear the LORD, [and] find great delight in his commands.”

The Hebrew word for “righteousness” is *tsedakah*. The Arab word “sedekah” which means “alms” is, obviously, derived from this. “Sedekah” is one of the important parts of the duty of a Muslim. Speaking about “alms,” Jesus also uses the Greek word *dikaïosune* which means “righteousness.” We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”⁹¹ The Bible doesn’t know any form of righteousness that cannot be expressed in terms of generosity.

When we say that the Old Testament expresses blessing in terms of material abundance, we presuppose that affluence and riches are purely material matters. We call a person rich when he possesses money, more money than he actually needs. Yet, some millionaires are, obviously, the people who are to be pitied most. Nobody is as rich as the person who is content, who loves, and is loved. George Mueller was one of the richest people in the world. At his death, he left behind a few pennies and a monument of faith in God.

The riches of the man who loves God is described in the verses 4-9. It consists of light in the darkness, which demonstrates God’s grace, compassion, and righteousness. A man who lives in darkness is poor. “A righteous man will be remembered forever.” Those words far transcend what we know to be true on earth. It draws our gaze inevitably to the only perfect man who ever lived, our Lord Jesus Christ. The word “forever” points to something that remains also in heaven, because the earth itself is not everlasting. When a person fears God and obeys Him out of love, God raises up a monument for him. Jesus said: “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.”⁹² We will never get used to this.

Verses 7 and 8 place the whole of the above in the realistic context of a hostile world. The “bad news” is the propaganda of the devil with which he tries to intimidate man in order to obscure his relationship with God through fear and worry. Jesus never understood this reaction to “bad news” which we call “human.” He reproached the disciples in the boat for their lack of faith.⁹³ And to Peter who tried to walk on the water but began to drown when he became scared of the waves, he said: “You of little faith why did you doubt?”⁹⁴ Jesus’ lack of understanding on this point proves that our doubt is less “human” than we would like to think. Vs. 8 defines in a better way what our reaction ought to be. The revenge that is described in this verse is, not necessarily, one of repaying evil with evil. That matter is left open. The tone of the psalm as a whole rather suggests that the man who fears God heaps coals of fire upon the head of his enemies by repaying evil with good. The Apostle Paul quotes vs. 9 in his epistle to the Corinthians in connection with the collection taken up for the believers in Jerusalem.⁹⁵ The repetition of the word *tsedakah* gives a double meaning to it. We may see in this a parallel between this repetition and the use of the words faith and works by Paul and James. The difference is that, in this psalm, it is the same author who uses the same word twice in different settings. In connection with vs. 3, we mentioned that God imputes to man the righteousness of Jesus Christ. In vs. 9 this same righteousness becomes a testimony of the person to whom righteousness had been imputed. Others recognize this righteousness as the fruit that grows in the life of the believer. The person who receives honor from God, sometimes (but not always) is honored by his fellowmen also. The vexation of the wicked, which the psalmist describes in the last verse not without a trace of humor, is in itself also a tribute to the righteous. We should not try to irritate people but if some people become irritated because of the fact that God’s blessing rests upon our life, we may accept that with gratitude. It is our duty to make people jealous. What they do with that jealousy is their business.

⁹⁰ Gen. 15:6

⁹¹ Matt. 6:1

⁹² John 12:26

⁹³ Mark 4:40

⁹⁴ Matt. 14:31

⁹⁵ See II Cor. 9:9

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTEEN

- 1 Praise the LORD. Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD.**
- 2 Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore.**
- 3 From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised.**
- 4 The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.**
- 5 Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high,**
- 6 who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?**
- 7 He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap;**
- 8 he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people.**
- 9 He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children. Praise the LORD.**

As we mentioned before, the emphasis in this third *Hallelujah* Psalm is on the fact that God raises up fallen man. This psalm is the first in the order of our experience. The editor of The Book of Psalms has reversed the order, beginning with the victory and returning to the basis of God's grace. That is a healthy principle which we ought to apply often in our spiritual life.

This psalm is also the first in a series which is called "The Egyptian Hallel," which consists of Psalms 113-118. Jesus sang these psalms with His disciples the night before He went to the cross. Mark tells us: "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."⁹⁶ In the Jewish Paschal liturgy, this psalm is connected to the preceding and the following ones.

Most commentaries mention the fact that there is a great resemblance between this psalm and Hannah's hymn which, in turn, finds its culmination in Mary's Magnificat.⁹⁷ The main theme of the Hallel is the exodus and connected with that Israel's rehabilitation as a nation. Both Hannah's and Mary's hymns express deeply personal experiences. The birth of Samuel was a turning point in Israel's history; the birth of Jesus was a turning point for the whole world. But the individual, who becomes a part of this plan of redemption, as were Hannah and Mary, experiences this as a profound and intimate personal experience. At the same time, the horizon of God's universal acts is never lost sight of in either of those hymns. Seen in this light, the *Hallelujah* of the servants of the Lord is, at the same time, intimate and universal.

The "servants of the Lord" are the people who obey Him because they love Him. The "Name of the Lord" is the eternal, perfect character of God. The psalm indicates that it is God's lifting up the poor from the dust that places man in the position where he becomes a servant and where his praise begins. If God's redemption of us had not had this effect upon our lives, we would be saved in vain. Genuine salvation and rehabilitation always goes together with obedience and praise. This is what gives man the nobility that allows him to sit with princes. It is in the way of obedience and praise that our barrenness is healed. The words "He settles the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children" do not pertain to women and mothers only.

The psalm places praise in the context of "time and space": "both now and forevermore." There is a beginning but there is no end. There is a place (From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets). This encompasses our whole planet. No human being is excluded.

The description of God's greatness and glory is magnificent. The image the psalmist paints of God is so lofty that God has to stoop to look at the heavens. The Hebrew Interlinear Bible reads: "Who (is) like Jehovah our God, who sits on high to dwell; who humbles himself to see in the heavens." We learn in the New Testament how deeply God stooped. In the incomparable words of the Apostle Paul: "Christ Jesus: Who, 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!"⁹⁸ God went beyond the extreme to "raise the poor from the dust and [to] lift the needy from the ash heap." Even Mary, when she sang the Magnificat, did not know how deeply God would humble Himself in Jesus Christ.

There are two things this psalm does not say: It doesn't say that the poor will become rich and it doesn't say that a barren woman will bear children. Blessings do not always come in the form in which we

⁹⁶ Mark 14:26

⁹⁷ See I Sam. 2:10; Luke 1:46-55

⁹⁸ Phil. 2:5^b-8

usually conceive of them. But the contents of the blessing is there in its fullness. The poor is elevated to the rank of nobility and the barren woman experiences the happiness of real motherhood. We can only respond to this by saying "*Hallelujah!*"

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN

- 1 When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,*
- 2 Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion.*
- 3 The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back;*
- 4 the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.*
- 5 Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back,*
- 6 you mountains, that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs?*
- 7 Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob,*
- 8 who turned the rock into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water.*

This psalm depicts both the humorous and the supernatural elements of the exodus, the birth of Israel as a nation. Both of these aspects are constantly present in the history of revelation. They also are characteristic for the normal Christian life.

The first two verses sketch with a few lines the whole essence of God's revelation. The period that began with Israel's exodus from Egypt till Judah's becoming God's sanctuary covers more than 500 years. Only when David had the ark brought over to Jerusalem, we can say that Judah became a sanctuary. This psalm was probably composed about this time. The psalm is not necessarily a prophecy that was uttered prior to this moment. The psalmist draws the conclusion that God's intention in the exodus was to reveal Himself in Jerusalem. Israel's redemption from slavery was never the sole, nor even the most important, part of God's actions.

Israel's passage through the Red Sea opened the way into the desert and the crossing of the Jordan River closed it. The skipping of the mountains and the hills is, undoubtedly, a reference to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai.

Verses 5 and 6 are among the most humorous in the Bible. Laughter is often a byproduct of God's miracles. Sarah first laughed in unbelief at the announcement of Isaac's birth but afterwards she admitted that God had made her laugh. We read in the Genesis account: "Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?' Then the LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' 'Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.' Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, 'I did not laugh.' But he said, 'Yes, you did laugh.'"⁹⁹ And after Isaac was born: "Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.'"¹⁰⁰ The meaning of the name Isaac is "He laughs" or "One laughs."

The way in which the exodus from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan are depicted is rather amusing. The sea, the hills, and the Jordan River are personified as beings that panic at God's acts. It is as if God stands by and asks them mockingly: "Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back, you mountains, that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs?" At the moment it happened, Israel did not laugh. We read: "They were terrified and cried out to the LORD."¹⁰¹ God's supernatural intervention does not always seem humorous to us, and we rarely share God's sense of humor. It is much easier to detect the fun five or six centuries later, as the psalmist does, than when you are in the midst of it when it happens. We don't always see God wink at us. Or, maybe, we are so preoccupied that we don't pay attention.

After the mocking tone of the verses 5 and 6, the psalmist becomes very serious in the last two verses. A time will come when the whole earth will tremble at the presence of the Lord. The prophet Haggai predicted: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty."¹⁰² The writer of Hebrews quotes this prophecy in order to remind us that we are heirs of a kingdom that cannot be shaken: "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."¹⁰³ And John sees at the end of world history "A great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for

⁹⁹ Gen. 8:12-15

¹⁰⁰ Gen. 21:6

¹⁰¹ Ex. 14:10^b

¹⁰² Hag. 2:6,7

¹⁰³ Heb. 12:26

them.” If we find ourselves unable to laugh at God’s intervention, we will certainly not laugh when this world comes to its end.

There is a challenge in the words: “Tremble, O earth....” Israel was in the desert, in the place Moses called “that vast and dreadful desert.” Israel should have perished of hunger and thirst. They should have trembled, and that they did from time to time. But this psalm tells us what really happened. The victors have a right to say: “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob” because God brought forth water from the most unlikely places. According to George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, the verb “turned” should be in the present tense.

Paul’s commentary, “[They] drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ,”¹⁰⁴ throws a new light on this psalm. God does for us what He did for Israel in the desert.

It is interesting that the psalmist calls the Egyptians “a people of foreign tongue.” It seems impossible that to the people of Israel who, according to the Exodus’ account, had been in Egypt for 430 years, the Egyptian language would be a foreign tongue. Even if their own Hebrew language was not lost in this time, it must have been strongly influenced by the Egyptian language. It is difficult to imagine that Moses, who was reared in Pharaoh’s court, spoke pure Hebrew that was completely free from Egyptian idioms. The difference between the Egyptian hieroglyphics and the Hebrew alphabet proves that Israel, as a people, preserved its own language and culture. This verse could be an indication that this psalm was written during or after the Babylonian captivity. When Israel was in Babylon, there was a similarity between their condition and the time they spent in Egypt, and during that captivity the Hebrew language disappeared almost completely. The psalmist, probably, referred more to the foreign culture than to the language when he said that Egypt was a nation with a foreign tongue. Israel’s transition was not a transition from the Egyptian language to Hebrew but from idolatry to the worship of YHWH.

¹⁰⁴ I Cor. 10:4

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN

- 1** *Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.*
- 2** *Why do the nations say, "Where is their God?"*
- 3** *Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.*
- 4** *But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men.*
- 5** *They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see;*
- 6** *they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell;*
- 7** *they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats.*
- 8** *Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.*
- 9** *O house of Israel, trust in the LORD-- he is their help and shield.*
- 10** *O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD-- he is their help and shield.*
- 11** *You who fear him, trust in the LORD-- he is their help and shield.*
- 12** *The LORD remembers us and will bless us: He will bless the house of Israel, he will bless the house of Aaron,*
- 13** *he will bless those who fear the LORD-- small and great alike.*
- 14** *May the LORD make you increase, both you and your children.*
- 15** *May you be blessed by the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*
- 16** *The highest heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man.*
- 17** *It is not the dead who praise the LORD, those who go down to silence;*
- 18** *it is we who extol the LORD, both now and forevermore. Praise the LORD.*

A fitting title to this psalm would be "Man bears the image of the god he serves." Vs. 8 says about the idol worshippers: "Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them," but the same could be said, even more appropriately, about those who worship the living God. Although the psalmist does not draw this conclusion, we may certainly do so.

The reason for the writing of this psalm seems to be the question of the nations: "Where is their God?" On the basis of this verse, some commentators conclude that this psalm dates from the time of the Babylonian captivity. But Israel had always been surrounded by nations that worshipped idols. The question "Where is their God?" was already asked in the days of the Sons of Korah.¹⁰⁵

When the ark was still present among the Israelites, it was never shown in public. After the captivity, even this symbol of God's presence was no longer there. The Roman officer who destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD is supposed to have cried out when entering the holy place: "They do not even have a god!" Judaism and Christianity worship a transcendent, immanent, invisible, eternal, and almighty God. There is no other.

The psalm begins with the words: "Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness." This suggests that man is in danger of claiming for himself the honor that belongs only to God. History tells us that the army that won the battle of Agincourt knelt down and spoke these words in Latin: "Non nobis, Domine."¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare put those words in the mouth of Henry V. We do not read whether this psalm was written on the occasion of a victory in battle. God showed Gideon the danger that Israel would claim honor for itself when it defeated the Midianites. We read in Judges: "The LORD said to Gideon, 'You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her.'"¹⁰⁷ The New Testament raises the principle to a spiritual level. The Apostle Paul writes: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."¹⁰⁸ Paul draws the conclusion from this that God allows us to be physically weak so that we will not be tempted to feel strong in ourselves. This psalm does not suggest any kind of weakness.

God is the one addressed in vs. 1. Man is created in God's image and, as such, he is worthy of honor. The psalm does not suggest that man lacks glory because he is human. "Not to us, O LORD, not to us..." is a rejection of glory outside God. The devil's sin consisted of the fact that he wanted to receive

¹⁰⁵ See Ps. 42:10

¹⁰⁶ Not to us, o Lord.

¹⁰⁷ Judges 7:2

¹⁰⁸ II Cor. 4:7

glory apart from God. The man who claims glory for himself is lost in the enemy camp. Our glory and honor consists in our service to God. Jesus says: "My Father will honor the one who serves me."¹⁰⁹ The author of this psalm says that God doesn't owe us any honor but should claim all honor to Himself. This reminds us of the scene in heaven John which depicts in Revelation where "the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'"¹¹⁰

The reason the psalmist gives for this kind of adoration is God's love and faithfulness. Those divine characteristics are particularly obvious in God's relationship with man. The context of the psalm suggests that the psalmist asks that God demonstrates His glory as a proof of His power so that the skeptics would have to acknowledge God's supremacy. His prayer is the same as in The Lord's Prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."¹¹¹ A good illustration of a situation where God showed this kind of supremacy is Gideon's war against Midian which he won with weapons that were nothing more than toys.

When George Mueller conceived the idea of opening an orphanage, his primary motive was that the work should be a demonstration of God's honor and glory. Such faith has been rare throughout the ages; this accounts for the fact that there are so few monuments, made by man, to the glory of God in this world.

The alternative is idolatry. The Apostle Paul says: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin."¹¹² We can say that everything that is not worship of God is idolatry. We should, therefore, not limit the verses 4-8 to those who, in ages past, made idol images and bowed down before them. Those verses can very well be applied also to our time.

The question "Where is their God?" is very timely. Originally, the question may have been asked mockingly, but that does not diminish the urgency of a demonstration of God's revelation in this world. If there were no place on earth where God could be found, mankind would be lost. It is God's revelation of Himself that constitutes man's salvation. The Apostle Paul was converted by means of God's revelation. He confessed: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."¹¹³

The psalmist's answer to the question: "Our God is in heaven..." is, of course, one hundred percent true. But if God were only to be found in heaven, mankind would be without hope. Through faith, which is the subject of the verses 9-11, God can also be found on earth.

"Our God is in heaven." He is above all, the supreme commander, the Almighty. He is not subject to human manipulation as the idols are. We are subjected to His will; not He to ours. He created us; we did not create Him. He is not the product of human handiwork; we are the work of His hands. Paul expressed this so powerfully in his address at the Areopagus: "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone-an image made by man's design and skill."¹¹⁴ Isaiah says with biting sarcasm: "The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.' From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god.'"¹¹⁵ Idols are dead images of living men. As such they stand on a much lower level than man. A person who worships an idol denigrates himself. Even if a man worships a demon, he

¹⁰⁹ John 12:26

¹¹⁰ Rev. 4:10,11

¹¹¹ Matt. 6:9

¹¹² Rom. 14:23^b

¹¹³ Gal. 1:11,12

¹¹⁴ Acts 17:29

¹¹⁵ Isa. 44:12-17

stoops to something that is below him in the order of creation. If “all angels [are] ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” as the Epistle to the Hebrew states,¹¹⁶ would Satan then be higher than man? We have to look up for our salvation, not down!

Vs. 8 – “Those who make them will be like them” may be translated: “May those who make them be like them.” This makes the sentence a wish instead of a statement. The Interlinear Hebrew Bible reads: “Like them are those who make them....” This suggests that the idols are an expression of man’s inner being. *The Word Biblical Commentary* says, however, that the Hebrew is ‘ambivalent.’ The LXX translates it as a wish. Whatever the case, it is true that there is a connection between man’s inner being and the God or god he serves. Man who prostrates himself before an idol lowers himself and, consequently, becomes less human himself. Serving the living God exalts us. It takes stupidity to put one’s trust in a lifeless object.

Paul puts the matter in perspective in his Epistle to the Corinthians. We read: “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.”¹¹⁷

Paul does not deny the fact that there are spiritual powers that present themselves as “gods,” but he states that we do not recognize any of those as legitimate. When a person serves lifeless images of gods, he opens himself to spiritual powers that are beyond his control. And evil spirits know no pity. It is, therefore, true that man will share the fate of the demons with which he associates himself. According to Revelation, anyone whose name is not found written in the book of life, will be thrown into the lake of fire, which is the same place where the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will spend eternity.¹¹⁸

The tragic part is that, as far as man is concerned, it is a matter of trust. “Trust” is a positive word. It is a word from God’s dictionary. It has been said that it is enough for man to have faith. But if faith is not properly directed, it can be fatal. How can man trust a murderer? And Satan is a murderer.

The verses 9-11 are an appeal for faith that is focused correctly. The appeal is addressed to Israel as a nation, to the priesthood of Israel, and to each individual. Like the church of Jesus Christ, Israel was meant to be a kingdom of priests. A nation consists of individuals. Without individual faith there is no kingdom of priests.

The psalmist repeats three times, like a slogan, the phrase: “He is their help and shield.” “Shield” depicts the protection God provides. “Help” speaks of the active initiative, the energy that is provided by God’s presence with us.

The psalmist states that God remembers us and blesses us but he does not elaborate how God remembers and what is involved in His blessing. The Apostle Paul explains what God’s remembering of us means. He writes: “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?”¹¹⁹ It means: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”¹²⁰ And the blessing, the one which God promised to Abraham, is the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote to the Galatians: “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”¹²¹ Thus the true Israel will be blessed in her priesthood, as will each person who puts his trust in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit makes no distinction between small and great. It doesn’t matter whether this pertains to age or position.

Vs. 14 probably addresses man as an individual, although it can also apply to the nation of Israel. The increase is an expression of blessing in earthly terms. The meaning is, obviously, not population increase because the children are mentioned separately. The verses 15 and 16 place the blessing in a cosmic context. The one who blesses is “the Maker of heaven and earth.” We should not read into these verses that God is against the exploration of space. The center of gravity of human life will always be on this planet. And the shortness of human life is enough limitation in a universe where distances are measured in light-years. All this doesn’t mean that the essence of God’s blessing is always only material.

¹¹⁶ See Heb. 1:14

¹¹⁷ I Cor. 8:4-6

¹¹⁸ See Rev. 20:10, 15

¹¹⁹ Rom. 8:32

¹²⁰ John 1:14

¹²¹ Gal. 3:14

The phrase “the earth he has given to man” expresses a tremendous mandate for man. Where does this leave “the prince of this world?” On the basis of this verse, Jesus could say: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”¹²²

The last two verses of this psalm do not constitute a proof that the Old Testament Israelite did not believe in the resurrection. How could we “extol the LORD, both now and forevermore” if death were the end? We cannot say either, on the basis of these verses, that praise is limited to the present. The psalmist puts these words in the context of the death of idolatry and of the life of those who serve God. The words remind us of questions by the Sons of Korah: “Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction? Are your wonders known in the place of darkness, or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion? But I cry to you for help, O LORD; in the morning my prayer comes before you.”¹²³ But the author of this psalm does not create this kind of special effect.

We conclude that the “we” in these verses are those who live through fellowship with God. The new discovery of who God is will always bring us to *Hallelujah!*

¹²² John 16:33

¹²³ Ps. 88:11-13

PSALM ONE HUNDRED SIXTEEN

1 *I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.*
2 *Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.*
3 *The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.*
4 *Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, save me!"*
5 *The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.*
6 *The LORD protects the simple-hearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.*
7 *Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.*
8 *For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,*
9 *that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.*
10 *I believed; therefore I said, "I am greatly afflicted."*
11 *And in my dismay I said, "All men are liars."*
12 *How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?*
13 *I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.*
14 *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.*
15 *Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.*
16 *O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains.*
17 *I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.*
18 *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,*
19 *in the courts of the house of the LORD-- in your midst, O Jerusalem.*
Praise the LORD.

I have precious memories of this psalm. When I was a young Christian and worked in Amsterdam, I once read this psalm during lunch hour in a small Anglican church on one of the canals of the city. I had the experience that the Lord was speaking to me personally. I have never forgotten that moment.

The Hebrew text reads literally: "I love because He hath heard, the LORD, my voice." The Jerusalem Bible translates the phrase with: "I love, because Jehovah listens." This, of course, does not contradict the great commandment: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."¹²⁴ The omission of the object of love suggests that God is the subject of it. This does not only prove that God is the source of love, as John states: "We love because he first loved us,"¹²⁵ but also that prayer changes us inwardly. The fact that the Lord hears our voice makes us into people who love.

The opening verses also demonstrate what is the purpose of oppression. God uses anguish, trouble, and sorrow, and even the menace of death to keep the line of prayer open. We will never cease being amazed at the marvel of prayer. Our amazement sometimes comes from unbelief. But even if, by faith, we expect the answer, our wonder will never cease to be. George Mueller tells how he prostrated himself in worship before the Lord when he realized how the Lord had led a man to bring money to him in the morning. The person didn't know the money was needed for the noon meal in the orphanage and he had planned to come in the evening. But the Lord made him change his plan in answer to Mueller's prayer.

Often the most painful experiences help us to come to the conclusion that James was correct when he said: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds."¹²⁶ Answers to prayer are always related to our becoming spiritually mature. Often we do not realize that what God seeks in our lives is the fruit. He is even willing to prune, dig, and cut down in order to achieve His purpose. Vs. 15 tells us how much this hurts Him: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."

The psalmist begins his psalm with a conclusion. We have seen another example of this approach in Psalm 73. His experience was particularly painful. We can draw a parallel between the psalmist's experience and that of Paul in Asia. He writes to the Corinthians: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.

¹²⁴ Deut. 6:5

¹²⁵ I John 4:19

¹²⁶ James 1:2

But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”¹²⁷ Paul draws various lessons from his experience, the most important of which is that God raises the dead. The psalmist does not reach this point. His uncertainty about death is part of his affliction and this is, at the same time, a point he has in common with the apostle. The difference was that Paul knew about the resurrection but it was not always a reality for him. The rediscovery of this truth came to him as a consolation. For the psalmist, the result of understanding is love. Passing on comfort that was received is an act of love. It is the practical application of it.

An important part of the psalmist's suffering was the hopelessness of his condition and the anguish. Senselessness is hard to bear. The vicious circle was broken when he called on the Name of the Lord. The Name represents all that God is. The psalmist asked himself the question, “if God is like this how can I be so different, so totally desperate?” The image of God in us recognizes the difference between God and us as incongruent. When Isaiah cried out, “Woe to me! I am ruined!”¹²⁸ he also understood that he ought not to be in that condition. In the same way the prodigal son asked himself the question, when he found himself at the pigsty, “What am I doing here?” Our deepest suffering occurs when we forget who we are. The rediscovery that there is a relationship between ourselves and “God, who raises the dead” will make us “call on the Name of the Lord.” After all, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”¹²⁹

The psalmist does not tell us in detail what God did for him. God's intervention is so self-evident, so natural, that it doesn't require mentioning. “The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.” That is sufficient.

Nobody experienced the truth of vs. 3 like our Lord Jesus Christ. “The cords of death entangled [Him], the anguish of the grave came upon [Him]; [He] was overcome by trouble and sorrow.” It could be that He applied this verse to Himself while in Gethsemane and at Golgotha. Our suffering becomes insignificant in comparison with His. The Apostle Paul draws comfort from this thought. He indicates that it is good and salutary for man to pass through experiences that give some measure of understanding of Christ's suffering. In his Epistle to the Philippians he calls it “grace.” We read: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.”¹³⁰ The Greek word, translated with “granted” is *charizomai* which is derived from *charis*, meaning “grace.” And in the Epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle draws a parallel between Christ's suffering and his own. “For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.”¹³¹ Our Lord Jesus Christ “called on the name of the LORD” and the Father saved Him from death in a way that has become the basis of eternal salvation for us. The resurrection of Jesus is our hope. The power of it is already active and renovating in the transient and perishable existence we have on earth.

The psalmist was probably speaking about physical sickness and death but we ought not to pass by the spiritual aspect of these verses. Calling on the Name of the Lord has consequences that go far beyond physical healing. The Bible says: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,”¹³² clearly speaking of the soul. We love, first of all, because the sacrifice of Christ made atonement for our sins justified us. This is the reason for the salvation of our soul. The truth is that we will not perish even if we die of cancer.

When God answers the psalmist's prayer, he concludes: “The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.” The word “righteous” does not seem to fit in the context of the salvation of a sinner. The Apostle John uses the same word in connection with forgiveness of sin. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”¹³³ God is righteous and just because He does not make us pay for the sins Jesus paid for already. This is more easily understood in the New Testament context but here we find the same concept in the Old Testament. The principle of forgiveness is the same in both testaments. The blood of the sacrificial animal was an image of the blood of the Lamb of God.

¹²⁷ II Cor. 1:8-11

¹²⁸ See Isa. 6:5

¹²⁹ Matt. 22:32

¹³⁰ Phil. 1:29

¹³¹ II Cor. 1:5

¹³² Rom. 10:13

¹³³ I John 1:9

The word “simplehearted” has a worse meaning than appears on the surface. The Hebrew word *pethiy* means silly. The KJV renders it with “foolish.” *The Tyndale Commentary* observes that it is identical with the fools that are set as an example in the Book of Proverbs. It describes people who have gone astray like sheep and who miss the intelligence to know this. They do not necessarily lack energy or are unintelligent in other fields, but they are morally deficient. Restlessness of the soul is caused by a lack of moral character. Rest returns, both in the emotional and spiritual realm, when fellowship with God is restored.

The deliverance from death in vs. 8 is, of course, the same experience as the one described in vs. 3. As mentioned before, this pertains probably to the threat of physical death. But God does more than extending life for a few more years. He gives us resurrection life. This psalmist died a few years after writing this poem. If all he talks about is that his death was postponed, there is no real comfort in these words. And God’s comfort is eternal. When He wipes away the tears from our eyes, we will never weep again. Walking before the LORD in the land of the living means more than living a few years longer on earth, as was the case with King Hezekiah to whom the Lord added 15 years of his life. God comforts us with the resurrection from the dead in which death is annihilated. He delivers our feet from stumbling by making us partakers in His divine nature and by clothing us with His glory. This cannot be separated from fellowship with God. Walking before the Lord is the key. It means living transparently in the realization that God knows us and searches us. It also means that we want to share our secrets with Him. It means walking in God’s love.

Verses 10 and 11 emphasize the contrast between our circumstances and our faith in God, and between trusting men or trusting God. The psalmist describes his circumstances with the word affliction and he classifies all men as liars. Faith in God has, in principle, nothing to do with circumstances. Nice-weather faith is no faith at all. And the unreliability of man only emphasizes God’s reliability.

In writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul quotes these verses from the Septuagint. We read: “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’”¹³⁴ The Greek text is stronger than the Hebrew which accounts for the stronger emphasis on faith. Faith in God, deliberately, opposes circumstances and the lies of men. Faith takes these factors into account, arms itself against them, and opposes them aggressively.

Verses 12-19 describe, in a moving way, the attitude of the redeemed to the Redeemer. There is no question of paying God back for what He did for us. There is nothing man can give in ransom for his soul. Throughout eternity, we will be indebted to God. This determines the attitude of the person who stands in God’s grace. In order to fully comprehend how this influences our relationship with God, we have to think back to the damage sin has caused in this relationship. When Eve began to believe Satan’s lie, she tarnished the reliability of God’s Word and in doing so she tainted God’s character. Man cut himself off from the source of life. It turns out that restoration of fellowship entails much more than a return to the former conditions. “The cup of salvation” brings us much closer to God than Adam ever was.

Lifting up the cup of salvation is a symbolic gesture that is worth a separate study. We can easily identify this cup as the cup Jesus took during the Last Supper when He said: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”¹³⁵ But the psalmist speaks about a cup in the context of repayment for what God did for him. For him, it must have meant a symbol of fellowship with God, or it stood for a libation as mentioned in the Book of Numbers.¹³⁶ To us, the cup represents “participation in the blood of Christ.” Paul writes to the church in Corinth: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?”¹³⁷ This is more than a recognition that Jesus Christ poured out His blood for us. It means an identification with Christ’s death. The only way we can pay God back for what He did for us is to consider ourselves as being crucified with Christ and to accept the consequences of that position.

Four times in this psalm, the psalmist mentions calling on the Name of the Lord. In chronological order, vs. 4 comes first. When he was in the agony of death, the psalmist says: “Then I called on the name of the LORD.” This could be considered to be the beginning of the psalm. The calling on God in vs. 2 is actually the conclusion of the psalmist’s total experience. The psalm opens with the statement: “Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live” but, actually, the conclusion should have appeared

¹³⁴ II Cor. 4:13

¹³⁵ Luke 22:20

¹³⁶ See Num. 15:5

¹³⁷ I Cor. 10:16

at the end. With this statement, the author sets the course of his whole life. Calling on the Lord becomes a way of life to him. In vs. 13, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD" is part of the debt of gratitude the psalmist has in response to the Lord's goodness to him. We tend to think that the main purpose of prayer is to have our needs met. We believe that we are the only ones profiting from prayer and that God only listens to us to do us a favor. But if prayer is part of the payment of the debt we owe God, then the contents of our prayers should give God as much satisfaction as it does us. That praise is not the only part that satisfies God is clear from vs. 17 where we read: "I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD." In this verse, calling on the Name of the Lord puts the emphasis upon the sacrifice of praise.

The main thought of the verses 13 and 14 is repeated in the verses 17-19, although not in the same words. The stanzas are, obviously, meant to be parallels. In Leviticus, the vow was part of the thank offering.¹³⁸ A vow is an act of surrender to God with the intent to obey His will. In the light of God's goodness to us, it is a logical conclusion that we submit our will freely and joyfully to the will of God. The psalmist wants this done in public, "in the presence of all his people." The surrender of our will to God is a very private matter but this doesn't mean that it is not done in the context of the church. As the psalmist approaches the end of his poem, his enthusiasm intensifies, precisely because he sees himself as a member of the body. The discovery that he is among people who have experienced salvation and who have reacted to it with the same vow of surrender, brings him to *Hallelujah*.

Vs. 15 seems to contrast in a paradoxical way with the psalmist's brush with death described in the first two stanzas. The Hebrew word translated "precious" is *yaqar* which means "valuable," or "costly." God attaches great value to the death of His children and it also cost Him everything in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The NEB renders the phrase with: "A precious thing is the death of those who die faithfully to Him." The Jerusalem Bible reads: "The death of the devout costs Jahweh dear."

The question, however, is whether the context requires that we interpret death here as physical death. It is my opinion that it is death by identification. To the psalmist, this meant that he identified himself with the sacrificial animal. To us it is our unity with the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. It speaks of a life that is based on death; that does not consider death to be the end of all but the starting-point. By accepting our death to God in Jesus Christ, we live His life of resurrection. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."¹³⁹ God considers precious our dying to our own will and our surrendering our right to self-determination. Because this kind of death would be futile apart from the death of Jesus on the cross, it cost God everything also. God invested, so to speak, all He had in us in order to bring us through death to real life. Accepting this implies that we also accept physical death but that is not all; it is not even the most important part of it. It has been said that it is much harder to die a little bit every day than to die once.

In this manner the psalmist goes from one death to the other. Metaphorically considered, he comes from the frying pan into the fire. But the actual difference is enormous. The death from which the psalmist was delivered in answer to prayer was a death without hope, a death which would have meant the end of all things, the ultimate weapon of the powers of darkness. In contrast, the death he ends up with is the gate to resurrection; the putting off of all that death had polluted, all that has the odor of death. It is the death of obedience. This is substantiated by the following words: "O LORD, truly I am your servant." This submission is illustrated in the attitude of the Hebrew slave who said: "I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free."¹⁴⁰ This is the slave with the pierced ear who serves the Lord because he loves Him.

The addition "I am your servant, the son of your maidservant" probably refers to the fact that the psalmist's mother fell in the same category of those who serve because they love. The attitude of faith of a mother, undoubtedly, plays an important role in the life of a son or a daughter. There are many examples of this, both in the Bible and elsewhere. Paul wrote to Timothy: "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also."¹⁴¹ This kind of example is the richest heritage a mother can leave a child. The psalmist must have had this kind of role model.

¹³⁸ See the specification in Lev. 7:16-18

¹³⁹ II Cor. 5:15

¹⁴⁰ Ex. 21:5

¹⁴¹ II Tim. 1:5

But more is involved in this. The Old Testament world knew the cast system that is so repulsive to us. The confession to belong to the caste of slaves goes deeper than the declaration of the Hebrew servant. This is, what the Apostle Paul calls “the attitude of Christ Jesus who “made himself nothing” and “humbled himself and became obedient to death.”¹⁴²

The great paradox of the Gospel is expressed in the words: “O LORD, truly I am your servant;... you have freed me from my chains.” Slavery to sin leads to death; we experience slavery to Christ as freedom because it leads to life. The New Testament has something to say about both forms of slavery. Speaking about slavery to the devil and to sin, Jesus said: “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”¹⁴³ Paul explains that we have a choice to consider ourselves to be slaves of Christ because “independence” would lead us back into the camp of the enemy. In the Epistle to the Romans we read: “Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.... But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.”¹⁴⁴

Besides our gratitude to God “the weakness of our flesh” is an important factor in our decision to be a slave of Christ.

In the verses 17-19, the psalmist does more than repeating the refrain of the psalm. We remarked earlier that calling on the Name of the Lord in these verses is linked to the sacrifice of a thank offering. The Ten Commandments forbid the vain use of the Name of the Lord. “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”¹⁴⁵ But there is an appropriate way to use the Name of the Lord. It is as with the intimacy of sexual intercourse. Outwardly, there is little difference between an expression of deep emotional love in a marriage relationship and pornography; yet the two are worlds apart. Calling on the Name of the Lord is the most intimate thing a man can do. It surpasses all other forms of intimacy. It is so exclusive that the use of it in any other form would be vain and vulgar.

The addition in vs. 19 to the refrain of vs. 14 – “in the courts of the house of the LORD-- in your midst, O Jerusalem” brings it all to a climactic end. The house of the Lord in Jerusalem was the place of God’s revelation of Himself. It is not up to us to choose the place and mode of our praise to God. We cannot be completely obedient and, at the same time, praise God and love Him as we see fit. For the psalmist, it meant going up to Jerusalem. For us it means that we come before God with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Also in our worship of God, the words of Jesus remain true: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² See Phil. 2:5-8

¹⁴³ John 8:36

¹⁴⁴ Rom. 6:13, 17-19

¹⁴⁵ Ex. 20:7

¹⁴⁶ John 14:6^b

PSALM ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEEN

1 Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples.

**2 For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever.
Praise the LORD.**

It is amazing that so many surprises can be packed into such a short psalm. There is, in the first place, the dimension. The psalmist addresses the whole world: "All you nations" encompasses the whole world-population and "all you peoples" puts the details of the smaller groups in the limelight. The Hebrew word translated with nations is *gowyim*, which has the connotation of heathen nations. It contrasts with "peoples" which refers to the tribes of Israel. The New Testament equivalent of *gowyim* is found in the scene of Revelation which the Apostle John describes with: "There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."¹⁴⁷ In the context of this psalm the word is used to indicate the groups of people who do not know the God of Israel. The NKJV renders the verse with: "Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles!" The word has acquired a derisive meaning, but it conveys correctly what the psalmist means to say. They are the people who do not know the truth of God and who, like the nations in the Second Psalm, conspired and rebelled against YHWH. Here they are called upon to come and praise God.

It is obvious that such a dramatic change of attitude does not happen automatically. The psalmist omits the conversion process completely. The psalm reveals only the goal, which is the praise of Yahweh, and the beginning, which is the fact that those people are gentiles. What happens in between is passed over.

The use of blocks of silence can be very effective in the hands of great writers and speakers. The psalmist forces us to fill in the blanks of the whole chapter of the preaching of the Gospel, conversion, forgiveness of sin, and rehabilitation. C. S. Lewis achieves a similar dramatic effect in his book *Out of a Silent Planet* in which he introduces the hero, Dr. Ransom to the archangel of Mars. The archangel questions Ransom on what God did on planet earth to provide salvation for man. Ransom's answer is left blank.

In the first stanza, the author addresses the whole world, in the second he limits himself to a smaller group which he designates with the pronoun "us." We may assume that, being an Israelite, he speaks about the people of Israel, the nation in whose midst God revealed Himself.

The interesting feature of this psalm is that it infers a relationship between Israel and the rest of the world. If this were not so, the topic of this psalm would be without foundation. This relationship is positive. If it were taken for granted that God only revealed Himself to Israel and not to the world, the exhortation to all the nations to praise God would have no basis. God's revelation to Israel is ultimately meant for the whole world. This is obvious from what God said to Abraham: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."¹⁴⁸ And to Israel God said: "Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."¹⁴⁹ When God chose Israel He had the salvation of the whole world in mind.

It is evident that the gentiles must recognize this truth. When God blessed Abraham, He made clear that the blessing of Abraham was for those who blessed Abraham. We may assume that the nations will not praise YHWH if they do not recognize God's self-revelation to Israel, and, consequently, bless Israel because of it. God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. For us, no praise of YHWH is possible apart from Jesus Christ. In Him "the blessing given to Abraham [came] to the Gentiles..., so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."¹⁵⁰ This is sufficient reason for us to thank and praise God.

The reason for praise given in this psalm, however, is not the fact of God's revelation but the greatness of His love and faithfulness. The Hebrew word translated "love" is *cheved* which is often rendered in the older versions with "lovingkindness." It is love that is based on a legal relationship. As in a marriage the partners pledge their love to each other, so God has made a contract with mankind that cannot be annulled by divorce. The Hebrew word for faithfulness is *'emeth* which means "truth," or "trustworthiness."

¹⁴⁷ Rev. 7:9

¹⁴⁸ Gen. 12:3^b

¹⁴⁹ Ex. 19:5,6

¹⁵⁰ See Gal. 3:14

God's lovingkindness always comes to man as a surprise. We always suspect God of having ulterior motives in His dealings with mankind. Since we ourselves are such a vessel full of contradiction, we cannot imagine that God's lovingkindness would be pure and unadulterated. God's pure goodness contrasts sharply with our malice. God's goodness exposes our sinfulness, but it also guarantees our pardon.

Once again, the psalmist does not specifically call things by their name. But the above forms the backbone of the argument on which this psalm rests. The topic is God's character and the attributes He revealed to us in order to draw us out of darkness into His wonderful light.

The accent is again upon the dimension. "The faithfulness of the LORD endures forever." The verb "endure" is not in the original Hebrew but it is understood. David explained the meaning of this when he wrote: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him."¹⁵¹ We don't know what image of the universe the poet had in mind when he wrote those words. It is possible that modern science gives us an advantage at this point. We have come to understand that "so great" means "infinite." God's attributes of lovingkindness and faithfulness are unparalleled to us, who are confronted with infinite space. This does not mean that we have no point of comparison. Solomon states in Ecclesiastes that God "has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."¹⁵² But God's eternity appeals to the image of God within us. The tension this evokes is only released in the praise to which this psalm calls us. This is true for all of mankind, both Jews and gentiles.

¹⁵¹ Ps. 103:11

¹⁵² Eccl. 3:11

PSALM ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEEN

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.*
- 2 Let Israel say: "His love endures forever."*
- 3 Let the house of Aaron say: "His love endures forever."*
- 4 Let those who fear the LORD say: "His love endures forever."*
- 5 In my anguish I cried to the LORD, and he answered by setting me free.*
- 6 The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*
- 7 The LORD is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.*
- 8 It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.*
- 9 It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.*
- 10 All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the LORD I cut them off.*
- 11 They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the LORD I cut them off.*
- 12 They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off.*
- 13 I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me.*
- 14 The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.*
- 15 Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The LORD's right hand has done mighty things!"*
- 16 The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!"*
- 17 I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.*
- 18 The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death.*
- 19 Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.*
- 20 This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter.*
- 21 I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.*
- 22 The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone;*
- 23 the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.*
- 24 This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*
- 25 O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success.*
- 26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you.*
- 27 The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar.*
- 28 You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you.*
- 29 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.*

What a beautiful psalm to sing at the beginning of a new millennium! It is a song of praise with rich shades of variations and with a strong prophetic line that highlights the important facts of salvation of the New Testament.

This psalm is the last one in the series of the Egyptian Hallel¹⁵³. It is the last psalm Jesus sang with His disciples before going to the cross.¹⁵⁴

The psalm begins with the liturgical call to worship: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever." Those were the words that were sung daily at the beginning of the temple worship service.¹⁵⁵ We find them in different places and different forms in the Book of Psalms.¹⁵⁶ There are also other themes found in this psalm that are borrowed from other psalms. There is, for example, a clear connection between the verses 2-4 in this psalm and Ps. 115:9-11.

The psalm does not give us any indication of a historical background. We could conclude from vs. 10 that there had been a military campaign in which Israel had been victorious. But the general tone of the psalm is more universal and supersedes one particular event. The psalmist seems to have had in mind all battles and all the victories, which is the reason that there are so many prophetic pointers to the facts of salvation of the New Testament. More than anything else, the main theme seems to be the battle and victory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁵³ Psalms 113-118

¹⁵⁴ See Matt. 26:30

¹⁵⁵ See I Chr. 16:41^b

¹⁵⁶ See Ps. 106:1; Ps. 136

The song of praise comes forth from the mouths of three groups of people: Israel, the house of Aaron, and “those who fear the Lord.” This again, follows the same sequence as in Ps. 115. Israel as a whole was meant to be a kingdom of priests, but the house of Aaron occupied a special place in their midst as mediators between God and the people. In our study of Ps. 115, we observed that “You who fear him, trust in the LORD” indicated a personal relationship with God. In this psalm, the phrase is used in the plural. Maybe the psalmist speaks here about “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.”¹⁵⁷ This makes this psalm as universal as the preceding one.

The opening words are at the same time solemn and enthusiastic. The rendering of the NAS, “Oh let Israel say,” is here preferable to the more prosaic style of the NIV: “Let Israel say....” The Hebrew *na'* is a spontaneous interjection that adds color and joy to the exhortation. We do not find this kind of enthusiasm in other places where this liturgical phrase is used. The fourfold repetition of this exhortation makes it very impressive. There is in the use of liturgy always a danger that the words lose their meaning and become an empty formula. Man has the ability to rob words of their power. There is also the difficulty that the psalmist tries to express the inexpressible. God’s eternal goodness and love are beyond description, particularly when all man has at his disposal are weak words that tend to lose their meaning. In a paradoxical way, this realization helps us to keep our amazement and emotions alive. We, as human beings, are more than can be expressed in words. For this reason God became man Himself when He wanted to demonstrate that His lovingkindness endures forever. John says: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹⁵⁸

When we consult various commentaries about this psalm, we realize that there is a lot of confusion concerning the meaning of this hymn. *The Word Biblical Commentary* sees in it a temple ritual in which the speaker, probably the king, enters the temple to bring a thank offering after a military victory. George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, believes that the occasion is the initiation of a proselyte. Others think that it deals with the circumcision of such a person. The text of the psalm gives us little to lean on. When the psalmist speaks about gates and buildings, he speaks about a spiritual reality.

In verses 5-14 the psalmist describes how God saved him from trouble. This theme is found in too many places in the Book of Psalms to mention. Vs. 10 depicts his anguish with: “All the nations surrounded me.” This is, of course, meant hyperbolically. The general point in these verses is the emphasis upon God’s reliability in contrast to man’s unreliability. The psalmist’s conclusion is that “it is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.” This conclusion is the result of practical experience, some of which is disappointing. David came to the same conclusion in another psalm where he said: “All men are liars.”¹⁵⁹

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews places vs. 6 in a practical light in connection with our concern about financial security.¹⁶⁰ The words are actually a quote from David: “In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”¹⁶¹ Jesus’ admonition to His disciples: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell”¹⁶² is also based on this text. The context of this psalm suggests that the psalmist’s anguish is caused by his fear of man. Fear of man is always linked to fear of death. When the poet calls to the Lord, we read: “He answered by setting me free.” The older versions follow the Hebrew more closely with: “the LORD answered me, and set me in a large place.”¹⁶³ God delivered him from fear in answer to prayer. The realization of who God is will always bring about an immediate change in our relationship to men. Fear of man, as well as the desire for recognition by others and honor from others, will diminish and disappear. The discovery that the Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, is standing with us is overwhelming. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “If God is for us, who can be against us?”¹⁶⁴

This does not mean that men or demonic powers will not be against us but the fact will have little or no effect upon our lives. It is clear that God can only associate Himself completely with us if we identify

¹⁵⁷ Rev. 7:9

¹⁵⁸ John 1:14

¹⁵⁹ Ps. 116:11

¹⁶⁰ See Heb. 13:6

¹⁶¹ Ps. 56:11

¹⁶² Matt. 10:28

¹⁶³ KJV

¹⁶⁴ Rom. 8:31

ourselves with Him. “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”¹⁶⁵ God’s deliverance not only consists of a release from fear of death but also in that He conquered death for us. In Jesus Christ, God also conquered my death.

The tone of these verses is very practical. The psalmist expounds certain principles but the word “helper” indicates that all this pertains to a concrete situation in which help was needed. God not only helps us to go to heaven, but He also helps us in times of sickness, hunger, and financial need. Particularly in these practical realms, human help is often disappointing. In spite of this, it seems so much harder to take one’s refuge in God than to trust man. I tend to throw myself upon the Lord and expect His help only in extreme cases after I have exhausted all human possibilities. It is so difficult for us to realize that our fellow human beings cannot be relied upon and that we cannot even trust ourselves. Yet the criterion for serving Christ is that we be trustworthy. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”¹⁶⁶ Only when the Holy Spirit makes us reliable can we be relied upon.

There is no firmer foundation for human life than taking refuge in the Lord. Taking refuge is a form of trust which recognizes that protection is needed. There are all kinds of dangers and circumstances that are beyond our ability to cope with. The Netherlands owes its existence to the faith of William of Orange, who once confessed: “I have made a covenant with the Potentate of all potentates.”

The verses 10-13 indicate how overwhelming was the resistance against the psalmist. “All the nations surrounded me” makes the opposition an international conspiracy. Those words point to the Messiah. The Second Psalm describes the situation with the words: “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.”¹⁶⁷

Three times in this psalm, the poet uses the phrase “In the name of the LORD I cut them off.” The Hebrew word for “to cut off” is *muwl* which, in most cases, refers to circumcision. *Strong’s Definitions* describes it with “to cut short,... figuratively, to destroy.” *Adam Clarke’s Commentary* mentions several deviating renderings: “Dr. Kennicott renders ‘amiyam... ‘I shall disappoint them;’ Dr. Horsley, ‘I cut them to pieces;’ Mr. N. Berlin, ... ‘I have repelled them.’ ‘I will cut them off;’ Chaldee. ... ‘I am avenged on them;’ Vulgate. So the Septuagint.” *The Word Biblical Commentary* translates the term with “ward off.” In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight links the expression to David’s killing of the two hundred Philistines and the bringing of their foreskins to King Saul as a bride price.¹⁶⁸ It seems reasonable to translate the phrase with: “...In the name of the Lord I will drive them back,” which is the rendering of the NEB. The hidden reference to circumcision could also imply an effort to evangelize the nations.

The intensity of the battle is expressed by the fourfold repetition of the images of being surrounded: “All the nations surrounded me”; “They surrounded me on every side”; “They swarmed around me like bees”; “they died out as quickly as burning thorns.” The psalmist saw himself as a single individual facing an overwhelming majority of enemies. He confesses in vs. 13 – “I was pushed back and about to fall.” The Name of the Lord proved to be sufficient to bring about victory. From our perspective, we understand that calling upon the Name of the Lord means an appeal to the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the basis of His resurrection from the dead, the bees are pushed back and the fire of thorns is put out. “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.”¹⁶⁹ The Name of the Lord is also a weapon of defense and even of attack.

Vs. 14 is a literal quotation from the song the Israelites sang at the shore of the Red Sea when they saw the dead bodies of Pharaoh’s army washed ashore. “The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.”¹⁷⁰ In reaching back to this song of redemption, the Holy Spirit also reaches forward to “the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb” sung by “those who had been victorious over the beast” in Revelation.¹⁷¹ The emphasis on this psalm is on the perfect unity between God’s being and His acts. God is what He does. A. B. Simpson discovered in his life the deep truth of this mystery and expressed this in the hymn he wrote: “First it was the blessing, now it is the Lord.” Moses and the people of Israel made the same discovery that God’s blessing cannot be separated from fellowship with

¹⁶⁵ II Chr. 16:9

¹⁶⁶ I Cor. 4:2

¹⁶⁷ Ps. 2:2

¹⁶⁸ I Sam. 18:27

¹⁶⁹ Prov. 18:10

¹⁷⁰ Ex. 15:2

¹⁷¹ See Rev. 15:1-4

God. YHWH does not make us strong, He *is* our strength. We do not sing psalms unto Him, He *is* our psalm and there is no salvation outside Him. The Apostle Paul experienced that our weakness accentuates this glorious truth. He testified: "But [the Lord] 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."¹⁷²

The third stanza, the verses 15-18, says actually the same thing as the preceding verses. The theme is redemption from a great and overwhelming emergency. In repeating the phrases, the poet achieves the same staccato rhythm as in the foregoing verses. We can almost hear the beat of the drums and percussion in the background.

Some commentators see in the mention of the tents an indication that this psalm may have been written on the occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is true that Israel *did* not live in tents in Canaan. There is a strong suggestion that the psalmist refers to the wilderness journey of which the Feast of Tabernacles was a memorial. It is also possible that the psalm dates from the time of Israel's sojourn in the desert. At that time, there were only two people who did not die in the wilderness: Joshua and Caleb. In saying: "I will not die but live," the psalmist identified himself with Caleb and Joshua.

It is hard for us to imagine the hopelessness of Israel's situation during the forty years in the desert. The only goal for the people was to die. It was an existential hell, such as is portrayed in Albert Camus' book *The Pest*. The psalmist breaks through this despondency. Shouts of joy and victory are the songs of the generation that partakes in the resurrection, in the new life in the Promised Land.

"The LORD's right hand" is mentioned three times in order to emphasize that the new life is the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It also means that the essence of the exodus and the entrance into Canaan is deliverance from death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. People who participate in this resurrection are called "the righteous." We understand that these people do not partake of the resurrection because they are righteous but they are righteous because they share the resurrection life. It is also clear that the point is deliverance from death for one person; the others are identified with this person. Seen in the light of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, vs. 17, and the whole stanza in which it is found, this turns out to be a clear prophecy.

If we picture the fourth stanza (verses 19-23) as taking place in front of the temple gate, the term "the gates of righteousness" becomes very interesting. The temple service, of which the ritual at the Day of Atonement was the most essential part, is then a service of righteousness. Paul was correct when he wrote in the Epistle to the Romans: "For in [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith' " and "but now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness...."¹⁷³ God's forgiveness of man's sins is an act of righteousness because the punishment for sin was executed in the killing of the sacrificial animal, which was an image of the Lamb of God.

Even if we do not visualize the scene as taking place in front of the temple gate, the principle does not change. We can only praise God if the demands of God righteousness are satisfied. After all, the temple gates stood usually open and the opening of the gates in this psalm ought to be seen as a symbolic act. Jesus used the same words to John the Baptist at the bank of the Jordan River: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."¹⁷⁴ We draw near to God on the basis of God's righteousness. The Epistle to the Hebrews states the same: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."¹⁷⁵

"This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may enter" corresponds to Jesus' words: "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find

¹⁷² II Cor. 12:9,10

¹⁷³ Rom. 1:17; 3:21-25 (NKJV)

¹⁷⁴ Matt. 3:15

¹⁷⁵ Heb. 10:19-22

pasture” and “No one comes to the Father except through me.”¹⁷⁶ The opening of the gates of righteousness took place at the cross. The writer of the Hebrew Epistle expresses this so graphically with the words: “by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.”¹⁷⁷ Again, we state that man is called “righteous” when he enters. Righteousness is not a condition for entrance.

The praise in vs. 21 (the NIV reads, “I will give thanks”) is not necessarily the same as in the earlier verses, although the first stanza ought to be taken as a conclusion of the whole. The salvation mentioned in vs. 14 pointed, evidently, to a particular situation of need in which the psalmist was under severe physical pressure. In vs. 21 he acknowledged YHWH as his salvation after he had entered the temple gates. The condition here is a spiritual one. The redemption from his physical hardship had opened the eyes of the psalmist for the real redemption from the real need.

Jesus quotes vs. 22 and 23, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” in three of the Gospels in connection with the parable of the tenants of the vineyard.¹⁷⁸ The image of the cornerstone is also used by Isaiah: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.”¹⁷⁹ *The Tyndale Commentary* observes here that the prophecy in this psalm demonstrates that God’s enemies were the builders of the temple. In the parable of the tenants of the vineyard, Jesus quotes these verses to indicate that Israel would reject her Messiah and that, for that reason, the Kingdom of God would be taken away from her. We may assume, therefore, that this is the actual meaning of these verses and that it is the primary lesson the Holy Spirit wants to teach us in this psalm.

The rejection of Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah is an incomprehensible phenomenon. It proves how deeply man’s mind had been affected by sin. The irony was that the builders of the temple rejected Him, those who expected the coming of the Kingdom of God, or at least thought they expected it. They studied the Scriptures and they even were experts in their field without understanding what they had studied. With biting sarcasm Jesus asked them: “Haven’t you read this scripture?”¹⁸⁰

For that reason, God performed the miracle of raising Jesus from the dead and making Him, as the cornerstone, the foundation of all that happens in heaven and on earth. “It is marvelous in our eyes” means “We are dumbfounded!” Our marvel is, in a sense, proof that we share, to some extent, in the hardness of heart of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. Although there are clear differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament dispensations, it is true for us also that the greatest resistance against the Gospel comes from the inside. It has been said that God’s greatest enemies are the Christians. The enemy hides within us. This has been true from the time that “certain men came [who] from James ... who belonged to the circumcision group”¹⁸¹ resisted the Apostle Paul till the present time. All kinds of obstacles are placed before us to prevent the Son of God being revealed in us. For that reason we are still dumbfounded when this yet does happen.

“The day the LORD has made” is the day of the cornerstone, the day of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is an indisputable truth that God is the maker of every day. The extraordinary feature of this day is that it is a day of creation. In the Genesis account, we read that God created order and life out of chaos and after that He rested on the seventh day. This day is the eighth day. It is a day of creation of the same order as the seven previous ones, but it is also the most important one of all. The Dutch rhymed version of the psalms renders this verse with: “This is the day, the crown of days, that Israel’s God sanctified.” Another hymn sings: “Welcome thou firstborn of all days, morning of the resurrection, at which dawn the power of hell is vanquished and death is destroyed.” This is the day about which Jesus said: “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”¹⁸² Abraham saw this day when he saw Isaac come down alive from the altar.

Those who were the first witnesses of this day, the day of resurrection, demonstrated little joy and they did not shout. The disciples were flabbergasted, and they lacked all understanding of the importance of what happened. After they had closed the door with a dead bolt, and they saw the risen Lord with their own eyes, some rejoicing was born in their souls. But it was all too overwhelming for a spontaneous reaction.

¹⁷⁶ John 10:9;14:6

¹⁷⁷ See Heb. 10:20

¹⁷⁸ See Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10, and Luke 20:17

¹⁷⁹ Isa. 28:16

¹⁸⁰ Mark 12:10

¹⁸¹ See Gal. 2:12

¹⁸² John 8:56

They had been too used to death to accept the resurrection. Jacob's reaction to the news that his son Joseph was still alive is an illustration of this kind of response. We read in Genesis: "They [his sons] told him, 'Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt.' Jacob was stunned; he did not believe them."¹⁸³ For the disciples the shouts of joy did not come until Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit applied the resurrection to the hearts of those who believed in Christ.

In vs. 25 the psalmist takes a step back. The success or prosperity which is expressed in material terms in this psalm is an essential element of the day of resurrection that is prophetically announced. They are, in the words of the Apostle Paul "every spiritual blessing in Christ."¹⁸⁴ This prosperity is our heritage. The Hebrew for "Save us" is *howshiy`aah*. This is what the population of Jerusalem shouted when Jesus entered the city riding a donkey. Matthew tells us: "The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Hosanna in the highest!'"¹⁸⁵ This psalm is quoted twice in the same chapter of Matthew's Gospel.¹⁸⁶ The very fact that the population of Jerusalem shouted the words of this psalm at Jesus' entry proves that they associated this psalm with the coming of the Messiah. We seldom realize how close it came to the realization of this prophecy on the day which we now call "Palm Sunday." It is useless to speculate about what would have happened if, in Jesus' own words "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace..."¹⁸⁷ We will never know what could have happened.

On the basis of vs. 26, commentators have reconstructed a scene in which there are two groups of people, one inside the temple and the other approaching the temple gate. The fulfillment of the prophecy of this verse took place when the glory of the Lord returned to the temple, as prophesied by Malachi: " 'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty."¹⁸⁸ The glory of the Lord had left the temple, as seen in Ezekiel's vision¹⁸⁹ and it returned in the person of Jesus Christ. Matthew describes the scene in his Gospel: "Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. 'It is written,' he said to them, ' 'My house will be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a 'den of robbers.' The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple area, 'Hosanna to the Son of David,' they were indignant. 'Do you hear what these children are saying?' they asked him. 'Yes,' replied Jesus, 'have you never read, ' 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise'?" And he left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night."¹⁹⁰

The priests who served in the temple when Jesus entered did not bless Him in the Name of the Lord. They asked Him: "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?"¹⁹¹ So the builders of the temple rejected the stone. They knew what they ought to have done because they were familiar with the prophecy of this psalm but they did not bless their Messiah from the house of the Lord. They asked Him for His identification papers. As it turned out they themselves had no authority to do so. From that time on, the church of Jesus Christ has sung: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD" because we expect the return of the glory of the Lord.

The fact that the Lord has made His light shine is related to His person. "The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us." Isaiah clarifies what this light is. We read in his prophecy about the suffering Messiah: "Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities."¹⁹²

¹⁸³ Gen. 45:26

¹⁸⁴ Eph. 1:3

¹⁸⁵ Matt. 21:9

¹⁸⁶ See Matt. 21:9,24

¹⁸⁷ See Luke 19:41-44

¹⁸⁸ Mal. 3:1

¹⁸⁹ See Ezek. ch. 9-11

¹⁹⁰ Matt. 21:12-17

¹⁹¹ See Matt. 21:23-27

¹⁹² Isa. 53:10,11

This speaks of His resurrection from the dead. God raised His Son from the dead because He is the Lord. Jesus Himself says: "He is not the God of the dead but of the living."¹⁹³ This psalm is full of the resurrection.

The rest of vs. 27 "With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar" is open to various translations. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "[Bind the sacrifice with cords] The Chaldee paraphrases this verse thus: 'Samuel the prophet said, Bind the little one with chains for a solemn sacrifice, until ye have sacrificed him and sprinkled his blood on the horns of the altar.' It is supposed that the words refer to the feast of tabernacles, and *chag*... here means the festival victim. Several translate the original 'keep the festival with thick boughs of the horns of the altar.' In this sense the Vulgate and Septuagint understood the passage. David in this entry into the temple was a type of our blessed Lord, who made a similar entry, as related in Matt. 21:8-10." The Interlinear Hebrew Bible reads literally: "Bind the sacrifice, with cords even unto the horns of the altar." The word *chag* can either mean "a festival, or a victim therefor." The word rendered with "bows" or "cords" is *`abothah* which means "something entwined, i.e. a string, wreath or foliage." The RSV translates the verse with: "Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar!" The JB reads: "With branches in your hands draw up in procession as far as the horns of the altar." A footnote in that Bible adds: "Lit. 'Inaugurate the ceremony with branches up to the horns of the altar.'" The NIB suggests: "... to us the ordered line of pilgrims by the horns of the altar." Good News: "With branches in your hands, start the festival." The Amplified Bible gives us the variation: "Decorate the festival with leafy boughs..." The line which renders the verse with "With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar," as the NIV has it, seems more logical that the ones that tie the sacrificial animals to the altar. The Bible says nowhere that sacrificial animals were tied to the horns of the altar. One has the impression that those that took palm branches and followed the crowd at Jesus' triumphal entrance in Jerusalem followed the NIV's interpretation. The air was full of this psalm at that moment. Thus, this prophecy was fulfilled. On the other hand one could say that, on that day, Jesus was tied to the horns of the altar. It is amazing to see how the Holy Spirit can use words that are open to such different interpretations. He seems to play with human language more than we can do. A friend of mine once remarked that sacrificial animals were never tied in the Bible. The only sacrifice that was ever tied down was Isaac. "Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood."¹⁹⁴

All of this gives a wonderful depth to the last two verses of this psalm. There is the spontaneous expression of love and adoration, "You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you" as well as the more liturgical "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever." The psalm ends the same way it began. Everything that was prophesied here was fulfilled in the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was an expression of God's enduring love and goodness.

¹⁹³ Matt. 22:32

¹⁹⁴ Gen. 22:9

PSALM ONE HUNDRED NINETEEN

This study is the result of notes taken during my personal devotions in the year 1991, which has become for me the year of Psalm 119, since it took me several months to finish my reading and study of the psalm.

The Tyndale Commentary has some excellent synthesis of this Psalm, (pp. 416-429). The psalm is the best-known example of an acrostic, that is, a poem in which each one of the twenty-two stanzas starts with one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph through Taw. Other examples of this kind of poetry we find in the Psalms 9 and 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145.

There is no indication as to who the author of this psalm may have been. He lived in a world in which the Word of God was devalued. He was deeply conscious of the creative power of the Word. He realized that it was the key to life out of death. And he knew that he himself lived in the shadow of death and that his nature had been affected to the core by death. We could consider this psalm to be a prayer for immortality.

The psalm shows the personal character of the psalmist, but more important than that, it is the Word of God as an expression of the character of God. The two stand next to one another in this psalm, and the psalm is built on the relationship of the one to the other and the interplay between the two. The psalm deals with God's speaking to man and man's reaction to the Word of God. It is as we read in Hebrews: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..."¹⁹⁵ Actually the whole psalm should be interpreted in the light of "the Word that became flesh." The theme is the testimony of Jesus Christ.

In our time in which "the battle of the Bible" is still going on, this psalm stands as a solid testimony that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

According to Kidner in *The Tyndale Commentary*, there are eight synonyms which are used in this psalm for the Word of God. I will cite these briefly:

1. **Tora** = Law. "Its parent verb means 'teach' (vs. 33) or 'direct'; therefore, coming from God it means both 'law' and 'revelation'. It can be used of a single command or of a whole body of law, especially the Pentateuch, or again of Scripture as a whole."
2. **Edot** = Testimonies. "As such it is translated in vs. 24. Israel was told to place the book of the law beside the ark of the covenant, 'that it may be there for a witness against you' (Deut. 31:26)." See also John 5:45. On the other hand the Scripture does give a positive, non condemning testimony about Jesus, which our Lord mentions in John's Gospel.¹⁹⁶
3. **Piqqudim** = Precepts. "This is a word drawn from the sphere of an officer or overseer, a man who is responsible to look closely into a situation and take action." It speaks of the authority of Him who has power over man.
4. **Huqqim** = Statutes. "These speak of the binding force and permanence of Scripture, as of laws 'engraved' or inscribed." It makes us think of the stone tablets on which the ten commandments were inscribed.¹⁹⁷
5. **Miswot** = Commandments. "This word emphasizes the straight authority of what is said; not merely the power to convince or persuade, but the right to give orders."
6. **Pispatim** = Ordinances. "These are better known in the Old Testament as 'judgments': the decisions of the all-wise Judge about common human situations,¹⁹⁸ and hence the revealed 'rights and duties' appropriate to them. Scripture, then, as the standard given for fair dealing between man and man, is a predominant sense of this term."
7. **Dabar** = Word. "This is the most general term of all, embracing God's truth in any form, stated, promised or commanded."
8. **Imra** = Promise, or Word. "This is very similar to the previous term, and is translated 'word' in AV, RV throughout the psalm."

The reaction of the psalmist to the Word of God is expressed in three words:

¹⁹⁵ Heb. 1:1,2

¹⁹⁶ John 5:39

¹⁹⁷ See Isaiah 30:8

¹⁹⁸ cf. Ex. 21:1; Dt. 17:8^a, 9^b

- a. 'delight', as in the verses 14,16, 111;
- b. 'love', which goes deeper, as in the verses 47,48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 132, 140, 159, 163 and 167;
- c. 'fear' in the sense of awe as in the verses 120 and 161.

The result of being occupied with the Word of God is expressed in words as 'freedom', as in the verses 45, 96 and 133, 'light,' as in the verses 105, 130, where light has a moral value. It does not only give sight but insight.

And finally, the Word is the source of life. Verses 144, 149, 156, 159 and of stability, as in the verses 23, 49, 50 and 165.

We will see how struggle and victory and the deep emotions that accompany them become evident in the various stanzas.

1. à ALEPH vs. 1-8

"The undivided heart"

1 Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.

2 Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.

3 They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways.

4 You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.

5 Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!

6 Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.

7 I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.

8 I will obey your decrees; do not utterly forsake me.

The psalm opens with a beatitude, just like the first psalm, with which this has much in common. We think of the nine-fold *makarioi* Jesus pronounces to announce the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. The key of the Kingdom is the Word of God that changes the lives of men so that they become partakers of God's holiness.

This first stanza makes clear that God diminishes in no way His demand for holiness. We cannot bargain with Him. It remains true that without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Vs. 5 shows that the psalmist is aware of the fact that he is far from this goal for his life. It even becomes clear that the goal is unreachable. Yet there is no despair in these verses. If we occupy ourselves with the Word of God, our real condition is unveiled; but it is in occupying ourselves with the Word that the creative power of the Word becomes operative in us. It is true that we are a new creation in Jesus Christ and that much that is stated in this psalm belongs to that which is past for us.¹⁹⁹ Yet we can identify quite clearly with the psalmist in his struggle for holiness even though the basis of our hope is so much stronger than his.

This first stanza sets the tone for the whole psalm. In searching the Scripture, we are searching for God Himself. If Bible study is not intended to seek Him with all our heart, then it is useless. The reproach that the psalmist is more intent upon the law of God than upon God Himself is ungrounded. God is at the core. Eternal life is "to know Him" as Jesus says in John's Gospel: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."²⁰⁰ To love God is the great commandment from which all the other commandments draw their value. Love for God cannot be separated from obedience to the Word of God. To be blameless is identical with walking according to the law of the LORD. Our vision of the Bible will determine our walk in life, and our walk will demonstrate our attitude toward the Word of God more than any confession by mouth can do.

In the natural it is impossible to be blameless before God. It is not just a matter of knowing the will of God and doing it. The testimony of the law is not a list of more precepts which we have to follow, but the receiving of new life in Jesus Christ.

¹⁹⁹ II Cor. 5:17

²⁰⁰ John 17:3

Paul says: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."²⁰¹ We have to understand this paradox in this way that it would be impossible for us to obey except for the person of Jesus Christ, who died for us and was raised for us. This paradox is the guideline for this psalm. In Christ we are blameless before God.

Shortly after my conversion I had my personal "battle for the Bible." In the opinion of the existentialists I probably committed intellectual suicide. But the first verse of this Psalm pronounces me blessed.

The verses 1 and 2 deal with our relationship to God and vs. 3 to our neighbor. These two are inseparable. Jesus puts the two together by saying: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."²⁰² The Apostle John dedicates a whole chapter to the subject, and he finishes by saying "Whoever loves God must also love his brother."²⁰³

The expression "They do nothing wrong" in vs. 3 means "not being unfair" toward others. We find a lot of misunderstanding, and even hypocrisy at this point. It is easy to work yourself up to the point where you think you love God. The thermometer is the love for our neighbor. Ultimately, God will judge us primarily on this point, if I understand correctly the implication of the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew's Gospel.²⁰⁴

We have the tendency to judge people who are socially hyperactive, and who do not share our dedication to God. It is possible to exercise neighborly love as a substitute or a compensation. There is a danger of being socially moved instead of loving God. But we should not miss the point in the above-mentioned parable, where the righteous are unaware of the fact that what they did was done unto the Lord!²⁰⁵ The correct requirement is, of course, if we consciously love God above everything and our neighbor as ourselves. Blessedness is love as obedience to the law of God.

The psalmist stresses the fact that he is seeking. This indicates that sin has brought us into a complicated and unsatisfying situation from which we seek to escape. The phrase also shows that seeking after God is identical with learning and obeying His Word. The law is an expression of God's character. God reveals Himself both in His creation and in His Word. The Word, in its written and spoken form, is the more important of these two modes of revelation for us. In Jesus Christ these two have become one. The Word that created all became creation and dwelt among us. The all-encompassing passion of our lives should be as Paul expresses it: "...to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."²⁰⁶ Jesus Himself tells us that we have to remain in Him and His words remain in us.²⁰⁷ The fact that the Word of God became flesh does not annul the written word. To be blameless and to walk according to the law of the LORD and to keep His statutes means remaining in Him and His word in us.

Vs. 4 says that God's commandments require commitment although no physical force is ever exerted to make one obey. Obedience comes from love, and as we have seen already, love is a choice; it is a matter of the heart. It is in this that we find at the same time the beauty of this psalm and the struggle. If we really want to obey, we ought to have a heart that is in harmony with the heart of God: and this, the human heart is not. Ever since sin entered the world, our heart is deceitful and unreliable. That is why vs. 5 starts with the plaintive little word "oh!" The moral unreliability of the psalmist prevents him from bringing up the zeal and steadfastness that are required. Even if he makes up his mind to be steadfast, it would turn out that there are forces in him that weaken his resolve. We find in these verses something of Paul's "wretched man that I am!"²⁰⁸ But the psalmist does not come to the point that he can claim Christ's victory as Paul did.

The to be "put to shame" in vs. 6 expresses the tension in which man lives. The feeling of shame is the result of the difference in tension between what we ought to be and what we are. It is seeing the reality of God's character and the condition of His image within us that makes us feel ashamed. That is why

²⁰¹ Rom. 3:21

²⁰² Matt. 22:37-40

²⁰³ I John 4:21

²⁰⁴ Matt. 23:31-46

²⁰⁵ See Matt. 25:37-40

²⁰⁶ Phil. 3:10

²⁰⁷ John 15:7

²⁰⁸ Rom. 7:24

people put on a mask in order to deny the reality of their own battered condition. We think that it is less embarrassing if we can put the blame on others or on circumstances. But we panic when we find ourselves naked before the throne of God, of whom we read: "Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them."²⁰⁹

Steadfastness is a requirement for the keeping of God's commandments. On the other hand the Word of God has a stabilizing influence upon man. A regular and consistent study of the Word of God will take the ups and down's out of our life. The opposite of shame is confidence. The Word of God will work confidence in us. John says this in a deep way: "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him."²¹⁰

Finally, studying the Bible will bring about praise of God. Vs. 8 indicates that reading the Bible will not produce fruit without the help of the Holy Spirit. If we are left to an act of our own will, there is little or no hope that we will produce fruit. Paul says: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."²¹¹

It sounds strange when the psalmist says: "do not utterly forsake me." It sounds as if a partial forsaking is to be expected. We live in a world in which perfect and uninterrupted fellowship with God is not possible. We hear a prophetic sample of the utter God forsakenness around which the whole history of salvation turns: "Eli, Eli Lama sabakhtani?"

2. **á BETH** Vs. 9-16

"Stored Treasures"

9 How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.

10 I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

12 Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees.

13 With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.

14 I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

15 I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.

16 I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

Every line in this stanza starts with the letter "Beth," just as the other stanzas begin with the letter of the Hebrew alphabet under which they are grouped.

The opening question in vs. 9 suggests that the writer is still a young man himself. The interesting feature of this verse is, in the first place, the fact that the psalmist is conscious of the danger of being young; and furthermore, that purity should be an integral part of youth. He does not seek purity, but he does not want to soil the purity with which God has endowed him. We should not draw the theological conclusion from this that man is born without a tendency to sin. Nothing in this psalm suggests that pollution comes only from the outside.

If we remember Jesus' image of the narrow gate and the narrow path, we can say that this young man went through the gate. He made the decision, and he is walking on the path. The Hebrew epistle speaks of Jesus as the One Who leads us to glory. "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."²¹² Here, too, we see before us the path that leads to glory and the guide, which is the Word of God. The New Testament makes clear that there is more involved than studying words that are printed on paper. It is a matter of walking in the footprints of a Person. Purity consists in following Jesus. This purity is the blamelessness of vs. 1. It means that the blood of Jesus Christ purifies our lives, so that every accusation that is brought to us loses its power. This purity is not our own, but the purity of Jesus Christ, that is imputed to us.

²⁰⁹ Rev. 20:11

²¹⁰ I John 4:17

²¹¹ Phil. 2:13

²¹² Heb. 2:10

Knowledge of the written Word is important because we will not know ourselves if we do not read it. The testimony of our own experiences is insufficient.

Seeking after God with the whole heart is mentioned twice (verses 2 and 10). In both cases it is mentioned in the same breath as the keeping of God's commandments. Once a man sets himself to seek God with his whole heart, the greatest obstacle has been removed. Our greatest enemy in our relationship with God is half-heartedness. A divided mind is identical with doubt. A united heart builds up faith. On the human level, this was Jesus' secret. There was no obstacle between Him and the Father. That is why He was able to perform such astounding miracles. This is what Jesus Himself explains when He says: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."²¹³ This means that in Him our divided heart will be healed. We will be able to seek and love God with all our heart only if Jesus Christ and the Bible become our guide in this. Fellowship with Him keeps us from straying away. Ever since the cross of Golgotha, there are no more obstacles from God's side. The Father will come running towards us and embrace us if He sees us coming in the distance. Our problem is to get up and go to the Father.

It is also clear that man who is left to himself loses his way. Just as our body does not decompose as long as there is life in it, so are we kept from going astray only by the life of God in us. The Word of God that we hide in our heart is a living Word. This does not mean that we should avoid committing parts of the Bible to memory. It is nonsense at this point to make a distinction between the spoken or written Word and the Spirit of Jesus Christ in us.

The parable of the sower shows us that the key to the secret of the Kingdom of Heaven consists in the sowing of the Word of God in the heart of men where it bears fruit. When the psalmist says that he seeks God with all his heart and that he hides the Word of God in his heart, he gives evidence of the fact that he is part of the good ground where the Word of God can grow and multiply.

We also learn from vs. 11 that the living Word is the best antidote against sin. If we spend all our energy to seek Him and to occupy ourselves with His Word so that it becomes part of our being, sin will have little germinating power in our life.

The difference between the parable of the sower and vs. 11 of this psalm lies in the perspective. The Lord sows His Word in our heart, but we are the ones who have to receive it and to hold on to it. Without God's intervention in us there would be no life and no hope, but we are not passive in all of this. Salvation and blessing consist of the hearing and obeying of God's Word. Luke tells us: "As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.' " He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it,"²¹⁴ implying that in doing this Jesus is formed in us.

I wonder if the phrase "Praise be to you, O LORD" (vs. 12), goes with the "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (vs. 11), or with "teach me your decrees." The latter seems more logical to me. The continuity between verses 11 and 12 lies in the fact that we learn as we pass on. The Word of God will take shape in us in the measure that we pass it on. This is the blessing of giving testimony. There is no contradiction between hiding the Word of God in our heart and proclaiming it. That which comes out of our mouth must have taken root in our heart first. Our lips produce the fruit of what grows inside us.

The KJV speaks about "the way of Thy testimonies"; the NIV says "following your statutes." (vs. 14). The idea is to put into practice what God has ordained. These three always go together: the heart, the mouth, and the hand. The psalmist has discovered that a man becomes richer inwardly as he puts God's statutes into practice. Inner riches are the most important. Hollywood demonstrates the emptiness of millionaires who go through life with empty hearts. A man who knows the Bible and understands it and who has the Holy Spirit in his heart is rich.

If we meditate upon God's Word, as vs. 15 suggests, we use the critical functions of our intellect. This does not mean Bible criticism in the negative sense of the word, such as is practiced by higher criticism. God's commandments appeal equally to our intellect as to our emotions. The rejoicing in following God's statutes as the rejoicing in great riches obviously speaks of the former. The key to both the head and the heart is found in the will. If we meditate upon God's Word in order to see whether we are

²¹³ John 14:12-14

²¹⁴ Luke 11:27,28

going to obey them or not, we don't get anywhere. But if we place our will on the basis of obedience, then it turns out that God's Word does not lay any burden on our intellect which is too heavy to bear. Our mind will even start to function more efficiently and soundly as we start to ponder the Word of God. This sounds like a paradox, but in as much as we surrender our intelligence to the reign of God, the more independently we will start to think.

The tone of the second part of this stanza is merry and joyful. Vs. 12 begins with a praise. "Praise be to you, O LORD." In vs. 16 we read: "I delight in your decrees." The latter points to a unity between our will and the will of God so that God's decrees become a natural expression of our own will as they are of God's will. This is not "brain washing." It is rather a healing of our sick thinking, feeling and wanting. We are being brought back to the original condition in which we experience the doing of God's will as the fulfillment of our natural desires. In the same way as our body reacts positively on the function for which we are created, so our spirit will rejoice in our willing the will of God. Our relationship with God rests on the obedience of our heart.

In the KJV the verses 15 and 16 are translated as future tenses. This would make these verses a prophecy of things to come at the arrival of the Holy Spirit. That is why Jesus could say: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me."²¹⁵

3. **â GIMEL** Vs. 17-24

"Solace in loneliness"

17 Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word.

18 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

19 I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me.

20 My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.

21 You rebuke the arrogant, who are cursed and who stray from your commands.

22 Remove from me scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes.

23 Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.

24 Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors.

The word in vs. 17 that is translated with "do good" is "gamal" in Hebrew. The word has a rather vast significance. The Interlinear Hebrew Bible translates it with "grant." *Strong's Concordance* says: "Treat a person (well or ill)." A derived meaning is "to ripen" in the sense of making independent. A word derived from "gamal" is "to carry a burden."

In the light of the above, Jesus' words in acquire a new meaning as He says: "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."²¹⁶ So literally *gamal* means, "do something," no matter what. But because God is the Person addressed and because only good and perfect gifts come from above, according to James, God doesn't do anything but good.²¹⁷ It is the character of God that gives to the word *gamal* the meaning "do good." Also the words by Jesus in Matthew,²¹⁸ quoted above suggest that God does good in that He puts upon us a yoke that heals, the heaviest part of which is borne by Jesus Himself.

The Psalmist shows that what God does to us guarantees us that we shall live. We will die if we are left to ourselves. It is the life that comes to us from God that will enable us to go good ourselves. Life here is, in the first place, spiritual life that gives moral insight. The Gospel of John says the same thing "In him was life, and that life was the light of men."²¹⁹ This lets us conclude that God's doing good to us actually is His giving of Jesus Christ.

We need the life of God in order to be able to keep the commandments. In other words, without the Holy Spirit in us it would be impossible to be obedient. This truth is reinforced in vs. 18: "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." The writer of that beautiful hymn "Open my eyes, that I may

²¹⁵ John 14:21

²¹⁶ Matt. 11:29

²¹⁷ See James 1:17

²¹⁸ Matt. 11:29

²¹⁹ John 1:4

see, glimpses of truth Thou hast for me,” obviously found his inspiration in this verse. The depth of God’s Word is invisible to the naked eye. The word “open” is *galah* in Hebrew. Strong translates this “denude.” *The Tyndale Commentary* draws a line to the taking away of the veil, as Paul says: “But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”²²⁰

We find the same word in Numbers where we read: “Then the LORD ‘opened’ Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell face down.”²²¹ It should be clear that the Lord wants us to do more than just see things that are invisible to the natural eye. A complete inner transformation is needed to be able to obtain insight in the wonders of the law. Actually, we should be more amazed about the fact that we can live among the wonders without seeing them. God reproaches Israel that they do not use their ears to hear and their eyes to see and their heart to understand. We read in Isaiah: “He said, ‘Go and tell this people: “‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.’”²²²

As Jesus uses the parables in Matthew, He picks up this reproach. We read: “The disciples came to him and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: ‘ though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘ ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”²²³

This reproach is also implied in the epistles to the seven churches in Asia. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”²²⁴ The above is the alternative when God does not open our eyes. There is no question of a new revelation, but of seeing that which has already been revealed. From Jesus’ explanation of Scripture to His disciples, we understand that the Old Testament was written in code and that Jesus deciphered this code for us. He was the first One whose eyes were opened to see the wonderful things of the law. But in Luke’s Gospel we read: “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”²²⁵ And the Apostle Paul says that the veil over our minds is removed in Jesus Christ. “But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away.”²²⁶

The opening of our eyes takes place during a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Cleopas and his friend testify to this when they say about Jesus’ Bible lessons: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”²²⁷

In Peter’s comment on the attitudes of the prophets and angels toward the Gospel, it also becomes clear how marvelous the Scriptures are. “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.”²²⁸ From this we

²²⁰ II Cor. 3:16-18

²²¹ Num. 22:31

²²² Is. 6:9,10

²²³ Matt. 13:10-17

²²⁴ See Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13 and 22

²²⁵ Luke 24:45

²²⁶ II Cor. 3:14

²²⁷ Luke 24:32

²²⁸ I Peter 1:10-12

understand that insight into the Old Testament is related to an understanding of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible becomes a living book only for those who have received pardon of sin by the blood of Christ and who have come to life through the Holy Spirit.

When the psalmist calls himself a stranger on earth, as in vs. 19, he confesses a fact, as well as a factor, that determines his conduct. The idea of being a stranger is also mentioned in vs. 54. This becomes clearer in the KJV than in the NIV. The KJV says: "Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage." In the NIV we read: "Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge." The pilgrim does not live in the country he tracks through. He is on his way to another destination. The image of a pilgrim is a common one in the Bible. In the life story of Abraham the word "stranger" or "alien" is found several times. Paul expresses the thought in different words: "Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord."²²⁹ Also Peter's first epistle is addressed "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."²³⁰ In Ephesians Paul uses the opposite of the concept when he says: "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household."²³¹

Our home is there where our roots entered the ground. In the spiritual sense of the word, our home is there where we receive spiritual nourishment. As born again Christians our home is there where God is: that is in Heaven. Therefore, the mentality that does not recognize God as the highest authority and does not accept His laws as the rules to live by and that does not live out of the forgiveness of sins is foreign to us. In a world that is influenced and governed by demons, where God is not recognized, we are strangers. The place we live may even be hostile to us. Having lived as a foreigner outside the country where I was born ever since I was 24 years old, I fully understand the spiritual significance of the word. The Greek word for "born-again," *gennethe anosen* can be translated as "born-again" or "born from above." Outside our birthplace, we are foreigners. If we were born in heaven we do not actually belong on earth.

Of course, it was never God's intention that we would be foreigners on earth. This earth used to belong to us and we belong to it; we were created out of its dust. God had appointed man to rule over the earth. Sin changed all this. We not only lost our authority, but the whole of creation turned against us. So being a foreigner on earth is as much the result of the fall as it is of redemption. It can be frustrating to be a foreigner in a foreign country; it is tragic if one is a foreigner in his own country. And such is our situation.

The prayer of the psalmist indicates that he is aware of the danger of getting used to his situation. Being a stranger, as vs. 19 expresses it, is not a physical condition, but a moral one. Not being able to see God's commandments would mean inner disintegration. We are in grave danger if we start losing our hunger for the Word of God.

The verses 18-20 contain the suggestion that we could easily get used to our position. If the world around us is no longer a strange place for us, then we no longer see the wonderful things of His law. It is good to sigh and long for a manifestation of God's law in this world. That is the same as the hungering and thirsting Jesus speaks about when He says: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."²³²

It should be clear, though, that God's commands are not hidden. We do not have to long for them in that sense of the word. The psalmist's difficulty was that the law of God was not written in his heart. The Holy Spirit had not yet come to fulfill the requirements of the law in the hearts of men. What Paul says: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, In order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit,"²³³ had not yet become a reality. This is the tension that is felt throughout the whole psalm.

²²⁹ II Cor. 5:6

²³⁰ I Pet. 1:1; 2:11

²³¹ Eph. 2:19

²³² Matt. 5:6

²³³ Rom. 8:1-4

“The arrogant, who are cursed” does not necessarily refer to other people. The psalmist may be aware of his own arrogance, or “pride,” as the KJV translates it, or “insolence” as it is given in the RSV. He knows the tendency of his own heart to stray and the dangers this entails. The scorn and contempt in vs. 22 are then not the feeling other people would have, but they express the objective truth that his own soul is polluted because of the sin that dwells within him. We are in a condition which, for men who are created in God’s image, dishonors God. The reproach Israel carried, as a nation was the fact that they had been slaves in Egypt. That is why God says to them in Joshua: “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.”²³⁴ For us the scorn of sin has been rolled away in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. We have been circumcised by the circumcision of Calvary through the Holy Spirit. In Colossians we read: “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.”²³⁵

The rulers who slander the psalmist and conspire against him may be humans or demons. In any case, wherever there is a conspiracy, we can be sure that the devil is behind it. We get the impression that the poet faces an overwhelming opposition. If men and devils turn against us and we find ourselves at odds that are too much for us, then the Word of God is our only hope. We find a clear example in the court case and the execution of our Lord Jesus Christ in which Jesus continuously falls back upon the words of the Bible.

It seems that the greater the outward pressure upon us, the greater the inward joy. The Bible shows us step by step the way out of the labyrinth in which the devil wants to keep us his prisoner. The key may be a simple verse from the Bible at which we clutch. The “pomp and circumstance” of the rulers who are gathered together can make an awesome impression on us. If we find ourselves standing in front of such a bar with a little Bible in our hands, we must make a ludicrous impression. But when God gives to the Apostle John the task to prophesy over many nations and people, he was given a little book as his only weapon. We in read in Revelation: “And I took the little book out of the angel’s hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter. And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings.”²³⁶

4. **ã DALETH** vs. 25-32.

“Revive me!”

25 I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.
26 I recounted my ways and you answered me; teach me your decrees.
27 Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders.
28 My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.
29 Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law.
30 I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws.
31 I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD; do not let me be put to shame.
32 I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.

Vs. 25 “I am laid low in the dust,” or as the KJV is translated: “My soul cleaveth unto the dust” is more than an image of the defeat of a corrupt nature. *The Interlinear Hebrew Bible* translates the word *dabak* “cleave” and *Strong* says that the root “impinge” means. *The Jerusalem Bible* translates it with “Down in the dust I lie prostrate.”

In his thoughts the psalmist goes back to the day when God first created man out of the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into him by which act man became a living soul. We read in Genesis: “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”²³⁷ “Man became a living soul” comes from the KJV. The introduction of sin into the world brought about a structural change in man, so that God could see no

²³⁴ Josh. 5:9

²³⁵ Col. 2:11

²³⁶ Rev. 10:10,11 (KJV)

²³⁷ Gen. 2:7

more in him than the dust from which he was formed. That is why we read after the fall: “for dust you are and to dust you will return.”²³⁸

So the psalmist sees himself returned to the elementary position, realizing how much damage sin had done. He prays for a repetition of the miracle of creation of that day when man first became a partaker of the divine life.

It is the Word of God that gives life: the Word in the widest sense as the Word that became flesh and the written Word. The prayer of the psalmist was answered in the Lord Jesus Christ, who breathed upon His disciples, so they would receive the Holy Spirit. We see this happen in John 20:22 “And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” At the same time “He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”²³⁹ We will only recognize the creative and life-giving power of the Word of God if we, ourselves, have been made alive by that Word. The miracle of creation, which we read about in Genesis 1 is repeated in the spiritual realm in the heart of each child of God. That is why Paul says “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”²⁴⁰ The psalmist must have tasted this, but he could as yet not drink his fill of the Holy Spirit as we can now.

In vs. 26 we read: “I recounted my ways and you answered me.” Or, as the RSV puts it: “When I told of my ways, thou didst answer me.” This seems to be the same kind of confession we are told to make in Proverbs: “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”²⁴¹

Intimacy and openness with God will keep us from stumbling. The answer the psalmist expects is that God will give him insight to make the right moral choices. But understanding the teachings and precepts is not something one does once for all. This learning process cannot be separated from a daily, personal fellowship with God.

If we understand something about the difference in proportions, it seems ridiculous to presume that if we share our plans with God, He will show us His plans and ways. Aren’t we too small to comprehend? It seems ridiculous to presume that if we share our plans with God, He will show us His plans and ways. Aren’t we too small to comprehend? Yet God does not look upon us as too small to share His secrets with us.

The reason for the weariness of sorrow is not stated in vs. 28. We may suppose it is not self-pity. It is probably related to the conspiracy of slander, which was mentioned in vs. 23. In the verse that follows here, “deceitful ways” are mentioned. It is possible, however, that the psalmist speaks about his own condition and that these words are an elaboration on the “cleaving to the dust” from vs. 25. Every human being is full of contradiction. Truth and deceit dance together on the floor of our heart. If we realize this, it is fitting to cry out in shame and sorrow. Through the grace of God, which is expressed in God’s laws and decrees, we receive healing through obedience. God’s giving of the law is an act of grace.

Before sin entered the world it was not necessary for God to tell man: “Thou shalt...!” And “Thou shalt not....!” God’s life in man was sufficient to give him insight in all that was needed to be morally right. The warning not to eat of the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” was meant to protect this life. Now man needs the law because he is dead. That is why the giving of the law is an act of grace although death in man prevents him from keeping the law. Whenever the Holy Spirit enters a life, the law of God is obeyed without any problem. As Paul says in Romans: “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”²⁴²

The verses 30-32 draw the big lines of the change that takes place, as seen from the perspective of man. George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, underlines three phrases:

1. “I have chosen.... (vs. 30)
2. “I cleave to.... (vs. 31)
3. “I will run.... (vs. 32).

These three decisions give the blueprint of the Christian life. God’s act of creation cannot be separated from our choice. We will probably never completely understand how the two fit together. It must

²³⁸ Gen. 3:19

²³⁹ Luke 24:45

²⁴⁰ II Cor. 4:6

²⁴¹ Prov. 3:6

²⁴² Rom. 8:3,4

be clear, however, that we will never become a new creation against our will. Walking on the narrow path starts with entering through the narrow gate, and that stands for our choice. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."²⁴³

The choice for the truth presupposes the possibility of choosing a lie. This takes us back to Genesis, where it all started. Eve chose the lie. Every human being will have to cancel that choice for himself by choosing the truth. Whosoever chooses the truth chooses reality and life and God. It is of vital importance to make this choice since we live in a world that is governed by a lie. We are being bombarded by the propaganda of the Evil One to the point that it exercises its influence upon us, unless we keep God's precepts continuously before us. This means in practice that we will have to renew our choice constantly. C. S. Lewis in his book *The Silver Chair* demonstrates this when Aslan says to the children: "Remember the signs!"

"Do not let me be put to shame" contains a world of significance. It suggests in the first place that faith is built upon invisible things. The appearance of things visible is against us. There are, however, promises in the Bible that assure us that, if we cast our lot upon God, we will not be put to shame. Paul says in Romans: "As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'"²⁴⁴

The following verse (32) speaks about the practical aspect of it in the image of the following of a path. It says: "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free." The Hebrew word *ruwt*, translated as "run," does indicate speed. It should amaze us to see a word like this in the context of a spiritual life. We are usually told that the essence of fellowship with God is found in quietness and tranquility. But evidently not all haste comes from the devil. It is haste at the wrong time and place, which is wrong. A balanced Christian takes time for fellowship with God, and the result is an abundance of activity in the fulfilling of his task. Paul admits to having worked harder than the other apostles he says: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them; yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."²⁴⁵ There is no place for laziness in the Kingdom of God, but on the other hand there is no place for activity without the rest of fellowship with God either!

Vs. 32 does not only speak about activity, it gives a reason for the running, viz. that the heart of the psalmist is "set free," as the NIV puts it. The KJV says: "when thou shalt enlarge my heart," and the RSV translates it with: "when thou enlargest my understanding!" The LB paraphrases it as: "If you will only help me to want your will." The JB interprets it as: "... since you have set me free." Finally the NEB: "... For they [thy commandments] gladden my heart." We can take all these shades of meaning as a stimulus to live for the Lord with all that is within us.

The difference between walking and running lies not only in the speed with which we move, but also in the energy we spend. The fact that "heart" can also be translated as "understanding," as the RSV does, or with "will" as the LB suggests, shows that they actively draw in man as a whole. This same thought is expressed in Deuteronomy: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."²⁴⁶ Jesus adds to this: "and with all your soul and with all your mind."²⁴⁷ Both our emotions and our intellect are involved as well as our will.

5. ä HE Vs. 33-40

"Teach me!"

33 Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end.

34 Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.

35 Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.

36 Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.

²⁴³ Matt. 7:13-14

²⁴⁴ Rom. 9:33

²⁴⁵ I Cor. 15:10

²⁴⁶ Deut. 6:5

²⁴⁷ Matt. 22:37

37 Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.

38 Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.

39 Take away the disgrace I dread, for your laws are good.

40 How I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness.

The same thought that concluded the last stanza is further elaborated upon in these verses. Teaching is not only directed to the intellect, it has to shape character. The psalmist asks that YHWH will be his private tutor. The subject is not only the law, but “the path of the commands” which is shown to us by God Himself. The path stands for the attitude and the goal of life. The Hebrew word that is translated with “to the end” may also include the meaning of reaching the goal and the reward that waits at the end. The man who observes God’s statutes will reach the goal of his life. The reaching of the goal is only possible in fellowship with God.

There are things we can learn only from a personal fellowship with God. Without a personal relation with the Father, it would be impossible to reach God’s goal for our life. That is why Jesus, when He gives the invitation to come, says: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.”²⁴⁸ God teaches us in drawing us to Jesus Christ. The path of the commands is in the fellowship with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. And the reaching of the goal is that Jesus will raise us at the last day.

It is nowhere more clearly stated than in vs. 34 that keeping and obeying the law is a matter of the intellect. To be obedient is a sign of intelligence. It is foolish to trespass. The psalmist is quite aware of the fact that God is the author of the human intellect. The problem of many intelligent people is that they miss this point. He also understands that intellect and understanding are not something static - something God has given once for all in its finished form - but that there is the possibility for understanding to grow or to diminish. And finally, he understands that things in the spiritual realm are accessible to the human intellect. This last statement takes the nerve out of the existentialist theory that spiritual matters belong to the “upper story” of human existence and that there is no bridge between them and the world below which is governed by the laws of logic and science.

The prayer for wisdom is part of a multiple request. In the positive sense the poet prays to be taught by God Himself, for direction on the path and for a heart that is turned toward God. We could ask the question to what point does God help us to be obedient? Obedience and disobedience are clearly our personal responsibility. But we find ourselves in the complicated situation in which we face a power stronger than ourselves, and which we created ourselves. Only God can help to get us out of this stalemate. It may be true that we receive credit for our obedience, but it turns out to be the grace of God if we really become obedient.

The Word Biblical Commentary translates “selfish gain” in vs. 36 “material gain.” The word “batsa” has often the connotation of a dishonest gathering of goods. The concept is that of what we call in modern times “materialism.”

The “worthless things” mentioned in vs. 37 evoke the image Solomon calls up in Ecclesiastes “‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ Says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless,’ ”²⁴⁹ or as the KJV puts it: “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” Objectively considered, there are no things that can be called “vanity” in the sense in which Ecclesiastes calls them so. The rhythm of nature, which God created, has value and meaning. Everything is made by the *logos*, and that guarantees its value. Vanity is in man who does not see the relationship between the Creator and creation. If, in vs. 37, the psalmist prays to be kept from seeing “worthless things” he indicates that he wants to see everything in relationship with God. Every philosophy that does not take God into account leads to death. Looking at the world in the light of God makes us alive, as the parallel phrase of this verse suggests. The RSV translates vs. 37 with: “Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; and give me life in thy ways.” To be made alive in God’s ways is a physical impossibility. Where there is no life there are no ways. The giving of life probably stands for the abundance of it as Jesus promises: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ John 6:44,45

²⁴⁹ Eccl. 1:2

²⁵⁰ John 10:10

The last part of vs. 37 - give me life in thy ways, (RSV) runs parallel to the end of vs. 40 - "in thy righteousness give me life!" (RSV). This translation seems to be closer to the original than the NIV's rendering "Preserve my life in your righteousness." We have to remember that it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ which covers us before God. As the Apostle Paul says: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."²⁵¹ Not only are we covered and made alive by God's righteousness, in Christ we become God's righteousness! That is the essence of the promise that is mentioned in vs. 38.

In a way it is a good thing that we only experience part of this transformation during our time on earth. A full realization of God's righteousness in us would spoil us completely. It is better when other people recognize God's righteousness in us than that we do so ourselves. That is why the psalmist asks for a confirmation. Not because God's promises would not be trustworthy, but we cannot trust our own senses. It is good if we have to ask ourselves "Is this really true?"

The disgrace of vs. 39 is not the only result of personal sin, but also the pollution of the world in which we live affects our human dignity. God has rolled this indignity off of us, and He rolled it on Jesus Christ. As Isaiah says: "He was despised and rejected by men,... and we esteemed him not."²⁵²

It is true, of course, that there exists a relationship between disgrace and disobedience. It was disobedience that brought about disgrace. The disobedience of one man introduced disgrace. Adam felt naked and he was ashamed. Objectively considered, there is no reason to feel shame because of one's sexual organs. One could just as well feel shame on account of one's ears or nose. But sexuality represents intimacy. After the fall, intimacy with God became impossible; and intimacy with fellow humans needed a mask. That accounts for the feeling of shame in our lives.

God's law leads us on the way of healing. We don't need to feel ashamed before God any longer. The circumcision at Gilgal is a beautiful picture of healing and rehabilitation. In Joshua we read: "Then the LORD said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.' So the place has been called Gilgal to this day."²⁵³ The rolling away of the reproach is the same kind of gesture as the rolling away of the stone of Jesus' tomb. Death is the greatest reproach man can suffer. God rolled away the reproach of death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Paul cries out: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"²⁵⁴ he receives the same answer as the women at the tomb of Jesus. In Mark's Gospel it says: "And they asked each other, 'Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?' But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away."²⁵⁵ How heavy with significance are those words! A bigger rock of reproach and shame than death does not exist. By God's precepts we are made alive through the righteousness of Him who said: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."²⁵⁶ It is certainly appropriate to put a "Halleluiahs" here.

6. **WAW** Vs. 41-48.

"Words for others"

41 May your unfailing love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise;

42 Then I will answer the one who taunts me, for I trust in your word.

43 Do not snatch the word of truth from my mouth, for I have put my hope in your laws.

44 I will always obey your law, for ever and ever.

45 I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.

46 I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame,

47 For I delight in your commands because I love them.

48 I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees.

²⁵¹ II Cor. 5:21

²⁵² Isa. 53:3

²⁵³ Josh. 5:9

²⁵⁴ Rom. 7:24

²⁵⁵ Mark 16:3,4

²⁵⁶ John 11:25

The prayer of vs. 41 is more than a desire for salvation. “Unfailing love,” or as the KJV translates it “mercy” is a divine attribute. The Hebrew word is *hesed*, which is used for the essence of the covenant God made with Israel. God’s love rests on a legal basis. The JB translates this first sentence: “visited by your love.” The NEB says: “Thy love never fails.” When God’s unfailing love comes to us, we become partakers of His divine nature. According to the Apostle Paul, salvation stands for the Holy Spirit in us, which is the essence of His promise. We read: “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”²⁵⁷

This salvation also means our justification for our fellow human beings. The psalmist does not explain who is the one that taunts him. But we may be sure that behind any person who mocks us is a mocking demon. It appears, though, that the answer is given primarily to man. The Apostle Peter elaborates on this in by saying: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ (Or: ‘Do not fear their threats’ - [foot note]) But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”²⁵⁸ Peter probably had the Roman government in mind when he wrote this, but the principle expressed is equally valid among peers. The point is not that Christians should come out on top in a debate, but that the character of God be demonstrated in the life of a person. God will take care of the taunting. It is not up to us to take revenge, neither in word or deed. Whether we are taunted or reviled is not important. If God is taunted in us, God will have to defend Himself.

In one sense the life of a child of God is no personal matter only. Whether we want to or not, as soon as we openly take God’s side, we become public domain and criticism will soon enter the scene.

Vs. 43 shows that the answer to being reviled is in the hanging on to the Word of God. The Lord Jesus gives us an example, not only in the way He answers Satan during the temptation in the wilderness, but also in His answers to the scribes and Pharisees. Even His words on the cross are mainly quotations from the Bible. We have to learn to lean upon the Word of God and not upon our own insight when we answer taunting and reviling. But we need wisdom to handle the Word justly. Some people throw around Bible verses in a way in which the Holy Spirit is not present. Leaning upon the Word has to be accompanied by leaning upon the Holy Spirit. That is why the psalmist prays that God will not snatch away the Word from his mouth as the NIV puts it.

The answer for being reviled is the demonstration of God’s goodness in our lives; and the Word of God plays a very important role in this. The key is obedience to the Word. Jesus explains the principle. We read: “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.’”²⁵⁹ Obedience to the Word of God will make us free people.

The Tyndale Commentary says about this stanza: “... the word spoken is first of all the word appropriated (41), trusted (42b, 43b), obeyed (44), sought (45), and loved (47).” *The Pulpit Commentary* says about vs. 45, “And I will walk at liberty,”: “Reklabah” is literally an open square in a city, or a large open space. The man who obeys is a free man. The city square stands for both space and also for protection. A wall protected Cities in the olden days. The wall around the New Jerusalem is God Himself; therefore, the city is an open place. There images paint clearly the picture of the condition of the child of God who obeys. This inner freedom frees man of intimidation.”

The psalmist sees himself placed before the highest human authority, and he is aware of the value God has placed on him. Daniel is another Old Testament example of this attitude in his audiences with Nebuchadnezzar and with Belshazzar.²⁶⁰ To Nebuchadnezzar he says bravely: “Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.”²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Gal. 3:14

²⁵⁸ I Pet. 3:13-16

²⁵⁹ John 8:31,32

²⁶⁰ See Dan. 5:7-28

²⁶¹ Dan. 4:27

Chuck Colson, in one of his books, says that he was always deeply aware of the importance of his visits at the “Oval Office,” but after his conversion, he realized how relatively unimportant human authority was.

The most unique example is that of our Lord Jesus Himself, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the “good confession,”²⁶² as Paul puts it. We read in John’s Gospel: “Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ‘Is that your own idea,’ Jesus asked, ‘or did others talk to you about me?’ ‘Am I a Jew?’ Pilate replied. ‘It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?’ Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.’ ‘You are a king, then!’ Said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘you are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.’ ‘What is truth?’ Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, ‘I find no basis for a charge against him.’”²⁶³

Once I shook hands with President Soeharto of Indonesia, but I was so nervous that I could hardly get a word out!

In the last two verses the poet reaches the peak in expressing his transport about the Word of God. Vs. 47,48 say: “For I delight in your commands because I love them. I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees.” We cannot separate this delight in worship of and love for the Word of God from the person of God. Otherwise, it would be idolatry to say such things. About “I lift up my hands to your commands” a footnote in the JB says that this is a “gesture of veneration.” We can only venerate God’s Word if we venerate God. The one cannot take the place of the other. It does not mean the worship of a book. It is no sin to put a hymnbook, or any other book for that matter, on top of a Bible as some people think.

7. æ ZAYIN Vs. 49-56.

“Steadying Words”

49 Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope.

50 My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.

51 The arrogant mock me without restraint, but I do not turn from your law.

52 I remember your ancient laws, O LORD, and I find comfort in them.

53 Indignation grips me because of the wicked, who have forsaken your law.

54 Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge.

55 In the night I remember your name, O LORD, and I will keep your law.

56 This has been my practice: I obey your precepts.

It sounds strange that the psalmist should remind God of His Word to him as if it would be possible for God to forget what He had said. The purpose of this kind of language is to remind us to whom we are speaking. The fact that God is omniscient makes it impossible that He would forget, and this is a great encouragement to us.

The psalmist does not give us any details about the content of the Word. Vs. 50 mentions a promise and in vs. 55, the Name of the Lord is given in the same context. God’s Name stands for His being and His character. But the effect the Word of God has upon the psalmist is elaborated on extensively. In vs. 49 it gives hope; in vs. 50, it comforts and gives life as the RSV translates it or preserves life according to the NIV. In vs. 54 the writer finds aesthetic enjoyment in the Word.

The first two verses of this stanza are particularly applicable to our Lord Jesus Christ. He went to the cross on the basis of the eternal covenant that had been made between the Father and the Son, about which the writer to the Hebrews speaks. “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....”²⁶⁴ It would have been very appropriate if Jesus had quoted these verses on His way to the cross: “Remember your word to your

²⁶² See I Tim. 6:13

²⁶³ John 18:33-38

²⁶⁴ Heb. 13:20

servant, for you have given me hope. My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.” The Father’s promise was the guarantee for His resurrection. In the same light we may read these verses for ourselves. If “preserving” or “giving” of life meant nothing more than making our mortality bearable, the comfort would not go very deep. Our hope in the Word of God is our resurrection and the glory which is connected to that.

That is why it is so important to stick to this Word when the “arrogant” come with “the hard facts.” It is a matter of life and death. The psalmist describes the people who stand on the side of death and corruption as “arrogant.” Actually, these people should be the most depressed of all. Only Christians have no reason to be depressed.

The author calls God’s laws “ancient” in vs. 52. The KJV says “judgments of old.” There is no such thing as “new morality.” Good and bad are unchangeable and absolute standards. That is a comforting thought. It is also not true that morality is only a private matter. Vs. 53 says: “Indignation grips me because of the wicked, who have forsaken your law.” We should be indignant because the eternal standards are being abandoned. We realize, though, that the reduction of the absolute to a relative matter and the consequent abandoning of it is almost as old as the standards themselves. Throughout the ages people have either bowed before God’s law or resisted it. In principle there is little difference between the situation in the days of the psalmist and the time of Cain and Abel. Two centuries ago the French revolution flooded Western Europe, and the “Anti Revolutionaries” resisted the slogan “No God, no master.”

From this public, and we could almost say, political scene, the psalmist withdraws into his inner room. In vs. 54 he sings in his bedroom. “Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge.” In the Dutch translation it says: “Your decrees are to me music on a stringed instrument”; but all the English translations I know of translated the Hebrew word *zaniyr* with “songs.” The equivalent of *zaniyr* is *zemerah*, which is derived from the verb *zamar*, meaning, “to pluck.” The intent is clearly to make music. But what we would call absolute music, that is music without words, probably did not yet exist. This verse has a special attraction for me, since music has played an important role in my life. “Wherever I lodge” is rendered in the KJV with “the house of my pilgrimage.” Some commentators see this as a reference to the Babylonian captivity. We could also take this as the human body in which we have our temporal abode, the inn or motel in which I spend the night, there I play the music of home. The precepts of God are like music in a foreign country. But pilgrimage means more than being in a foreign country. *Magur* means both foreign country and pilgrimage. The steps of a pilgrim are directed toward a well-defined goal, more than those of a foreigner. There sounds a melancholic tone in the expression “the house of my pilgrimage.” The songs from home and the voyage of the pilgrim should be full of joy and happiness.

Being a foreigner determines at the same time the kind of music we listen to. For me it is no relaxation to listen to Indonesian music in Irian Jaya. I need the music I know from childhood. “Your decrees” give me joy and relaxation! They speak to me in the depth of my soul.

It would be rather impractical to “remember the name of the Lord and keep His law” at night, unless one would commit substantial portions to memory. It is a salutary and useful exercise to saturate one’s memory with the Word of God. Vs. 56 says: “This has been my practice: I obey your precepts.” The RSV translates it with: “This blessing has fallen to me, that I have kept thy precepts.” Another possible translation would be, “This has become my share,” suggesting possession and riches.

Remembering the Name of the Lord is an effort to imagine who God is. We will be occupied throughout eternity with the knowing of God. The Apostle John sees Him, seated on the throne of heaven: “And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.”²⁶⁵ We have these words as a starting point. But how could this be all!

8. § HETH Vs. 57-64

“With all my heart”

57 You are my portion, O LORD; I have promised to obey your words.

58 I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise.

59 I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes.

60 I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands.

²⁶⁵ Rev. 4:3

61 *Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law.*

62 *At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.*

63 *I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts.*

64 *The earth is filled with your love, O LORD; teach me your decrees.*

The Good News Bible translates “You are my portion, O LORD” with “You are all I want, O LORD.” The verse is a reminder of the arrangement God made for Aaron and the priests, that they would receive no heritage of land in Canaan. We read in Numbers: “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.’”²⁶⁶

It is possible that the author was a priest or a Levite himself. In that case these words would be literally true for him. It could also be that the psalmist understood that God had put the Levites up as an example of what would actually be true for each Israelite. Even if we have earthly possessions as children of God, we should deal with the world as though we had no dealings with it as the RSV puts it. “And those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away.”²⁶⁷ If God is our portion then we are unbelievably rich. To enjoy something or somebody on earth, as if that is all there is, means pauperism.

To enjoy things on earth and leave God out is sheer stupidity. To make YHWH my portion does not narrow things down, it enlarges them to an infinite extent. To do so means the summit of positivism; it is all encompassing. Dr. A.B. Simpson made this discovery, and he wrote the hymn: “First is was the blessing, now it is the Lord.” The priests and Levites were richer than the other Israelites, not poorer. All the other people had was an image of the real riches. The priests were the real rich; they had the original. For us “YHWH is my portion” means: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”²⁶⁸

This is why the most important and inspiring thing a man can do is to be occupied with the Word of God. It is a catastrophe if we are distracted and start doing things of secondary importance. Our problem, as people who live in this world, is that we are rarely able to put things in black and white like this. Sin has spread a thick blanket of fog over our awareness so all borders are wiped out and all contrasts disappear in the mist. It takes an act of the will, the binding effect of a promise to God, to have us keep the exact course.

There is, therefore, a direct connection between the knowledge that God is our portion and our being occupied with the Word of God. Jesus makes this clear when He says: “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”²⁶⁹ Obeying the commands, that is obeying the will of God, is a prerequisite of God’s revelation to us. There has to be a climate of obedience and love if we are to become conscious of God’s presence in our lives. I find myself returning over and over to the image C.S. Lewis uses in “*The Silver Chair*” when Aslan says: “Remember the signs!” If we do not remind ourselves of the Word of God continuously in this corrupted world, we lose our direction. It is good to make promises to the Lord that we will do this, but without God’s help and grace we will not put it into practice. That is why we need two promises: God’s and ours. It is my personal experience that, if we promise to have our quiet time, God will wake us up in time in the morning.

Vs. 59 says: “I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes.” We see here that our obedience to the Word of God immediately has a correcting effect upon us. Christian living consists mainly of a comparison between the image and the original. In our reading the Word of God we find ourselves, as images placed next to the original, God Himself, and the deviations become apparent. On our way to heaven we constantly have to have our course corrected.

Both the KJV and the RSV use the word “testimonies” instead of “statutes” in vs. 59, which is the translation of the word *edot*. If the law is called a testimony it means that it expresses a concrete situation; that there is a revelation in history of the will and character of God. We find a parallel in that the Christian faith is not called a dogma but a history of salvation. What God has done for us in history should stimulate our faith. We should remember constantly the facts of salvation, both in the Old Testament and in the

²⁶⁶ Num. 18:20

²⁶⁷ See I Cor. 7:31 (RSV)

²⁶⁸ Col. 1:27^b

²⁶⁹ John 14:21

New: the Incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. These facts will turn out to be more of an indication of the moral course of our lives than any precept.

One of our problems is that these facts of salvation are not within our field of vision, and, as far as our own spiritual experiences are concerned, we have “the gift” to forget things. Reality that stares us in the face comes to us from a godless world.

In vs. 61 the psalmist talks about the ropes of the wicked. “Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your law.” The RSV says: “Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget thy law.” The author realizes that he could easily be trapped. Forgetting the law always precedes falling into a snare.

To be able to sleep is a blessing of God. We read in one of the psalms: “In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat; for he grants sleep to those he loves.”²⁷⁰ But sometimes insomnia may be a blessing, as we read in vs. 62: “At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.” When it is dark the stimuli of the visible world fall away. We are alone with ourselves. For some people this is a frightening experience. It can also be a condition in which we are driven toward God. There is no better remedy against darkness in whatever form it may come than praise. For Paul and Silas it meant freedom from imprisonment as we read in Acts.²⁷¹ Their songs in the night were a clear testimony to their fellow cellmates and it brought about the conversion of the jailer. Apart from this kind of incident, praising God is a wholesome exercise that benefits us personally. Praise is always a blessing at any moment of the day or night.

It could be that “at midnight” suggests more than 12 o’clock at night. Possibly the psalmist speaks about the darkness of the godless. It is a good thing to resist darkness with praise. The devil can’t stand it when people really sing to glorify God.

It is easier to gain the victory if we fight in fellowship with other people who love the Lord. Vs. 63 seems to imply that: “I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts.” We could translate “all who fear you” with “all who take you seriously.” If we fear and obey, we show that we take God into account.

Very rarely are we aware of the fact that the visible things that threaten us are unnatural. What the devil tries to accomplish goes against God’s creation. There is enough left of the original glory of creation, even after the fall, to conclude that “The earth is filled with your love, O LORD” (vs. 64). From our perspective, that is, on the basis of the things we can see, we tend to react strongly to this statement. We see with our own eyes how one animal tears another one apart and how this world is full of cruelty. But the little voice inside us tells us that this is not the way things ought to be.

If we place ourselves next to the psalmist, we proclaim the profession of faith that says that, at the return of our Lord Jesus Christ, the fullness of God’s love on earth will be clearly visible again. The psalms and the prophet Isaiah say the same thing as our verse. “The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.”²⁷² “And they (the Seraphim) were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’”²⁷³ Glory and love, or mercy, or steadfast love, as the KJV and RSV put it, are not necessarily identical; but they are both characteristics of the same God.

It is important to see that the psalmist relates the essence of creation with God’s precepts. This shows that God’s law contains more than just moral guidelines that govern human behavior. The whole of creation in its original condition reflects God’s character. The great tragedy of the fall is that this fact is no longer clearly visible. A man, born and raised in sin, can look at creation and come to the conclusion that there is no trace of love and glory. The existentialist says that the objective world is our enemy. But the child of God can say: “The flower speaks to me. To me the weeds are alive. Everything God created greets me.” Or: “If the soul listens; it hears that everything alive speaks a language. Even the softest whisper has language and meaning. Clouds, sky and winds, those paths of God’s holy feet, speak and translate the deeply hidden word so sweetly. If the soul listens.” In those words the Flemish poet Guido Gezelle says the same things as the psalmist who writes: “Teach me your decrees.”

²⁷⁰ Psalm 127:2

²⁷¹ See Acts 16:25

²⁷² Ps. 33:5

²⁷³ Is. 6:3

9. è TETH Vs. 65-72

“Hard lessons learnt”

- 65. Do good to your servant according to your word, O Lord;**
66. Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands.
67. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.
68. You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.
69. Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart.
70. Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law.
71. It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.
72. The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

The writer shows deep insight in the purpose of suffering in this stanza. Together with the writer to the Hebrews, James, and Paul this portion of Scripture belongs to the important pronouncements about, what C.S. Lewis called *The Problem of Pain*. In Hebrews we read: “And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.’ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”²⁷⁴ James says: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”²⁷⁵ And the Apostle Paul writes: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”²⁷⁶ Verses 67 and 68 express this theme: “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.”

The psalmist comes to the conclusion that the goal God wants to reach in the life of man is ripeness and that affliction and hardship are the only routes to achieve this purpose. Therefore, we believe it is not true, what *The Pulpit Commentary* says, that God is good in the eyes of the psalmist, in spite of the affliction he experiences. God is good *in* the emergency. He talks about affliction when he says in vs. 65: “You are good, and what you do is good.” This is a true confession of faith. It shows that we, humans, don’t know ourselves what is good for us. We think affliction is harmful. It becomes evident, however, that being left alone, we go astray. Only when God starts to put pressure upon our life, do we start to know and distinguish what is good and bad. It is bad for us to be at ease. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews speaks about this subject.²⁷⁷ Maturity is shown in our ability to distinguish between good and evil, both objectively as well as subjectively.

This proves that obeying the commandments is not a mechanical act, which we perform without knowing what we do. God wants us to understand what we obey and why we obey. It is even more important for us, in whose heart the Holy Spirit has written the law.

The Word of God creates ripeness and maturity in us through affliction. Vs. 65 says: “Do good ... according to your word, O LORD.” But this is not an automatic process. I have to think, in connection

²⁷⁴ Heb. 12:5-11

²⁷⁵ James 1:2-4

²⁷⁶ II Cor. 12:7-10

²⁷⁷ See Heb. 5:11-14

with the above, of Sadu Sundar Singh's illustration of the butterfly that wrestled to work itself out of the cocoon. When Singh tried to help it by cutting the cocoon open, the butterfly got out without any problem, but it was unable to fly. Its struggle would have resulted in the blood, or juices of its body, entering the arteries of its wings; but now they hung down as if they were paralyzed.

The result of affliction is that we flee toward God. In that way our moral conscience is awakened and strengthened to the point where we reach spiritual maturity. So it is good that we come under so much pressure that we flee to God. Without the famine, the prodigal son would never have come to himself in the foreign country and returned home.

God's goodness comes to us in disguise. Once we are able to see through the disguise, we have reached the point of knowledge and understanding. James teaches us that on the basis of our faith we can adopt a positive attitude even before we are able to see through the disguise.

God does good to us according to His Word. If we know the Word of God, the painful trials will not seem strange to us. "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."²⁷⁸ Our painful experiences will throw new light on the sufferings of Christ.

This verse also makes us aware of the fact that without God we would not learn a thing. Affliction gives us self-knowledge. God allows us to see enough of ourselves so that we may conclude that it is better not to lean upon our own understanding because we cannot trust ourselves. The keeping of the Word of God is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Paul makes this clear to us when he says: "In order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."²⁷⁹

The psalmist teaches us that this process does not reduce us to puppets. Vs. 66 says: "Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I believe in your commands." God doesn't want us just to apply the book, but to develop the gift of discernment.

There is no further explanation as to what "smearing with lies" stands for in vs. 69. It could be slander directed at the person of the poet, but the context of these verses shows us a person who is insensitive to spiritual things and who propagates this attitude as real liberty. The psalmist knows better than that. He knows that real liberty, real possession that makes us rich is in the law that comes out of the mouth of God. As we read in Deuteronomy: "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."²⁸⁰ In quoting this verse, Jesus gained the victory over the devil.²⁸¹ The way in which this is stated makes the Word that comes from the mouth of God a personal communication as if we hear God talk to us.

Finally, the psalmist distinguished between possession and riches. Real riches do not exist in gold and silver. We hear him say in vs. 72: "The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold." There is no doubt about the fact that Peter and John were richer than any body else when they said to the beggar at the temple gate: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."²⁸² Just ask the lame man who got up, went into the temple "walking and jumping and praising God" if he would rather have had a few pieces of gold. And even health is not the greatest wealth. The New Jerusalem is presented to us as a city built with gold and precious stones, which represent the glory of God. The real riches are God's glory. Gold and silver are more images. A man who seeks gold and silver instead of glory is stupid in the highest degree. Whoever chooses gold and silver instead of glory is not right in the head. When the psalmist heard the Word of God he realized the value of it.

10. **É YODH** Verse 73-80

"They glorified God in me"

²⁷⁸ I Pet. 4:12,13

²⁷⁹ Rom. 8:4

²⁸⁰ Deut. 8:3

²⁸¹ See Matt. 4:4

²⁸² Acts 3:6

73 Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands.
74 May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word.
75 I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.
76 May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.
77 Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.
78 May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts.
79 May those who fear you turn to me, those who understand your statutes.
80 May my heart be blameless toward your decrees, that I may not be put to shame.

In the preceding stanza the emphasis was upon God's goodness as the basis for our affliction. In these verses we read about the testimony of our life; this is the result of this affliction. *The Tyndale Commentary* says about vs. 73: "Fashion is not the potters word of e.g. 33:15, 139:16, but one with emphasis of giving a thing its firm constitution.... Hence NEB 'made me what I am.' " That is why the same commentary writes above this portion: "They glorified God in me." This last quote is derived from Paul's report about his visit to the apostles in Jerusalem in his epistle to the Galatians.²⁸³ We could also refer to First Corinthians, where Paul says: "But by the grace of God I am what I am."²⁸⁴ The problem here is that our testimony ought to be, at least partly, unconscious. As with humility, the more we are aware of it, the less we become it. What Oswald Chambers once said is true: "We want to be conscious saints and unconscious sinners, but God makes us conscious sinners and unconscious saints."

If God makes us what we are, the restriction will remain that we will not see ourselves as we really are and as others see us. The weakness of our flesh would make it difficult for us to realize the full work of grace in us. We have the tendency to credit ourselves too easily for things we did not bring about ourselves and which often surpass our own abilities and power. We should be constantly aware of this danger.

The psalmist's prayer in vs. 73 is very realistic. He realizes that he is what he is because of the work of God in him and not as the result of his own doing and perseverance. He is also aware of the fact that his own intelligence is insufficient to understand this. Actually, he admits that he is too dumb to handle the things God has entrusted to him. His prayer for understanding proves that he understand more than he thinks.

God is the Creator of my body, my soul and my spirit. I am not autonomous. I have to account to Him for my life, my acts and my thoughts. If I don't understand my origin, I miss the goal and purpose of my life; and I will be doomed to go astray. *The Pulpit Commentary* refers to Deut. 32:6, which reads: "Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?" How we live is always connected with the understanding of our origin and goal. The decisive factor in the conversion of the prodigal son was the remembrance of his father's house.

The intent of God's commands is to show us who we are and where we are going. The only way the world can understand anything about God is if God's commands are demonstrated in our lives. That is why people who fear God, as vs. 74 puts it, rejoice because God's commands become flesh and blood in the life of the psalmist.

Vs. 75 reaches back to the previous stanza. The affliction the psalmist experienced taught him the discipline to be consistently occupied with the Word of God. Where the NIV uses the term "your laws" both the KJV and RSV say "your judgments." The use of the word judgment implies a confession that there were things in the life of the psalmist, which God condemned and for which he had to receive forgiveness. In saying this, he reaches the core of the Gospel, which is that knowledge of salvation and knowing God comes through forgiveness of sins. Zacharias says: "To give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins."²⁸⁵ And God puts in Jeremiah's mouth: "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."²⁸⁶

²⁸³ Gal. 1:24

²⁸⁴ I Cor. 15:10

²⁸⁵ Luke 1:77

²⁸⁶ Jer. 31:34

In connection with judgment and affliction the writer uses the words “righteous” and “faithful.” The Apostle John uses the same expressions in connection with forgiveness: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”²⁸⁷ This use of the same words is not coincidental. Righteousness is fundamental in all God’s dealings since it is part of His being. God deals with our sins according to the absolute standard of His righteousness. What the psalmist experienced as affliction is miles removed from the deserved punishment that was finally carried by Jesus Christ. Even the sacrificial animal in the Old Testament was afflicted more severely than the psalmist himself. Through the shedding of blood, his sins were forgiven; but it was not his own blood. The affliction was nothing more than the application of the forgiveness and the shaping of his own character so that it would conform to the image of Him, who is the measure of all righteousness. God is faithful to His intention to incarnate His Son in each one of His children. Without affliction this will not be brought about.

In vs. 75 the poet says: “I know,” and we wonder how much he knew. The Gospel is born out of the conflict between God’s righteousness and God’s love. Vs. 76 says: “May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.” God’s love, as a comfort for us, implies much more than that we feel comforted because God is kind toward us. Our comfort is based upon the hard facts of Golgotha. God’s love and mercy, His *hesed* is just as much a legal aspect of His character as is His righteousness. God is not favorably inclined toward us because we demonstrate zeal toward His law, but because Jesus took our sins upon Himself. The important thing is that the facts of salvation are applied to our life and touch us personally, in the same way as the coal from the altar touched Isaiah’s lips.

The prayer for comfort is justified because comfort does not come to us automatically. If God does not wipe away the tears from our eyes, we will keep on weeping. But we have His promise and we may expect that if we look up to Him, He will do for us what He promised. John says the same thing in Revelations: “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”²⁸⁸

Death will always play a major role in our life on earth where we experience sorrow and suffering. This is evident from the verse in Revelation, quoted above as well as from vs. 77 - “Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.” Not only is death all around us; it is in us. God’s compassion, that eternal quality of character of tender mercy, as the KJV calls it, comes upon us and drives away death, but from the inside as from the outside. Once again we have to say that God does not do this because we delight so much in His law. Our delight in God’s law only shows that we have not completely lost our tie with reality. How good it is to live and delight ourselves in God’s law!

We find the word “arrogant,” which is used in vs. 78 also in other verses, sometimes with different adjectives.

In vs. 21 they are called “the arrogant, who are cursed”

Vs. 51 “The arrogant mock me without restraint”

Vs. 69 “Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies”

Vs. 78 “May the arrogant be put to shame”

Vs. 85 “The arrogant dig pitfalls for me”

Vs. 122 “let not the arrogant oppress me.”

We find the same people designated by other names:

Vs. 61 “Though the wicked bind me with ropes”

Vs. 139 “My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words.”

Vs. 110 “The wicked have set a snare for me”

Vs. 115 “Away from me, you evildoers”

In this sense of the word, darkness is not absent in this psalm. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not disappeared yet. We can see the day dawning, but the sun has not yet risen. But once the light starts breaking through, there is no holding back.

When the psalmist prays that the arrogant be put to shame, he implies that they have the capacity to feel shame, which in turn presupposes a conscience that reacts to a confrontation with evil. This shows that the psalmist has a positive attitude. He does not pray a prayer of revenge, but a prayer for conversion, or, at least, for an attitude that could lead to conversion.

²⁸⁷ I John 1:9

²⁸⁸ Rev. 7:17; 21:4

Peter deals with this attitude that the psalmist demonstrates in by saying: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.”²⁸⁹ Peter also shows that nobody put the whole of mankind so much to shame as our Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer of the psalmist, therefore, is a desire for the victory of good over evil. In this way does the affliction he suffers become a testimony of the first order.

We see here the link between this stanza and the previous one, where affliction was the main theme. All this shows that God uses tensions and conflicts in our human relations to reach His goal with us.

Contrasting to the being shamed of the arrogant, we find the feeling of shame of the psalmist himself. In vs. 80 we read: “May my heart be blameless toward your decrees, that I may not be put to shame.” This does not mean, of course, that his conscience would not function normally, but that he would always remain obedient and thus keep his conscience clean. The fact that he prays for this indicates that a clean conscience is no foregone conclusion. Without God’s grace, his heart would not be blameless. Sin pulls at him as it does at everyone else. It pulls on the inside, as well as on the outside. The only way we will not be ashamed before God is if God covers our nakedness. The typical attitude of the arrogant is that he covers his own nakedness and acts as if he is not naked and that he has nothing to be ashamed of. Grace means that we are ashamed before God and that He covers us.

The clearest example of this is the fall of Adam and Eve. They knew they were naked and they were ashamed and covered themselves. God gave them a better covering, but that cost blood.²⁹⁰

When the feeling of shame disappears, the masks will disappear also. I believe that this process will never be totally completed on earth, but the presence of the Holy Spirit within us will have the effect that other people will know that we are more genuine than the average person. Paul treats this subject in depth in Second Corinthians chapter 3. And in the same epistle he speaks about the double effect our unspoken witness will have. “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?”²⁹¹

The psalmist, however, shows more hope than the Apostle Paul. Paul speaks about “the smell of death ... for those who are perishing.” In our text the psalmist prays for the arrogant to be put to shame. About the believers he says: “May those who fear you turn to me, those who understand your statutes.” In saying this, he sounds a prophetic note. If our testimony would only draw the attention to ourselves, it would be in vain. There is in these words an echo of what Jesus says: “All that the Father gives me will come to me ...”²⁹² It remains true, however, that there grows a strong bond of unity among people who know God’s statutes. After all, we are members of the same body.

11. Æ KAPH vs. 81-88

“The brink of ruin”

- 81 My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word.*
82 My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, “When will you comfort me?”
83 Though I am like a wineskin in the smoke, I do not forget your decrees.
84 How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?
85 The arrogant dig pitfalls for me, contrary to your law.
86 All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for men persecute me without cause.
87 They almost wiped me from the earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts.
88 Preserve my life according to your love, and I will obey the statutes of your mouth.

²⁸⁹ I Pet. 3:13-17

²⁹⁰ Gen. 3:7-21

²⁹¹ II Cor. 2:15,16

²⁹² John 6:37

In this stanza the psalmist undoubtedly reaches the lowest point in the psalm. The cries he utters are not so much a sign of despair as of exhaustion. He is burnt out, because his physical strength fails him. Now, the condition of our body influences, undoubtedly, the state of the health of our spirit. But if the relationship between these two brings us to despair, something is wrong. It is a natural thing that tension may become too much for us to bear. But often, when we think that the pressure becomes too heavy, we come to the realization that it is not our duty to stand up in our own strength. The psalmist does not come to this liberating insight yet.

In His struggle in Gethsemane, our Lord Jesus Christ took upon Himself a burden that went far above His physical abilities to bear. Obviously, He was at the point of collapse when an angel came to give Him strength. We read how "An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him."²⁹³ Sooner or later every child of God will have to learn that the real Christian life can only be lived in a supernatural way. Often physical energy and spiritual vitality are antipodes. Paul made this discovery in his own life. He says: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."²⁹⁴ At our most difficult points salvation is closer to us than ever.

In the Beatitudes,²⁹⁵ Jesus pronounces a blessing the man who longs for God's salvation. Satisfaction will come. The danger is that we are so greatly swamped with substitutes and junk that we will no longer discern what real salvation is. If we long for God's salvation to the point of fainting then God is nigh to us. It is a blessing that hardship has such an effect upon our lives.

The only reliable link with reality we possess is the Word of God and His promises. It is good if we are so familiar with God's Word that we can fall back upon it automatically when everything else fails. Jesus did this when He was nailed upon the cross. Even if the Word of God is nothing more than: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" it is still God's Word.

The commentaries are not unanimous about their interpretation of the "wineskin in the smoke." Some think (like *The Pulpit Commentary*) that wineskins were hung up in smoke to harden them. Others feel that the skins become unusable when treated like that. (*The Word Biblical Commentary*). It is obvious that the psalmist describes a less than ideal situation. Even if it were good for a skin to be hung up in smoke the picture is not a flattering one when used for humans. I have to think of the native salt blocks that are hung up to dry in the huts of the tribal people in Irian Jaya. We get the impression that the psalmist feels dried out and dirty, a burnt out case. Without God's decrees that situation would be hopeless.

The prayer for revenge in vs. 84 makes one think of the souls under the altar in Rev. 6:10 who 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?" A desire for revenge is not always bad. We are not allowed to avenge ourselves, but that does not mean that we should accept every situation in which unrighteousness and cruelty presents itself. And we certainly may pray for "sweet revenge," that is that our adversaries will feel ashamed and eventually be converted. In doing so, we rob our real adversary, the devil, more than when our enemies are crushed and stay in the hands of the Evil One.

There is no indication whatsoever of the kind of pressure that is put upon the life of the psalmist. When he says in vs. 85: "The arrogant dig pitfalls for me, contrary to your law," he indicates that the possibility exists that he would fall into a trap. He realizes that his life is in danger because he is not immune to temptation. It is a good and safe thing to know that one is not reliable. The only guarantee against stumbling is in God; as Jude says: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy..."²⁹⁶ The context of these verses shows that stumbling would be the result of disobedience. The pitfalls are dug by people who do not keep the law. The pressure to leave the way of the law and to accommodate to the lifestyle of his surroundings is almost unbearable for the psalmist. Death surrounds and oppresses him, and he feels himself being morally

²⁹³ Luke 22:43

²⁹⁴ II Cor. 12:7-10

²⁹⁵ Matt. 5:3-12

²⁹⁶ Jude vs. 24

suffocated. The wineskin is besmirched with smoke and dry and empty. Wineskins are supposed to be filled with wine. Jesus even says this in his parable: "And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."²⁹⁷

With this we have come to the fundamental difference between the New Testament and the Old. The psalmist has little or no concept of being filled with the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that New Testament Christians know nothing of the struggle the writer here goes through. But we have more to fall back on.

Vs. 86 states: "All your commands are trustworthy." The KJV says: "All thy commandments are faithful." Faithfulness is one of God's characteristics, and in as far as the commands are an expression of God's character we can say that the commandments are faithful. But probably more is meant. When a man starts to obey the commandments, he will discover that sooner or later the faithfulness of God is being transferred to his own character.

Also, God's faithfulness is our guarantee that He will, under no circumstance, forsake us. On the other hand, obedience to the will of God will make us to people who will be faithful to Him to the end. We find some of this faithfulness expressed by the psalmist himself in the verses where he is prostrate on the ground and keeps on calling upon God.

Vs. 88 express a deep understanding of the reality of the need. The psalmist prays: "Preserve my life according to your love." The KJV translates it more archaically, but also more appropriately with "Quicken me after thy lovingkindness." "To quicken" in old English means "to make alive" or "to give life." We find the very same word in the following verses: vs. 37: "Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word." Vs. 50 - "My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life." Vs. 77: "Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight." The psalmist understood that the law of God would be powerless as long as he himself would be "entangled by the cords of death."²⁹⁸

It is the interplay between the law and the Holy Spirit, which enables us, as New Testament Christians, to stand justified before the throne of God. Without this new life, that has become ours in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ obeying the law would be completely out of reach.

The Tyndale Commentary remarks here that the psalmist does more here than just send up "a prayer for bare survival." Jesus promises us more in John 10:10 - "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Or, as the KJV puts it, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." The source of this life is God's love, or lovingkindness. We receive this life through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. The longing, with which this stanza started, is fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

12. 1 LAMED Vs.89-96

"The great certainties"

89 Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.

90 Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures.

91 Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.

92 If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.

93 I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life.

94 Save me, for I am yours; I have sought out your precepts.

95 The wicked are waiting to destroy me, but I will ponder your statutes.

96 To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless.

With this twelfth stanza we have arrived at the mid-way point of the psalm. The subject that is celebrated here is the eternal character of the law. There is a clear contrast with the preceding verses. The essence of man's misery, that which causes him the deepest suffering is the temporal and transitory, the corruptible character of life. Life is fenced in by death, which makes life senseless. In the present stanza

²⁹⁷ Mark 2:22

²⁹⁸ Ps. 116:3

the psalmist breaks through this impasse. In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Derek Kidner says about this stanza: "A striking feature of these verses is the coupling of God's creative, world sustaining word with His law for man."

The unity between creation and morality, between the physical and the spiritual is being emphasized at several places in the Bible. Psalm Nineteen is a clear example of this. Not only is it the same God who created heaven and earth and who wants us to live a holy life, but it is the same Word also that is operative in the natural world and that renews us spiritually. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."²⁹⁹

It is also true that our moral condition is a decisive factor in the place we occupy in this creation. Jesus stilled the wind and the waves, He walked on water and conquered death by the power of His holiness. And the Bible says about us: "the man who does the will of God lives forever."³⁰⁰

Vs. 89 elevates the law of God above, what is currently called, situational ethics. The law of God is eternal and absolute. That which is good or evil on earth, is good or evil everywhere. The character of God, which is the eternal measure of good and evil, is the same in heaven and on earth. The Word stands for more, though, than just a rule of living for man on earth or for any other creature with a sense of moral responsibility. The Word is the Word that creates and makes alive and, as the Gospel of John makes clear, it is closely connected to the Person of God. "The Word was God." "The Word became flesh."³⁰¹ We are often confused in our thinking on this point, because when we use the expression "word," we think only of human speech, which is often meaningless. If we compare the human word with the eternal Word of God there is a chasm just as wide or wider than the babble of a parrot and the cadence of the reading of a Shakespearean work.

The psalmist does not make a distinction between God's relationship with material creation and His covenant with man. Laying the foundation of the earth and God's faithfulness toward generations of men are treated as poetical parallels. Vs. 90 says: "Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures." We may look at the stability of visible things and take them as a guarantee of the quality of God's dealing with man. We have to understand that if God's faithfulness toward us would cease, the atoms would split apart. The fact that the sun rises proves that God is who He is.

Insight in these things enlarges our horizon considerably. The law in vs. 92 is not only a series of commandments of do's and don'ts, but it is the eternal principle that determines both creation and man's moral behavior. That is why a sinner does not belong in this world, and that is why the land spews out the man who steals and lies and murders. On the other hand, man can be pure inwardly only if he is able to delight in God's creation. That is why our ability to reign over God's creation is closely connected to our redemption in Jesus Christ.

The emphasis of this psalm seems to be that a right relationship with God does not protect us from pressure and misery. Jesus warns His disciples: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."³⁰² And persecution is the subject of the last two beatitudes. "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."³⁰³ The essence of God's promise is not that we will be spared, but that we shall live. That is the subject of the verses 92 and 93.

If the psalmist says in vs. 94: "I am yours" this presupposes an act of personal surrender. It would be impossible to draw the conclusions the psalmist draws in this stanza, if there were not such an act of surrender. It is impossible to see oneself as a fitting part of creation without personal abandon to the will of God. Harmony is only possible through submission of our will to the will of God. How would it be possible to be God's own and God not save us and keep us? In the parable of the lost sheep the shepherd looks for the sheep because it is his. It is not on the basis of our surrender and obedience that God saves us.

²⁹⁹ II Cor. 4:6

³⁰⁰ I John 2:17

³⁰¹ John 1:1,14

³⁰² John 16:33

³⁰³ Matt. 5:10-12

We should not interpret vs.94 in this way. The reason for our salvation is in God, not in us. Solomon says: "I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me."³⁰⁴

In the light of the theme of this stanza, the eternal character of God, the plot of the wicked to destroy the psalmist comes to stand in a different light. The Word of God puts the efforts of the devil in the right perspective. This is important, because otherwise we would easily be overwhelmed by the propaganda of the enemy. We should not underestimate the threats of the Evil One. But as we see in Acts, we should turn the threats of the enemy over to God, lest our testimony would be hindered. We read: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."³⁰⁵ If the threats of the enemy result in that we do not do what we should and that we are not what we should be, we are defeated.

Vs. 96 says: "To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless." *The Tyndale Commentary* remarks about this that the verse gives the message of the book of Ecclesiastes in a nutshell. There is, of course, some exaggeration in the words: "To all perfection I see a limit." The psalmist did not live long enough on earth to say this knowingly. The Holy Spirit put these words in his mouth, and the Holy Spirit knew what He is talking about. It is good, however, for a man to know that he lives in the shadow of death. "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."³⁰⁶ The man who lives as if he will never die is a fool. As Christians we belong to the resurrection and we are looking forward to eternal life. The key to this is obedience.

The word that is translated with "limit" is *qats* in Hebrew. It is derived from *katswats* which means "to cut off." The word emphasizes the contrast between the limits of everything on earth and the limitlessness of the Word of God.

13. **Í MEM** Vs. 97-104

"Heavenly wisdom"

97 Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

98 Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.

99 I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.

100 I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.

101 I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word.

102 I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.

103 How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

104 I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path.

The preceding stanza painted the picture of God's Word in lines of eternity. The proportions were cosmic and beyond our human reach. Such regions are not suited for us humans; they are too cold, too uninhabitable. But in this stanza we return to the warmth of our habitat. The relationships that are shown are warm and lovely. However the wisdom presented is a combination of both stanzas. It presents both the limitlessness of God's Word as well as the limits of our intimacy with it that tends to make us wise men.

As in the preceding stanza, so here is the transition made by linking the first thought of these verses with the final verse of the last part.

If "Your law" in vs. 97 would only pertain to the book, it would have little or no significance. One cannot love a book; otherwise it would be possible to love the phone directory. The law represents the whole of God's will and character. Our love for the Scriptures cannot be detached from our love of God's Person. If the Word were not a Person and the Person would not stand in the center of the Word, we would have only a collection of Bible verses. "Oh, how I love your law!" has just as little to do with the book as "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!" in Psalm eighty-four pertains to the buildings.

³⁰⁴ Song of Songs 7:10

³⁰⁵ Acts 4:29

³⁰⁶ Ps. 90:12

The basis for loving the law should be the acceptance of the law. The moment I made the decision to accept the Bible as a whole as the Word of God was a turning point in my thinking. If the psalmist discovers wisdom in himself, it is undoubtedly the result of his new relationship with the Word of God. Wisdom contains knowledge, but it is not knowledge alone. Intelligence is also a part of wisdom. Wisdom is the harmony of the head, the heart, the mouth, and of life itself. It is not necessary to elaborate about the disharmony in and among intelligent people. It is clear that intelligence is no guarantee against foolishness.

The enemies are naturally foolish. They are the psalmist's enemies because they are the enemies of God. But in vs. 99 the psalmist says: "I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes." The teachers can hardly be marked as God's enemies, can they? We may suppose that solid believers taught the psalmist. The influence of a teacher upon his pupil has its limits. A teacher can transfer knowledge, but the application of knowledge on a practical level depends upon factors in the pupil about which the teacher has no power whatsoever.

Vs. 100 blows away the saying that wisdom comes with age. We read: "I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts." Growing old is no guarantee of wisdom either. Many people gather experience over the years which they are unable to digest. Some people gather experiences as others collect junk. The beginning of all wisdom is the fear of the Lord. If at one point, we do not align our lives with the will of God through an act of personal surrender, we will remain fools all our life.

Key words in this section are meditate, keep, obey. The core is a combination of insight and obedience. It is, of course, possible that the rather optimistic evaluation the psalmist gives of his own insight is a result of his youth, but that does not mean that the principle he espouses would not be correct. He understands that the traffic goes in both directions. Obedience to the law of God leads to the right way of living. We have to resist the tendency on our side to be drawn away by evil, which would harm our relationship with God. The relationship with God is a two-way street, but the stress is upon our responsibility.

It sounds paradoxical, but the psalmist's confession that he is wiser than other people proves the truth that wisdom belongs to God alone and not to man. A teacher cannot pass on God's wisdom to others. He may demonstrate the wisdom God has given him; he may explain the principles, and he may show the way, but he cannot give to others what is not his.

God's wisdom surpasses all human comprehension. A wise man knows that he occupies himself with things that are beyond him. The psalmist does not boast vainly when he gives expression to the limitless riches God opens up for people who obey Him.

Finally, the Bible makes clear that wisdom is not an ability or a functioning of intellect, but a person. The Old Testament represents wisdom as a woman who calls people to herself. "Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gates leading into the city, at the entrances, she cries aloud: 'To you, O men, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind.'"³⁰⁷ And the New Testament tells us that Jesus has become our wisdom. Paul says: "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God; that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."³⁰⁸ The psalmist does not boast in himself, he boasts in the Lord.

True wisdom is the result of God's intervention in our lives. Vs. 102 says: "I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me." This speaks of an intimate relationship with God. There are things only the Holy Spirit can communicate to us. This becomes clear in Jesus' teaching of His disciples. He instructed them and laid the basis in their lives, but the real work started at Pentecost.

The image of vs.103 - "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" - shows us the similarity between natural and spiritual nourishment. We find this comparison in other Scriptural passages also:

- "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."³⁰⁹

- "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty." Jer. 15:16

³⁰⁷ Prov. 8:1-4

³⁰⁸ I Cor. 1:30

³⁰⁹ Deut. 8:3

- "So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, 'Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth."³¹⁰

- "Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: 'Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.' So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, 'Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.' I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour."³¹¹

- "They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb."³¹²

Men not only needs food, he also enjoys eating it. Good food is delicious. God created food for the stomach and the stomach for food. All functions of the human body, when used for the purpose for which God created them, are enjoyable. When we compare food for the physical needs with food for the soul the Word of God is far superior and gives the greatest enjoyment. Our spirit is more than our body and therefore its capacity to enjoy things is greater. God created our heart, as Augustine said, more than for anything else, for the purpose that we would find rest in Him. There is no greater satisfaction than to rest in God.

Perfect love cannot exist without perfect hatred. We cannot love God, who is the essence of love, without hating the devil, who is the personification of evil. For this we need insight, because the Evil One camouflages his intentions quite well. This we learn from vs. 104: "I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path." The KJV translates "wrong path" with "false path." In vs. 29 it is called "deceitful path." The Dutch translates it with "path of lies." The use of the term "wrong path" indicates a personal destination. The word is derived from the Hebrew *yakar*, meaning to deceive. *Strong* translates it with "a sham."

Young people often have a strong sense concerning that which is genuine. The love for the "real thing" is not always real itself. The paradox is that we can fake being genuine. We will only acquire insight in the complexity of deceit if we develop a deep love for God. Nobody is completely exempt from self-deception. If we become genuine it is by God's grace in us. The attraction Jesus must have had when He lived on earth was that people saw He was genuine.

14. Î NUN Verse 105 - 112

"Not losing the way"

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

106 I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws.

107 I have suffered much; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.

108 Accept, O LORD, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your laws.

109 Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law.

110 The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts.

111 Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

112 My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.

As usual the psalmist connects the first verse of the new stanza with the last one of the previous section. The "wrong path" of vs. 104 lies in the dark, but the light of God's Word shines upon the path in vs. 105. And just as on the wrong path we encounter the power of darkness and sin, of hypocrisy and sham, so is the path upon which the light of God shines the way of truth and sincerity.

Vs. 105 is probably the most quoted verse of this psalm. The image is striking. The path itself lies in the dark; a lamp would have no effect at midday. Light and darkness are moral realities. Darkness not only represents that which is unknown, but also the confusion and degeneration which are the result of the break with God. It stands for decomposition of values, of which physical death is an image.

³¹⁰ Ezek. 3:2,3

³¹¹ Rev. 10:8-10

³¹² Ps. 19:10

Similarly, the light of the Word is an image of fellowship with God and of obedience to His will, through which man obtains moral insight and receives guidance. The light not only shows the way, it also conquers darkness.

The picture of the path speaks of a journey, of progress, and of a purpose. The light goes before us only if we ourselves go forward. Victory keeps in step with us. The dynamo of a bicycle lamp may be the best example of what is meant; although, of course, the psalmist was not familiar with the gadget. The light shines only as we go on.

Jesus identifies Himself with this light, as in John's Gospel: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."³¹³ "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."³¹⁴ "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."³¹⁵

The solemn oath of vs. 106 tends to make us apprehensive. It sounds overconfident. We know from Peter's experience, who denied Jesus, that such dear promises are a sure way to fall into sin. We read in Luke's Gospel: "But he [Peter] replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.'³¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that there would be no place for promises and oaths. If we say: "So help me God!" and we mean it, we are on solid ground. An oath that is based on confidence in self is a false oath. But if we realize how unreliable we are in ourselves and we recognize the danger of our fluctuating emotions, an oath, in which we appeal to God's omnipotence, is often the only means to protect ourselves against the attacks of the Evil One. If a marriage is based upon vows that are exchanged between spouses, why would this not be done in our relationship with God?

It is ironic that the clouds start covering the soul of the psalmist immediately after he swears his oath. In the first two verses the emphasis was on the Word of God and on the light it spreads. After that, the eye of the psalmist strays away toward the darkness and everything it contains. The repeated prayer for life proves that death and darkness are not only outward entities, they stand for spiritual realities. In the same way life and light go together, as John 1:4 states: "In him was life, and that life was the light of men."

Vs. 108 says: "Accept, O LORD, the willing praise of my mouth, and teach me your laws." The KJV translates it: "Accept, I beseech thee, the freewill offerings of my mouth, O LORD, and teach me thy judgments." Oral freewill offerings, or offerings of praise, were unknown in the law. Only Hebrews mentions "a sacrifice of praise." It says: "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise; the fruit of lips that confess his name."³¹⁷ Sacrifices of the mouth are oral affirmations of the death of a sacrificial animal. It means an identification with the animal and the sacrifice. For us this means that we see ourselves as crucified with Christ Jesus. The psalmist touches a mystery when he asks God to accept the sacrifice of his mouth. God must hold each death in abhorrence, both the death of man as of an animal. Without the horror of sin the concept of death would be inconceivable. Death is as much God's enemy as ours. We will never be able to understand fully the fact that death was conquered by death. God did not rejoice in the death of His Son. The motivation, that caused the Word to become flesh and that drove Jesus to the sacrifice of Himself, is the essence of God's acceptance and pleasure, even to the point that a sacrifice can be a sweet odor to Him. Only to the extent that we share in Christ's love and come to the point where we are willing to sacrifice ourselves in love for God and our neighbor will the sacrifice of our mouth kindle God's enthusiasm.

It seems to me that with this we arrive at a higher level of the teaching of God's laws. There is more involved than the letter of the law, if that was ever the issue.

What can we say about this paradox: The psalmist is at one point ready to die and at the same time he tells God that his life is in danger? The seeming contradiction comes from the fact that even if we are willing to lay down our life for God, it is still the enemy who wants to kill us. God does not kill. Death is the result of the broken fellowship. In death we are on enemy territory. Even if fellowship with God has been restored, death remains active. This is hard to grasp. Holding fast to God's Word and obeying it when our life is in danger is the only guarantee for life.

³¹³ John 8:12

³¹⁴ John 9:4,5

³¹⁵ John 11:9,10

³¹⁶ Luke 22:33,34

³¹⁷ Heb. 13:15

Vs. 111 says: "Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart." The heritage mentioned is a prophetic expression for what is called in the New Testament the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, through which the demands of the law are met in us. As Paul says in Rom. 8:4 "In order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit." If the heritage would not change our heart, we would be without hope indeed. The constant presence of God's law in a wicked and sinful heart would mean eternal torture. Only a new heart, which is full of God's Spirit, can genuinely rejoice in the Word of God. We don't know how much of this prophetic utterance the psalmist could experience himself.

Vs. 112 read in the NIV: "My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end." The KJV says: "I have inclined mine heart to perform thy statutes alway, even unto the end," as does the RSV - "I incline my heart to perform thy statutes for ever, to the end." The Berkley translation renders it as: "I have set my heart on practicing Thy statutes." The LB puts it even more beautifully by saying: "I am determined to obey you until I die." "To the very end also contains a hint of reward, as in vs. 33 - "Teach me, O LORD, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end." That is why the NEB translates the verse with: "I am resolved to fulfill thy statutes; they are a reward that never fails." The point is obedience until death, but not in the negative sense of the word. We find the same shout of joy in this verse, because the finish line is reached, as Paul expresses it: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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."³¹⁸

15. ñ SAMECH Vs. 113-120

"No renegade"

113 I hate double-minded men, but I love your law.

114 You are my refuge and my shield; I have put my hope in your word.

115 Away from me, you evildoers, that I may keep the commands of my God!

116 Sustain me according to your promise, and I will live; do not let my hopes be dashed.

117 Uphold me, and I will be delivered; I will always have regard for your decrees.

118 You reject all who stray from your decrees, for their deceitfulness is in vain.

119 All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross; therefore I love your statutes.

120 My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws.

In talking about "double-minded men," the psalmist speaks not necessarily about other people. In vs.112 he said: "My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end." But here he realizes that it is easier to set goals than it is to carry them out?

The poet wrestles with the fact that there are two powers struggling in his life. He tries to identify with the one, but that turns out to be difficult. We see that this problem has not subsided in the New Testament. In Romans, the Apostle Paul describes this condition. He says: "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. 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. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing."³¹⁹

A person who tries to deny this condition is not a realist. All our promises, our decisions of the will, our sacred oaths, do not change this basic condition. The actual problem is that we are responsible for the whole of our being. As Christians we don't mind accepting responsibility for the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to us, but not for the lusts of the flesh that are manifest in us. The only solution is a complete surrender of our lives to the authority of Christ.

The line of separation between good and evil is not drawn between one person and another, but it goes through everyone's heart. It is embarrassing to admit this to ourselves.

³¹⁸ II Tim 4:7,8

³¹⁹ Rom.7:13-26

That is why the pressure of the “evildoers” is so painful to bear, because there is so much within us that responds to this pressure. If God is our refuge and our shield, He protects us first of all, against ourselves. And the profession of the psalmist that he loves God’s law and hopes in His Word serves first of all to keep him on his feet.

The above-mentioned problem is linked to our human nature, not necessarily to our sinful nature as such. As human beings, such as God, when He created Adam, we are susceptible to temptation. Since we are descendants of Adam, who introduced sin into this world, we are carriers of the disease also, which makes us even more prone to fall. But we see the same struggle and probably the same susceptibility in Jesus Christ. Even after having been filled with the Holy Spirit at His baptism, He was exposed to temptation.; the uncorrupted was exposed to corruption. And obviously He was not immune to the attacks. The devil knew He was not immune. Victory over temptation was not automatic.³²⁰ Jesus found immunity in the Word of God. The same goes for the psalmist and for us. It is healthy for us to realize what our condition is and what could happen to us if we do not take God as our refuge and shield and do not hope in His Word.

Vs.115 shows us what an important role peer pressure can play. Rarely does the devil attack us frontally, as he did with Jesus. Most demonic pressure is exercised upon us in an indirect way, often through people we rub shoulders with. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish what is going on. Often we have to choose between social intercourse and fellowship with God via His Word. Vs.116 says that this is a question of life or death. God promises us life for our spirit. That is what will uphold and support us, as Aaron and Hur supported Moses while he prayed. This gives us hope, which does not make ashamed. Vs.116 says in the KJV and “let me not be ashamed of my hope,” and vs.117 “I will have respect unto thy statutes continually.” The two verses are parallel expressions. One says negatively “let me not be ashamed” and the other positively “I will have respect unto thy statutes.” The word “respect” also carries the sense of intense enjoyment.

God’s upholding us points both to our weakness as well as to the powers of God’s promises. The words “hope” and “promises” indicate that the matters in question are not visible to the natural eye. We are dealing with an invisible world, while at the same time we live in a visible one. This creates tensions, which would be unbearable if God would not intervene. That is why the psalmist prays for life, that is spiritual life that can function in the spiritual world.

The last three verses are rather unusual in the context of this psalm. Vs.120 says: “My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws.” And yet the whole of the psalm is based on this assumption of fear and respect. Paul says: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked.”³²¹ And in Hebrews we read: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”³²² We shouldn’t think that this is only a danger to which unbelievers are exposed. Peter says the same: “For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, if it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner? So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”³²³

We should, as Paul expresses it: “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”³²⁴ Our fellowship with God should always be a mixture of deep intimacy and deep respect. The key to this is confession of sin and receiving of forgiveness. It is only in as much as we are satisfied with the love of Christ, that fear will disappear from our lives.³²⁵

16. Ò AYIN Vs. 121-128

“Pressure from the godless”

121 I have done what is righteous and just; do not leave me to my oppressors.

³²⁰ See Matth.4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Matt. 16:21-23 and John 13:1-5

³²¹ Gal. 6:7

³²² Heb. 10:31

³²³ I Pet. 4:17-19

³²⁴ Phil.2:12

³²⁵ See I John 4:18

*122 Ensure your servant's well-being; let not the arrogant oppress me.
 123 My eyes fail, looking for your salvation, looking for your righteous promise.
 124 Deal with your servant according to your love and teach me your decrees.
 125 I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes.
 126 It is time for you to act, O LORD; your law is being broken.
 127 Because I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold,
 128 And because I consider all your precepts right, I hate every wrong path.*

We may have trouble identifying with the psalmist in vs.121. It sounds too righteous to be true. We feel closer to Ecclesiastes, where Solomon says: "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins."³²⁶ Or with his prayer at the dedication of the temple: "When they sin against you; for there is no one who does not sin..."³²⁷

We have to look at these verses as a continuation of the previous stanza. The psalmist does not deny his sinful nature, but he puts himself on the side of righteousness. The important part is that he asks God to be his "surety" as the KJV puts it in vs. 122. "Be surety for thy servant for good: let not the proud oppress me." This is a better translation than the NIV's "Ensure your servant's well-being." It shows that the psalmist knows which is the source of his righteousness. Even in the Old Testament with its incomplete knowledge of justification and redemption, people knew that righteousness consisted in the covering of sin and in being clothed with a righteousness that did not originate in man himself. How much more then may we boast in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As 2 Cor 5:21 says it: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

A surety is a person who takes responsibility for other people's debts. Jesus Christ is our surety. Isaiah says of Him in chapter 53, in several verses: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,"³²⁸ "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."³²⁹ "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."³³⁰ "For the transgression of my people he was stricken."³³¹ "And he will bear their iniquities."³³² "He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."³³³

Because of what Christ did for us, we can withstand the pressure of godless people upon our lives. Paul says: "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies."³³⁴

The salvation the psalmist is looking for with such intensity is the salvation that has been granted to us. As far as that is concerned, we are an eternity ahead of him. Yet we have a lot in common with him. Even under the guarantee that has been given us, we have to stretch out continuously to grasp and to pursue with all our might. There is no place for complacency in the life of a child of God.

In the verses 124 and 125 the word servant is used twice. The Old Testament servant was a slave, who owed his master obedience and surrender of himself. If we give ourselves in this way to God, we imply that He may do with us as He wills. The psalmist knows, however, that all God does is motivated by his goodness and love. The result of this kind of surrender is a deepening of insight into the will of God. People who put their intellect on the altar become intelligent and receive understanding. That is why Jesus can say: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."³³⁵

³²⁶ Eccl. 7:20

³²⁷ II Chr. 6:36

³²⁸ Isa. 53:4

³²⁹ Isa. 53:5

³³⁰ Isa. 53:6

³³¹ Isa. 53:8

³³² Isa. 53:11

³³³ Isa. 53:12

³³⁴ Rom. 8:31,33

³³⁵ John 15:15

When vs. 126 says: “It is time for you to act, O LORD; your law is being broken,” it declares nothing new. People have broken God’s law ever since the Fall. There have been periods in world history where godlessness was more openly demonstrated than at other times, so that God had to pass judgment upon people and places. There was the flood, which wiped out all of mankind, but for eight souls. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed and there was the captivity. Actually God has acted ever since sin entered the world. In Genesis God calls Adam.³³⁶ Jesus says in John’s Gospel: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”³³⁷ God’s work is in the first place a work of redemption. John says: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”³³⁸ This doesn’t mean that there is no judgment, but judgment is not what God wants.

Yet there is a hint of fear in vs.120, as we have seen. Without fear there would be no amazement and wonder about God’s acting in this world. It is this tension that gives depth to the commandments. Love for the Word of God is related to the understanding that God is to be feared. Paul says: “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.”³³⁹

Finally, vs.127 compares the Word of God with gold. In the world of shadows in which we live, riches are measured by the amount of “gold” we possess. Gold however is an image of the real thing. The reality is the glory of God. In the description of the New Jerusalem, given to us in Revelations, the mention of gold and pearls says nothing less than “The city had the glory of God.”³⁴⁰

To love gold is sin. Paul says to Timothy: “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.”³⁴¹ But love of glory is actually love of God Himself, of His truth and righteousness. This is no hypothetical statement. It is translated in a walk on the right path. Glory will demonstrate itself in what we are and what we do.

17. Ô PE Vs. 129-136

“The light shines in the darkness”

129 Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.

130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple

131 I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.

132 Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.

133 Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.

134 Redeem me from the oppression of men, that I may obey your precepts.

135 Make your face shine upon your servant and teach me your decrees.

136 Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.

Vs.105 and the opening verse of this stanza are probably the most well-known parts of Psalm 119. The thread runs between this stanza and the previous one, where there was mention of the preciousness of God’s command. Here the psalmist elaborates further concerning the riches of the Word of God.

“Wonderful” is a word from the realm of the supernatural; it is a divine expression. Jesus said to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world.”³⁴² We can say the same about God’s testimonies. The wonder of them does not belong in this world of sin and darkness.

“Wonderful” has at the same time the meaning of “extraordinary beauty.” The Word of God brings us to ecstasy. “More than gold, more than pure gold.” The true riches of the soul are in the heavenlies.

God’s statutes are monuments of God’s intervention in this world. The first statute is the creation, the second the Exodus, and the last one the Incarnation. Between each we find all kinds of smaller and greater wonders, which testify of God’s acts. The law is one of those.

³³⁶ See Gen. 3:9

³³⁷ John 5:17

³³⁸ John 3:17

³³⁹ II Cor. 5:11

³⁴⁰ Rev. 21:11-27

³⁴¹ I Tim. 6:10

³⁴² John 18:36

We read about Mary that she “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”³⁴³ The miracle of God’s testimony is too great for a man to digest. That takes time and quietness. It is good to store God’s Word in our heart and to bring it out from time to time to appreciate it and to be changed by it.

The soul in which the Word of God lives is a healthy soul. Speaking about His mother, but with a wider application to others, Jesus said to the woman in the crowd who called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”³⁴⁴ In obeying the Word of God in our heart we will partake of the Incarnation, so that Christ will be formed in us. Several times Jesus speaks about obedience to the Word of God. “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”³⁴⁵

Vs. 130 “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.” The unfolding speaks of the reading of a scroll, or the opening of a book. The reports of the facts of salvation, as recorded in the Bible, are put on the same line here with the facts themselves. The written Word is just as much a monument as the Word Incarnate. Peter says: “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”³⁴⁶

He reports about the facts of which he had been an eyewitness and his goal is “to refresh your memory.” Interestingly he puts his prediction and the following report of events on the same line. And in the same way as the psalmist, does he speak in this connection about light, when he compares prophecy with a light shining in a dark place. The light itself is a prophecy about the breaking of the day in our heart. The light starts to shine if we open the Word of God if we read it and study it and if we search it and apply it.

The thrill one experiences in nature at the rising of the sun can be compared to the emotions of a man who opens the Bible and sees darkness disappear at the dawn of the new morning. “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”³⁴⁷

The existentialists had a slogan, I believe particularly Albert Camus, saying that belief in God meant intellectual suicide. Vs. 130 contradicts this and gives proof to the contrary. At the same time the existentialists preach the relative value of knowledge. In doing this they put themselves in the same category as the ignorant. It is not clear to me how someone who claims to have no certainty about the value of knowledge, can commit intellectual suicide. But it has been my experience that when a person takes God’s Word seriously, he obtains insight in matters that actually surpass his own comprehension. On the basis of this insight the psalmist reaches to the fullness of blessing, with everything that is in him.

The open mouth and the panting in vs. 131 evoke the image of the deer in Psalm 42 that pants for the streams of water. Only God Himself can quench thirst for God. Nothing on earth will give true, deep, and lasting satisfaction. God uses the hunting aspect of this life and the disappointments of our search to teach us this lesson. He promises us without failing that he will provide complete satisfaction to our deepest and most fundamental yearnings. “Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”³⁴⁸ God put in Isaiah’s mouth to say: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and

³⁴³ Luke 2:19

³⁴⁴ Luke 11:27,28

³⁴⁵ John 14:21, 23

³⁴⁶ II Pet.1:12-21

³⁴⁷ Prov.4:18

³⁴⁸ Ps.81:10^b

your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.³⁴⁹ And Jesus says the same: “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.”³⁵⁰

There is a surprise in vs.132. The NIV says: “Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.” “Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is thy wont toward those who love thy name” (RSV). Literally it says: “as Thy rule is with those who love Thy Name.” It seems that the psalmist is saying that the man who loves God has a right to his fellowship and grace. We often forget that the relationship between God and man is of the same kind as a legal marriage. The death of Jesus on the cross makes the relationship legal. The insight is important both for the understanding of the reality of our spiritual relationship with God was with our marriage relationship, which is an image of the former. I mean that we will understand the form and content of God’s covenant with us better, in as much as we understand what a marriage is. And on the other hand, we will understand better why marriage is what it is as we understand that it is a physical and emotional expression of a spiritual reality. We act out as husband and wife on a physical and emotional level what our relationship with God is on a spiritual plane. This explains why extra-marital affairs are bad. God’s relationship with us is the reality and marriage is the image. If we have part in the reality, we will be able to play our part in the image that expresses the reality, so much the better.

Just as in a marriage, so in our relationship to God does mutual love play an all-important part. We love Him, because He loved us first. As we read in John’s epistle: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.... We love because he first loved us.”³⁵¹ Many people who get married have no idea what role they play and what they are expressing in their marriage relationship.

So in our relationship with God we have the right to His presence and His grace: that is, the forgiveness of our sins and our rehabilitation as human beings. This realization makes me dizzy.

Verses 132-135 express the psalmist’s four-fold prayer: “Turn to me,” “Direct my footsteps,” “Redeem me,” and “Make your face shine upon your servant.” The first and the last request pertain to fellowship with God. They demonstrate the legality of the relationship and of the glory. They deal with the heavenly aspect of the relationship. The second and third requests deal with the earth. They speak of the enemy inside us and outside of us.

The psalmist’s admonition “Direct my footsteps,” or as the RSV puts it: “keep steady my steps,” indicates the possibility and the danger of stumbling. We do not stumble because there are obstacles on the way, but because we are inwardly weak. If God had not promised to keep us from stumbling, nobody would remain standing. In the parallel passage, where we read: “let no sin rule over me,” it becomes clearer even that the danger is the sin inside us. The New Testament opens the window widely on this point. The fact that Christ died in our stead means that we have a right to be free of the tyranny of sin. Paul states this clearly when he says: “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; Because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”³⁵² And in Jude’s epistle we read: “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy...”³⁵³ This is the promise of God upon which we may call. If we do stumble, it means that we let our eye deviate from Him.

Oppression of men, as mentioned in vs. 134, may come in different forms. Tyranny that is exercised from above often has as a result that we are driven into the arms of God. This kind of oppression is salutary, if at least we have said a wholehearted “yes” to God and if we are not influenced by the fear of death.

A much more subtle danger lies in what is commonly called “peer pressure.” In the natural we are all human beings who need social intercourse. None of us is so individualistic that we are completely immune

³⁴⁹ Isa. 55:1,2

³⁵⁰ John 7:37,38

³⁵¹ I John 4:10,19

³⁵² Rom.6:6,7,12-14

³⁵³ Jude vs.24

to the concern about the opinion others have about us. We are warned by Moses: “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong.”³⁵⁴ That pertains to extreme cases. But there are many gray areas in this domain. It is important that we pray that God will keep our relationship with Him pure. There are good human influences that come from the healthy functioning of the body of Christ. We need wisdom to distinguish between good and evil. Any human relationship that diminishes our obedience to God comes from the devil. We should quote also in connection with the above what Paul says: “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”³⁵⁵

The last prayer in vs.135 is borrowed from the priestly blessing in Numbers: “The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you...”³⁵⁶ God shared His glory with Moses and from the words of this blessing we understand that it was His intention that every Israelite would share in this blessing also. In the Old Testament this was an outward demonstration. In the New Testament it is the presence of Jesus Christ within us by the Holy Spirit. Paul calls this: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”³⁵⁷ It is for this glory the psalmist prays here. As human beings in our present condition, we are unable to see God’s face. God’s ultimate purpose with us is that we shall see Him and that we shall partake of His character. We read in Revelations: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”³⁵⁸ Great changes will have to take place within us before we will be able to see Him. This metamorphosis is slowly taking place in our present situation if we live a life of obedience and of fellowship with God. The psalmist establishes a clear link between glory and obedience.

The last verse of this stanza seems to be in complete opposition to the preceding verses. “Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.” We live in a world in which the glory of God is not taken into account. The psalmist demonstrates that he partakes already in principle in the glory of God because of his sadness over a lost world. He partakes in God’s sadness because he partakes in God’s love. He does not show any arrogant criticism, but genuine brokenness of heart. Matthew 5:4 says: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” This mourning shows that there exists a deep love for God, who is being dishonored, as well as of love for fellow human beings, who are lost. We see this burden also in Jesus who “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”³⁵⁹ and Luke writes: “As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it And said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace; but now it is hidden from your eyes.’”³⁶⁰ God’s glory will have this same kind of effect upon us.

18. Ö TSADE vs. 137-144

“Everlasting righteousness”

137 Righteous are you, O LORD, and your laws are right.

138 The statutes you have laid down are righteous; they are fully trustworthy.

139 My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words.

140 Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.

141 Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts.

142 Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true.

143 Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands are my delight.

144 Your statutes are forever right; give me understanding that I may live.

³⁵⁴ Ex.23:2

³⁵⁵ Gal.1:10

³⁵⁶ Num. 6:24,25

³⁵⁷ Col. 1:27^b

³⁵⁸ Rev.22:4

³⁵⁹ Matt 9:36

³⁶⁰ Luke 19:41,42

It seems as if there is no connection between this stanza and the preceding one. But “*My zeal wears me out*” in vs. 139 corresponds with “Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed” in vs. 136.

The righteousness and trustworthiness of God’s Word are highlighted in these verses. Words such as “everlasting” and “thoroughly tested” are significant for what is meant. The KJV says “for ever” and “pure.” It is clear that what the psalmist says about the Word of God is also applicable to the Person of God. John states this also in his Gospel. “.... and the Word was God.”³⁶¹ God’s Word is true and reliable because God Himself is. The Word is not a collection of arbitrary rules but it is an expression of the character of God.

In the preceding stanza the writer expressed his deep sadness because people neglected and denied the only thing that gives sense and content to life. Here he contrasts God’s faithfulness with human unfaithfulness. In vs. 138 he says: “The statutes you have laid down are righteous; they are fully trustworthy.” The RSV renders it as follows: “Thou hast appointed thy testimonies in righteousness and in all faithfulness.” In the next verse the psalmist’s foes forget God’s Word.

It is impossible for us to grasp God’s plan of creation and salvation in its totality. When Paul thinks about it, he bursts out: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!” But we can comprehend enough of the incomprehensible to realize that God’s plan is good and perfect.

God has linked Himself to man by His decrees. The fact man has broken this covenant does not diminish God’s faithfulness. It is as in a marriage; if one of the partners commits adultery, it is still possible that the other one maintains his wedding vows. In the same way God does not deviate from His promises. God’s faithfulness puts man’s unfaithfulness in sharper contrast. This is what troubles the psalmist so deeply. He says, “My zeal wears me out.” And, as we have seen already in the preceding stanza: “Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.”

Vs. 140 says: “Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them.” The KJV translated this with “Thy Word is very pure.” And the RSV with “Thy promise is well tried.” The idea is of a smelter, which purifies precious metals. This evokes two images in our mind. The first one is the one Peter uses: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith; of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire; may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed,”³⁶² and also: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.”³⁶³ This comparison is only partly valid as far as the Word of God is concerned. The testing of our faith is done to remove impurities. The testing of God’s Word demonstrates that there never were any foreign elements to start with.

This brings us to the second part of the image. Purity means absence of particles that do not belong to the element. Human words and motives are never completely pure. Man has ulterior motives in everything he thinks, does or says. The Holy Spirit may say various things with one word, but that does not diminish its purity in any way.

In Jesus’ conversations we see this purity demonstrated. The Lord must have made the impression upon everyone with whom He entered into conversation that what He said was one hundred percent true and pure. That is why His words always penetrate immediately to the core of the matter. God’s Word proves that there are no hidden things or incomprehensible matters for Him.

When a man loves God he loves His Word also. The opposite is true too. It is clear that a person who loves God and His Word cannot be little in the sight of God. When the psalmist says: “Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts,” (vs. 141), he speaks about what fellow humans think of him. Subjectively, this can be a very important matter. No one is completely insensitive to public opinion. This is in itself no sin, as long as our conduct is governed by the Word of God and not by “opinion polls.” What other people think of us, or what we think others think of us, can be an important part of our emotional suffering. This is often harder to bear than physical oppression. Jesus calls us to withstand this pressure by thinking of the reward that awaits us and of the fact that we are in the good company of the prophets of old. In Matthew’s Gospel He says: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you

³⁶¹ John 1:1

³⁶² I Pet. 1:6-7

³⁶³ I Pet. 4:12

and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”³⁶⁴

The truth of the Gospel is often more clearly demonstrated in situations of dire need than at any other time. If nothing else gives comfort and help, God’s Word turns out to be enough to see us through. That is why it is important to commit portions of it to memory. We are not always able to open a Bible. Jesus quoted Psalm 22 when both His hands were nailed to the cross!

In vs. 142 we read: “Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is true.” God’s righteousness is absolute. Throughout the centuries and into eternity will the rule of God’s righteousness will be the only valid standard. The principle of God’s holiness, human sin, redemption and forgiveness will always be valid. This means that we have an eternal point of focus in the changing situation in space and time in which we live as human beings. Public opinion changes like the weather. Hardship and oppression are temporary conditions. Even the reign of the Antichrist is not everlasting, but the righteousness of God, which Jesus Christ acquired for us and with which we have been clothed, is eternal. It is a garment that does not wear out. Nobody who wears it is “lowly and despised.”

That is why it may be possible that in the midst of very difficult circumstances we praise and glorify God. “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”³⁶⁵ No wonder they caught the ear of the other prisoners. If we delight in God’s commandments and obey them because we love Him, our surrounding will know this and our circumstances will change. In another psalm we read: “As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.”³⁶⁶

We need understanding and intelligence to live. The psalmist expresses this in vs. 144 “Your statutes are forever right; give me understanding that I may live.” Biologically, we may vegetate, but real living is a life that has quality and is fitting to the dignity of the life that God wants us to lead. The Existentialists are right at this point. It is a tragic phenomenon that Christianity and stupidity are often put on the same line, and sometimes rightly so. Paul says indeed: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things; and the things that are not; to nullify the things that are.”³⁶⁷ But it was said of Stephen that the liberals “could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.”³⁶⁸ God gives wisdom to those who ask him, says James 1:5. A foolish Christian is a contradiction in terms. God wants us to live a life of intelligence.

19. ÷ QOPH Vs. 145-152

“Hope deferred”

145 I call with all my heart; answer me, O LORD, and I will obey your decrees.

146 I call out to you; save me and I will keep your statutes.

147 I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word.

148 My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.

149 Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your laws.

150 Those who devise wicked schemes are near, but they are far from your law.

151 Yet you are near, O LORD, and all your commands are true.

152 Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever.

It seems strange that the psalm ends in a minor key. It is not that the psalmist is defeated, but victory seems so far away. The stress in these last stanzas is more upon the lostness of man than upon God’s salvation. Actually this is the main theme of the whole Old Testament. That is why the first part of our Bible is one protracted cry for the coming of the Messiah. In this light we should also see the end of this

³⁶⁴ Matt. 5:11,12

³⁶⁵ Acts 16:25

³⁶⁶ Ps. 84:7

³⁶⁷ I Cor. 1:26-28

³⁶⁸ Acts 6:10

psalm. The whole psalm portrays the tension between the hope based on the Word of God and the grim reality of the situation in which we find ourselves. “In the body, away from the Lord,”³⁶⁹ as Paul calls it. The tension increases at the beginning of the stanza we have before us.

Three times the psalmist uses the words “I cry” (RSV). Vs. 145 “With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD! I will keep thy statutes.” vs. 146 “I cry to thee; save me, that I may observe thy testimonies. Vs. 147 “I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in thy words.” “With my all my heart” indicates that the whole man is involved. The psalmist knows that there is an answer and he expects it. But the answer is not given in its totality until the coming of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. However, none of the saints in the Old Testament has ever drawn the conclusion that there was no answer.

The keeping of God’s statutes is always linked to the answer God is going to give. What the psalmist is saying is that man would never be able to bring himself to obedience if God did not speak. The New Testament shows that this is even truer than the people in the Old Testament realized. Through Jesus Christ’s death on the cross and by His subsequent resurrection from death, the Holy Spirit could come into the heart of man and begin a new creation; that transaction produces love and obedience.

The psalmist sees this truth in the far distance, but he cannot make out the details. What he sees urges him on to cry with his whole heart, without losing hope.

Vs. 147 and 148 show that the psalmist followed a strict daily routine in his devotional life. “I rise before dawn and cry for help; I have put my hope in your word. My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.” Early in the morning and late at night he sets aside fixed periods of meditation and prayer. A profound spiritual life is in no way in conflict with the keeping of a strict daily routine. Without a program of regularity our enthusiasm will soon ebb away.

Vs. 149 tells us that the preservation of our life is part of God’s law. The RSV is even stronger at this point. We read: “Hear my voice in thy steadfast love; O LORD, in thy justice preserve my life.” Justice seems a strange word in this context. We have seen earlier, in connection with vs. 132, that God’s relationship with us is based on legal grounds. Since Jesus died and rose for us we have a right to participate in His life. As Paul says to Timothy: “Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him.”³⁷⁰ We have a right to the new life in Christ, not on the basis of our crying but because of the work Jesus Christ accomplished for us.

In the following verse the adversary pops up again in the person of “those who devise wicked schemes.” The idea is not that man is prone to indulge in human weakness, but that some consciously and willingly give themselves to perversity. In the same way as God’s children pursue holiness, according to Heb. 12:14b, some people give their energy to what causes man to be lost, things about which they ought to feel shame. The Dutch translates “wicked schemes” with “shameful acts.”

Vs. 150 is evidently open to various translations. *The Word Biblical Commentary* says: “My persecutors are coming close with malicious intent...” The Interlinear Hebrew gives: “Draw near the pursuers of mischief...” KJV translates it with: “They draw nigh that follow after mischief.” RSV “They draw near who persecute me with evil purpose.” LB “Here come the lawless men to attack me.” NEB says: “My pursuers in their malice are close behind me.” And lastly the JB: “My cruel persecutors are closing in.” A footnote is added here, saying: “Those who pursue (malice).” Evidently in Hebrew we can take the object of the phrase to go in different directions.

It is shameful to deviate from God’s law. This becomes clear in the parallel phrase of vs. 150. The evil people surround the psalmist. It sounds as if the author is afraid of contamination by evil. But over against the presence of evil is the presence of the Lord Himself. This weighs heavier than everything else.

In the life of every child of God there is the tension between the presence of evil, which is visible, and the invisible reality of God’s closeness. This spiritual reality can become concrete only through faith. If we accept the revealed Word as truth and we build upon it in faith, our eyes will be opened to the reality of spiritual things.

When our eyes are opened, we will become aware of the fact that everything God does is eternal. Vs. 152 – “Long ago I learned from your statutes that you established them to last forever.” It is hard to describe the effect this discovery has upon a man who lives within the boundaries of time and space. The manifestation of evil, which is so visible and sometimes so overwhelming, will not stand against eternity.

³⁶⁹ II Cor. 5:6

³⁷⁰ II Tim. 2:11

The Word of God is eternal and, according to John: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”³⁷¹

20. Ø RESH Vs. 153-160

“Precious life”

*153 Look upon my suffering and deliver me, for I have not forgotten your law.
 154 Defend my cause and redeem me; preserve my life according to your promise.
 155 Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek out your decrees.
 156 Your compassion is great, O LORD; preserve my life according to your laws.
 157 Many are the foes who persecute me, but I have not turned from your statutes.
 158 I look on the faithless with loathing, for they do not obey your word.
 159 See how I love your precepts; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your love.
 160 All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.*

As the psalmist approaches the conclusion of the psalm, the tone becomes more intense. The theme of this stanza is “preserve my life,” or as the RSV translates it “give me life.” We find this phrase in verses 154, 156, and 159. The Hebrew word is *chajah*, which means, “make to live” or “let live.” The fact that the psalmist stresses the point so much shows that the issue in this psalm is not the knowing of God’s law as an academic pursuit, but that it is a matter of life or death. When Moses speaks his last words, he says: “See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”³⁷² The issue is not a series of rules and regulations. God’s Word means life. Life consists of knowing God and obeying Him on the basis of a personal relationship of love. That is why Jesus said: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”³⁷³

The life mentioned here is not mere physical life. That is only part of it. It is possible to be alive physically and to be spiritually dead. The point made is the spiritual life that is brought about by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Speaking about the coming of the Holy Spirit Jesus says: “You will see me. Because I live, you also will live.”³⁷⁴ His physical resurrection from the dead played an important role in their seeing Him, but that was not all. When we pray for *chajah*, we ask for a lot!

This stanza suggests that keeping the law does not protect us from misery and suffering. The enemy will concentrate his attacks particularly against those who seek to do the will of God. He puts pressure on the child of God with, so called, legal means. That is why the psalmist says: “Defend my cause.” The Hebrew word *rieb* does not only mean a court case though; it is also used for matters of personal interest. But the context suggests that there is a public accusation, a matter that is brought into the open.

We read in Zechariah, that the devil uses legal means to undermine God’s work, if this happens to suit him. “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, ‘The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?’ Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.”³⁷⁵ God fought our case in court in the death of Jesus at the cross of Golgotha. There the accuser’s mouth was shut. That is why Paul said: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.”³⁷⁶ The psalmist’s prayer has been heard. God took it and has defended our cause and our life has been preserved. We have been justified and redeemed and made alive in the resurrection of Jesus.

³⁷¹ I John 2:17

³⁷² Deut. 30:15,19

³⁷³ John 17:3

³⁷⁴ John 14:19

³⁷⁵ Zech. 3:1-3

³⁷⁶ Rom. 8:33

The Hebrew word for “salvation” in vs. 155 is *Yeshuah*. This is related to *Yehoshuah* even in sound. This relationship opens interesting perspectives. God’s salvation in Jesus Christ is far from the wicked, because they are far from the Word of God. There is a clear connection between salvation and obedience to God’s Word. Jesus expresses this by saying: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.”³⁷⁷ The key is obedience to God’s Word.

After having shown the connection between God’s compassion and God’s plan of salvation in vs. 156, the psalmist suggests that the purpose of God’s law is life. The goal of the law is reached when God raises us from the death in Jesus Christ. If we receive new life in Jesus, then God’s promise is fulfilled, (vs. 154) the goal of the law is reached, (vs. 156) and God’s compassion is demonstrated. (vs. 159). Our new life is, even as the law, an expression of God’s character. For the psalmist this new life was a promise that would be fulfilled later. We could say that he took out a loan on this equity. For us the promise has been fulfilled.

That is why our relationship to the enemy is basically different from his. He did not have the proof of victory as we do. We should not underestimate the enemy, but there is no reason for us to be intimidated. We know that our adversary has reason to be afraid of us if we are clothed with Jesus Christ. All the psalmist knew was that he should cling to God’s statutes. In this he was right, of course, but he could not have told us why. Sometimes intuition is better than knowledge.

The suffering or affliction the psalmist mentions in the beginning of this stanza is caused by the tension between death and life. Death is around him in the form of enemies, but there is also death within. In the Word of God the psalmist encounters life and traces of this life is found within him also. If only death were inside, there could be no question of love for the Word of God. Paul says: “No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”³⁷⁸ In the same way no one can say: “See how I love your precepts” (vs. 159) unless the Holy Spirit is in him. Yet this tension makes him very miserable. He knows that he will never be able to stand before the Lord in this condition. He finds himself in a stage between life and death and it is impossible to remain there. It is also impossible that he could have seen the solution, as we know it. “[We] are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God; that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”³⁷⁹ At the same time those things that are for us proofs of our position in Christ were present in the psalmist also. Abhorrence of evil, intense longing for life and love for the Word of God are guarantees of victory.

This affliction is accentuated by the realization that we live in a temporary and transitory situation but that God has destined us for eternity. We read in vs. 160 - “All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.” The parallel concept of eternal in this phrase is truth. We may conclude from this that the parallel for temporal and transitory is “lie.”

21. ù SHIN Vs. 161-168

“The place of peace”

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

The first sentence of this stanza gives us an idea under which regime the psalmist lived. *The Word Biblical Commentary* translates it with: “The authorities persecute me without reason.” *The Tyndale*

³⁷⁷ John 14:23,24

³⁷⁸ I Cor. 12:3

³⁷⁹ I Cor. 1:30

Commentary suggests that the psalmist is more the victim of slander than of open persecution and physical abuse. Spiritual and emotional pressure are often harder to take. But the author of this psalm takes the attitude on which Jesus would later expound: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”³⁸⁰ If our eyes remain open to the spiritual reality, we keep things in their right perspective. Fear of man and fear of God are mutually exclusive.

But fear and joy form a sound combination for fellowship with God. This sound paradoxical, but if we realize who God is and what He does for us in His creative, life giving Word, the contrasting elements will be brought into harmony in our souls. The discovery of the riches of God’s Word will cause the same joyful surprise in us as the man experienced who found the treasure in the field, or of the merchant of pearls who found the perfect pearl.³⁸¹ I believe that in these two parables God is the person who is happily surprised, but in vs. 162 of our psalm it is the author of the psalm. In a certain way we share in God’s joy when we discover God’s Word. The word is “great spoil” implies that we may take it.

We may apply the lesson of the lepers in Samaria, who concluded that they were wrong in keeping the spoil for themselves. In II Kings, we read: “The men who had leprosy reached the edge of the camp and entered one of the tents. They ate and drank, and carried away silver, gold and clothes, and went off and hid them. They returned and entered another tent and took some things from it and hid them also. Then they said to each other, ‘We’re not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let’s go at once and report this to the royal palace.’”³⁸²

The riches of God’s Word surpass all other riches. If the psalmist can say this of the Old Testament law, how much more can we say this about the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

There is a clear tone of victory in this stanza. I wonder if the psalmist would have come to this apogee of joy and praise if he had not come under so much pressure from the authorities. Actually, those people who “persecute him without cause” render him a service. This doesn’t mean that they would not belong to the realm of lies and that they would not merit our abhorrence. We cannot love God with all that is in us if we do not hate everything that is against God. There is no perfect love without perfect hate. It is important, though, that we love and hate the right things.

The same can be said about joy and abhorrence. Our problem is that the line of separation does not run between one man and another but through the heart of every individual. As long as it is a matter of choosing between God and the devil, it is easy, but since we are dealing with human beings who are not one hundred percent holy or completely evil, we need discernment.

“Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws” (vs. 164). This “seven times” is probably an idiomatic expression for a continuous praise. There is no law that prescribes such a ritual. We read that Daniel was in the habit of praising God three times a day. We read about: “Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.”³⁸³ It is a good and healthy habit to make our times of praise part of a fixed daily routine.

Vs. 164 shows again that the psalmist does not blindly worship a book of law. He accepts that law for what it is: the expression of God’s character. Loving the law cannot be detached from loving God. Jesus reproached the scribes and Pharisees of His time that they studied the law, but they did not love God. In John 5:39 and 42 He says: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me ... But I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.” It is also an open question as to whether they really loved the law. To study the law and to obey the law may not always lead to one’s loving the law.

Joy, love, praise, peace, and hope go together in the verses 162-166. We find the same elements in the heart of the New Testament Christian. It has been my experience that occupying myself with the Word of God gives peace in my heart. Jesus promised peace to those who take up His yoke, and He says that His burden is light. We read: “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.”³⁸⁴

³⁸⁰ Matt. 10:28

³⁸¹ See Matt. 13:44-46

³⁸² II Kings 7:8,9

³⁸³ Dan. 6:10

³⁸⁴ Matt. 11:28-30

There is also the promise that God will keep us from stumbling if we obey Him because we love Him. Jude says: "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy; to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."³⁸⁵

This condition of obedience, peace and love is called "salvation" in vs. 166. The psalmist says: "I wait for your salvation, O LORD, and I follow your commands." The fact that he waits for salvation means that, although the elements of salvation are present in his life the matter is not yet complete. As New Testament Christians we have to say "Amen" to this. In a certain sense we are far ahead of the believers in the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit indwells us, but Christ is in us as "the hope of glory." The seed that is planted in us has enormous potential for growth, but the time of harvest has not yet come.

The Hebrew word for "salvation" here is *Jeshuah*, the same as in vs. 153 where it is translated "deliver me." So salvation and deliverance are closely related. There is probably no other word that so clearly demonstrates the tension between the deliverance that is promised and the present situation than the word *Jeshuah*. God has shown us sufficiently of His glory to make us long for it. And for us salvation is closer by than for the Old Testament saints. The best testimony we can give about ourselves is the one from vs. 166 "I wait for your salvation, O LORD, and I follow your commands." Our life in the New Testament dispensation should be governed by hope and obedience.

The NIV misses a point in vs. 167 that is brought out more clearly in other translations. Vs. 167 reads in the NIV - "I obey your statutes, for I love them greatly." The KJV says: "My soul hath kept thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly." And the RSV: "My soul keeps thy testimonies; I love them exceedingly." The involvement of the soul is a result of our being occupied with the Word of God. Our whole man is involved by God's acts and pronouncement, both intellectually and emotionally. Such an involvement is akin to love, because it absorbs us completely. The best definition of love is given in Deuteronomy: "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."³⁸⁶

"I obey your precepts and your statutes, for all my ways are known to you (vs. 168). The last reason the psalmist gives for his obedience is God's omniscience. KJV and RSV say: "All my ways are before Thee," which may mean that the author opens himself up willingly before God, without wanting to hide anything from Him. In the context of the stanza, this would seem to be the preferred interpretation. The basis for all disobedience is the silly thought that God doesn't see and that He will never know! The psalmist concludes objectively that there are no secrets for God. That is a good reason not to try to hide anything subjectively before the all seeing eye of the all knowing. This is a reasonable ground for obedience for us too.

22. Ú TAW Vs. 169-176

"Teach me, help me, seek me"

169 May my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word.

170 May my supplication come before you; deliver me according to your promise.

171 May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees.

172 May my tongue sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous.

173 May your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts.

174 I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight.

175 Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me.

176 I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

The last stanza of this monumental psalm recapitulates the theme for the last time. Everything that has come to the psalmist comes back with the exception of the adversaries. It could be that the adversary stands in the shade in the prayer for help. It seems to me, however, that what the author is saying is that the greatest hindrance is not on the outside, but on the inside. He considers himself his greatest enemy.

His prayer in the first two verses of this stanza is for access. He asks for certainty that God hears him. In a certain way this prayer is an expression of faith; it shows insight into God's character. What

³⁸⁵ Jude vs. 24

³⁸⁶ Deut. 6:5

reason does man have to presume that the Creator of heaven and earth would listen to him? There is even no guarantee that God would hear the request to be heard, let alone that He would do something about the content of the prayer. The psalmist's prayer is far removed from the cry "God! If there is a God..."

The Bible not only guarantees us that God hears our prayers, but also that He hears immediately. Jesus says: "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly."³⁸⁷

The most glorious perspective of what happens when our prayers reach the throne of God is given in Revelations where we read: "Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand."³⁸⁸ Our prayers reach God as a sweet fragrance that delights Him and makes Him ecstatic. Certainly our supplications reach Him!

When the psalmist says: "give me understanding," "deliver me," "teach me to praise and to sing..." would God not answer? Jesus says: "He will see that they get justice and quickly."

An important point the author of this psalm emphasizes is that we only become really aware of our needs only in the presence of God. A man who is far away from God does not even realize that he needs understanding. The Word of God makes us see how little we have. The same Word promises us that God gives to us according to His Word.

The prayer the author utters turns more or less around himself. He prays for himself. The praise he wants to sing is, of course, directed toward God, but for the rest there is nothing that would qualify as intercession. And it is specifically on the point of intercession that "the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express,"³⁸⁹ as Paul says in Romans. This does not mean that the Spirit would have nothing to do with the prayer of the psalmist. I suppose there would be no real prayer possible unless the Spirit of God is involved in it. Intercession is only possible if we have a clear and clean personal relationship with God. A large part of the poet's struggle stems from the fact that he is not sufficiently aware of the working of the Holy Spirit in his own heart. But then, how could he know that the words he wrote down would turn out to be the inspired Word of God?

The KJV translates vs. 172 and 173 in the future tense: "My tongue shall speak of thy word: for all thy commandments are righteousness. Let thine hand help me; for I have chosen thy precepts." The words can also be understood as expressing a wish, as the NIV renders it: "May my tongue sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous. May your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts." *The Word Biblical Commentary* says: "May my lips pour out praise. May my tongue sing about your saying." The implication is that we are not able to produce this praise in our strength. Without God's help we are dumb before God and unable to produce any sound at all. This fact, probably more than anything else, indicates how serious our situation actually is. Only the Holy Spirit can make our lips pour out praise and cause our tongue to sing. This does not mean that we will not be involved in it when we begin to sing. The Spirit comes to our help; He does not make us "Hallelujah robots." We praise and sing out of our free will. The tragedy is that without God we cannot be what we ought to be and we are unable to do that for which we were created. It is good to pray that God would touch our lips and our tongue, so we can be ourselves.

If God touches our lips our praise will have content. We often make "hallelujah" an empty word that conveys only an atmosphere or evokes a feeling. The praise of the poet who wrote this psalm rests upon his insight in the righteousness of God as expressed in His commands. How much more reason do we, who know the Gospel, have to praise God. As Paul says: "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.'"³⁹⁰

Man's choice is an important part of his personality. In a certain way Sartre was right when he said that man proves his humanity in choosing. He was wrong in that he thought that the content of the choice was of no importance. The psalmist has chosen to be obedient and this choice has made him more man.

In vs. 174 he says: "I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight." The salvation for which the psalmist longs is the fulfillment of all God's promises to man. It is the coming of our Lord

³⁸⁷ Luke 18:7,8

³⁸⁸ Rev. 8:3-4

³⁸⁹ Rom. 8:26

³⁹⁰ Rom. 1:17

Jesus Christ, who is called “our hope” in the New Testament. Paul says to Titus: “While we wait for the blessed hope; the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”³⁹¹

By longing for the “Parousia,” we keep God’s purpose for our lives with the world in focus. The law serves as our guide. But this desire also implies that we acknowledge the tension between what is ahead and the imperfection of the present situation. Surely, we confirm what the writer of the Hebrew epistle says: “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”³⁹² If we keep these facts before our eyes, we will be able to delight in God’s law, because the law does not only pertain to our life on earth, but also, or particularly, to the future.

The prayer “let me live” occurs several times in this psalm. At least five times: vs. 17, 77, 116, 144 and 175. The Hebrew says literally “Make me live.” We may very well see in this prayer a reference by the Holy Spirit to the life each believer receives because of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as to the resurrection of our own body. This prayer will ultimately be fulfilled in the promise Jesus gives three times in John’s Gospel: “I will raise him up at the last day.”³⁹³

It is clear that man cannot be raised by obeying the commands. Before there is life, there can be no question of obedience. This prayer must be based on the supposition that there is life, even if only in seed-form. Jesus’ parable of the sower implies this. Prayer for life, just as prayer for wisdom presupposes the presence of both. The commands serve to help us keep the road we have taken.

Vs. 175 - “Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me,” or as the KJV puts it - “Let my soul live, and it shall praise thee; and let thy judgments help me,” indicates both the quality as well as the place of this life. In several places in Scripture it is said that God is not praised in the kingdom of death.

Ps. 6:5 - “No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”

Ps. 30:9 - “What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?”

Ps. 88:10 - “Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you?”

Ps. 115:17 - “It is not the dead who praise the LORD, those who go down to silence.” To praise God will, in its final instance, mean that we stand before Him in glory.

Vs. 176 says: “I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.” The psalm ends with the parable of the Good Shepherd, as Jesus tells it.³⁹⁴ The psalm ends where the New Testament begins. The whole psalm is one great confession of lostness, but the light that shines through in Isaiah’s prophecy - “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all,”³⁹⁵ we still see very little here. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd, who gives His life for the sheep, as is stated in John’s Gospel: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”³⁹⁶ Paul says to the elders of Ephesus: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”³⁹⁷

Had the psalmist known how deeply and completely his prayer: “Seek your servant,” had been answered, he would, no doubt, have written a different psalm.

³⁹¹ Tit. 2:13

³⁹² Heb. 13:14

³⁹³ John 6:39,40,54

³⁹⁴ See Matt. 18:12-14 and Luke 15:4-7

³⁹⁵ Isa. 53:6

³⁹⁶ John 10:11

³⁹⁷ Acts 20:28

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY

A song of ascents.

- 1 I call on the LORD in my distress, and he answers me.**
- 2 Save me, O LORD, from lying lips and from deceitful tongues.**
- 3 What will he do to you, and what more besides, O deceitful tongue?**
- 4 He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows, with burning coals of the broom tree.**
- 5 Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech, that I live among the tents of Kedar!**
- 6 Too long have I lived among those who hate peace.**
- 7 I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for war.**

This psalm is the first in a series of 15 psalms which are called the *aliyah*. In most of the English translations it is called "A Song of Ascents." *Adam Clarke's Commentary* explains: "This Psalm, and all the rest that follow it, to the end of Ps 134, fifteen in number, are called Psalms of Degrees; for thus the Hebrew title *hama'lowt*... is generally translated, as coming from the root *`aalah*,... to ascend or mount upwards. Hence, *ma'lowt* ..., steps or stairs for ascending, 1 Kings 10:19-20; 2 Kings 9:13. But as the word may be applied to elevation in general, hence, some have thought that it may here signify the elevation of voice; "these Psalms being sung with the highest elevations of voice and music." Others have thought the word expresses rather the matter of these Psalms, as being of peculiar excellence: and hence, Junius and Tremellius prefix to each Canticum excellentissimum, 'A most excellent ode.' " Ps. 134, which is the last one in the series, is a climax of praise in the sanctuary but the series opens with distress. The psalms form a pilgrimage from darkness to light.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Derek Kidner observes: "The Mishnah records that fifteen steps led up from the Court of the Women to the Court of the Israelites 'corresponding to fifteen Songs of Ascent in the Psalms, and upon them the Levites used to sing. But... there is no record that what they sang there was these psalms, although this is possible and has often been asserted."

Some commentators, as a proof that pilgrims sang the Psalms of Degrees while climbing the temple mountain, refer to a verse in Isaiah which reads: "And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel."³⁹⁸

The theme of this psalm suggests a pilgrimage that leads from a lie to the truth. Sin entered this world via the lie. From that time on, man has believed the lie and the lie has pursued and hunted man. It is important to realize that a lie is usually expressed in words. This has done much damage to the power and prestige of the world. Before sin conquered the world, the Word of God had been the instrument of His self-revelation. Heaven and earth were created by the Word. The Word has become flesh. In using the word, Satan has caused immeasurable damage to the human mind. The word has become a mere sound that has no immediate relation to reality.

The devaluation of the word is the basis of man's angst. As far as we know, the psalmist was not exposed to physical danger. If we see this psalm as a prophecy about Jesus, we understand that He was driven to the cross because of "lying lips" and "deceitful tongues." The spiritual and emotional damage that the lie can do to us is much greater than the death of our bodies. Spiritual death is the first death that man died. All other forms of death are related to it. In using the word, the devil did not rob the Word of God from its power but, because man believed the lie, he became separated from the Word. This is the cause of all angst. The lie causes despair and distress.

It is paradoxical that the psalmist can say: "I call on the LORD in my distress." The word translated with "distress" is *tsarah* which literally means "tightness." The word is derived from *tsar* which means "narrow," or "a tight place." The KJV renders it sometimes with "anguish." The anguish or distress are caused by a separation from God, and calling means fellowship with God. The fact that both can exist together constitutes our salvation. The fact is that man may have let go of God, but God never let go of man. That is the reason God answers immediately when man calls. Like the father of the prodigal who saw his son "while he was still a long way off," God waits day and night for the man who calls to Him in his distress.

The remainder of the psalm, obviously, is the contents of the psalmist's prayer. It is a prayer of a child of God. It is the prayer of a child of God who, not only, found peace with God in the forgiveness of his sins but who also participates in this peace. He is so much aware of the fact that Jesus himself is [his]

³⁹⁸ Isa. 30:29

peace³⁹⁹ that he can say with confidence: “I am a man of peace.” The Hebrew says literally “I [am] peace.” This is the answer to his prayer.

Evil and struggle in this psalm are symbolized by the lips and the tongue of man. James takes up this theme and elaborates on it in his epistle⁴⁰⁰ and he says: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.”⁴⁰¹ This, of course, does not mean that the evil in man would be isolated in the tongue and the lips of man and that the rest would be unaffected. Jesus addresses the religious leaders of His time as “You brood of vipers,” and He says: “How can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.”⁴⁰² The psalmist does not mention any specific incidents. We don’t know about whom he is speaking or what his circumstances were. The point is that lie and deceit present themselves as the truth. “They come... in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”⁴⁰³ The lie comes dressed up as the truth and death presents itself as life. The means of communication in this process is the word. The psalmist’s prayer is to be delivered from this lie. The person who hears a lie is in danger of listening to it. For this reason we have to flee the lie and run to God who is the truth.

Slander attacks a person’s dignity and ruins his standing among his peers. That is what Solomon, speaking of man’s funeral says: “A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.”⁴⁰⁴ A man’s testimony is important in society. When someone’s good name is besmirched, he becomes a pariah. The devil loves to use slander in the lives of God’s children. He tried to do this with Jesus, but this backfired and the result was Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. When Jesus entered the kingdom of death, Satan may have thought that he had captured Jesus’ soul. But since Jesus harbored no corruption in His heart, the devil had no power over Him. Where there is no “worm”, “the fire” has no effect.⁴⁰⁵ The power of death was taken away from Satan. He dropped the keys which the Lord picked up. He opened the gate and rose from the dead. Jesus is the truth. All forms of slander merely justify Him.

In the verses 3 and 4, the psalmist speaks about the judgment over those who indulge in slander. He experienced the libel against himself as “a warrior’s sharp arrows,” and “burning coals of the broom tree,” but he paces what he endured against the background of eternity in which God avenges. This soothes his pain.

We should not exclude compassion from these verses. We can also read in his words that he trembled at the thought of what awaited his adversaries. A child of God who is maligned will eventually be exonerated. It will become evident that we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. But what about those who stand naked before the throne of God?

Meshech and Kedar are names of people: one group who lived far away from Israel and another who lived close by. Ezekiel’s prophecy call God, “chief prince of Meshech.”⁴⁰⁶ Kedar refers to the Arabs who lived south of Israel. On the basis of these topographical distances, some commentators interpret the personal pronoun “I” in this psalm to represent the whole nation of Israel. Others believe that the names are symbolic for paganism, as “Babylon” stands for godlessness. It doesn’t mean, necessarily, that the psalmist would be in captivity or that he would be abroad. The mentality of Meshech and the lifestyle of Kedar were, undoubtedly, found in the midst of Israel also.

If the peaking of peace in vs. 7 is meant to be the testimony of the psalmist, we are faced with the question as to how long we should continue to witness to people who resist the truth. Jesus put limits to our perseverance when He advised His disciples: “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.”⁴⁰⁷ Paul and Barnabas took this advice literally when they left Pisidian Antioch.⁴⁰⁸ We should not throw our pearls to the pigs. These kind of verses prove that we are not only dealing with powers of darkness that manipulate human beings but also

³⁹⁹ See Eph. 2:14

⁴⁰⁰ See James 3:1-12

⁴⁰¹ James 3:6

⁴⁰² Matt. 12:34

⁴⁰³ See Matt. 7:15

⁴⁰⁴ Eccl. 7:1

⁴⁰⁵ See Mark 9:48

⁴⁰⁶ Ezek. 39:1

⁴⁰⁷ Matt. 10:14

⁴⁰⁸ See Acts 13:51

with men who are themselves responsible for their choices. Our “passion for souls” does not give us an unlimited freedom to continue to witness to people who do not want to hear.

As we saw above, the Gospel does not only give us peace but it makes us people of peace. We not only partake in the peace of Christ but that peace becomes incarnated in us. Yet, Jesus also said: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law- a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’”⁴⁰⁹ At the same time, the Apostle Paul says: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”⁴¹⁰ Both verses of Scripture depict the predicament of the psalmist. He is not the one wielding the sword. We are called to be peacemakers.⁴¹¹ But if our fellowmen react with war, it becomes their responsibility. Peace between men is only possible on the basis of peace with God. Where men fight together it is always proof of the fact that they have deviated from the basis of atonement in Christ.

⁴⁰⁹ Matt. 10:34-36

⁴¹⁰ Rom. 12:18

⁴¹¹ See Matt. 5:9

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-ONE

A song of ascents.

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from?**
- 2 My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.**
- 3 He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber;**
- 4 indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.**
- 5 The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right hand;**
- 6 the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.**
- 7 The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life;**
- 8 the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.**

In the preceding psalm, we saw the beginning of a pilgrimage from darkness to light. In this second pilgrim's song, we go one step further. The psalmist, not only evinces a growing faith in God's power and protection, but the psalm is also written in the form of a testimony. In the previous psalm, the poet spoke about himself. The one addressed there was the enemy. Here he speaks to fellow believers and he states that he experienced God's help. This help far surpasses certain emergency situations; it acquires cosmic proportions.

Some have seen in the lifting up of the eyes to the hills a reference to pagan idolatry. Even those who served YHWH sometimes sacrificed on altars on hills. To the modern eye, the mountains rather symbolize God's majesty. But the suggestion of some pagan influence is probably closer to the truth than the psalmist wanted to convey. He contrasts idol images and local deities with the almighty creator of heaven and earth, and they all fade away into nothingness. Even if we see majesty in the mountains, we have to admit that they are only things of this earth. This first verse, obviously, wants to create a contrast between the help that comes from God and all other forms of help. God and the mountains are not identical.

The confession of the second verse opens various windows for us. In the opening verse, the psalmist was seeking; here he has found. The experience is a personal one: "My help comes from the LORD." It says what God did for him. Here, as in Ps. 120, the principle is more important than any specific instance. No details are given and we know nothing of the psalmist's circumstances. He wants us to understand that what he experienced personally can be applied to every man.

In pointing to the source of help, the psalmist mentions both the Name of YHWH as well as the creation of heaven and earth. YHWH is the Name with which God revealed Himself to Moses at the beginning of the history of salvation. God's acts of creation demonstrate the power that guarantees the help. It is the God who redeemed His children from slavery in order to bring them to liberty and human dignity and who redeems us from the power of darkness in order to bring us in the freedom of Jesus Christ. It is the "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' [who] made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."⁴¹² That is, in the first place, the help that is spoken of here.

We are often do not know ourselves what kind of help we need. We think in terms of certain situations in which help is required and we pay no attention to the fundamental issue. If our sins are forgiven and God has made us a new creation, help will come in time when we need it for our specific occasions.

Vs. 3 indicates, however, that the help that is mentioned is not only the help that results in our new birth. The slipping of the foot pertains to our walk on the way. Jude writes in his epistle that God "is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy."⁴¹³ Little do we realize how great the dangers are that meet us on the way. God knows exactly what awaits us.

The psalmist's remarks about God's inability to slumber or sleep refer to the human tendency of losing concentration. Although we are created in God's image, God is not like us. God's consciousness is never mentioned in the list of divine attributes. Yet, this psalm speaks of God's watchfulness and alertness. A paradoxical thought in this connection is that Jesus slept in the boat when the storm raged. But, at another time, He exhorted His disciples to watch and pray that they would not fall into temptation.⁴¹⁴ Faith

⁴¹² See II Cor. 4:6

⁴¹³ Jude vs. 24

⁴¹⁴ See Mark 4:36-38; Matt. 26:40,41

in God's wakefulness will also stimulate our watchfulness. The promise of God's alertness does not release us from our responsibility to keep our eyes open.

Vs. 4 calls God by the name "he who watches over Israel." The Hebrew uses only one word. We could read: "Israel's watchman." It is not clear if this means that the psalm is addressed to Israel as a whole or to one single individual. The "you" in the psalm is singular and it is possible that the psalmist wants to address Israel as one single person. If, however, we are dealing with one individual, it remains true that this person has to belong to the household of God in order to claim His protection. One has to belong to Israel in order to be watched over by Israel's watchman. Israel's history, which is a chronicle of being lost, indicates that God's protection is not automatic. The majority of Israel was lost because it did not want to be kept by God. Without our trusting surrender, God's protection will have no effect. God forces His protection on no one.

Vs. 5 shows how close God is to the person He protects. He identifies Himself with our shadow. The light that God shines upon us from the left causes the shadow on our right side. The position of the shadow is of no importance here but the fact of God's nearness and our walking in the light certainly is. If God is our shadow, we are blessed. Our shadow is not part of our body but it cannot be separated from our person and from our actions. We can see in it an image of the influence we have upon our surrounding. If God is our shadow, we spread the odor of Christ around us. But the context of this verse speaks, primarily, about the nearness of God.

The sun can be both a blessing and a curse for man. She brings both life and death. In one of the psalms, it is said: "The LORD God is a sun and shield."⁴¹⁵ The sun is thus represented as a symbol of God's glory and, at the same time, God is a shield that protects us against the sun's harmful rays. In this psalm the image of protection is paramount. Here also, we should not read too much in the image. The protection mentioned is probably against physical harm that come from too much sun. There is also the protection against the moon, which may stand for spiritual or emotional damage by being "moonstruck." (The word "lunatic" refers etymologically to the moon). God's presence protects the whole man, body, soul, and spirit.

Our personal experience tells us that God's protection against "all harm" does not mean that we will always be protected against pain and suffering. God protects our soul in those circumstances. In everything we undergo, God will keep us from being lost or from suffering spiritual damage. It is absolutely necessary to realize this in order to be kept from despair. When Jesus tells us: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul,"⁴¹⁶ He implies that we may be killed. Such considerations are only meaningful in the light of eternity. If we keep staring at the present, our physical well-being will take on enormous proportions. We will only be able to see things in their right perspective in the light of eternity. God's protection reaches into eternity; "both now and forevermore." It sounds contradictory to say that God protects the whole man and, at the same time, that our body turns out to be so vulnerable. This paradox demonstrates the two sides of our life as a child of God in a torn world. I don't know how the two pieces fit together but, in my personal experience, I have known both periods of sickness and instances of divine healing.

The "coming and going" in vs. 8 (mark the sequence!) probably refers primarily to the coming and going through the temple gate. But "both now and forevermore" places it against the background of eternity. Interestingly, it covers the time that is spent outside the temple. God also protects us in those periods in which we are not in His immediate presence. We are not called to spend all of our life on earth in the temple. God sends us out with the promise: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁵ Ps. 84:11

⁴¹⁶ Matt. 10:28

⁴¹⁷ Matt. 28:20

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-TWO

A song of ascents. Of David.

- 1 I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."**
- 2 Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.**
- 3 Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.**
- 4 That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel.**
- 5 There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.**
- 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure."**
- 7 May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels."**
- 8 For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you."**
- 9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity.**

These Songs of Ascent show a clear progression of thought. Each of them is a independent poem. They all have their own specific place in the series. The theme of the first psalm was a flight from fear. In the second psalm, the pilgrim was on the way, and in this one he arrives at his destination.

Sometimes there is as much joy in preparation as in reaching the goal. Hope can be as stimulating as receiving that which is hoped for. I picture someone who might be reading this psalm to me on my deathbed. Things on earth are a shadow of heaven. We are on our way to God's real dwelling place. Our final destination is the heavenly Jerusalem.

A strange characteristic of this psalm is that the actual goal of the pilgrimage is not mentioned; only the setting is alluded to. God's presence is implied but not stated explicitly. It is, however, clear that the glory of Jerusalem is derived from the glory of God.

The psalm intones a melody of joy, praise, and peace. As we said above, the joy is a foretaste of what is going to happen. The joy is related to fellowship. Others, of the same persuasion, invite the psalmist to the pilgrimage. The joy is not merely personal or individual. There are signs of brotherly love and a passion for souls; otherwise, the others would not have bothered to ask the poet to join them. When, as a young man and a non-Christian, my peers invited me to a youth retreat, I reacted differently. I resisted strongly, at least inwardly. The psalmist accepted the invitation with joy because He knew God and I didn't.

Vs. 2 expresses the emotion of a person who has reached the goal toward which his whole life had been set. It was required of every Israelite to appear before the Lord three times a year.⁴¹⁸ In practice, this commandment was not always observed. We read of Jesus' parents: "Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover."⁴¹⁹ This psalm suggests that the average Israelite did not routinely go up to Jerusalem. The impressions upon the psalmist are too vivid and overwhelming. His description sounds more like a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It could also be that the writer wants to tell us how our reaction ought to be. For that reason he paints a picture of Jerusalem seen through the eyes of someone who had never seen it before. The twelve-year-old Jesus must have seen it that way. In our fellowship with God there is no place for a "dèjà vu."

We must never forget that the Bible shows us what heaven is like. The city described in this psalm is, in the words of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."⁴²⁰ In a sense, we all live in tents in a foreign land. If David was the author of this psalm, which fact is contested by some, there was no temple yet in Jerusalem when this psalm was written. The subscript "Of David" is lacking in the Septuagint and in the Vulgate. In David's time, the city resembled more the heavenly Jerusalem, of which John wrote in Revelation: "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."⁴²¹

The layout and construction of Jerusalem makes a profound impression upon the psalmist. One translation (PBV) renders vs. 3 with: "a city that is a unity in itself." *The Tyndale Commentary* points out that the same verb is used here as in Exodus where the tabernacle is put together with bronze clasps to

⁴¹⁸ See Deut. 16:16

⁴¹⁹ Luke 2:41

⁴²⁰ Heb. 11:10

⁴²¹ Rev. 21:22

make it into a unit.⁴²² The picture strongly suggests “living stones, [that] are being built into a spiritual house.”⁴²³ The church of Jesus Christ is an organism in which the members form one body wherein they are connected to each other in a vital way. “The city with foundations” turns out to be “the bride of the Lamb.”⁴²⁴

The body of Christ presents unity as well as diversity. “That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to praise the name of the LORD.” Fellowship with God accentuates diversity. A person who surrenders his life to God finds himself, and groups of population demonstrate more clearly their distinctive cultural traits when service to YHWH occupies the central place. The tribes are “the tribes of the Lord” but they remain twelve tribes. Their diversity provides the entrance into the city. The Apostle John writes: “On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.”⁴²⁵

All this reminds us of the fact that conditions on earth are quite different from the heavenly reality. In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Derek Kidner points out that Jesus said about the city: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you....”⁴²⁶ In daily life on earth, the tribes of the Lord did not go up to Jerusalem in great harmony to praise YHWH. Ever since “the sin of Jeroboam” this never happened anymore. At some periods in Israel’s history, Judah was even at war with the Northern Kingdom. In Revelation, the Apostle John calls Jerusalem “the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.”⁴²⁷ The Jerusalem of this psalm is the Jerusalem that ought to be, not the Jerusalem that is.

Like the commandment to “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” which Jesus called “the first and greatest commandment,” the commandment to praise is equally binding.⁴²⁸ Although these are commandments, neither is possible without spontaneity. It is clear that such a paradox would not exist had man not fallen into sin. After Adam and Eve rejected the command of God, love and praise became an order for man. God issued an order for that which ought to have been a spontaneous expression and He did this so that we would not completely lose our way in life. Obedience to this commandment is our salvation.

Vs. 5 presents us with a problem. Commentators argue that, if David himself had written the psalm, the words “The thrones of the house of David” would not occur. Without choosing sides in the debate, we observe that David received a prophecy, during his life, about the house that God would build him. The prophet Nathan had told David: “The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you.”⁴²⁹ The more important part of vs. 5 is that it introduces judgment, that is righteousness, before it speaks of peace. I will never forget a sermon I once heard on a verse in Hebrews. The writer, speaking about Melkizedek says: “First, his name means ‘king of righteousness’; then also, ‘king of Salem’ means ‘king of peace.’ ” The topic of the message was “First righteousness, then also peace.” The preacher pointed out that this sequence is consistently mentioned in the Bible. There cannot be peace without righteousness; no peace with God and no peace among men. It is because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ that we can have peace with God.

The Apostle Paul writes about both aspects when he says: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,”⁴³⁰ and “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.”⁴³¹ Part of this righteousness is the confession of sin, which gives us inner peace.

The pilgrim went up to Jerusalem to have fellowship with God, but the throne for judgment of the house of David was a human throne. The actual throne for judgment is the cross of Jesus Christ. That is the

⁴²² See Ex. 26:11

⁴²³ I Peter 2:5

⁴²⁴ See Rev. 21:9,10

⁴²⁵ Rev. 21:12

⁴²⁶ Luke 13:34

⁴²⁷ Rev. 11:8

⁴²⁸ See Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37-39

⁴²⁹ II Sam. 7:11

⁴³⁰ Rom. 5:1

⁴³¹ Eph. 2:14,15

place where judgment was executed onto the Son of David. "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him."⁴³²

Peace is not the immediate result of this judgment. The greatest judgment on the entire universe took place in Jerusalem, but this does not, automatically, provide peace for Jerusalem. Ever since the crucifixion, the city has been the center of war and destruction. There has to be a prayer for peace. God's plans are only accomplished through the prayers of His children. What God does, does not leave us unaffected. There will be no peace for Jerusalem if we do not ask for it. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" has become a modern rallying cry among Christians. There will, however, be no peace for Jerusalem without the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ which was made available at Jerusalem. At this time, the city is still far from the peace about which this psalm speaks. We ought, therefore, to be careful not to interpret merely in a geographical sense. The peace of Jerusalem is, first of all, the peace of those who have found peace with God. Much is still lacking in that realm also. Jesus prayed for the peace of Jerusalem when He said: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-the name you gave me-so that they may be one as we are one.... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."⁴³³

It is not wrong to love certain places on earth if they are connected to memories that are precious to us. The psalmist loved Jerusalem because God had said that He would dwell there. What is wrong is to love a place instead of loving God. When the glory of the Lord departed from Jerusalem, as we read in Ezekiel's prophecy and in Matthew's Gospel, ⁴³⁴ nothing was left but an empty hull, a dead decomposing body. That is not the place over which we should ask God's peace. This does not mean that Israel no longer has a place in God's plan. Zechariah prophesied: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."⁴³⁵ And John writes in Revelation: "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."⁴³⁶ The Apostle Paul prophesied that the time will come when Israel will partake in the redemption in Jesus. In Romans, he writes: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.'⁴³⁷ This change, however, will not occur without repentance and conversion. At present, we as Christians have little in common with Jerusalem as it is now. The Jerusalem whose peace we covet is the place of God's revelation of Himself, that is the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. This prayer pertains, first of all, to the church of Christ, our brothers and sisters. It is the prayer of our Lord.

⁴³² Isa. 53:5

⁴³³ John 17:11,20,21

⁴³⁴ See Ezek. ch. 9-11 and Matt. 24:1-3

⁴³⁵ Zech. 12:10

⁴³⁶ Rev. 1:7

⁴³⁷ Rom. 11:25-26

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-THREE

A song of ascents.

1 I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven.

2 As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy.

3 Have mercy on us, O LORD, have mercy on us, for we have endured much contempt.

4 We have endured much ridicule from the proud, much contempt from the arrogant.

In the previous psalm, the pilgrim let his eyes roam over the city in which God had promised to reveal Himself. His gaze wandered over his surrounding. As we have seen, Jerusalem owed her glory to the presence of God, but this presence was never mentioned directly. In this psalm, the poet penetrates to the core. Not only does he recognize that God's presence in Jerusalem is an image of the heavenly reality but he directly addresses God in heaven. There is no roving glance but a deep concentration. Here is the counterpart of what was said in Psalm 121 – "I lift up my eyes to the hills..." God is seated on the throne of the universe. Isaiah confirms this fact in his vision and he says: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple."⁴³⁸ And in Revelation, John says: "There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne."⁴³⁹ Our eyes look up to God, the Almighty. When we lift up our eyes, we do not look at a projection of our own fantasy but we look up to Him whose throne is in heaven, we see reality. Everything else that is visible to our eyes is a shadow of this reality. The psalmist denies that faith is an "upper story experience."

This psalm speaks of obedience. Our fellowship with God is depicted as the relationship of a slave to his master, or a maid to her mistress. It sounds as if there are traces of feminism in the Bible. Yet, God does not treat us like slaves. Jesus says emphatically: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."⁴⁴⁰ Paul, however, advises us: "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness."⁴⁴¹ There is a danger in intimacy with God that we lose sight of the proportions. The fact that our obedience is voluntary does not make it less absolute.

There is also a touch of intimacy in looking to someone's hands. Words are superfluous. One little gesture is enough to discern the will of the Lord. In the natural, this is a matter of training. A dog can be taught to obey without words, but this would be considered denigrating for a human being. But if we speak about voluntary obedience, it becomes an art. This must be what Paul had in mind when he said: "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."⁴⁴² Exercise breeds perfection. That which, on a human level, is authoritarian and unpleasant becomes loving refinement in our relationship with God. It means that we become part of God's team.

Kidner draws the conclusion from the phrase "till he shows us his mercy" that the slaves do not wait for orders but for freedom or for time-off. In my opinion, this would make the image meaningless. It is clear, however, that much more is meant than that God would snap His fingers and we obey. It is obvious that "mercy" means more than freedom from service when we consider Jesus' words: "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."⁴⁴³ The yoke of Christ is God's merciful discipline. This may mean hard and demanding labor which is balm for the soul. The Hebrew word translated with "mercy" is *chanan*. It is a term that is hard to define. The literal meaning is "to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior, to favor." It is related to the word *chanah* that means, "to pitch a tent." God's greatest act of mercy was when the Word became flesh and

⁴³⁸ Isa. 6:1

⁴³⁹ Rev. 4:2,3

⁴⁴⁰ John 15:15

⁴⁴¹ Rom. 6:18,19

⁴⁴² Eph. 5:17

⁴⁴³ Matt. 11:28-30

pitched His tent among us.⁴⁴⁴ Ultimately, it stands for the act of uttermost love expressed in Jesus' death on the cross, even to the point where we participate in the sufferings of Christ and endure unjust punishment for acts we have not committed. Peter describes, what he calls "the true grace of God," with the words: "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God."⁴⁴⁵ This latter shade of meaning seems to fit best in the context of this psalm. The Greek word translated here with "commendable" is *charis*, which, in many other contexts, is rendered with "grace."

In the last verses, the psalmist speaks about contempt and ridicule to which he is subjected. As in the previous psalms, no specific circumstances are mentioned. The emphasis is on the general principle. The incongruity of the position of a child of God in this world is that, although he is heir of God's glory, he is, at the same time, subjected to the scorn of a world that has turned away from God. This is the "disgrace for the sake of Christ"⁴⁴⁶ in which we share when we belong to Him. Jesus said: "If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub (Lord of the flies), how much more the members of his household!"⁴⁴⁷ If we share in the disgrace of Christ we will also share in His grace. Peter defines this grace as: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."⁴⁴⁸ Grace, then, consists of the fact that we do not get fed up when we are reviled and treated with contempt but that we "rejoice that [we] participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that [we] may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If [we] are insulted because of the name of Christ, [we] are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on [us]."⁴⁴⁹

This does not mean that God will not avenge Himself. We read about the souls in Revelation: "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."⁴⁵⁰ They are not told that there will not be a day of revenge, but they are comforted with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The proud who despise God will call "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! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"⁴⁵¹ God's wrath is a built-in device within man. Pride takes revenges upon itself. God is not vengeful in the sense we understand the word. God's revenge consists in the fact that God leaves man to his own devices which leads to his decomposition. If man resists God's grace, God's grace will ultimately become his undoing. That is the point the psalmist wants us to understand.

As the slaves of God, we can afford to concentrate our attention upon the hand of God, realizing that those who oppress will end up much worse than the ones they oppress.

There is one more truth about the element of human dignity that arises from this psalm. To be a slave of Christ does not make us ridiculous or contemptible. As human beings, we are honorable and we have a right to be honored. The basis for this psalm and for the complaint it expresses is the image of God we bear. Only a despicable person is able to despise. The psalmist is aware that the contempt he undergoes is incongruous with the fact that God created him according to His image and likeness. The tension that sin causes can sometimes be almost unbearable.

⁴⁴⁴ See John 1:14

⁴⁴⁵ I Peter 2:20; 5:12

⁴⁴⁶ See Heb. 11:26

⁴⁴⁷ Matt. 10:25

⁴⁴⁸ I Peter 2:23

⁴⁴⁹ I Peter 4:13,14

⁴⁵⁰ Rev. 6:10,11

⁴⁵¹ Rev. 6:16,17

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FOUR

A song of ascents. Of David.

- 1** *If the LORD had not been on our side-- let Israel say--*
2 *if the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us,*
3 *when their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive;*
4 *the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us,*
5 *the raging waters would have swept us away.*
6 *Praise be to the LORD, who has not let us be torn by their teeth.*
7 *We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped.*
8 *Our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

This is a psalm of jubilation and amazement. The psalmist uses three images to depict Israel's situation: a ferocious wild animal, a river in flood stage, and a bird caught in a snare. The three pictures show what men can do to each other under the dominion of sin.

The psalm bears the subscript "Of David." *The Tyndale Commentary* does not hesitate to ascribe the psalm to David personally. Kidner places the psalm against the background of David's ascension to the throne and the effort made by the Philistines to annihilate David.⁴⁵² There is, of course, no reason to suppose that David would not be the author.

A child of God always lives in enemy territory. Jesus characterizes the situation with the words: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves."⁴⁵³ What happens to us is never an accident. We are attacked because we have been sent. Without this commission and without Jesus' assurance that He is with us, we would have no chance of survival. Our problem is that we realize so seldom what our condition is. Jesus' admonition to "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves"⁴⁵⁴ is not superfluous. The fact that God is with us does not give us license to be careless.

The opening verse: "If the LORD had not been on our side..." is an admission that what happens to us can only be explained supernaturally. This is the core of the matter. That is the only explanation for the continued existence of Israel. It is also the only key to the understanding of the life of every Christian. The psalmist wants Israel to live by this understanding. Insight in God's intervention in history is the best guarantee of hope for the future. Israel did not understand that their history was the world's history of salvation. Israel still does not understand this fact at present. The meaning of Israel's history can only be understood in Jesus Christ.

The psalmist also demonstrates that the actual struggle is "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."⁴⁵⁵ The fact that the struggle takes on the form of human opposition is only a smoke screen. People who oppose us are being manipulated by higher powers.

The three pictures depict both Israel's experience as a nation as well as the experience of the individual. As far as our experience is concerned, the images are given in a reversed order. Man begins to be trapped in a snare, then he is swept away by the current, and finally the monster devours him. But our salvation in Jesus Christ begins at the other end. Because Jesus overcame the monster, our snare is broken. Victory is not incidental; it occurred at the basis. We experience personal deliverance because death has been conquered and the teeth of the animal are broken.

The picture of the fowler's snare is the clearest image of what the devil tries to do to man. The bait appeals to man's desires. This deceives him and it is the reason for his being trapped. What the enemy promises seems to be good and reasonable. But it is a lie and it leads to death. It is as impossible for a person who is caught in the snare to save himself as it is for a fly to save itself from a spider web. Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel: "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin!"⁴⁵⁶ The Greek word translated with "the things that cause people to sin" is *skandalon* which means "a trap-stick, a bent sapling, or snare." Our word "scandal" is derived from this. Man is caught in this snare because of the

⁴⁵² See II Sam. 5:17

⁴⁵³ Matt. 10:16

⁴⁵⁴ Matt. 10:16^b

⁴⁵⁵ Eph. 6:12,13

⁴⁵⁶ Matt. 18:7

enticement to sin. This brings him under the power of one who is stronger than he is. The torrent then sweeps him away. What then are the chances of yet being saved? The psalmist demonstrates that God can still intervene in such impossible circumstances to save man.

Water is often seen in the Bible as a picture of God's wrath, as in the flood of Noah. And David says in one of the psalms: "Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me."⁴⁵⁷ In the context of this psalm, the torrent represents the brute force of the enemy to which man is no match. There is no contradiction between either meanings of the image. God is not a God of brute force. If we become subject to His wrath it means that we are left in the power of the Evil One whose side we had chosen.

A person who sees bait often has no inkling that behind it is a monster that wants to swallow him alive. Peter says about the devil: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."⁴⁵⁸ But people try to devour each other also. World history is full of gruesome episodes of cannibalism and holocausts, both incidental and systematic, from the cannibals of New Guinea to Auschwitz. Israel got more than her share of this. It is tragic that this psalm that is so applicable to Israel's condition no longer has any meaning for the average Jew of our time. It has, however, lost none of its meaning for us Christians. We know that it is the almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, who protects us from being devoured and torn apart by the enemy of our souls. The child of God encounters opposition of cosmic proportions. It is not a question of what one person does to another but of the prince of the kingdom of darkness in heavenly places against the representatives of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. That is why it is so important to realize that "our help is in the name of the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." There is help in the Name. This does not mean that we are protected by a mantra but by the very character of God; the very being of YHWH is our guarantee. We are protected by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He is in us as the hope of glory. Satan will not try to break his teeth on this. He tried it once and it was enough.

⁴⁵⁷ Ps. 42:7

⁴⁵⁸ I Peter 5:8

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE

A song of ascents.

- 1** *Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.*
2 *As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.*
3 *The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil.*
4 *Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart.*
5 *But those who turn to crooked ways the LORD will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel.*

The theme of this psalm is faith; that is trust in God as a practical way of life. Faith in the Lord means acting on the basis of God's promises and being certain that He will do what He promised. The classic manifesto of faith is found in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews.

We have to remark at the onset that this kind of faith is seldom found in its pure form. Those people who are presented as heroes of faith in Hebrews, and elsewhere in Scripture, often turn out to have groped for the truth and stumbled. The only person who ever demonstrated a completely pure and consistent faith is our Lord Jesus Christ. I know of no one else who ever walked on water or who moved mountains. This fact, however, does not make this psalm worthless. To the contrary, it stimulates us to reach for what God has for us.

Faith is a fundamental need in our pilgrimage. Even when our hope is fulfilled and we have reached the reality of things unseen, faith will remain a lasting element in eternity.

The psalmist tells us that faith makes us like Mount Zion. Mount Zion, probably, stands for the temple, the place of God's revelation of Himself. The pilgrim, who travels to Jerusalem, himself becomes Jerusalem. In the same manner, the heavenly Jerusalem turns out to be the bride of the Lamb. Thus the individual members of the body of Christ become the place of God's revelation.

It is obvious that the psalmist says more than he himself knows. The Word of God which we handle and proclaim far surpasses our own comprehension.

Although this is not specifically stated, it is clear that trust in God presupposes circumstances that are contrary to the things we hope for. When all is well for us, we seldom tend to involve God in our life.

The pilgrimage began with the fear of Psalm 120 and the journey itself is full of snares and ferocious monsters. Supernatural intervention is needed to save us. The psalmist tells us here that trust in the Name of YHWH, not only brings about salvation, but it makes us a new person. This transformation is so drastic that it surpasses our wildest dreams. Mount Zion endures forever and cannot be shaken. She has the glory of God. Faith in God makes us into creatures of eternity. The Apostle John writes: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."⁴⁵⁹

There is seemingly little connection between the verses 1 and 2. Mount Zion was a picture of God's presence, but here the pilgrim is identified with the same image. God's presence is now seen in the mountains that surround Jerusalem. This emphasizes the theme of protection. It also seems to stress the point that God uses the church to protect the sanctuary. If the pilgrim becomes one with Mount Zion, he becomes part of all God's mountains. As believers we, not only, become the essence of the New Jerusalem but also her wall of protection, simply because of our faith in God.

Vs. 3 brings us back to earth and it also places conditions on earth in their right perspective. The incongruity is that Jerusalem, the place of God's revelation of Himself, is under the scepter of the wicked. This impossible situation generates an unbearable tension. This description fits the essence of the cross of Christ. When the Lord of glory was nailed on the cross, the scepter of the wicked remained over the land allotted to the righteous. And although the victory was won at this grass root level, we still live, in a sense, under the scepter of the wicked. This psalm appeals to our sense of reality. Our eyes should be open to the fact that what we see is, actually, an optical illusion. The present situation is not a lasting reality. If we do not have this vision which faith in God provides, we will be as shaky as the present powers of darkness and their accomplices. The immovability of Mount Zion manifests itself, first of all, in spiritual discernment.

It sounds paradoxical that, on the one hand, the believer is compared to the eternal immovable Mount Zion and, on the other hand, it is possible for the righteous to use their hands to do evil. The Bible is a book of realism. There is a difference between justification and sanctification. The fact that we are in Christ does not make us automatically immune to sin and its temptations. It is possible for us to lose our

⁴⁵⁹ I John 2:17

vision and to fall prey to the propaganda of the devil. There is enough sinful nature left in each of us for sin to appeal to us and to find a receptive heart. Without the fullness of the Holy Spirit we become an easy prey to sin. Satan can put us under so much psychological and physical pressure that only God's supernatural intervention can keep us from stumbling. This is probably what Jesus meant when He said: "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened."⁴⁶⁰ It is important for us to realize that the domain that is under the scepter of the Evil One is the inheritance of the righteous. The meek will inherit the earth. But if we lose our meekness, what will happen to our heritage? How important it is for us to stand in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Vs. 4 is the only prayer in this psalm. It is the only place where God is addressed directly. From a theological viewpoint, this verse is difficult to explain. Is God only good to those who are good? And who is good? Does the psalmist make the same mistake the rich young ruler made, to whom Jesus replied: "Why do you call me good? No one is good-except God alone."⁴⁶¹ We should not take this verse out of its context. Jesus spoke to a young man who thought that he was good enough for God. The psalmist speaks about people who put their trust in the Lord and who, on the basis of their faith, do not buckle under the pressure of the enemy to "use their hands to do evil." The goodness of those people is not their inborn tendency but the application, by faith, of the goodness of Jesus Christ to their lives. They "do good works, which God prepared in advance for [them] to do."⁴⁶² This goodness is the fruit of the confession of their sin and the forgiveness they received. God's goodness is not a preferential treatment for friends. God gave His Son for the salvation of a world that hates Him. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."⁴⁶³ God is always good to all men. What the psalmist means to say is that the man who is saved and forgiven receives a taste of God's goodness which remains hidden to those who cling to their sins. Only those who have received a new heart are "are upright in heart."

In the last verse it becomes clear what trusting in the Lord means. Vs. 5 puts it negatively, but we only have to turn the image around to see the positive aspect. The opposite of crooked ways is the straight path. The question how we reach our goal is related to our love for God. Uprightness is revealed in our way of life. This verse does not speak about atheists but about people who, though they have the name to believe in God, differ in no way in their manner of living from those who do not know God. This psalm says that if we live like evildoers, we are in danger of sharing their fate. For someone who is conceived and born in sin, it is almost impossible to be open-minded and upright. It requires an attitude of constant confession of sin and asking for forgiveness. This is implied in the name Israel. Hosea's definition of Jacob's change of name to Israel is: "He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor."⁴⁶⁴ That is the only way one becomes an Israelite. *Shalom* over Israel!

⁴⁶⁰ Matt. 24:22

⁴⁶¹ Luke 18:19

⁴⁶² Eph. 2:10

⁴⁶³ Rom. 5:8

⁴⁶⁴ Hos. 12:4

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SIX

A song of ascents.

- 1 When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed.**
- 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."**
- 3 The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.**
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.**
- 5 Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.**
- 6 He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.**

The Tyndale Commentary points out that the phrase "When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion" acquires a completely different meaning if the Hebrew word *shiybah* is taken for *sebut/sebit*. The difference would be that the psalm would not deal with a return of captives from exile but with a change in the fortunes of Israel as in the case of Job: "And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends."⁴⁶⁵ The RSV takes this line and renders vs. 1 with: "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." The most important implication of this interpretation is that the psalm would not, necessarily date from the period after the Babylonian captivity. This, however, has little bearing upon the spiritual application of this psalm.

The psalm uses a double theme: a supernatural intervention which brought about a sudden and complete deliverance, and the process of the growing of fruit which is the result of man's toil. In the life of a child of God, both elements are present, the heavenly and the earthly. There is a marvelous relationship between the two: laughter and weeping! It makes little difference whether the psalm deals with a return from captivity, or the exodus from Egypt, or whatever miracle of redemption is meant. The historical facts all are an image of a greater spiritual reality. The Apostle Paul states: "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."⁴⁶⁶ And Peter writes: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

It was like a dream; it seemed too good to be true. When the reality penetrates, we will burst out in laughter and praise. Even the pagan nations, the outsiders, those who had never personally experienced God's love, had to admit that things had happened to Israel that could only be explained as supernatural phenomena.

This is the basis for our life. It is a resurrection from the dead. We should never forget this. We should never forget and come to the point where the miracle of our redemption has become a "déjà vu." Israel made this mistake when they crossed the desert on their way to the Promised Land. In the dryness and sterility of their daily routine, they forgot the Song of Moses which they had sung at the other shore of the Red Sea when they saw the dead bodies of the Egyptians washed ashore at their very feet. During our journey through life's wilderness, we should never forget to sing "the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb."⁴⁶⁷ We are, after all, victorious over the beast.

However strange this may seem, the reality of our redemption is more easily recognized by outsiders than by ourselves. We may, initially, react with laughter and songs of joy, but the heathen nations are the ones who recognize that God was behind these supernatural phenomena. It seems as if there is a lapse of time before we come to the same conclusion. Deep inside, we often say to ourselves that God could reach His goal with us because He had such good material to work with. But outsiders often know better than that!

All this, however, is behind us and, presently, we find ourselves in the desert. The Negev or the South is the desert south of Judea. The psalmist prays in vs. 4 that the Lord would repeat the miracle that was mentioned in vs. 1. Both verses use the same expression which is translated with "brought back the captives" and "restore our fortunes." The prayer is "Lord, bring about a change in the dryness of our lives." Occasionally, it happens that there is such a heavy rainstorm in the desert that there are streams in the desert. Isaiah prophesied that these things will happen. "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the

⁴⁶⁵ Job 42:10 (RSV)

⁴⁶⁶ Col. 1:13,14

⁴⁶⁷ See Rev. 15:3

wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. ... Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.”⁴⁶⁸ This psalm has much in common with Isaiah’s prophecy, even in the use of words. The psalmist prays for a universal revival of which the fullness of the Holy Spirit, which we may experience in the presence, is the surety. God has already performed the greatest and most absolute miracle of our redemption. But we still live on earth and not in paradise. God places us in the Negev and orders us to sow our seed. We sow in tears. I remember my own tears when we left the work on our mission field and had to say good-bye to our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. The miracle described in vs. 1 will be repeated on a much higher and more universal level than we can imagine.

There is no sowing without tears. It sounds so easy when Paul says: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”⁴⁶⁹ Yet, the same labor pains accompany sowing and planting as the birth of a baby. If we understand that this pain is part of the whole process of the new birth, and not a senseless, incidental suffering, our sowing acquires a much deeper meaning. When God calls us, we become partakers of the suffering of Christ in the same way as we will be partakers in the ingathering of the harvest and the revelation of His glory. God does not only promise tears to us. And if we only shout for joy because of our own salvation, we have not learned to shout yet as we should. The streams in the Negev Desert give us a foretaste of the time when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”⁴⁷⁰ There is also a foretaste in the carrying of the sheaves. The sparks in the eyes of the reaper will light the eternal bonfire of joy when the harvest of the whole earth is gathered in.

⁴⁶⁸ Isa. 35:1,2,6,7

⁴⁶⁹ I Cor. 3:6

⁴⁷⁰ Hab. 2:14

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SEVEN

A song of ascents. Of Solomon.

1 Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.

2 In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat-- for he grants sleep to those he loves.

3 Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him.

4 Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth.

5 Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.

This psalm was the text for our wedding-ceremony. Ever since, it has occupied a central place in our family life. Yet, it has taken years before I came to ask myself if I had ever clearly understood the message of this psalm. I always thought that the psalm said, in general terms, that our efforts were in vain if the Lord was not in them. Now I ask myself if this is all. The problem lies in the relationship between the images that are used. What connection is there between the building of a house, the protection of a city, and the sons that are born in one's youth? Unless we comprehend that the three pictures illustrate the same truth, we miss the point. The theme is marriage and family. It seems ironic that this particular pilgrim's song bears the name of Solomon. His life of polygamy made him particularly unsuitable to say something meaningful about the subject.

This psalm, which deals with the family, is like a sparkling diamond with various facets. First if all, it is a song of ascents. It moves us toward fellowship with God which means eternal life. In the olden days, eternal life was expressed in a physical way in terms of progeny. There must have been a link between the Israelite philosophy of life and the heathen worldview. The concept of life after death was rather vague. It was clear that a man lived on in the lives of his children. This explains why barrenness was considered to be such a shame. It makes the "sons born in one's youth" the central point of this psalm. The person who makes the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to meet His maker sees in a tangible, physical manner what God does for him on a spiritual level.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Derek Kidner places the three images next to each other as separate units. But he also emphasizes that the word "house" has a double meaning in Hebrew. *Bayith* means "a house—in the greatest variation of applications, especially family."⁴⁷¹ The word *banah* means "to build" but it can also be rendered with "to obtain children." There is a play on words in Hebrew in *banah* and *baaniym* or *ben* which means "a son—as a builder of the family name." This play on words is obvious in Nathan's prophecy to David. We read in Second Samuel: "Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? 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.'"⁴⁷² This reinforces the idea that all three images express the same thought.

All functions on earth for which the Lord created man are shadows of a heavenly reality. According to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, sexual intercourse in a marriage expresses the unity between Christ and the church. We read: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church."⁴⁷³ This makes us understand that the conception of children is an earthly image of God's dealing with us.

The psalm says different things at the same time. The unity of the three images throws light on the fact that the founding of a family is like the building of a house, as well as the building of a city, and the guarding of a city. The purpose of building a house is more than providing living space. A house must be a home. Our family is, at the same time, a protected unity. A city symbolizes safety. In the olden days, the enemy was kept out by city walls and gates. The sense of uncertainty with which most people go through life can always be traced back to a lack of security in the family in which they grew up.

⁴⁷¹ According to Strong's Definitions

⁴⁷² II Sam. 7:5,11,12

⁴⁷³ Eph. 5:31,32

Lastly, the family is an extension of our defense. The fact that we are well armed makes the enemy decide that it is preferable to confer than to confront. When the psalmist says that the father of the sons will not be put to shame, we can read in this that it is the enemy who has to be ashamed.

It is not stated who the enemy is. We don't have to look far if we understand that we are dealing with pilgrims who are going up to Jerusalem to seek fellowship with God. If knowing God means eternal life then the enemy who is put to shame must be the devil and death. Death is called "the last enemy" in Scripture.⁴⁷⁴

The next aspect, which turns out to be the main theme of the psalm, is the fact that man, by himself, is unable to achieve these things. Our task is greater than we are. Solomon, who wrote this psalm, is proof of the fact that, if we abandon God, nothing will be left of life but an empty shell.

No one, probably, conceived more children in his life than King Solomon, but his quiver remained empty. We only strain ourselves if we leave God out of our calculations and if we act as if everything depends upon our toil.

The first application of this principle is to the struggle for existence. But, ultimately, much more is at stake. If we are successful in this life and death has not been conquered for us, we lose everything. In *The Parable Of The Sower*, Jesus calls the thorns "the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth."⁴⁷⁵ These are the elements that choke the Word of God in the human heart. The person, who rises early and stays up late and toils for food to eat, thinking that this will benefit him in eternity, has no idea what it is all about. According to Paul's definition, sin does not merely consist in committing adultery, lying, or murdering but in falling short of the glory of God.⁴⁷⁶ Here we can repeat Paul's question: "And who is equal to such a task?" with the only possible answer: "our competence comes from God."⁴⁷⁷

The question remains, "What can we do?" We cannot force God to bless us. The first important step we can take is to recognize the reality and confess our impotence. If we say to God: "Lord, if you don't do it in me and through me, it will not be done," He will certainly pour down His blessing upon us. It is then quite possible that we *will* "rise early and stay up late" and there is no guarantee that we will be "toiling for food to eat" but our motives will be different. But that is another chapter.

⁴⁷⁴ See I Cor. 15:26

⁴⁷⁵ Matt. 13:22

⁴⁷⁶ See Rom. 3:23

⁴⁷⁷ II Cor. 2:16^b; 3:5^b

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-EIGHT

A song of ascents.

- 1 Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways.**
2 You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours.
3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.
4 Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD.
5 May the LORD bless you from Zion all the days of your life; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem,
6 and may you live to see your children's children.
Peace be upon Israel.

Again, we can see a direct link between this pilgrim's psalm and the preceding one. The family is the core of this poem as an image of a heavenly reality. The relationships in this psalm, however, are not depicted in terms of defense and security but as a growing, flourishing joy, expressed in the word "blessed." This psalm is the first direct beatitude in the series of Songs of Ascents. The fear of the Lord is synonymous with the recognition that God is the deciding factor and the only value-denominator in the life of man. This was also expressed in Psalm 127. The word "fear" is another term to describe the reality of our fellowship with God. It has nothing to do with angst but with the realization that God is the one for whose presence earth and sky will fly.⁴⁷⁸ This elevates our relationship with Him to the highest level, far above what we can think or imagine. Fellowship with God is the deepest satisfaction of our being and a harmonious family, consequently, is an earthly expression of this fellowship.

We have to be careful not to see in this psalm a fiat for a "God-wants-you-to-be-rich" theology. The fact that spiritual blessing is expressed in terms of material prosperity does not mean that material blessing is essential. Absence of prosperity is not necessarily an indication that something is wrong in our fellowship with God. It is true that poverty, sickness, death, strife, and discord are not parts of God's original plan with man. On this point also, sin has caused a lot of havoc. The Lord of glory said about Himself: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."⁴⁷⁹ If this is so, what basis do we have to assume that we have a right to affluence and to a happy family life? God guarantees us the essentials, which does not mean, necessarily, the material expression of blessing. He "has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."⁴⁸⁰ Sometimes material blessings are added to this.

The beatitude of this psalm reminds us of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus turns upside down all our reasoning on this point and declares blessed those who are not blessed from an earthly point of view. Blessedness is the result of our relationship with God and it declares itself in our moral conduct: walking in His ways.

This psalm also reminds us of the curse that fell upon this world at the fall and that is, obviously, lifted in this psalm. We read in Genesis: "To Adam [God] said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ' 'You must not eat of it,' ' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.' "⁴⁸¹ Hard labor has not been eliminated but the curse has been replaced by a blessing.

This psalm does not mention reconciliation. No explanation is given about how the break with God, which caused the curse, was healed. Healing is implied in the name Israel in the last verse. Israel is the symbol of God's grace and of forgiveness of sins that are confessed. All this is assumed without further explanation. The psalm addresses itself to those who are "in Christ." It is no anachronism to say this about the believers in the Old Testament. The fact that their sins were covered by the blood of a lamb instead of being washed away by the blood of *the Lamb* does not make any fundamental difference. The psalm speaks about a person who is reconciled with God and who has drawn the conclusion of this fact in a walk of fellowship with the Lord. Love, obedience, and blessing always go hand-in-hand. The psalm moves

⁴⁷⁸ See Rev. 20:11

⁴⁷⁹ Luke 9:58

⁴⁸⁰ Eph. 1:3

⁴⁸¹ Gen. 3:17-19

between blessings that have a general application and personal applications. In the verses 1 and 4 people are addressed in general but in other verses the psalm addresses itself to specific individuals. In the verses 1-4 the poet affirms certain facts, but the verses 5 and 6 are a prayer of intercession for a single individual as well as for a whole congregation. The preceding verses explain the conditions and the contents of the blessing, the last verses refer to the source and the dimensions of the blessing.

Zion was the goal of the pilgrimage. It was the place of God's revelation of Himself. The blessing consists in a personal encounter with God. The Apostle Paul calls this being enlightened with "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."⁴⁸² This was the blessing Moses hoped for when he said to God: "Now show me your glory."⁴⁸³ This blessing transforms us. The Apostle Paul says about it: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."⁴⁸⁴

"The prosperity of Jerusalem" or, as the KJV calls it, "the good of Jerusalem" is the glory of God. Revelation says about the New Jerusalem: "It shone with the glory of God."⁴⁸⁵ Seeing the good of Jerusalem means partaking of it. We will not only see God's glory, we will reflect it also. For this reason God has created us. It is obvious that this glory cannot be our daily experience on earth. "All the days of your life" does not seem to fit the reality of our daily life. We should not forget that the poet always uses earthly images when speaking about the invisible, spiritual reality. In this psalm also, all the pictures are on this side of death. But the reality is eternity. This is best expressed in the phrase: "May you live to see your children's children." As in the previous psalm, in this psalm also eternal life is seen in the coming and going of one generation after the other. The person who sees his grandchildren has the living proof that life goes on.

What the psalmist says about one single individual pertains to Israel as a whole in the widest sense of the word. At this point, *The Tyndale Commentary* mentions Paul concluding blessing in the Epistle to the Galatians: "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God."⁴⁸⁶ This "Israel of God" refers to what Paul says in the preceding verse: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation." Paul actually follows in the footsteps of the writer of this psalm. The Israel of God consists of people who fear the Lord, and who walk in His ways. This psalm demonstrates that fellowship with God is a growing process, just like the fruit of one's labor and the forming of a family which does not happen overnight. In that sense, Psalm 128 precedes Psalm 127.

⁴⁸² II Cor. 4:6

⁴⁸³ Ex. 33:18

⁴⁸⁴ II Cor. 3:18

⁴⁸⁵ Rev. 21:11

⁴⁸⁶ Gal. 6:16

PSALM ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-NINE

A song of ascents.

- 1** *They have greatly oppressed me from my youth--let Israel say--*
- 2** *they have greatly oppressed me from my youth, but they have not gained the victory over me.*
- 3** *Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long.*
- 4** *But the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked.*
- 5** *May all who hate Zion be turned back in shame.*
- 6** *May they be like grass on the roof, which withers before it can grow;*
- 7** *with it the reaper cannot fill his hands, nor the one who gathers fill his arms.*
- 8** *May those who pass by not say, "The blessing of the LORD be upon you; we bless you in the name of the LORD."*

The opening words of his psalm remind us of Psalm 124, with which it has also other features in common. The emphasis in this psalm, however, is placed differently and we find here elements of revenge upon an enemy that are absent in the other psalm. We do not know whether this poem was written before or after the Babylonian Captivity. Before the captivity occurred, Israel had undergone enough persecution to provide material for this psalm. It began in Israel's youth! Israel was born as a people while still in Egypt and as a nation in Canaan. Both places were enemy territory.

Oppression experienced in youth marks a person for the rest of his life, as does every youth-experience, whether good or bad. There are things from our youth we will never forget. The first of the Songs of Ascents begins with a reaction to suppression: "I call on the LORD in my distress....," and the psalm that follows this one is also written in a minor key.

The tone of Psalm 129, however, is not negative. Oppression has not brought about defeat. Negative experiences do not always have negative effects upon men. If, in our distress, we call on the Lord, our suffering works together for good. It is often in oppression that the characteristics of the Holy Spirit are shaped in us. Paul explains this in his Epistle to the Romans: "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."⁴⁸⁷ And James, in his epistle, makes trials the subject of a beatitude: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."⁴⁸⁸ Oppression can bring the best and the worst out of us. For those who love God, oppression will bring about purification; but if a man misses the basis of God's love in his life, oppression will only contribute to his doom.

"They have not gained the victory over me" is proof that Israel partakes in the grace of God. The description in vs. 3 is very graphic. It could literally be true that the backs of some Israelites had been torn open by scourging. In the book *That Fatal Shore*, which tells the story of how Great Britain dispatched its prisoners by sending them to the colony of Australia; I read how prisoners were scourged with a whip called "the cat o' nine tails" which took the flesh off their backs. Our thoughts go inevitably to the scourging of Christ. Mark tells us: "Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."⁴⁸⁹ All the cruelty one man can inflict upon another seems to have been packed in that scene.

The oppression Israel experienced in connection with God's election should not be confused with the punishment God meted out to them as a result of their sins. Israel's slavery in Egypt and some episodes during the reign of King David certainly belong to the first category. The Babylonian Captivity should be classified under the second. Yet, a line of demarcation is difficult to draw. Even when Israel was subjected to the wrath of God because of their sin, there were always righteous ones who shared in the lot of the wicked. Habakkuk's prophecy and Daniel's experiences are proof of this.

⁴⁸⁷ Rom. 5:3-5

⁴⁸⁸ James 1:2-4, 12

⁴⁸⁹ Mark 15:15

We place this psalm in a broader perspective if we see Israel's suffering as a shadow of the great suffering of the greatest of all Israelites, our Lord Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the purpose of God's election in taking upon Himself the punishment for the sins of the whole world. It is on the basis of His suffering that God demonstrate His righteousness which allows Him to "cut [us] free from the cords of the wicked." The Apostle John refers to the concept of God's righteousness when he says: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."⁴⁹⁰ In every deliverance from oppression there is an element of forgiveness of sin because no one who is persecuted for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven is completely pure. Only the cords of Jesus Himself were cut because of His own righteousness. We are freed because we share in His righteousness.

The Tyndale Commentary points out that the church that stands on this side of the cross is just as much called to share in the sufferings of Christ, as were the Israelites on the other side of Golgotha. This makes this psalm such a pertinent statement for us.

The phrases "They have not gained the victory over me" and "the LORD is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked" are parallel sentences. Our victory consists in Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead.

In vs. 5, the psalmist turns his attention from the victim to the perpetrator. As we have seen before, whenever shame is mentioned there is a ray of hope.⁴⁹¹ The person who feel shame in the presence of God has not yet lost all sense of difference between good and evil. Moral consciousness is the first step on the road to conversion. The psalmist does not pray here for revenge, as did David in Ps. 40. He simply states a fact. Those who hate Zion will be put to shame. Zion, in this context, does not only represent the place of God's revelation but also Israel itself. The psalmist identifies Israel with God's revelation of Himself. This foreshadows the Incarnation. God's revelation becomes men of flesh and blood instead of a presence between the cherubim above the ark. It needs no further explanation that the incarnation of the revelation in Israel was far from perfect. In some instances there was no visible trace of it. Never in the whole of world history was there such a black-and-white situation as the one that is depicted in this psalm. This is another reason to see in this psalm a prophecy about the sufferings of Christ. He is the real Zion, God in the flesh.

The curse that is pronounced in this psalm is one of the strangest in the whole Bible. It cuts so deeply because it implies what could have been. In the background we see the abundantly rich harvest that is gathered in under God's blessing; however, God is not directly mentioned in this context. The psalmist draws a comparison without specifying the second factor. That is what makes these lines such powerful poetry. In a previous psalm, Israel gathered in its harvest with rejoicing while being oppressed at the same time. We read: "He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him."⁴⁹² Here the wicked is not even compared with a meager harvest but with grass on the roof that withers before it is thrown away. The image makes the wicked a parody of reality. On the day of judgment, the angels will not even pay any attention to such people. In the Book of Ruth, Boaz greeted the harvesters with: "The LORD be with you!" and they called back: "The LORD bless you!"⁴⁹³ There will be no question of the usual greeting which one reaper will call to another at harvest time.

During the suffering of Jesus, the Roman soldiers mocked Him by treating Him for a moment as if He were a king. They did this on the presumption that He could make no claim to such an honor. The wicked, backed up by Satan and his hordes, lay claim to an honor they do not possess. The psalmist exposes them here in their shameful nakedness. There can be no question of honor because there is no question of God's blessing. This is the doom of those who hate Zion.

⁴⁹⁰ I John 1:9

⁴⁹¹ See Ps. 40:14,15; 70:2,3

⁴⁹² Ps. 126:6

⁴⁹³ See Ruth 2:4

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY

A song of ascents.

- 1** *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;*
2 *O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.*
3 *If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?*
4 *But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.*
5 *I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope.*
6 *My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.*
7 *O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.*
8 *He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.*

The title the Vulgate gives to this psalm is *De Profundis*, "Out of the depths." This psalm is also a song of ascents, a song sung by the pilgrims, a song of longing for fellowship with God. It is the most introspective psalm in the series of songs of ascents. It is also the sixth in a series of seven psalms of contrition.⁴⁹⁴

Barnes' Notes observes about the opening verse: "The word rendered 'depths' is from a verb-`aamaq ...-which means to be deep; then, to be unsearchable; then, to make deep; and it would apply to anything low, deep, or profound, as the ocean, a pit, or a valley. The word used here occurs elsewhere only in the following places: Ps 69:2,14, where it is rendered 'deep,' applied to waters; and Isa 51:10; Ezek 27:34, where it is rendered 'depths.' The word, as used here, would be applicable to deep affliction, dejection, or distress. It would be applicable

- (a) to affliction-the depths of sorrow from loss of friends, property, or bodily suffering;
- (b) sin-the depths into which the soul is plunged under the consciousness of guilt;
- (c) mental trouble-low spirits-melancholy-darkness of mind-loss of comfort in religion-powerful temptation-disappointment-the anguish caused by ingratitude-or sadness of heart in view of the crimes and the sorrows of people-or grief at the coldness, the hardness, the insensibility of our friends to their spiritual condition. From all these depths of sorrow it is our privilege to call upon the Lord; in those depths of sorrow it is proper thus to implore his help. Often he brings us into these 'depths' that we may be led to call upon him; always when we are brought there, we should call upon him."

From the context we conclude that "depth" is the depth of guilt because of sins committed. The psalm is a prayer for forgiveness. Chronologically, this psalm ought to be placed at the beginning of the songs of ascent, probably just before Ps. 120 or immediately following it. It is true, however, that man becomes more conscious of his guilt as he draws closer to God. Our sense of guilt intensifies in the measure in which our sense of God's presence deepens. Most people, like me, have a vague feeling of guilt at the time of their conversion without an awareness of specific sins. To put it in a human way, God had a difficult time showing me that I was guilty because of certain sinful acts I had committed. Sin has an built-in tendency of denial of reality. When Adam sinned, he hid from God, from his wife, and from himself. Every sinner after him has always done the same. And no one would ever come to a complete confession of sin if it weren't for the realization that God wants to forgive and to heal.

The psalmist is in the depths, but his gaze is upward and thus he begins to rise up. People who find themselves in the depths have only one way out: cry to God.

The names YHWH (LORD) and Adonai (Lord) are used interchangeably in this psalm. God is called by the Name with which He revealed Himself to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM."⁴⁹⁵ He is recognized as the Redeemer and as the Master who has to be obeyed.

The fact that the psalmist mentions the volume of his voice may be an indication that he believed that his redemption would depend upon the intensity of his cry. The basis of man's redemption is outside himself in the atonement of Jesus Christ. Whether we cry out loud or whisper makes no difference. Brother Andrew, the subject of the book that bears his name, was saved when he said to God: "OK, go ahead!" Yet,

⁴⁹⁴ The others are Ps. 32; 38; 51; 102; 143

⁴⁹⁵ Ex. 3:14

intensity is important in so far as it is an indication of our will. It was with good reason that Jesus asked the paraplegic at the Pool of Bethesda: “Do you want to get well?”⁴⁹⁶

The image of the pit in which we find ourselves by our own fault is a very graphic one. Man is created to live on the surface of the world, not several feet below. The depth of a cemetery is for the dead; it is not the level on which the living are supposed to exist. The psalmist finds himself at the point of being buried alive. Joseph and Jeremiah experienced this in a physical way.⁴⁹⁷

In a sense, Ps. 130 is the most important of the songs of ascents. The foundation of the Gospel is bared in it. Zechariah, in his song of praise says that the coming of the Messiah was: “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”⁴⁹⁸ In this psalm, we find awareness of sin and the certainty of forgiveness, waiting on God and biblical hope. All of this is placed in an Old Testament setting. Atonement was achieved through the blood of animals, and knowledge of pardon did not cleanse man’s conscience. But this shadow is proof of the fact that the reality, which casts the shadow, cannot be far behind. We live in this reality, the reality of Christ. As the Apostle Paul says: “These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”⁴⁹⁹ God reveals His love for us in Jesus Christ by not keeping a record of our sins. This was my personal experience when, at the moment of my conversion, I became conscious of my guilt and God said to me: “We don’t talk about that any longer.” If God would not wipe away our sins by the blood of Christ, no one would be able to stand before Him.

This pardon of our sins places us on a higher level than the angels. In Isaiah’s vision, the seraph picked up the live coal from the altar with tongs but Isaiah kissed the coal with his lips. The seraphs covered their faces before God but, after being touched by the coal, Isaiah stood before God without any cover and the commission was given to him, not to them.⁵⁰⁰ Forgiveness places us in a relationship with God which is unique in the whole universe.

Forgiveness also creates in us a biblical fear of God. Vs. 4 says: “But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.” This verse adds a new dimension to the concept of “the fear of the Lord.” In a footnote in *The Tyndale Commentary*, we read that in Hebrew there exists another version of the verb “to fear” in which *Twr* is taken for *Twrh* (Torah). The LXX has the reading: “on account of Thy Name.” In both cases the text speaks about reverence for the character of God. The psalmist states here that forgiveness increases our awe for the character of God.

This goes against the grain of our human reasoning. We tend to believe that fear belongs to the realm of evil. In doing so we start from the assumption that we are good. If we project this kind of reasoning upon God, we become good and God is evil and wants to harm us. When it turns out that in reality the opposite is true, it becomes clear that our interpretation of “the fear of the Lord” was wrong. In Revelation we read: “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the 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! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”⁵⁰¹

Forgiveness draws us out of the realm of evil into the realm of good; out of darkness into light. God’s awesomeness does not diminish in this process. To the contrary! When John says: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love,”⁵⁰² he does not contradict the above because he uses the word “fear” in its popular meaning, not in the biblical sense.

In the verses 5 and 6, the psalmist confesses to wait for the Lord. This attitude expresses hope. The pit, the emotional depth with which this psalm begins, is an image of despair. The certainty of forgiveness, which is based upon the character of God, changes despair into hope. There is light at the end of the tunnel. This hope is based upon the Word of God. The psalmist does not mention specific examples of God’s promises and he does not elaborate upon the contents of the Word. The Bible as a whole gives to man whose sins have been forgiven the hope that he will see God face to face.

⁴⁹⁶ John 5:6

⁴⁹⁷ See Gen 37:23,24; 42:21; Jer. 38:1-13

⁴⁹⁸ Luke 1:77

⁴⁹⁹ Col. 2:17

⁵⁰⁰ See Isa. 6:1-9

⁵⁰¹ Rev. 6:15-17

⁵⁰² I John 4:18

We should not forget that this psalm is a song of ascents, a pilgrims' song. The psalmist was on the road to Jerusalem. He either had with him the sacrificial animals or he carried enough money to buy them in Jerusalem. Soon, he would bow down before the altar of YHWH and bring his sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews says: "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"⁵⁰³

That is the psalmist's hope. That which he longed for in such a passionate, way has come to us in Jesus Christ. The intensity of his hope is expressed in the words: "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits...." The certainty of this hope is manifested in the image of the night watchmen waiting for the first rays of sunlight in the East. The repetition of the words "more than watchmen wait for the morning" makes the psalmist a watchman himself. It is still pitch dark but this darkness is not lasting. We are children of light. The expectation of the psalmist is more certain than a watchman's expectation of the sunrise. Something may go wrong one day with the whole solar system but nothing will ever change the character of God.

The psalmist speaks as a member of the nation of Israel. What goes for him goes for all those who have entered into the covenant God made with His people. The same thought was expressed in previous psalms such as Ps. 125 and 128. The psalmist stood not only personally guilty before God, the whole nation was guilty. The Day of Atonement ceremony is proof of this.⁵⁰⁴ Israel as a whole is in need of forgiveness but this forgiveness consists in the atonement of each of its members individually. Caiaphas, the high priest, was right when he said: "You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." The Apostle John adds to this: "He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one."⁵⁰⁵ John the Baptist called Jesus: "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"⁵⁰⁶ The great Day of Atonement has come, but unless the blood is applied to our personal life, like the coal that touched Isaiah's lips, forgiveness of sin will be an empty phrase for us. The redemption of Israel will be a reality when every Israelite is redeemed.

⁵⁰³ Heb. 9:14

⁵⁰⁴ See Lev. ch. 16

⁵⁰⁵ John 11:50-52

⁵⁰⁶ John 1:29

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-ONE

A song of ascents. Of David.

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

2 *But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

3 *O Israel, put your hope in the LORD both now and forevermore.*

This psalm could be called “God’s lullaby.” The difference with other lullabies is that it is the child who sings it. The psalm bears David’s name and there is no reason to doubt his authorship.

It contains several moving elements. We may not forget that this psalm follows the previous one to which it is closely related and which was written “out of the depths.” The satisfaction and deep peace that radiates from this psalm is the result of the forgiveness of sin which was announced in Ps. 130.

The whole atmosphere of this psalm breathes love and tenderness. It speaks of the most elementary experiences of the soul. We all experience the first draught of God’s love on our mother’s breast. This psalm shows that God is our Mother before we get to know Him as our Father.

In vs. 1 David describes his condition. He does this as a grown man. The image of a child is a comparison. A child is unable to analyze himself as the poet does here. In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Derek Kidner observes correctly that, in using such images, David project Jesus’ use of object lessons. We read, for example, in Matthew’s Gospel: “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”⁵⁰⁷ Jesus makes clear that only those are great who make no claim to greatness. David says the same thing in this psalm.

Such understanding can only be obtained if we understand something of God’s glory. If we think that we are able to equal God’s glory through our own efforts, we have not yet understood what it is all about. The definition of sin is “falling short of the glory of God.”⁵⁰⁸ Pride and haughtiness are symptoms of illegal means to attain this glory. They are characteristic for the ways of the enemy. The question is never *if* man can become like God, but *how*. God has destined us to glory. We can only reach it through self-denial. This is the way Jesus was raised to glory. Paul says: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, 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! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”⁵⁰⁹

“My heart is not proud, O LORD” is a confession. David confesses that, as far as the Kingdom of Heaven is concerned, he is a mere child. God is the absolute adult to us. God’s plan for man is a matter too great and a thing too wonderful for us. But we need insight and maturity to come to such a conclusion. Woe unto us if we lose sight of the wonder of it!

David does not say that it is good and praiseworthy to be small and average and to lead a life of mediocrity. As people who are created in the image of God, we are destined for greatness. The point of the first verse is that we have no reason to boast about things that God has given to us in His grace. Pride and haughtiness are symptomatic of efforts to obtain the benefits of fellowship with God without intimacy with God. This fellowship cannot be better expressed than in the image of a child that is satisfied by drinking on its mother’s breast and who remains in her arms in this condition.

The word “to wean” in modern English has the meaning of becoming independent. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* gives the following definitions: “1 : to accustom (a young mammal) to take food by means other than nursing 2 : to free from a source of dependence; *also* : to free from a usually unwholesome habit or interest.” We can think of the admonition of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by

⁵⁰⁷ Matt. 18:1-4

⁵⁰⁸ See Rom. 3:23

⁵⁰⁹ Phil. 2:5-10

this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."⁵¹⁰

The Hebrew word is *gamal* which *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines as: "to deal out, deal with, wean, ripen." The dictionary states: "[The word is] found in both biblical and modern Hebrew, this word occurs 35 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. While the basic meaning of the word is 'to deal out, with,' the wide range of meaning can be seen in its first occurrence in the biblical text: 'And the child grew, and was weaned...' Gen 21:8. *Gamal* is used most frequently in the sense of 'to deal out to,' such as in Prov 31:12: 'She will do him good and not evil....' The word is used twice in 1 Sam 24:17: '...thou hast rewarded me good, whereas I have rewarded thee evil.' The psalmist rejoices and sings to the Lord 'because he hath dealt bountifully with me' Ps 13:6. This word can express ripening of grapes Isa 18:5 or bearing ripe almonds Num 17:8."

In this psalm there is no trace of what might be called, "withdrawal symptoms." The whole tone is one of peace, intimacy, and satisfaction. I would, therefore, rather see in the image a child who has drunk enough for the time being than one who is no longer in the habit of drinking.

It is a known fact that the experiences of our earliest days of life stamp us for the rest of life. For a person who has been bereaved of motherly love in his early childhood, it is difficult to find balance and equilibrium as an adult. It is hard to realize the love of God in one's life if one has not received the signals of love on the natural level via the mother. The image expresses the most elementary form of satisfaction. This is the condition of a soul who experiences God's fellowship and who has learned to receive God's love.

As a baby is created in such a fashion that it is natural for him to drink at his mother's breast, so the soul of man is created for fellowship with God. We experience this bond as natural. Peter makes a comparison between a baby who drinks the milk of his mother and our use of the Word of God. We read: "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation."⁵¹¹ The NKJV uses the expression "the pure milk of the word." In our relationship with God, the Word of God is a unique means of satisfaction for our souls. Jesus has demonstrated clearly during His life on earth that "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."⁵¹²

This psalm emphasizes again the relationship between our personal experience and the fellowship of the believers. Israel is the organism of people who are fed and satisfied by the Word of God. No one is ever blessed by God merely for his own satisfaction.

⁵¹⁰ Heb. 5:11-14

⁵¹¹ I Pet. 2:2

⁵¹² Matt. 4:4

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-TWO

A song of ascents.

- 1 O LORD, remember David and all the hardships he endured.**
- 2 He swore an oath to the LORD and made a vow to the Mighty One of Jacob:**
- 3 "I will not enter my house or go to my bed--**
- 4 I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids,**
- 5 till I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob."**
- 6 We heard it in Ephrathah, we came upon it in the fields of Jaar:**
- 7 "Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool--**
- 8 arise, O LORD, and come to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.**
- 9 May your priests be clothed with righteousness; may your saints sing for joy."**
- 10 For the sake of David your servant, do not reject your anointed one.**
- 11 The LORD swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke: "One of your own**
- 12 descendants I will place on your throne--**
- 12 if your sons keep my covenant and the statutes I teach them, then their sons will sit on your throne**
- for ever and ever."**
- 13 For the LORD has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling:**
- 14 "This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it--**
- 15 I will bless her with abundant provisions; her poor will I satisfy with food.**
- 16 I will clothe her priests with salvation, and her saints will ever sing for joy.**
- 17 "Here I will make a horn grow for David and set up a lamp for my anointed one.**
- 18 I will clothe his enemies with shame, but the crown on his head will be resplendent."**

This Song of Ascents takes us back to the beginning. It is a good thing in our fellowship with God to always keep the facts of salvation in full view. This protects us from the danger of limiting our experiences to the level of our emotions. This psalm forced the pilgrim who ascended to Jerusalem in order to encounter God to remember the historical facts. As for us, when we appear before God, it is good to remind ourselves of Golgotha and of the open grave.

The psalm is clearly divided into two sections: The verses 1-10 deal with what David did, and the verses 11-18 recount the acts of God.

"O LORD, remember David and all the hardships he endured." The Hebrew word translated with "remember" is *zakar* which means "to mark, so as to be recognized, to remember, to mention." The word means more than "do not forget." *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* writes about *zakar*: "The first occurrence of *zakar* is in Gen 8:1 with God as the subject: 'God remembered Noah...: and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged.' In Gen 9:15 God said to Noah: 'And I will remember my covenant...; and the waters shall no more become a flood to destroy all flesh.' As in these two cases (cf. Gen 6:18), 'remember' is used of God in respect to His covenant promises and is followed by an action to fulfill His covenant."⁵¹³ God delivered Lot from Sodom because of His covenant with Abraham to bless all the nations through him Gen 18:17-33: 'God remembered Abraham, and brought Lot out of the catastrophe...' Gen 19:29, NIV. This marks the history of Israel at every major point: 'And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel... and I have remembered my covenant... and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians...' Ex 6:5-6." The intention of the psalmist is that God considers the factors of what He did for David, and the fact that David was who he was, as a ground for accepting those who approach Him.

It is true that, in his days, David went to great pains to give the ark Moses had made the central place which it ought to have in the daily life of Israel. He ordered the ark to be brought to Jerusalem and he made preparations for the building of the temple. Without David's vision there would be no pilgrimage.

The Hebrew word for "affliction," as the NIV translates it, is *'anah*. The literal meaning is "to be depressed." The same word is found in the verse: "Anyone who does not deny himself on that day must be cut off from his people."⁵¹⁴ The implication is that it deals with searching one's heart. David realized that it was a moral necessity that God would have the central place in Israel and in his own life. Self denial

⁵¹³ The italics are mine

⁵¹⁴ Lev. 23:29

implies, not only, admission of guilt and weakness but also the involvement of our whole personality in giving to God the place that belongs to Him.

The verses 2-5 emphasize this attitude of a humble heart that is fully dedicated to God. It demands an oath because it involves our whole personality. It, sometimes, requires denial of even the most basic fulfillments of our human needs, such as sleep. The oath is, not only, the affirmation of a promise but also a plea for divine help: "So help me God!" The content of David's oath is, obviously, rendered in a poetical fashion. It took months for the ark to be brought over from the house of Obed Edom to Jerusalem. And the temple was never even built during David's lifetime. Yet, we do not suppose that David never closed his eyes during his forty-year reign. In reality, his vision was not always as intense as it is portrayed in this psalm. David's life was laced with moments of sin. Even the place where the temple was to be build he found because he had sinned in ordering a census of the people.⁵¹⁵ We ought, therefore, to see in David's oath a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah. He was the One who build the temple in three days.⁵¹⁶

The important lesson for us in this psalm is that the pilgrim prays God to accept him on the basis of the work of someone else. TLB renders the psalm as if David himself wrote it: "Lord, do you remember that time when my heart was so filled with turmoil? I couldn't rest, I couldn't sleep, thinking how I ought to build a permanent home for the Ark of the Lord, a Temple for the mighty one of Israel. Then I vowed that I would do it; I made a solemn promise to the Lord." That is a very free rendering of the text. It seems safer to put the words in the mouth of a pilgrim.

The Tyndale Commentary sees in vs. 6 a reference to the search for the ark. Ephrathah is in the neighborhood of Bethlehem and Jaar may be short for Kirjath-Jaerim, where the ark had been stored. The Holy Spirit may have reached forward in these verses to the experience of the shepherds in the field of Ephrathah who heard of Jesus' birth and who went to Bethlehem to see the newborn Savior.⁵¹⁷ After all, much more is referred to in this psalm than a building and a gold-covered chest. The topic is that "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."⁵¹⁸

Vs. 7 – "Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool" is similar to a verse in Psalm 99: "Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his footstool; he is holy."⁵¹⁹ The earth is called God's footstool. This implies that God Himself fills the heavens.

Vs. 8 is a direct reference to Moses' words at the moving of the ark. We read in Numbers: "Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, 'Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you.' Whenever it came to rest, he said, 'Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel.'"⁵²⁰ The suggestion here is that the goal is reached. This implies a looking back to past history and a recalling of the memory of redemption from slavery and the entrance into the Promised Land.

The psalmist indicates that much more is involved than outward manifestations. The pomp of the sacerdotal garments would have no value if the priests were not clothed with righteousness. This means that they had confessed their sins and the blood of the lamb covered them. The joyful singing of the saints betokens the fact that others also partake of this righteousness. The mention of David and of "your anointed one," probably, means that, at that moment, one of David's descendants was present. But the Holy Spirit, obviously, speaks here about Christ. He is the source from which all righteousness flows. We all appear before God because He accepts us in the "Anointed One." David's vision was a foreshadowing of His vision and zeal through which we are given confidence to enter the Most Holy Place. No one put this more clearly than the writer to the Hebrews. We read: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."⁵²¹

The psalmist places David's oath in vs. 2 and following verses next to God's oath. We find the historical background in Second Samuel.⁵²² No one at that time could have known how costly God's oath

⁵¹⁵ See I Chr. 21:28-22:1

⁵¹⁶ John 2:19-22

⁵¹⁷ See Luke 2:8-20

⁵¹⁸ John 1:14

⁵¹⁹ Ps 99:5

⁵²⁰ Num. 10:35,36

⁵²¹ Heb. 10:19-22

⁵²² See II Sam. 7:4ff.

would be. It cost God infinitely more than it cost David or any other human being. Interestingly, though, there is no mention of a divine oath in the record of Second Samuel. God's Word came to David via the prophet Nathan in the form of an announcement.⁵²³ The only oath found is in Psalm 110 where David's descendant is addressed as priest. Those words, "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek' "⁵²⁴ are almost identical to the oath in this psalm. God's promises are irrevocable.

The psalmist makes a distinction between one of David's descendants and David's sons. This psalm is more specific than Nathan's prophecy. One of the sons is clearly set apart from the other descendants. The others are not unconditionally elevated to the throne. The suggestion is that human infidelity does not influence the position and the rule of the Messiah.

It is obvious that the hill of Zion with the adjoining threshing floor of Araunah on which the temple was built were an image of the heavenly reality. The Apostle John saw this heavenly scene which he described with: "Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads."⁵²⁵ The blessing mentioned in these last verses applies primarily to this heavenly reality. In this psalm, they are expressed as material and physical symbols of spiritual entities. Yet, the election of Zion, like the cover of the ark is more than merely symbols. God's presence in the temple was a reality. The Shekinah was localized. We ought not to disregard the earthly expressions of that which is invisible. That would rob the sacraments and the Incarnation of its contents and meaning. God's election of Zion is related to the fact that the Word became flesh and this opens for us the door to the world of spiritual realities. Without these earthly realities, we would have no entrance into the spiritual.

The phrase: "This is my resting place for ever and ever" makes clear, however, that the psalmist speaks of symbols. If the physical place on earth were meant, then the statement of the psalmist is contradicted by Ezekiel's prophecy who saw the glory of the Lord depart from the sanctuary and the temple.⁵²⁶ God no longer lives in Jerusalem above the cover of the ark but in the church, which is the body of Jesus Christ.

The blessings God wants to pour out over His people are both spiritual and material. The poor are satisfied with food, and the priests are clothed with salvation. The two are meant to keep the balance. Satisfaction with material goods is the greatest danger that threatens the church. The thorns will choke the seed. If a man is spiritually mature enough that he knows what to do with his riches without damaging his soul, he is really blessed and he will be able to sing for joy. It is obvious that God would rather see His children healthy and happy than sickly and needy. If a child of God does experience need and weakness, we have to believe that God is putting into effect a different plan for his life that supersedes the general rule temporarily. It is important to find out what this plan is.

The verses 16 and 17 are answers to the prayer of the verses 9 and 10. The psalmist had not asked for satisfaction and abundance. Those blessings were given over and above the prayer for righteousness. God did the same thing for Solomon when he prayed for wisdom; He gave him riches on top of it.

God does not turn away His face from David. He promised him power, light, and glory so that his enemies would be ashamed. The horn in the Old Testament is a symbol of strength. There were horns at the four corners of the burnt offering altar and of the altar for burning incense. The horns on both altars speak of the fact that there is a relationship between atonement, surrender, and righteousness. A guilty person could appeal to God's righteousness by gripping these horns. Zechariah confirmed this at the birth of John the Baptist when he cried out in his ode of praise: "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David."⁵²⁷ Zechariah must have had this psalm in mind when he said this.

The RSV renders vs. 17: "There I will make a horn to sprout for David." The Hebrew word *tsamach* literally means, "to sprout." The word refers both to growth and to the fact that one of David's descendants is meant. It is related to the word *tsuwts* in vs. 18. The NIV reads: "But the crown on his head will be resplendent." The Hebrew text uses the word "to blossom" or "flourish." What God did for the house of David was, in reality, a growing process that would result in flourishing and fruit bearing.

⁵²³ See II Sam. 7:11^b

⁵²⁴ Ps. 110:4

⁵²⁵ Rev. 14:1

⁵²⁶ See Ezek. ch 9-11

⁵²⁷ Luke 1:69

The mention of a lamp supposes the presence of darkness. The light of a lamp has no effect in bright daylight. The enemy and darkness belong to the same category. God's answer to enmity and darkness is light and life. *The Tyndale Commentary* mentions at this point the incident of Aaron's staff that blossomed.⁵²⁸ Glory is the fruit of a growing process.

⁵²⁸ See Num. 17:1-11

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-THREE

A song of ascents. Of David.

1 How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!**2 It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.****3 It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.**

David gives in this psalm an Old Testament vision of a New Testament reality: the unity of the body of Christ. This psalm is also a "song of ascent." As the pilgrim drew closer to God, he drew closer to his fellowmen. Fellowship with God always binds people together. This is the reason there was such a spontaneous demonstration of love and unity in the early church after the coming of the Holy Spirit. We read in the Book of Acts: "All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts."⁵²⁹

It needs no further mention that the ideal situation which is depicted in this psalm is seldom or never seen on earth. It is also true, as *The Tyndale Commentary* observes, that David's own family did not exemplify the principles that are set forth in this psalm. And the family is the first entity in which "brothers live together in unity." The wider application is, of course, to all who are related to each by the love of Christ. In order to put this into practice, a vision of reality is needed. The psalm does not deny the present condition of family and church life.

*To live above, with saints we love,
that will be bliss and glory.
To live below, with saints we know,
is quite a different story.*

In the practice of daily life on earth we often see more a suffering of each other's idiosyncrasies than the unity of mutual love. TLB renders Paul's admonition in Galatians with: "Share each other's troubles and problems."⁵³⁰ We are always confronted with the fact that sin has done incalculable damage, not only to our relationship with God, but also to the bond with our fellowmen. We are not even able to live in harmony with ourselves; let alone with others.

The conditions described in this psalm, therefore, are in the first place an ideal that ought to be pursued, not a picture of an existing situation. There may be cases in which a group of people comes close to this ideal but it will never be attained perfectly. But unless we set our course to this ideal, we will go astray completely. Perfect fellowship will only be attained in heaven.

The second verse discloses to us some aspects of the mystery of perfect fellowship. The anointing of Aaron speaks, in the first place, of the work of the Holy Spirit. This unity of love and fellowship is only possible in the Holy Spirit. It is not a case of some people who live together because they happen to like each other but of a supernatural influence that binds people together. This is the reason fellowship between men depends on each person's personal relationship with God.

The consecration of Aaron as high priest is found in Exodus.⁵³¹ It is God who takes the initiative for this consecration to this ministry. We read: "Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests."⁵³² We see in the person of the high priest an image of our Lord Jesus Christ in whom God and man are truly united. It is clear that Aaron represented the whole nation before God. What happened to Aaron and his sons during the consecration, actually, happened to all the people.

When we read the chapters in Exodus that deal with the subject, we understand that the anointing was the crowning moment of an elaborate process of preparation. There was, in the first place, the birth. The priesthood was limited to the tribe of Levi. People from another tribe or from a different family could not be considered. The basis of our fellowship with God and with our fellowmen is our new life in Jesus

⁵²⁹ Acts 2:44-46⁵³⁰ Gal. 6:2⁵³¹ See Ex. ch 28,29⁵³² Ex. 28:1

Christ. The new birth is fundamental. This psalm is based on the principle of the new birth, although the subject is not elaborated. The word “brothers” is indicative.

The psalmist emphasizes the experience of fellowship. We seldom realize the riches of our condition. The words “live together” express, of course, more than a physically being in the same location. The unity is spiritual. There is nothing “good and pleasant” in the fact that sheep are put together in the same fold. “Good” is an ethical and “pleasant” is an esthetic evaluation of the condition.

Back to Aaron and the precious oil! The oil is an image of the Holy Spirit. We find in Exodus a description of the preparation and the use of the oil.⁵³³ The perfume poured on Aaron was unique. He and his sons were the only ones who were allowed to use it. It is the “aroma of Christ” of which the Apostle Paul says: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”⁵³⁴

The ordinance in Exodus says that it could not be used for carnal purposes. We read: “Do not pour it on men’s bodies and do not make any oil with the same formula. It is sacred, and you are to consider it sacred. Whoever makes perfume like it and whoever puts it on anyone other than a priest must be cut off from his people.”⁵³⁵ The spiritual application of this principle is of great importance to the fellowship that is described in this psalm. Unless our “flesh” is crucified with Christ, there can be no question of spiritual harmony among brethren. The “good and pleasant” consists in the being together of human beings who consider themselves crucified with Christ. In pursuing this principle is it very difficult not to cross the line of spiritual arrogance. Only when the presence of the Lord is felt, and the Holy Spirit has freedom of action can there be mutual love and humble submission to one another.

There is some confusion among commentators about the “collar of his robes.” The Hebrew word is *peh*, which literally means “the mouth,” also “edge, or side.” The NKJV reads: “Running down on the *edge* of his garments.” The meaning is obviously the collar, since the same word is used in the instructions for making the ephod: “Make the robe of the ephod entirely of blue cloth, with an opening for the head in its center. There shall be a woven edge like a collar around this opening, so that it will not tear.”⁵³⁶ It makes no difference for the spiritual lessons of this psalm. Some translations render the phrase in such a way that it is the beard that runs down the edge of the garment, not the oil. (KJV – “It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments”). The intent is, obviously, that the whole body experiences the benefits of the anointing.

The picture of the high priest makes the application very pertinent to us. In our present dispensation, Jesus is our High Priest. It is His intercessory prayer for us, as we read in John chapter 17 and in the Epistle to the Hebrews that melts God’s children into one body that cannot be achieved in any earthly way. This is the oneness of the body of Christ, described by Paul in his epistles.⁵³⁷

The first picture in this psalm touches upon the mystery of our fellowship in Christ; the second picture, in vs. 3, speaks about the fruit of this harmony. The dew of Mount Hermon descends upon Mount Zion. Hermon was the highest mountain in Israel. The morning dew on its slopes had become proverbial refreshment in the mainly dry climate of the land. In comparison with Mount Hermon, Zion was an insignificant little hill. In this psalm, Zion takes on the shape of the highest peak.

When a group of people experience fellowship with one another in Christ, they provide refreshing in the dryness of their surrounding which will become a blessing, even for unbelievers. Zion becomes the highest peak on earth because God Himself is present.

In both images, there is a downward flowing. The oil flows from the head on the beard and the dew descends from the mountain to the valleys. Blessings always come from above. But the earth has first to meet certain conditions. People who have received the blessing are required to share this with one another. If people who have been blessed catch the vision and make up their minds to act accordingly, then YHWH bestows His blessing. The Hebrew word translated with “bestow” is *tsavah*, which means “to enjoin.” Most older translations, like the KJV, render the verse with: “the LORD commanded the blessing.” To command a blessing is more than to bestow one. Commanding supposes authority and power. God

⁵³³ See Ex. 33:22-33

⁵³⁴ II Cor. 2:14-16

⁵³⁵ Ex. 30:32,33

⁵³⁶ Ex. 28:31-32

⁵³⁷ See Rom. 12:4-8; I Cor. 12:12-31

holds nothing back from us. If we strive to be blessed with all that is in us, God will activate all His eternal glory and majesty to bless us. "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him."⁵³⁸

Eternal life is the basis for the brethren to live together in unity. Eternal life is also the contents of the blessing. There is life for us and abundance. "Let's move up a little higher!" as the Negro Spiritual says.

⁵³⁸ II Chr. 16:9^a

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-FOUR

A song of ascents.

- 1 Praise the LORD, all you servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD.**
- 2 Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD.**
- 3 May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.**

With this psalm ends the *ham'lowt* or "Songs of Ascents" that began with Psalm 120. The series opened with: "I call on the LORD in my distress" and ends with "Praise the LORD." The British preacher John Stott once said that wherever in the Bible it says: "Praise the Lord," it is always followed by the word "for." This psalm, seemingly, makes an exception. In this case "for" precedes the "Praise the Lord." The reason for the praise is the theme of redemption, blessing, satisfaction, and rehabilitation that rings through the whole series and reaches its climax here.

The psalm is addressed to the Levites and priests who serve in the temple. The psalmist, probably, considered them to be more representatives of the whole nation than a class by itself.

Chapter 25 of First Chronicles specifies the division of tasks and shows that there were 24 groups that were responsible for the music services. The Book states that the Levites who formed the choir performed their service day and night. We read: "Those who were musicians, heads of Levite families, stayed in the rooms of the temple and were exempt from other duties because they were responsible for the work day and night."⁵³⁹

It is interesting that, in this psalm, the psalmist addresses particularly those priests and Levites who did the nightshift in the temple. The night brings out some specific aspects of this service. Darkness is the domain of the enemy. Day and night, as we know them now, are, probably, different from the "evening and morning" God originally created, as recorded in Genesis. The fool moon probably always lighted up the night. I believe that the pitch darkness that we know is a result of man's fall into sin. The priests and Levites who served at night stood guard against the enemy. Their weapons of defense were praise. This proves that the sanctuary in this psalm is a place on earth. The heavenly Jerusalem knows no day or night. John writes about the holy city: "On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there."⁵⁴⁰

Because of the praise of the priest during the night, the inhabitants of Jerusalem can sleep safely. And if we are in a situation in which we are threatened by darkness, in whatever form, we can sing praise, as Paul and Silas did. We read about them in Acts: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."⁵⁴¹

Vs. 2 – "Lift up your hands in the sanctuary" can also be rendered with "Lift up holy hands." The Apostle Paul interpreted this verse in that way when he wrote to Timothy: "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing."⁵⁴² In that case, it is not a specific location that is intended but rather a life that is covered by the blood of the Lamb. The priests stood on holy ground because behind them a sacrificial animal, the blood of which had been poured out, was going up in flames on the altar. Without that sacrifice their praise in intercessory prayer would have had no basis.

It is also true that the priest lifted up their hands to a place that was beyond their reach. They were in the temple but there is a sanctuary that is far above them. If the vision upon this sanctuary is lacking in our prayers, the lifting up of our hands has no value. The physical gesture has little meaning in itself.

The last verse: "May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion" is probably the priests' answer to the pilgrims. It can also be seen as the last words of the pilgrims. The traffic goes in both directions. As the praise mounts up the blessing descends, even in the middle of the night. The priest stood between God and man. He was the representative of both.

The situation has not changed in the New Testament dispensation in which we live. Our praise rises up to the Father via our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why the prayers of the saints are mixed with the incense of the golden altar in heaven. John describes this for us as follows: "Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the

⁵³⁹ I Chr. 9:33

⁵⁴⁰ Rev. 21:25

⁵⁴¹ Acts 16:25

⁵⁴² I Tim. 2:8

saints, went up before God from the angel's hand.”⁵⁴³ And the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”⁵⁴⁴

The last verses place it all in a cosmic perspective. There is nothing provincial, or territorial, in this pilgrimage. God is no national deity who is bound to a certain place above the cover of the ark between the cherubs. The God of Israel is the creator of the universe who fills heaven and earth with His glory. This gives to this song of praise and to the blessing such dynamics that surpass our comprehension. The realization of this makes the journey to Jerusalem an act of symbolic significance. It makes our whole life into a pilgrimage.

⁵⁴³ Rev. 8:3,4

⁵⁴⁴ Heb. 7:25

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-FIVE

- 1 Praise the LORD. Praise the name of the LORD; praise him, you servants of the LORD,**
- 2 you who minister in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God.**
- 3 Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant.**
- 4 For the LORD has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession.**
- 5 I know that the LORD is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods.**
- 6 The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.**
- 7 He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.**
- 8 He struck down the firstborn of Egypt, the firstborn of men and animals.**
- 9 He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants.**
- 10 He struck down many nations and killed mighty kings--**
- 11 Sihon king of the Amorites, Og king of Bashan and all the kings of Canaan--**
- 12 and he gave their land as an inheritance, an inheritance to his people Israel.**
- 13 Your name, O LORD, endures forever, your renown, O LORD, through all generations.**
- 14 For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.**
- 15 The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men.**
- 16 They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see;**
- 17 they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths.**
- 18 Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.**
- 19 O house of Israel, praise the LORD; O house of Aaron, praise the LORD;**
- 20 O house of Levi, praise the LORD; you who fear him, praise the LORD.**
- 21 Praise be to the LORD from Zion, to him who dwells in Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.**

The Tyndale Commentary observes about this psalm: "Every verse of this psalm either echoes, quotes or is quoted by some other part of Scripture. Alongside these familiar and great passages it build up its own coherent structure of praise, beginning and ending with a worship-call to Israel, which the main body of the psalm substantiates by contrasting the true Sovereign and Redeemer with the helpless idols of the heathen." Almost every verse is, indeed, a quote from a different psalm. But this does not mean that this psalm is not a unity in itself.

- Vs. 1 quotes Ps. 113:1 reversing the word order.
- Vs. 1^b and 2 echo Ps. 134:1
- The thought that God is good and that His Name is good is found in the Psalms 52:9; 147:1; 92:1.
- Vs. 4 puts the same strong emphasis upon God's election of Israel as Deut. 7:6.
- The verses 5-7 are parallel with Ex. 18:11; Ps. 115:3, and Jer. 10:13.
- Most of the sentences in the verses 8-14 are found in Ps 136:10,18-22.
- The tendency to give an historical overview is also found in the Psalms 78, 105, and 106.
- The victory over Sihon and Og are recorded in Num. 21:21 ff. 33 ff. And also in Deut. 3:11.
- The absurdity of idol worship which is described in the verses 15-18 is a copy of Ps. 115:4-6,8.

Yet, as we said above, this psalm is not merely a collection of Bible verses; it teaches its own lesson: its theme is praise.

In the previous psalm, we quoted John Stott who has said that the Bible always gives a reason for praise and that the word "for" was lacking in that psalm. This is not the case in this psalm. Ample reasons are given to praise the Lord. The word "for" is found several times in our English translations and is understood even more often in the Hebrew.

While in Ps. 134 praise was used as a weapon against the darkness, here it is an activity in clear daylight and it is done in the courts of the temple; this constancy means that it pertains, not only to the priests and Levites, but to all the people. Praise and worship are not only meant for professionals. The fact that the task had been delegated to the priests and the Levites in order to assure that it would be done without interruption does not mean that the layman is not under obligation to praise God. The day-and-night praise gave an eternal character to it within the framework of time. This is, undoubtedly, why the four living creatures in Revelation never cease their praise. We read: "Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.' ⁵⁴⁵ Like the previous psalm, this one is also addressed, primarily, to the "servants of the LORD," but the fact that they are placed in "the courts of the house of our God" gives a broader meaning to the whole psalm.

Vs. 3 gives us the most urgent reason for praising God: the goodness of His character. Jesus says that this characteristic is only true about God. To the young man who asked Him about eternal life, He answered: "Why do you call me good? No one is good-except God alone."⁵⁴⁶ Goodness is a concept that is grossly misused by us. Although we know nothing about genuine goodness among men, we tend to attribute to God our watered-down ideas about goodness. God is good is like a diamond is good. Even a vague notion about God's goodness will make us burst forth in songs of praise. The word "good" stands for an absolute attribute against which all else is measured.

"Pleasant" is man's reaction to an encounter with God. The literal meaning of the word is "delightful." There is no contradiction in the fact that, elsewhere in the Bible, God is depicted as terrible and awesome. The contrast is in man, not in God. When we approach God as creatures to their Creator, as children to their Father, in humility and openness, we will experience the tenderest embrace that exists. God is a God of tender strokes. He created lips that can kiss, fingers that can touch softly, warm furs, kind smiles, and delicious smells. He wipes away our tears. Such is His Name, His character. Only the cruel human heart, which is filled with duplicity, encounters God as the God of vengeance.

God's election of Jacob and Israel was a legal act. This election was for the salvation of the whole world. It is not an act of predestination, which is exclusively for Israel and which leaves all else out. In a lost world, God chose Noah to build an ark of salvation. In the world after the flood, God chose Abraham in order to found a nation which would be the bearer of His revelation and from which would arise "the Savior of the world," as the Samaritans called Him.⁵⁴⁷

It was, of course, never God's intention that the bearers of the message of salvation would be lost themselves. Yet, not every Israelite is saved. Election of a nation does not make salvation automatic for the individual. The Apostle Paul defined Israel's election as follows: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."⁵⁴⁸ Both the author of this psalm as well as the Apostle Paul are driven to adoration by the thought of God's election.

The fact that Israel is God's own people elevates them, as a nation, to the highest possible level of human dignity. The same is true for each individual. This dignity goes into effect at the moment we recognize that we are His and that we, no longer, appeal to our personal rights. As long as I do with my own body and my own soul as I please, there will be no question of dignity in my life.

The theme of God's greatness in comparison with the idols, which is mentioned in vs. 5, is further worked out in the verses 15-18. It is true, however, that the "gods" that are mentioned are not idol images. It is possible that other spiritual authorities are meant, both good and bad ones. God is, in no way, accountable to them. As creator of the spirit world, He is just as far above them as He is above the physical creation.

When the psalmist says in vs. 5 "I know," he speaks from his own experience. He has experienced God's greatness in his own body. All theological understanding begins with "a gut feeling."

In the verses 6 and 7, the psalmist describes how the creator of heaven and earth sustains His creation. The psalmist draws only a rough sketch, and he pays no attention to the consequences of the fall. He mentions the two extremes, the heavens and the depths of the oceans. Those two are sufficiently impressive to the human mind. Modern man has, probably, more data at his disposal than a person from the time in which the psalmist lived, but this only makes him realize how little he knows. We only understand more how endless space is and how mysterious the depths of the oceans are. God is the absolute master of His creation.

"He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth," or as the NKJV puts it: "He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth," probably, refers to the clouds that are formed by the oceans. We should look at the rain and lightning with the eyes of a person who lives in a dry land that depends upon two short rainy seasons in the year. Lightning provides the background sound for the needed rain.

⁵⁴⁵ Rev. 4:8

⁵⁴⁶ Luke 18:19

⁵⁴⁷ See John 4:42

⁵⁴⁸ Rom. 9:4,5

God's interventions in history are not recorded here in a chronological order. Vs. 8 mentions the Tenth Plague in Egypt and vs. 9 goes back to the preceding plagues in order to jump from there to the victories over Sihon and Og and the conquest of Canaan. All of this is put in the framework of God's greatness and His superiority over all the other "elohim." In this way history is elevated above a struggle between man and man to a confrontation between spiritual powers. Both Egypt and Canaan with their surrounding kingdoms were manifestations of the power of the Evil One. Demonic activity was primarily directed against Israel as the guardian of God's revelation. Satan knew much better why God had chosen Jacob than Israel knew. He could see the coming Messiah from afar, and he knew that the seed of the woman would, eventually, crush the head of the serpent.

God's acting in this period did not mean that He did not love the Egyptians and the inhabitants of Canaan. But the way in which they were completely possessed by the powers of darkness made them unacceptable to God's holiness.

It is interesting that, in vs. 9, Egypt is the one who is addressed. This suggests that, after so many centuries, the power that wanted to destroy Israel at that time is still alive and active. It is also true that no generation can separate itself from its history and deny responsibility for what happened in the past. In a sense we are all children of murderers. Jesus said to the people of His time: "So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets."⁵⁴⁹ Only by way of confession can we break the bonds of guilt that link us with previous generations.

The tenth plague of Egypt was a terrible event, a national catastrophe of enormous proportions. It did not come about, though, without previous warning. God only wiped out a whole generation after having issued nine severe warnings which were all ignored. In this way, Egypt learned the lesson that the God of Israel is great upon the whole earth and that His goodness does not tolerate evil.

Vs. 12 is parallel to vs. 4. God's election of Israel was His eternal design made in heaven. Giving the land of Canaan to Israel as their inheritance was the application in time and space of this heavenly counsel. Just as God's election of the nation did not automatically ensure the salvation of individual members, so was the inheritance of the Promised Land not something that was merely dumped in their laps. In the Book of Judges we read how Israel failed to take possession of their inheritance. Not until David's time were all Israel's enemies subdued. The Kingdom of Heaven does not come without human beings acting upon their faith based upon the promises of God.

One who realized this truth writes this psalm. He knew his history and the facts of salvation. Praise is based upon God's intervention both in history as well as in our personal lives. The "forever" and "through all generations" in vs. 13 are not strictly parallels, although eternity in the Bible is often presented as an ongoing chain of moments in time. Eternity can be expressed in images of time but it belongs to another dimension. God is eternal and we live in time. Because of God's intervention, however, we have become partakers of His eternity. Vs. 13 says: "Your name, O LORD, endures forever," and on earth, where one generation follows the other, man discovers, in every century anew, that God's character is eternal. The way in which that discovery is made is described in vs. 14. God intervenes by vindicating His people and by having compassion on His servants. These are demonstrations of God's righteousness and love. Righteousness, or vindication, suggests both payment of debt as well as rehabilitation, and it supposes the presence of an enemy who oppresses. We do not know if the psalmist refers to any specific incident, but there are numerous illustrations of oppression in Israel's history. This is to be expected on the basis of God's election of Israel. It is, therefore, important that the psalmist uses the words "through all generations." No generation has only history to fall back on; God intervenes in every century by demonstrating righteousness and compassion.

The psalmist does not use the word "prayer" but the reference to idols suggests that God acts in answer to prayer. God vindicates His people because He chose them as His people and the ones to whom He shows compassion are His servants, that is, they are people who serve and obey.

The idols in these verses are seen as the products of human hands. There is no mention of the fact that there may be demonic powers behind these statutes. Even if we see these powers of darkness, we have to admit that, in comparison with the Incarnation, they are not worth mentioning. The Word became flesh but the devil has never been able to manifest himself other than in pieces of wood, stone, or metal, and that never without the help of human hands. If sinful man is already superior to an idol, how much more the living God Himself! As we have seen before, in connection with Ps. 115, idolatry debases a human being. Man bears the image of the God or the gods he serves. And if the person, who serves a deaf-and-dumb idol

⁵⁴⁹ Matt. 23:31

acquires the characteristics of the idol, how much more will eternal glory come upon those who call upon the Almighty and honor Him.

We are reminded again, in this context, of the sarcastic description the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah gave of the making of idols.⁵⁵⁰

The psalm ends with an exhortation to praise the Lord. This exhortation is addressed, first of all, to the nation as a whole, then to the high priest, the priests, and the Levites, and, finally, to every individual. This admonishing is just as fitting in the conclusion of this psalm as it was in the opening verse. The circle is complete. Praise is man's "raison d'être." For this reason God created man and in it man finds his highest fulfillment.

The last verse reveals the greatest miracle of all: God dwells in Jerusalem. The Word became flesh and lived among us, tabernacled among us, pitched His tent among us, rented a flat in our neighborhood. Because God dwells on earth, man can bless Him on earth; that is if he does it at the place where God dwells; at the place He has chosen, Zion, that is "in Christ."

⁵⁵⁰ See Isa. 44:9-20; Jer. 10:1-16.

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-SIX

- 1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.**
His love endures forever.
- 2 Give thanks to the God of gods.**
His love endures forever.
- 3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords:**
His love endures forever.
- 4 to him who alone does great wonders,**
His love endures forever.
- 5 who by his understanding made the heavens,**
His love endures forever.
- 6 who spread out the earth upon the waters,**
His love endures forever.
- 7 who made the great lights--**
His love endures forever.
- 8 the sun to govern the day,**
His love endures forever.
- 9 the moon and stars to govern the night;**
His love endures forever.
- 10 to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt**
His love endures forever.
- 11 and brought Israel out from among them**
His love endures forever.
- 12 with a mighty hand and outstretched arm;**
His love endures forever.
- 13 to him who divided the Red Sea asunder**
His love endures forever.
- 14 and brought Israel through the midst of it,**
His love endures forever.
- 15 but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea;**
His love endures forever.
- 16 to him who led his people through the desert,**
His love endures forever.
- 17 who struck down great kings,**
His love endures forever.
- 18 and killed mighty kings--**
His love endures forever.
- 19 Sihon king of the Amorites**
His love endures forever.
- 20 and Og king of Bashan--**
His love endures forever.
- 21 and gave their land as an inheritance,**
His love endures forever.
- 22 an inheritance to his servant Israel;**
His love endures forever.
- 23 to the One who remembered us in our low estate**
His love endures forever.
- 24 and freed us from our enemies,**
His love endures forever.
- 25 and who gives food to every creature.**
His love endures forever.
- 26 Give thanks to the God of heaven.**
His love endures forever.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Kidner observes that many translations make the refrain of this psalm too long, which causes the repetition of the words to have a boring effect. *L^aowlaam chadow* is rendered in the Hebrew Interlinear Old Testament with “forever His mercy.” The JB translates it with “His love is eternal.” The shorter, and the more powerful, the better!

When reading this psalm, we ought to imagine that it was intoned by a song leader and answered by the congregation, accompanied by the clapping of hands. The rhythm increases and the enthusiasm at the end is an ecstatic shout of praise.

The keyword in the refrain is *chesed* which represents God’s covenant with Israel. It is the love-contract, such as a marriage bond. God has linked Himself to us legally in love. This covenant cannot be broken. The issue is not, in the first place, the emotional aspect of love (however wonderful that may be) but God’s commitment to us. Human marriage is, in effect, the best illustration of this.

“Give thanks” is the translation of the Hebrew *howduw* which is the hortatory form of *yadah*. It denotes a motion of the hands like holding out the hands or even throwing a stone. It is especially descriptive in its intensity in its meaning of to revere or worship with extended hands. Some versions bring out the intensity by adding “O!” This elevates the psalm from a solemn expression of thanksgiving to a spontaneous shout of praise.

The praise in the first three verses is based on the character of God. Vs. 1 states that the Lord is good. He is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. He is the Most High both in comparison with all other heavenly powers as with all “gods” and “lords” on earth.

In the verses 4-9 God is being praised as the creator of heaven and earth.

In the verses 10-24 praise is given to God as the redeemer and in vs. 25 God is depicted as the great provider. The last verse: “Give thanks to the God of heaven” reaches the climax.

In the previous psalm, we saw that God’s goodness is unique; it cannot be compared to anything. Human “goodness” (or what passes for it) is only a vague shadow of this reality. God’s goodness is unadulterated; God has no ulterior motives. We have to keep this in mind when we come to the verses in this psalm that seem to contradict this. Specifically those verses that describe how evil is eradicated demonstrate the difference between God’s goodness and ours. The fact that God is good does not mean that one can play games with Him. His goodness is perfect and eternal. Man does not feel at ease with this goodness until he has received forgiveness of sins. Because God is good, we can thank and praise Him without holding back anything.

The refrain tells us that we share in His goodness on a legal basis. *Kiy L^aowlaam chadow* means “a covenant of eternal love.” God’s goodness may be foreign to us but it belongs to us by right. “His love endures forever” is a confession in this psalm. It is the recognition of a fact. Our confession does not increase or decrease God’s goodness but it elevates us in as we bow down before Him.

Vs. 2 says that God is “the God of gods” and vs. 3 “the Lord of lords.” Both the gods and the lords are God’s creatures. It seems that the two phrases are more than mere parallels. The “gods” are, possibly, heavenly authorities and the “lords” human powers on earth. Whatever the meaning may be, it is obvious that God is the Almighty and that His omnipotence reaches far beyond our horizon.

Vs. 4 intones the hymn of praise to the creator of material things, as vs. 2 did for the spiritual world. Unless we assume that the repetition of the refrain is a senseless exercise in futility, we should be able to see a connection between God’s miracles of creation and His eternal love and goodness. The creation of heaven and earth, of the spiritual and material universe, is the greatest miracle that was ever performed. It has never been surpassed. God spoke and it came into existence. All other miracles are derived from this one; this is made clear in this psalm.

We may ask ourselves: “What is a miracle?” For us, it usually means an event that supersedes the laws of nature. But if “understanding,” or “wisdom” is part of the miracle, as it is stated in this psalm, then the laws of nature are included in the miracles. We may have to revise our definition of miracles. It appears that the creation of the laws of nature is a greater miracle than the interruption of those laws. Maybe, we can say that there are no miracles for God. If everything God does is a miracle, what do we then do with the natural?

It is amusing that the psalmist recognizes God’s wisdom (the NIV uses the word “understanding”) in connection with the creation of heaven and earth. As if the creator of human intelligence would not possess Himself that which He created for others! The miracle here is that we possess the gift of understanding.

The psalmist takes only a few examples from the facts of creation in this psalm. He only mentions the second, third, and fourth days of creation.⁵⁵¹

The psalm also answers the question whether God did well in creating at all; this is presented in view of the fact that creation left open the possibility of a fall. The refrain of the psalm confirms that God did well. God's creation, which includes the fall, is a demonstration of His *chesed*, His covenant of love. This controversial point gains in intensity as we come to the verses 10, 15, 17-20. It is true of course that this psalm was written by an Israelite and that God's covenant of love was, in the first place, concluded with Israel. Although this may be hard to accept, we have to admit that God's killing of enemies can also be an act of loving righteousness. Giving free reign to evil would not be proof of love, either to Israel or to Egypt, or the Amorites of Bashan. The death of Egypt's firstborn may have saved the country from total destruction.

The verses 10-24 deal with redemption from the power of sin, victory, and rehabilitation. Here also, the psalmist only takes samples out of an abundance of data. We can read the record of the death of Egypt's firstborn and Israel's departure from Egypt in Exodus 12:29-39. The passage through the Red Sea and the drowning of Pharaoh and his army is recorded in Exodus 14:1-31. The victory over Sihon is recorded in Numbers 21:21-26 and over Og in the same chapter, verses 33-35.

It is difficult to determine whether the verses 23 and 24 look back to the distant past or to a recent experience in which the psalmist took part. Some commentators see here a reference to the return from Babylonian captivity. There are many episodes in Israel's history in which the nation was oppressed and persecuted, and there is little reason to give priority to one event over another. Both Mary and Zechariah, when God remembered them, refer to humiliations to which they were subjected, both personally and as a nation. Mary states: "He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."⁵⁵² And Zechariah sings: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people."⁵⁵³

Sin demeans man, and God's righteousness which is bestowed upon us in Jesus Christ elevates us. The NIV reads in vs. 24: "and freed us from our enemies." The Hebrew word translated with "freed" is much more powerful. *Paraq* means "to deliver," but it suggests a dramatic intervention. It can mean, "to break off or crunch." In Elijah's story it is the word translated with "to rent." "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains"⁵⁵⁴ The word does not suggest a slow transition from death into life but a dramatic and revolutionary new birth. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was a tremendous demonstration of God's power that left the devil powerless.

Vs. 25 seems to be an anticlimax in the context of the psalm. We can classify the creation of heaven and earth among the greatest miracles that God ever performed, but the giving of daily bread seems such a routine act that we hardly pay attention to it. Our minds have been numbed on this matter. We have almost fallen asleep and the rhythm of this psalm, accompanied by the clapping of hands and the mounting intensity of its *kiy L^aowlaam chacdow* brings us to a brutal awaking from our comfortable rest. God gives us today our daily bread because "His love endures forever."

The last verse could be an indication that this psalm dates from the post-Babylonian captivity because the title "the God of heaven" is found particularly in the writings of Ezra and Nehemiah.

⁵⁵¹ Compare Gen 1:6-19

⁵⁵² Luke 1:48

⁵⁵³ Luke 1:68

⁵⁵⁴ I Kings 19:11

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-SEVEN

- 1 *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.*
- 2 *There on the poplars we hung our harps,*
- 3 *for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*
- 4 *How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?*
- 5 *If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget [its skill].*
- 6 *May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.*
- 7 *Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"*
- 8 *O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us--*
- 9 *he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

In regard to this psalm, there can be no doubt about the time of its writing. Prof. E. M. Blaiklock believes that someone who had returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity wrote it. The past time in which the verses 1-3 are put suggests this. On the other hand, this supposition does not fit into the remembrance of Jerusalem in the verses 5 and 6.

We can hardly imagine the despair that must have marked the Babylonian captivity. The destruction of Jerusalem and the disappearance of the ark must have seemed to be the death of God's revelation in this world. In a sense, this was true. The darkness of this period in world history is only surpassed by the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Golgotha and His lying in the grave.

This psalm was not written from the perspective of the rebuilding of the temple and the resurrection from the dead. This is a poem that might have been written in a Nazi concentration camp where people were exterminated. We will be better able to understand it if we see it against the background of a place like Auschwitz. This is a descent into hell. Here God is dead and the only grip on reality this psalm offers is that this is impossible.

According to some archeologists, "the rivers of Babylon" were canals in the desert that connected the Euphrates with the Tigris. It was the place where, centuries earlier, Paradise must have been located and where the Tree of Life grew. But the psalmist's thoughts do not go back that far. His remembrance does not reach beyond the destruction of the temple and of the city of Jerusalem. The only thing remaining was the empty spot where God had dwelt and where the covenant had been made. There was only an open window that looked in the direction of the city that lay in rubble.⁵⁵⁵

The prophet Ezekiel heard about the fall of Jerusalem in the fifth day of the tenth month of the twelfth year of the captivity.⁵⁵⁶ This psalm, obviously, dates from a time after that date. For Ezekiel, the news meant physical healing. We read: "Now the evening before the man arrived, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he opened my mouth before the man came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened and I was no longer silent."⁵⁵⁷ After the fall of the city, Ezekiel's prophecies take on a completely different character.⁵⁵⁸ The writer of this psalm does not hear the new tone of hope Ezekiel heard. He did not yet understand that YHWH had taken a step forward in the destruction of the temple and the city, not a step back. He weeps over the death of God's revelation.

This psalm, probably, marks a turning point in Hebrew liturgy. The traditional Hebrew music, as we know it now and from which we inherited the Gregorian music, probably, dated from this time. The old temple hymns must have been composed in a major scale. The harps that hung on the poplars were not tuned for music in a minor key.

The opening verses depict an intolerable condition. The Babylonians, not only, considered the Jews a cultural curiosity, but they, the people who had robbed the temple and had destroyed it, who had murdered the infants of the captives, asked the stunned survivors to sing them a song! This defied all

⁵⁵⁵ See Dan. 6:10

⁵⁵⁶ See Ezek. 33:21

⁵⁵⁷ Ezek. 33:22

⁵⁵⁸ See Ezek. ch 36

human compassion. These poor Jews were in the hands of sadists, people who found pleasure in the pain they caused others.

The Jews wept as they thought of Zion. We should take a closer look at those tears? Did they weep out of self-pity or was it a sharing in God's sorrow? Although God's heart must have bled at the destruction of the temple, His actual grief was about the sin and hardness of heart that had led to this condition.

As people who are born and reared in sin, we can hardly imagine how sin affects God. Jesus' soul-struggle in Gethsemane gives us a glimpse of God's agony. Jesus did not shed any tears when He foretold His disciples that the temple they raved about would be destroyed. We read that He said: "Do you see all these things?... I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."⁵⁵⁹ But Luke tells us: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you.'⁵⁶⁰

The tears of the captives represented a whole complex of grief. There must have been an element of bewilderment about the dishonoring of God. But this was mixed with a sense of loss of national pride and a great deal of self-pity. Daniel demonstrated brokenness about the national guilt, but at the time he prayed his prayer, the captivity was in its last days.⁵⁶¹ The repressed anger of this psalm is proof of the fact that brokenness was not part of the national sentiment at this point. This doesn't mean that there is no legitimate place for anger about unrighteousness. No one could have seen what the Babylonians did to the Jews without indignation.

The most important feature Israel ought to have demonstrated in connection with God's revelation was a zeal for evangelism. There is in this psalm no trace of a vision of a lost world of which Babylon was a part. It would have helped to lighten the lot of the captives if they had sung the songs of Zion. Daniel did this a few times, as did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego with astounding result.⁵⁶² Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie sang the songs of Zion in Ravensbrück and the world has never been the same since. Some of the guards of concentration camps found Christ because of it.

But the Jews in Babylon found that the ground had given away under them. They lived between Good Friday and Easter. They were like the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, who said: "But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place."⁵⁶³ They did not know to whom they were speaking. Their hope had been defeated, and they had no deep sense of personal guilt. We find this same mentality with the Jews by the rivers of Babylon.

Without hope there can be no evangelism. Without confession there is no forgiveness, and without forgiveness there never is hope.

Yet, it is easy to judge from a distance. We can hardly reproach people who had seen their children being murdered before their very eyes. There are moments at which it would be a sin to reach for the harp and sing songs. The taunt of the Babylonians only aggravated the situation.

It sounds to us as a nationalistic misconception that the songs of Zion could not be sung in a foreign land. But the words "foreign land" can have a deeper meaning. Zion was the place God had chosen to reveal Himself. Moving the worship service to another location would have been the equivalent of breaking with God's revelation, which was the sin of King Jeroboam. It would be similar to idolatry. It is clear from the stories of Daniel and Ezekiel that, to the Jews in captivity, God was not considered to be a national deity who was confined to the borders of the land of Israel. The fact that the glory of the Lord appeared to Ezekiel at the Kebar River proves that a new chapter in the history of revelation had begun.⁵⁶⁴

We may, however, suppose that the not forgetting of Jerusalem referred more to the person of God than to the place. To identify God with the place where we meet Him is, in itself, not wrong. To forget

⁵⁵⁹ Matt. 24:2

⁵⁶⁰ Luke 19:41-44

⁵⁶¹ See Dan. 9:4-19

⁵⁶² See Dan. 3:1-30; 9:1-23

⁵⁶³ Luke 24:21

⁵⁶⁴ See Ezek. 1:1

Jerusalem would mean forgetting the most precious moments in man's life. Those moments surpass all human effort, represented by "my right hand" and all human joy.

"May my right hand forget" does refer to a complete cessation of activity, such as was the case with the shriveled hand of the man who came to the synagogue of Capernaum.⁵⁶⁵ It was of the utmost important that the memory of Jerusalem was kept alive, particularly in the land of demonic activity in which the Jews were held in captivity.

Before the psalmist curses his guards, he binds himself by an oath that is reinforced by a curse. In our culture we are far removed from either of those curses. This is one of the results of the influence of the Gospel upon our civilization. Even if we leave the self-invoked curse aside for a moment, we can learn an important lesson from the oath. We may not forget the background of this psalm. A Jewish psychiatrist, Frankel, who survived Word War II in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote a book *Man's Search for Meaning in Life*. He describes how only those who could cling to something that gave meaning to their lives were able to survive in a world in which all human values were trampled. The psalmist's oath means that he reached out to the highest value that exists. Only those who have fellowship with God can survive torture. The Gospel has proven its validity in the worst of circumstances.

Verses 7-9 belong to those parts of the Bible against which we can object on humanitarian grounds. For many, the doctrine of Biblical inspiration would be much easier to accept if these verses were not part of Scripture. On the one hand, this indicates misunderstanding about the meaning of Biblical inspiration. Inspiration of the Scriptures does not mean that all that is written in the Bible expresses the thoughts and feelings of the Holy Spirit. God's grief about the murder of Jewish children was as great as the smashing of the infants of Babylon. The phrase: "If God is love..." does not apply here. The Holy Spirit grieved over the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem five centuries before it took place!⁵⁶⁶

The real problem is how a person who knows God can say such things and mean them. *The Tyndale Commentary* has some important thoughts concerning this. And in Prof. Blaicklock's book on the Psalms, we find some interesting thoughts about the use of the curse as a weapon in the culture of the Middle East. Kidner says: "[They] have the shocking immediacy of a scream, to startle us into feeling something of the desperation which produced them." And Blaicklock quotes a report by Prof. Palmer, an expert in Oriental Studies, who was murdered by Arabs in 1822 and who, in his last words, pronounced a solemn curse over his murderers. But we could hardly classify the curse of the psalmist under "solemn curses."

We do an injustice to the poet if we try to judge him according to our Western standards, or even according to New Testament ones.

An interesting feature in this psalm is that blessing and curse are reversed. The psalmist curses himself in order to keep his love for Jerusalem alive, and he pronounces a blessing upon those who pay Babylon back in the same coin. Yet, it is obvious that the real meaning is the opposite. It seems that the Holy Spirit wants to show us that the key to understanding the mystery is hidden in this paradox. There is no trace of a desire of personal revenge; vengeance is left to a third person. The role of the avengers is clearly outlined. I don't know if it is possible to do the work of a Jehu without possessing Jehu's character. A robber once attacked me. A night watchman shot and killed the thief. I felt I could never have done this myself. I actually cried for the young man who was killed but I could not reproach the watchman for shooting him and saving my life.

The core of the message of the New Testament is based on a reversal. The Apostle Paul writes to the Galatians that Christ was cursed so we could receive the blessing. We read: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."⁵⁶⁷ This subject is, of course, quite different from what the psalm says but the principle is the same. The psalmist puts himself under a curse so that God's righteousness could be administered to the enemies. In the same way, Christ became a curse for us in order that God's righteousness could be applied to our lives.

All this does not circumvent the problem with which this psalm presents us. From the perspective of the dispensation in which we live, it will be hard to say more about it.

⁵⁶⁵ See Mark 3:1-6

⁵⁶⁶ Cf. Jer. 31: 15; Matt. 2:16-18

⁵⁶⁷ Gal. 3:13,14

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-EIGHT
Of David.

*1 I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart; before the "gods" I will sing your praise.
2 I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness,
for you have exalted above all things your name and your word.
3 When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.
4 May all the kings of the earth praise you, O LORD, when they hear the words of your mouth.
5 May they sing of the ways of the LORD, for the glory of the LORD is great.
6 Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar.
7 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me.
8 The LORD will fulfill [his purpose] for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever--do not abandon the works of your hands.*

This psalm is one of the best known ones in the hymnal. When my mother had to undergo major surgery in 1939, the verses 7 and 8, which were sung as a hymn, became a stronghold for her to see her through. The psalm is a song of praise and great encouragement. Praise always lifts man up above himself and his circumstances.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight places this psalm in the period after the Babylonian Captivity, and he sees a connection with the so-called Deutero Isaiah who, supposedly, was among the captives. There is, however, no reason to doubt that the psalm is of the hand of David. There are many unsubstantiated theories of this kind among scholars to which we will not yield in our study.

David praises God with all his heart. This statement includes the mind and the will. The great command in Deuteronomy reads: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."⁵⁶⁸ And Jesus reinforced this, in Matthew's Gospel, by adding "and with all your mind."⁵⁶⁹ The whole man must be involved in praise. David says in another psalm: "Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name."⁵⁷⁰

The word "gods" in vs. 1 is the translation of the Hebrew *'elohiym*, which has a broad meaning. The word is specifically used of God but occasionally applied to angels or, by way of deference, to magistrates and judges. It is difficult to determine in what way it is used in this psalm. If it refers to heavenly powers, then it stresses man's unique position in the ministry of praise. In several parts of the Bible, when a theophany is described, we see four heavenly beings that carry the throne of God. Isaiah calls them "seraphs," Ezekiel "living creatures," as does John.⁵⁷¹ The rendering "beasts" in the KJV seems unacceptable in modern English. David takes his place among these heavenly beings who in many respects are far superior to man, in order to praise and thank God.

The Hebrew word for "praise" is *yadah*, which can mean both to praise and to thank. It implies the use of hands. It must be seen in connection with the bringing of a thank-offering, as the sacrifice described in Leviticus.⁵⁷² Thanksgiving never consists in the mere use of words. What we see is the gesture that accompanies the bringing of a sacrificial animal upon which the person who brought the sacrifice laid his hands and which was then killed and burned on the altar. For us, praise and thanksgiving consists in our identification with the death on the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what sets us apart from the heavenly beings. This reality is expressed in the presence of twenty-four elders who cast their crowns before the throne of God.⁵⁷³ No other heavenly being is able to do this because they have no part in the redemption by Jesus Christ.

The question as to why David says: "I will bow down toward your holy temple" when, in his days, the temple had not yet been constructed, is adequately answered by *The Tyndale Commentary*. I am not sure that David merely had a place on earth in mind when he wrote these words. He knew quite well that

⁵⁶⁸ Deut. 6:5

⁵⁶⁹ Matt. 22:37

⁵⁷⁰ Ps. 103:1

⁵⁷¹ See Isa. 6:2; Ezek. 1:5; Rev. 4:6

⁵⁷² See Lev. ch. 3

⁵⁷³ See Rev. 4:10

the real sanctuary was in heaven. But even if he was referring to a geographic location where the ark stood, or where the tent with the altar had been erected, the object was the presence of God, not the place alone.

David gives three reasons for his praise:

1. God's character,
2. God's promises, and
3. The experience of God's blessing.

Those three are closely linked together. God's character is "love and faithfulness." God's goodness is unique. Jesus explained this to the young man who asked Him the question about eternal life. He said: "No one is good-except God alone,"⁵⁷⁴ meaning that no one is good in the sense that God is good. God's goodness is eternal and absolute. He is the standard with which all goodness is measured. And God is faithful. James calls God: "the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."⁵⁷⁵ There is no reason for our human fear that God's love and faithfulness toward us will, one day, change. The realization that God's goodness is better than the most solid rock is reason enough for us to praise Him. Our praise, worship, and thanksgiving are based, primarily, upon God's character.

The second reason for praise is God's promises. The Hebrew in vs. 2 seems difficult to translate. The Interlinear Bible reads: "Thou hast magnified above all thy name thy word." The NIV renders the verse with: "For you have exalted above all things your name and your word." The KJV reads: "For thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name." TLB, probably, grasps the meaning best with: "For your promises are backed by all the honor of your name." My theology teacher in The Brussels Bible Institute used to say that God signed His Name under His promises.

It, obviously, does not mean that God promises more than He is. But it proves that there is an inextricable bond between God's promises and His character. God's being is the warranty of His promises. There are hundreds, maybe a few thousand, promises in the Bible. The Apostle Paul says about them: "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God."⁵⁷⁶ The fulfillment, the guarantee and the signature of God's promises are in Jesus Christ. We may say "amen" to this. In other words, we are permitted to co-sign God's promises.

God's promises are "exalted" or "magnified." The Hebrew word is *gadal* which, literally means, "to twist." It is used in the sense of "to make large." It is found in the verse: "O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together."⁵⁷⁷ God's promises are magnificent because they have the glory of God Himself. The essence of all God's promises is that He wants us to be partakers of His glory, that is His holiness. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us: "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."⁵⁷⁸ Everything God promises to us is subservient to this.

In the phrase: "for you have exalted above all things your name and your word," the Hebrew word used for "word" is *dabar*. *The Tyndale Commentary* comments about this: "[It is] the most general term of all, embracing God's truth in any form, stated, promised or commanded." Since the Word became flesh, we can say that those words speak of the exaltation of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we saw earlier, all God's promises are given and fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.⁵⁷⁹

The third reason for praise is the experience of answered prayer and the strengthening of faith. David says: "When I called, you answered me." Nothing is so exhilarating as seeing our prayers being answered. This is what made the life of George Mueller so exciting; it is what makes my life exiting also.

The answer in David's situation was encouragement. Not all prayers make the sun stand still or allow people to walk on water. Derek Kidner observes: "It is not always the situation which most needs changing; it is, as often as not, the man involved in it." We sometimes arrive in difficult situations because of God leading us in them. We read about Israel's journey through the desert: "The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place *as the LORD commanded*. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink."⁵⁸⁰ And "Jesus *was led by the Spirit*

⁵⁷⁴ Luke 18:19

⁵⁷⁵ James 1:17

⁵⁷⁶ II Cor. 1:20

⁵⁷⁷ Ps. 34:3 (KJV)

⁵⁷⁸ Heb. 12:10

⁵⁷⁹ See II Cor. 1:20

⁵⁸⁰ Ex. 17:1

into the desert to be tempted by the devil.”⁵⁸¹ A change in circumstances can sometimes mean disobedience to the will of God. The answer to prayer David refers to is probably best put in words by Isaiah who said: “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.”⁵⁸² If we try to get our energy from any other source but God, we are on dangerous ground.

In the first verse, David finds himself among “the gods” and in the fourth among “all the kings of the earth.” We are not told who those kings are. Very few kings of this world have ever praised God and sung of the ways of the LORD. The former queen of Holland, Wilhelmina, once gave her personal testimony at a convention of the Salvation Army. As far as I know, she was the last truly Christian monarch. A more typical description of the powers of this world is found in one of the psalms: “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’”⁵⁸³ David does not show how this change of heart among the kings and rulers will come about. The psalm prophesies about what will happen at the end of times, of which the Apostle Paul says: “For [Christ] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he ‘has put everything under his feet.’ Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 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.”⁵⁸⁴ The corruption of the earthly powers is a temporary stage in the history of the universe. God’s glory will not always be trodden under man’s feet. A time will come when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”⁵⁸⁵ God will be glorified by all His kings. The rulers will precede the rest of humanity in humility. The crowned heads will cast their crowns before the throne of the Almighty who had delegated their authority to them. John further elaborates in Revelation what David prophesies here.

I believe it was never God’s intention for one man to rule over another. Before the fall, Adam ruled over the animal kingdom, not over Eve. Monarchies, or whatever forms of government we know, came into being after man’s fall into sin and is related to man’s rebellion against God. Even Christ’s kingdom will come to an end when all His enemies are subjected to Him. Paul says: “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”⁵⁸⁶ When the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that “the Son of the Most High... will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end,”⁵⁸⁷ he refers to the eternity of Christ’s human nature.

In Christ, every human being is destined to the throne. We will all rule with Him. In this sense, David’s prophecy has an endless application. It refers to a multitude no one can number. Hearing and accepting the Word of God will make us all into kings and priests. Our royal status will make us sing. It will also make us realize how great the glory of the Lord is.

How can one sing of “the ways of the Lord?” “The ways of the Lord,” not only, refers to what God does but also to how He does it. Most people have difficulty with this point. It seems to us that God’s way is not always the shortest line between two points. A good illustration is the story of the exodus of Israel from Egypt. God told the people to “encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea.” Taking the route from Egypt to Canaan via the Red Sea seemed to be a fatal mistake. Yet, once the people were on the other side of the sea, they burst out in song. They sang the song of Moses.⁵⁸⁸ Thus we will all, one day, sing “the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb.”⁵⁸⁹ If we can really rejoice, not only, in what God does but also in the way He does it, we demonstrate to understand the secret of victory. Jacob did this at the end of his life. We read: “Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.”⁵⁹⁰ Thus God allowed me to thank Him for the sickness of my son. The book of Revelation is one whole illustration of

⁵⁸¹ Matt. 4:1

⁵⁸² Isa. 40:29-31

⁵⁸³ Ps. 2:2,3

⁵⁸⁴ I Cor. 15:25-28

⁵⁸⁵ Isa. 11:9^b; Hab. 2:14

⁵⁸⁶ I Cor. 15:25

⁵⁸⁷ Luke 1:32,33

⁵⁸⁸ See Ex. ch. 14

⁵⁸⁹ Rev. 15:3

⁵⁹⁰ Gen. 47:31^b

this point. When the Lamb opens the seals of the scroll and the reign of the antichrist begins, it seems that an enormous catastrophe occurs. Yet, it becomes clear that, especially at the end of time, the greatness of God's glory becomes evident and that the way this is revealed is the only possible way. It is also clear that it is difficult to make a distinction between God's acts and God's ways.

Many translations have difficulty with the Hebrew word *kiy* that opens vs. 6. The NIV renders the verse with: "Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly." The RSV reads: "For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly." The word "though" is not in the Hebrew. Our human minds tend to think that God's greatness would prevent Him from paying attention to the lowly. The word *kiy*, however, according to Strong's definitions, is a "particle, indicating causal relations of all kinds, antecedent or consequent." The KJV often renders it with "for-as-much, inasmuch," etc. God does not look upon the lowly in spite of His greatness but just because of it.

The word "for" in vs. 6 is the touchstone of all God's acts. In opposition to God's highness stands, either man's humility, or his pride. The verse indicates that God is not too great for man. The devil always tries, by all means, to implant this lie into man's mind. God's greatness requires that He knows every detail, even those that are too small for man. Nothing is too great or too small for God with the exception of man's pride.

The bitter irony of man's sinfulness is that, as we think ourselves to be more important, we become less significant in the eyes of God. What counts is not greatness or smallness but our relationship with God because humility has nothing to do with insignificance. It is rather the realization that what we are is a gift of God. Denying that we possess gifts and abilities is not humility. This is why Jesus could set His own humility as an example. He said: "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."⁵⁹¹

The enemy causes the trouble in vs. 7; it is a threat to the psalmist's very life. The phrase, "you preserve my life" is the translation of the Hebrew word *chayah*, which means "to revive," or "to give life." It refers to a resurrection from the dead. Death is, in Paul's words, "The last enemy to be destroyed."⁵⁹² God does so much more for us than to help us when we are in trouble. He redeems us from death itself. That is the complete and perfect deliverance which is given to us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the result of God's stretching out of His hand.

We see God's hand in the redemption of Israel from Egypt. "The children of Israel went out with an high hand."⁵⁹³ We see God's hand in the glorification of Jesus. Peter said: "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."⁵⁹⁴ Salvation from the enemy means salvation from death, even though our bodies die one day. God has implanted the seed of resurrection within us and He will see to it that it will bear fruit.

The psalmist realizes that God is at work in his life and that He is not yet finished with him. On the basis of God's *chesed*, there is no reason to believe that God would quit halfway.

⁵⁹¹ Matt. 11:29

⁵⁹² I Cor. 15:26

⁵⁹³ Ex. 14:8 (KJV)

⁵⁹⁴ Acts 2:32,33

PSALM ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-NINE

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

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.*
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.*
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*
- 4 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.*
- 5 You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.*
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.*
- 7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*
- 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*
- 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,*
- 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"*
- 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*
- 13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.*
- 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*
- 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,*
- 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*
- 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!*
- 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.*
- 19 If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!*
- 20 They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.*
- 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?*
- 22 I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.*
- 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*
- 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

We ought to ask ourselves the question, does this psalm deal with me or with God? God is the person who is addressed, but I am the subject. The psalm says as much about God as about me. Although this is never said in so many words, it is obvious that there is a connection between God's knowledge about me and my knowledge about God.

We don't know what conditions were like before the fall. Adam and Eve possessed, probably, no perfect self-knowledge and no perfect knowledge of God. The fact that there was a Tree of Life and a Tree of Knowledge is an indication that man needed to grow in both areas of life and knowledge. The coming of sin into the world has considerably complicated relationships. By breaking the bond with God man became also a stranger to himself.

There is a tremendous difference between seeing oneself as a mystery that has to be searched and feeling threatened by the thought to be found out. This makes this psalm so profound and important because it shows the way to healing for man's sick soul.

God knows us through and through. In this truth we find the key to the knowledge of God and of ourselves and the balance of harmonious relations. The search for our identity (which is a fad of our time) finds its solution and answer in the discovery that He has searched me and knows me. If this truth were the basis of modern psychology, psychology would become less dangerous than it is now and it would become more effective in its application. There is a danger in trying to know oneself without involving God. Our soul is too deep for our capacity to search and the presence of sin within us makes the area of our subconscious full of dangerous pitfalls. Self-analysis, however is not new. The Greek philosopher Socrates preached and practiced it and was condemned to death and executed because of it.

The Hebrew Interlinear Bible reads literally: "O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me." The Hebrew word for "search," *chaqar*, means "to penetrate, to examine intimately." The picture suggests

that, after God had created us, He took us apart again to analyze us carefully. This analysis is an accomplished fact, not an ongoing process.

David gives us an outline of God's detailed knowledge of us. The list is incomplete. It doesn't even come close to Jesus' astonishing pronouncement: "And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered."⁵⁹⁵ David merely takes samples from his complex personality.

Strangely enough, he begins with a position of rest. "You know when I sit" precedes the "when I rise." But if David never took time to sit down and rest, he would, probably, never have written this psalm. God usually speaks to us when we sit and rest. We often, mistakenly, think that God is only interested in our activities.

David speaks of sitting and rising as fixed habits. We all tend to follow certain habits in life. Every man has his routines, as well as his activities and periods of relaxation. Sitting and rising, together with going out and lying down, form a poetical parallel with "my thoughts" and "all my ways." God does not have to come close to us to know what we think. The suggested distance and the intimacy of the search speak of God's perfect knowledge of us. When we think of the fact that God's detailed and complete knowledge is not limited to the complexity of one single individual but that He knows the billions of people who have ever lived, who are alive now and who are not born yet, we become dizzy at the thought. God's omniscience includes the macrocosm, the microcosm, and man. The miracle with man, though, is that there is an affinity between us and God. It is not only, in Paul's words, that "in Him we live and move and have our being" but also "We are his offspring."⁵⁹⁶

David says: "You have laid your hand upon me." The miracle of this touch surpasses all other miracles. This is a touch of fellowship; it is the intimacy of love. God's knowledge of us is based upon His love for us, and it is stimulated by love. The imposition of hands is the symbol. In our society a handshake is all that is left of the intimacy we would have known with all our fellowmen if sin had not come in between and made us wear masks before each other. In our relationship with God, the touch has not lost its depth of meaning. A good illustration is given when the Apostle John sees the risen Lord Jesus in His heavenly glory. We read: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.'"⁵⁹⁷ God's touch is a demonstration of His love for us.

The second stanza, the verses 7-12, suggests that David does not feel quite comfortable in this intimacy with God. Fleeing from God's presence may not have been a real option but it was a secret desire. The mention of the word "flee" is an indication of the presence of sin. In C. S. Lewis' book *Perelandra*, one of the main characters has an encounter with an angel whom he recognizes as good. He reacts by asking himself if "good" is what he really wants. Such duplicity is characteristic of our relationship with God. On the one hand, we yearn for God's love but there is also a little inner voice that urges us on to escape. The fact that this stanza has probably some of the best poetry that can be found in the Bible does not diminish this negative aspect.

As far as poetry is concerned, this passage is unparalleled. The positive accent is upon God's omnipresence. God is in heaven and He is in hell. The Hebrew word translated in the NIV with "depth" is *sheol*. He is where the sun rises and where it sets. He is in the darkness and in the light. The Holy Spirit is everywhere. These words give greater depth to what was said in vs. 5, "You hem me in--behind and before." We can say what David couldn't say: "Christ in [me], the hope of glory."⁵⁹⁸ David realizes that God's presence is more than a topographical reality. He wants to express the nearness of God rather than His presence. He tries to imagine all the possible places where he could go himself, but at none of those he would be out of the presence of God. Some commentators quote, in connection with the verses, Francis Thompson's poem *The Hound of Heaven* which was probably inspired by this portion of Scripture.

The certainty that flight is impossible gives, at the same time, a comforting assurance. We need this kind of protection against ourselves. Otherwise we would continue to flee life till the day we die. It is this paradoxical ambiguity that makes these verses vibrate.

We repeat, it is sin that makes us want to hide. "Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God

⁵⁹⁵ Matt. 10:30

⁵⁹⁶ See Acts 17:28

⁵⁹⁷ Rev. 1:17,18

⁵⁹⁸ Col. 1:27^b

among the trees of the garden.”⁵⁹⁹ This tendency will remain as long as there is a root of sin in us. Adam and Eve could only face God when they were covered with the skin of an animal God had killed for them. For us it is the covering with the righteousness of Jesus Christ by whom we were washed in His blood that allows us to have fellowship with God. We have this advantage over David, that our conscience is cleansed. David felt overwhelmed by the intimacy of God’s knowledge of him. For us the relationship is mutual. We have the option to flee toward God, not to flee from Him.

The verses 13-18 describe the miracle of the creation of a human being from the conception through the resurrection. The Hebrew word translated in the NIV with “inmost being” is *kilyah* which literally means “a kidney (as an essential organ); figuratively, the mind.” The kidney was considered to be the seat of emotions, as is the heart in modern speech. David does not merely speak of his physical being when he uses these words. He mentions the soul before he even speaks of the embryo. The idea that the human soul would only start to develop in a later stage of pregnancy is un-biblical nonsense. The conception of every living being is a great miracle but the forming of man as the crown of creation is the crown of all miracles. Few human beings realize that they are part of an ongoing miracle. The birth of my own children made me realize how wonderful life is.

David proves the greatness of his own spirit and his exceptional intelligence in the way he describes his own conception and the existential miracle of his person. Nothing is as beneficial to our self-image as to praise God for the way in which He created us. The depth of this knowledge (Your works are wonderful, I know that full well) must have been an important factor in David’s life and a significant contribution to his own greatness. That person is truly spiritually dead who is blind to the miracle of his own body and soul. Ironically, we often begin to realize the importance of the normal functions of our organs when something goes wrong with them.

Modern science has made significant progress in the understanding of conception since the days of David but our praise to God has not kept pace with this increase; which means that, on the whole, we have fallen behind to a considerable distance.

Kidner, in *The Tyndale Commentary*, sees in the phrase “in the depths of the earth” a metaphor of security as in the womb of the mother. George Knight, in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, goes further than that and sees a connection with the creation of man from the dust of the earth. This does not seem a logical interpretation to me. Physically, we were made from the surface of the earth, not from the depths. The motherly womb hides as many mysteries as mother earth. Understanding of our origin is the key to the understanding of the purpose of life. A person who holds as truth that life came into being through a series of coincidences and that he himself is the product of random events will never be able to make sense out of life. If however, we understand, not only that God created us, but that our bodies are wonders of complexity in which we will always find something new to amaze us, and that the miracle of our souls is even greater than that, we cannot escape the conclusion that all this must be geared to a definite goal. And if we accept God as the origin, it is a small step to seeing Him as the goal also. The fact that sickness and death do not fit in the picture, as the Bible clearly explains, cannot be called an insurmountable obstacle. Death, not the absence of death, is the problem!

At first glance, it seems as if David is hung up on the origin of life and that he has nothing to say about life’s purpose. But then, what does he mean with the phrase: “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be?” And: “When I awake, I am still with you?” In a cryptic fashion he speaks about the totality of his life and about his ultimate resurrection from the dead.

The facts that “the days ordained” were all written in God’s book seems to say that man can do only what God predetermined. The practice of life and the way we function contradicts this. Our lives consist of bigger and smaller decisions. To our limited understanding it appears that God’s predestination and man’s free will exclude each other. Calvin built his theology on this premise. The solution to the contradiction lies in an extra dimension that is beyond our scope of vision. How the two fit together, I cannot explain. That they do fit together is evident from my use of my free will to seek the will of God in order to obey it. We are free either to choose God’s will or to reject it. We will reach our destination and consummation in obedience to the will of God. David doesn’t consider the fact that God has written down his day from beginning to end as an infringement upon his personal liberty. Actually, the discovery makes him ecstatic. God’s thoughts are precious and innumerable to him. Much of the tension between God’s predestination and our liberty will disappear if we understand that we live within the framework of time

⁵⁹⁹ Gen. 3:8

and that our decisions are made in a sequence of consecutive moments. God fills eternity; He is outside time, without beginning or end. We cannot even imagine what this means.

The context gives no reason to interpret David's awaking as waking up from a natural sleep. The subject is not sleep inductive! The counting of God's thoughts does not put David to sleep. Since, however, he began by speaking about himself as an embryo, it is logical that his thoughts also dwell upon the time when his life on earth ends. His thoughts even go beyond his last sleep on earth to the moment of his final awakening. As in another psalm, he sees out to the day when he will be fully satisfied. We read: "And I-in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness."⁶⁰⁰ That will be a real awaking. During our waking hours on earth our consciousness is still rather limited. We do not see much and what we see is distorted. Seeing God will place everything in God's light. Not only shall we be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is, as John says,⁶⁰¹ but we will also see everything else as it is and that will change us.

The stress in this psalm is upon our relationship with God when we awake. When we lift up our eyes on the other side, He Himself will bend over us and the first thing we see will be His face. Try to imagine that!

The following four verses (19-22) form such a contrast with the rest of the psalm that some commentators believe that they don't belong there. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "The remaining part of this Psalm has no visible connection with the preceding. I rather think it a fragment, or a part of some other Psalm." We do not share this supposition. It is a normal phenomenon that abhorrence of evil will increase as we get closer to God and our fellowship with Him becomes more intimate. David's eruption may be unexpected but it is not inexplicable. We do not read that there are circumstances that warrant such an outburst. There were "bloodthirsty men" who came too close for comfort to David. The contrast is between God who creates life and brings human beings into this world and man who sheds blood and murders his fellowmen. Those "men of blood," as the RSV calls them, "speak of [God] with evil intent." It sounds rough that David asks God that He would slay those men but that is what they do with their fellowmen. It is possible that David had Joab, who was a man without scruples, in mind. It was he whom David was never able to dismiss for fear of losing the whole army. David's impotence to discharge Joab and the revenge he took upon him on his deathbed may give us an explanation of the frustration that is hidden behind these verses.

The situation in these verses is not completely black-and-white. David tries to oppose evil as if he himself had never been contaminated by it. That, of course, was not the case. The stanza depicts, probably, more an ideal situation than a real one. If David really had entrusted his enemies to God and not tried to compromise for diplomatic reasons, his life would have been different. The moment he was really ready to give up his kingdom, was probably the high point of his career. We read in Second Samuel: "Then the king said to Zadok, 'Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the LORD's eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, 'I am not pleased with you,' then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him.'"⁶⁰²

These remarks reduce the value of David's indignation about the wicked. We may be wrong in our suppositions but that does not diminish the truth of these verses. Even if David endeavored to convince himself with his own words, the truth remains that our hatred of sin ought to be absolute. We cannot love God without hating the devil.

The last two verses of this psalm show that David is aware of the fact that sin is not only something that threatens him from the outside, but the enemy is also in the inside. The idyll of the creation of man is besmirched by the suggestion that man is not what he ought to be. The depth of these last verses is emphasized by the almost literal repetition of the opening words: "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me," and "Search me, O God, and know my heart." God's omniscience will not benefit us unless we surrender ourselves to it wholeheartedly. If we deny the Holy Spirit access to our innermost being that doesn't mean that He doesn't know us completely. But if we do not ask Him to search us, we will not experience the healing effect of His presence. No self-knowledge is possible without opening oneself to the scrutiny of the Spirit of God. Self-analysis can even be dangerous without the presence of the Lord in our lives.

⁶⁰⁰ Ps. 17:15

⁶⁰¹ See I John 3:2

⁶⁰² II Sam. 15:25,26

In asking for this, David confessed that he did not know himself. He also admitted that he could not trust himself. There are “offensive/wicked/hurtful” ways in our hearts and minds. Different versions give different translations of the Hebrew word *`otseb*. The word is related to a word for “idol.” Only when God leads us out of this labyrinth can we walk the straight and narrow way that leads to life. Without God we will never be able to make the right moral choices.

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

- 1 Rescue me, O LORD, from evil men; protect me from men of violence,*
- 2 who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day.*
- 3 They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips. Selah*
- 4 Keep me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; protect me from men of violence who plan to trip my feet.*
- 5 Proud men have hidden a snare for me; they have spread out the cords of their net and have set traps for me along my path. Selah*
- 6 O LORD, I say to you, "You are my God." Hear, O LORD, my cry for mercy.*
- 7 O Sovereign LORD, my strong deliverer, who shields my head in the day of battle--*
- 8 do not grant the wicked their desires, O LORD; do not let their plans succeed, or they will become proud. Selah*
- 9 Let the heads of those who surround me be covered with the trouble their lips have caused.*
- 10 Let burning coals fall upon them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise.*
- 11 Let slanderers not be established in the land; may disaster hunt down men of violence.*
- 12 I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.*
- 13 Surely the righteous will praise your name and the upright will live before you.*

This world is full of evil men, "men of violence." David does not mention any names here and there is no indication about what the cause of the writing of this psalm may have been. The psalm can be applied to several episodes in David's life. We have to look more to the principle than to one particular incident; this calls for a broader application.

The psalm is a prayer for God's protection of one man for another. The word "sin" is written with large letters on the paper of this poem, sin as it influences human relations. It has been said before that, when man broke the bond with God, he became a stranger to himself and to his fellowmen. In this psalm, the emphasis is upon the latter. God's intention has always been that human beings would love each other and live together in harmony, thus complementing and fulfilling one another. Through the atonement in Christ, believers, in their fellowship together, give expression to the love and unity of the divine Trinity. In praying for His disciples, Jesus said: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-the name you gave me-so that they may be one as we are one. ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. ...I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."⁶⁰³

In this psalm, we see the other extreme: "Dog-eat-dog!" The ultimate result of sin is that one human being devours another human being spiritually and emotionally and, sometimes literally, as in cannibalism. A book, *That Fateful Shore*, describes, in gruesome detail, how escaped prisoners in Australia ate one another. We can imagine the panic and hatred the last two survivors of such a party must have felt for one another. The Apostle John writes: "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."⁶⁰⁴ Paul warns against the alternative when he says: "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."⁶⁰⁵ There is no reason to believe that, if we do not demonstrate the love of Christ to one another, we will not come to the point of devouring each other.

The first and most destructive weapon we can use against our fellowmen is the tongue. In the first stanza, this is particularly brought out in vs. 3. The great difference between the Word of God and our words is that God's Word creates and our words are only sharp in the negative sense. We cannot call anything into life with our words, and we seldom use them to build up. We can, however, be very effective in the use of words to destroy. Nothing can do so much damage in a human life as a lie. An example occurred some years ago when, Clarence Thomas who was an appointee to the Supreme Court of the United States had his reputation almost destroyed by Prof. Anita Hill. In the hearings that preceded the appointment, she accused him of sexual harassment.

⁶⁰³ John 17:11,21,26

⁶⁰⁴ I John 3:16

⁶⁰⁵ Gal. 5:15

James issues the warning: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”⁶⁰⁶ As Christians, we have the double task of, on the one hand, placing ourselves under God’s protection, as David does in this psalm, and on the other hand offering our tongue to God as an instrument of righteousness.⁶⁰⁷

The second prayer for protection, in the verses 4 and 5, is parallel to the first prayer in the verses 1-3. The threat is here not what man can say, but what man can do. This negative feature can also be turned around so that we obtain a positive image. Paul says: “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”⁶⁰⁸ And James admonishes us: “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”⁶⁰⁹ The point in Jesus’ parable about the goats and the sheep is whether or not we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and the prisoners for Jesus’ sake.⁶¹⁰

The atmosphere in the second stanza, however, is different from the first one. David sees himself as a hunted animal, and he realizes that the danger is not imaginary but that he can easily be trapped. He is not immune because, inside of him, there is something that responds to the sin that surrounds him. We ought always to be aware of the fact that we are vulnerable. Self-assurance, usually, leads to an immediate defeat. Peter’s denial of Jesus is a classic example of this.⁶¹¹

The answer to the anxious question: “What can man do to me?” is given by the author of Hebrews who says: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”⁶¹² We ought to live unselfishly and be content with what God has given to us and place our trust in the Lord. What is trapped is the animal within us. But once we have fallen into God’s trap, we will be immune to the traps, snares, and ambushes of men. Somehow, God always leads us back to our starting point to make us understand where the real danger lies.

The verses 6 and 7 are among the most passionate cries for help in the whole Bible. David calls upon God as *Elohim*, *Yahweh*, and *Adonay*. He cries for mercy. He confesses with Thomas: “My Lord and my God!”⁶¹³ He recognizes that his deliverance is closely linked to the person of God. He calls God: “Sovereign LORD, my strong deliverer.” The Hebrew says literally: “O God, the Lord, the strength of my salvation.” He sees that God places on his head, what Paul calls, the helmet of salvation.⁶¹⁴ The enemy always aims at our heads. Our thoughts need to be protected by the salvation of Jesus Christ. Sin clouds our brain and Satan wants to poison it. We can only think clearly if we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is quite possible that David was on a literal battlefield in this psalm, fighting a real battle. He sees then, in his circumstances, a picture of the greater battle, in which he finds himself at the same time, on a spiritual level. The great difference between the Old Testament and the New seems to be that, in the spiritual battle, we are the attackers. Once our sins have been atoned for by Jesus Christ, our defense becomes God’s business. In a sense, this was also true for the Old Testament believer; God was David’s shield. He says elsewhere: “But you are a shield around me, O LORD.”⁶¹⁵

This psalm speaks about the protection of the head. In Ephesians, Paul describes “the whole armor of God”⁶¹⁶ which is needed for our protection. But the Apostle Paul also speaks of weapons of attack. We read: “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine

⁶⁰⁶ James 3:9-12

⁶⁰⁷ See Rom. 6:13

⁶⁰⁸ Gal. 5:6

⁶⁰⁹ James 2:14-17

⁶¹⁰ See Matt. 25:31-46

⁶¹¹ See Matt. 26:33-35

⁶¹² Heb. 13:5,6

⁶¹³ John 20:28

⁶¹⁴ Eph. 6:17

⁶¹⁵ Ps. 3:3

⁶¹⁶ Eph. 6:13-17

power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”⁶¹⁷

In this psalm, David moves towards the attack but he doesn't seem to be sure of his position and of the basis upon which he stands. He is not after personal revenge. He wisely leaves vengeance to God. His treatment of his enemies does not exclude their conversion. The “burning coals” in vs. 10 could be interpreted in a New Testament sense of “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head”⁶¹⁸ but it is not certain if David means it this way. The principle is not only one of the New Testament. David does not pray for the extermination of men, but he wants the evil they invent for others to fall back upon themselves. The evil person has isolated himself from the truth of the Gospel. If, however, he begins to experience himself some of the harm he had intended for others, it could pierce the armor of his soul. Nothing David says here denies man the possibility of conversion. It is quite possible that David was familiar with the words in Proverbs quoted by Paul above and that his use of the words “burning coal” is not accidental.

The violent man is the person who believes he needs to defend himself against God. He thinks that he needs violence to protect himself against the wrath of the Lamb. That his efforts are futile we read in Revelation where John records: “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the 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! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’”⁶¹⁹ We see that, ever since Jesus made atonement for our sins, we have become the attackers and the violent people have to defend themselves.

It is ultimately a matter of justice over injustice. Justice is the fundamental issue in the relationship between God and us. All injustice among men can be traced back to men's broken relationship with God. We mentioned this above already but at this point in the psalm the judicial aspect of the matter is highlighted.

Davis is sure “that the LORD secures justice for the poor.” This refers to disputes among men. God's securing of justice is preceded by two other court cases. The first is the case between God and us and the second is the one in which Satan accuses us before God. God says by the mouth of Isaiah: “Come now, let us reason together, ... Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”⁶²⁰ We have been pardoned in Jesus Christ “who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.”⁶²¹ In the second case, Satan is our accuser. Zechariah describes the following scene: “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, ‘The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?’”

Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.’ Then I said, ‘Put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.”⁶²² Revelation shows us how, as people who have been made righteous, we can act against Satan and silence him. We read: “Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.’”⁶²³

On the basis of those two cases which were decided in our favor, we can appeal to God as the judge of the whole earth to settle our human disputes. The certainty of the verdict gives us the strongest possible basis for our human relations. In the social pressure under which we live, we may, as righteous people, that is as people who have been declared righteous because of the blood of Christ, praise the Name

⁶¹⁷ II Cor. 10:4,5

⁶¹⁸ Rom. 12:20 (also Prov. 25:21,22)

⁶¹⁹ Rev. 6:15-17

⁶²⁰ Isa. 1:18

⁶²¹ Rev. 1:5^b (NKJV)

⁶²² Zech. 3:1-5

⁶²³ Rev. 12:10,11

of God. This praise will have its effect upon our human relations. From an animal that is in danger to be trapped, we will become attackers who are able to bind the demons of violence. With the weapons of spiritual warfare, we will be able demolish strongholds.

It is, however, not only a matter of being justified but also of being upright. Justification is a judicial term but it also produces a very effective change of character. The yoke of Christ makes a person gentle and humble in heart.⁶²⁴ Dwelling in God's presence will change us. The Apostle John says: "We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."⁶²⁵

Dwelling in His presence speaks of the eternal character of our relationship with Him, and by consequence, with one another. "The righteous" and "the upright" are in the plural. The topic of this psalm covers all inter-human relations.

There is no sharper contrast than between the beginning and the end of this psalm. The violent men have the devil as their father, the upright are God's children. The difference is about light and darkness. The psalmist's prayer was "rescue me" and "protect me." God answers him by showing him the picture of the fellowship of the saints in the presence of God. In faith, he clings to this. That is how he can resist the attacks and preserve the victory.

⁶²⁴ See Matt. 11:28-30

⁶²⁵ I John 3:2

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-ONE

A psalm of David.

- 1** *O LORD, I call to you; come quickly to me. Hear my voice when I call to you.*
2 *May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*
3 *Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.*
4 *Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.*
5 *Let a righteous man strike me--it is a kindness; let him rebuke me--it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it. Yet my prayer is ever against the deeds of evildoers;*
6 *their rulers will be thrown down from the cliffs, and the wicked will learn that my words were well spoken.*
7 *[They will say,] "As one plows and breaks up the earth, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave."*
8 *But my eyes are fixed on you, O Sovereign LORD; in you I take refuge--do not give me over to death.*
9 *Keep me from the snares they have laid for me, from the traps set by evildoers.*
10 *Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by in safety.*

This psalm is packed with contrasting emotions. As in the previous psalm, the opening words are like a cry for help in times of distress. The end of the poem also resembles the previous psalm but the middle section is of a quite different character; it seems to deal with a totally different subject.

In the first stanza, the poet feels he is in danger of slipping. The enemy surrounds him but the more disquieting aspect is that his inmost being tends to respond to the tempting call that comes from outside. The enemy is inside also! This makes the cry of this prayer so urgent.

It is a very disturbing discovery to realize that we are not the stable kind of person we thought ourselves to be. As far as temptation to sin is concerned, we cannot trust ourselves. Even our prayers are not pure. More than anywhere else in the Book of Psalm, the psalmist bares his heart here. As in the beginning of the history of man, nakedness and sin caused shame, so it is here; there is a feeling of deep shame. This is what makes this prayer so urgent.

David did not know the parable of the Prodigal. Yet he expects that the Father will come running toward him and embrace him.⁶²⁶ He expects God to hurry because his inner need is so urgent.

It is good to pray in times of need. But David realizes that prayer is more than a cry of distress. The way in which the Prodigal returned home is not the only way home. Prayer ought also to be a sacrifice of incense, the sweetest form of fellowship with God. The embrace of the Father is deeply moving and it gives healing but it is preceded by lostness and injury. The Prodigal had been dead before he came to life. Yet, this is what gives the accent of joy to our lives. As people whose sin have been forgiven, we know no more wonderful embrace. We should not think, however, that this is the only, or the best, form of fellowship. A marriage relationship of uninterrupted harmony is better than one in which relationships have been restored.

In the previous psalm (vs. 3) the evil men sinned with their tongue. In this psalm, David realizes that he would as guilty as they were did if God had not kept him from it. The difference between them and him is the grace of God. In order to be able to pray as I should, the Lord will have to set a guard over my mouth and "keep watch over the door of my lips." It is good to understand that our speaking can cause great damage.

In several places in the Bible, we read about the strategic importance of the tongue, or the mouth, or the lips, as tools that produce sin. Jesus says that man's mouth can defile him. We read: "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.' But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean.'"⁶²⁷ James adds to this: "If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able

⁶²⁶ See Luke 15:20

⁶²⁷ Matt. 15:11,18-20

to keep his whole body in check.”⁶²⁸ And Solomon observes: “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”⁶²⁹

It is clear that what matters most is the sin within us. The tongue is nothing else but the gate through which sin comes out. Even if God keeps this door closed for us, that does not mean that we become clean inside. The fact that the door has to be kept closed proves that there is something inside that should not be allowed to come out. If all crime disappeared from the land, all the gates of prison would be open. It is, therefore, logical that, in the following verse, the psalmist asks for the same kind of protection on the inside. He prays: “Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.” This seems theologically more sound than the rendering of the NKJV: “Do not incline my heart to any evil thing, to practice wicked works with men who work iniquity and do not let me eat of their delicacies.” It is not God who inclines our hearts to evil. James clearly says: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”⁶³⁰ But the Lord’s Prayer seems to side with David here. Jesus taught His disciples to say: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”⁶³¹ Behind this is the confession that God is greater than our heart and that He can influence our tendencies and our will if we ask Him to do so.

As we stated earlier, the tendency toward evil is within us and if God did not protect us from ourselves, we would all commit crimes. The very fact that the psalmist doesn’t say: “This will never happen to me” is an indication that he has seen the light.

The mention of the word “delicacies” makes me think of C. S. Lewis’ book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in which Edmund comes under the spell of the White Witch because he ate her “Turkish Delight.” As long as sin appears to us in the form of a delicacy we have not, as the psalmist says, tasted and seen that the LORD is good.⁶³² Demons can influence our taste buds, but if the Holy Spirit is in our heart we will say: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”⁶³³ Ezekiel and John had the same experience with the Word of God. We read in Ezekiel’s prophecy: “Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.’ So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.”⁶³⁴ And in Revelation: “So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, ‘Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.’ I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.”⁶³⁵ The fact that the psalmist is able to say these things proves that he is able to see through the deception. He recognizes the fraud and he knows what the result of the eating would be: good tasting, but deadly, poison.

The second stanza presents, obviously, problems of translation and some scholars believe that the Hebrew text here is corrupted. It seems that the verses give us the testimony of the psalmist after he has refused to eat the delicacies. He compares the sadistic treatment by the wicked with the loving, although painful, corrections the righteous would impart to him.

The rulers who are thrown down from the cliffs present us with a linguistic, as well as with a logical, problem. The Interlinear Hebrew Old Testament says literally: “Also my prayer is against their evils. Have been cast down against the rock their judges; they shall hear my words for they are pleasant.”

This is translated variously by the

- KJV with: “for yet my prayer also shall be in their calamities. When their judges are overthrown in stony places, they shall hear my words; for they are sweet.”
- The Berkeley translation reads: “for I will still pray in the face of their wickedness when their judges are hurled down along the side of a rock, then they will listen to my words, for they are pleasant.”
- TLB: “But I am in constant prayer against the wicked and their deeds. When their leaders are condemned, and their bones are strewn across the ground, then these men will finally listen to me and know that I am trying to help them.”

⁶²⁸ James 3:2

⁶²⁹ Prov. 18:21

⁶³⁰ James 1:13,14

⁶³¹ Matt. 6:13

⁶³² See Ps. 34:8

⁶³³ Ps. 119:103

⁶³⁴ Ezek. 3:3

⁶³⁵ Rev. 10:9,10

- The RSV: “for my prayer is continually against their wicked deeds. When they are given over to those who shall condemn them, then they shall learn that the word of the LORD is true.”
- The NEB: “...for that would make me a party to their crimes. They shall founder on the rock of justice and shall learn how acceptable my words are.”
- The Jerusalem Bible: “Daily I counter their malice with prayer. When their judges are flung on jagged rocks, they will learn how mild my words have been.”

The Adam Clarke Commentary suggests that this unclear passage is a reference to David’s kind treatment of Saul in the cave of Engedi. He comes up with the following possibility for a translation: “Their judges have been dismissed in the rocky places; and have heard my words that they were sweet.” Who knows? Clarke’s suggestion has the merit of not violating the context and the topic of the psalm.

The seventh verse is also suspected of having been corrupted. The problem is in the words “our bones.” The NIV tries to clarify this by introducing the phrase with “[They will say].” Neither the Masorite text, nor the Septuagint give the reading “their bones” instead of “our bones.” The NIV’s suggestion may be the most logical.

There is no linguistic or logical problem in the last three verses. The secret of faith is to keep our eyes fixed on the sovereign Lord, on YHWH, Adonai. This reminds us the experience of Peter who was able to walk on the water as long as his eyes were fixed upon the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶³⁶ We read: “But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ ” Blessed is the man whose eyes are fixed on the Sovereign LORD! He will have faith to walk on water.

Faith also means, as this verse suggests, taking refuge. God does not expect us to deny the dangers or to act as if they do not exist. Faith confirms the danger, and it takes refuge in the only safe place that exists. Without a sense of danger there cannot be a sense of protection. David’s definition of faith is: “I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.”⁶³⁷

The NIV renders vs. 8 with: “Do not give me over to death.” The Hebrew word used is *‘arah* which means to be made bare or to empty, pour out, to demolish.” A Dutch version translates it with: “Do not pour out my life.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* concurs with this by giving the following explanation: “[Leave not my soul destitute]-Hebrew..., make not my soul bare; or, by an image from pouring out blood (in which is the life or soul), as the same Hebrew is used in Isa 53:12; 32:15, ‘Do not pour out my soul’ to destruction; cf. the same image 2 Sam 14:14. The Hebrew is used for emptying a vessel in Gen 24:20; 2 Chron 24:11. My soul is that of the people, whose life was bound up with that of their Anointed King, and that of David’s seed (Lam 4:20).” Isaiah uses this expression in connection with the death of the Messiah. He says: “Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.”⁶³⁸

In the context of this psalm, it means, undoubtedly, that the psalmist does not want to die physically at the hands of his enemies. Having confessed in the first stanza that the enemy was on the inside, it can also be seen as a prayer to remain alive spiritually.

In the previous psalm we saw already how sin boomerangs on the wicked.

⁶³⁶ See Matt. 14:28-31

⁶³⁷ Ps. 16:8

⁶³⁸ Isa. 53:12

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-TWO

A maskil of David. When he was in the cave. A prayer.

- 1 I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.**
- 2 I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble.**
- 3 When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who know my way. In the path where I walk men have hidden a snare for me.**
- 4 Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life.**
- 5 I cry to you, O LORD; I say, "You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living."**
- 6 Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me.**
- 7 Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.**

David composed this psalm, like Ps. 57, when he fled from King Saul and hid in the cave of Adullam. The story is recorded in the I Samuel.⁶³⁹ The psalm was, probably, written while David was still by himself, before his family came to him and a group of four hundred gathered around him.

In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, George Knight makes some very interesting observations. He says that Francis of Assisi quoted this psalm on his deathbed on October 3, 1226. Knight has also something important to say about the function of imprisonment in the Old Testament to which we will refer later on.

In the confinement of the cave, David was subject to strong changes of mood. God had just saved him from a precarious situation when he escaped death at the court of King Achish of Gad,⁶⁴⁰ to which we owe the beautiful 34th Psalm. Now, he finds himself safely between four walls and he cries out to God in his distress! He is "climbing the walls." It is often difficult to keep emotionally abreast of what God is doing for us. It is much easier to look back to experiences and then to praise God than to praise Him while we are in the midst of trouble and are in the process of digesting what goes on. This psalm is a good example of this.

David is safe in the cave but the closed-in space oppresses him. When outward pressure recedes, the inner turmoil begins to reveal itself. Only when we are inwardly free, it makes no longer any difference in what circumstances we find ourselves. If we compare David with the Apostle Paul, we see that David had more liberty in the cave of Adullam than Paul faced in the prison of Rome. Yet Paul wrote his epistles to the churches in Ephesus, Philippi, and Colosse, and also II Timothy and Philemon. David does not come beyond the point of "Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name." Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God in prison at midnight.⁶⁴¹ What counts is inner freedom. Joni Eareckson Tada, who is unable to move any muscle below her neck, testifies that she is free in her wheelchair.

We see a sharp contrast between David's cry for help and Jonah's in the belly of the fish. When God saved him from drowning by having him swallowed up by the fish Jonah said: "But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."⁶⁴²

The cave of Adullam protected David against Saul but he needed more to be protected from himself. David's faith faltered. God had given him the promise that he would be the king of Israel. Samuel had anointed him in the presence of his brothers.⁶⁴³ This promise ought to have been the basis for his confidence in God. This psalm demonstrates how far removed David was inwardly from becoming a king. God brought him into this solitude. David fled from Saul, now David tries to flee from David. He is more afraid of himself than of Saul although, in this poem, he does not admit this. He blames Saul for the snare on his path. He looks to the right where his advocate is supposed to be but he doesn't see the Paraclete. We can see in this psalm a prophecy of the absolute forsaken condition of our Lord Jesus Christ when He hung on the cross.

⁶³⁹ See I Sam. 22:1,2

⁶⁴⁰ See I Sam. 21:10-15

⁶⁴¹ Acts 16:25

⁶⁴² Jonah 2:9

⁶⁴³ See I Sam. 16:13

George Knight points out that imprisonment in the Old Testament only meant incarceration until the time of sentencing. Imprisonment was never a mode of punishment in itself. He quotes as examples Leviticus 24:12 – “They put him in custody until the will of the LORD should be made clear to them” and Numbers 15:34 – “and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him.” David’s experience, therefore, was not common but created bitterness. He feels jailed, but there is no verdict. He looks for an advocate who is supposed to be at his right side but there is nobody. The senselessness of the situation adds a feeling of oppression. The only way out is God. That is what makes this poem into a psalm.

David may not have come to the same inner liberty as did the Apostle Paul, but he chose the only possible way out. His loud cry is an indication of inner turmoil and how troubled he is. There is no need for us to swallow our complaints, even our self-pity. We do well to pour it all out before the Lord, even to vomit up our confusion.

Loneliness can be a terrible thing, not only, because it accentuates our own oppression, but also because God created us for fellowship with other men. “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’”⁶⁴⁴ This is true, not only as far as marriage is concerned. Our first love and deepest fellowship ought to be with God Himself. If human relationships usurp the place of our vital relationship with God, we are on the wrong track. But this does not mean that we can live alone.

The breakthrough in David’s complaint comes when he says: “You are my refuge.” He says this while still being inside the cave. He identifies the shelter in which he has taken refuge with his spiritual hiding place in YHWH. It is possible that every time he calls God “my rock,” he had the image of the cave before his eyes. David uses this expression more than twenty times in the Book of Psalms. For us, Jesus is the “Rock of Ages, cleft for me.”

We don’t know how soon David’s prayer was answered. But Scripture tells us that, afterwards, 400 men surrounded him.⁶⁴⁵ God does not want us to be lonely but sometimes we need to be alone. The late Queen Wilhemina of the Netherlands called her autobiography *Lonely but not Alone*.

⁶⁴⁴ Gen. 2:18

⁶⁴⁵ See I Sam. 22:2

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-THREE

A psalm of David.

- 1 O LORD, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief.*
2 Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you.
3 The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in darkness like those long dead.
4 So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed.
5 I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done.
6 I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.
Selah
7 Answer me quickly, O LORD; my spirit fails. Do not hide your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit.
8 Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.
9 Rescue me from my enemies, O LORD, for I hide myself in you.
10 Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.
11 For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life; in your righteousness, bring me out of trouble.
12 In your unfailing love, silence my enemies; destroy all my foes, for I am your servant.

This psalm is the spiritual companion of the previous one. They were, probably, both written under similar circumstances. In the preceding psalm, David felt oppressed in the cave of Adullam because his physical liberty was curtailed. Here he feels shackled by sin. The contrast is immediately clear because of David's appeal to God's faithfulness and righteousness, as qualities that are not found in himself.

Calling upon God's righteousness would be dangerous for us apart from the atonement in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are, in the eyes of God, identified with His righteousness. The Apostle John uses the terms "faithful and just" in the context of forgiveness of sin. We read: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."⁶⁴⁶ In David's experience, the use of those words also brings him to pray for pardon.

On the basis of the second verse, this psalm is considered to be one of the psalms of penance.⁶⁴⁷ "Do not bring your servant into judgment," would be senseless apart from atonement and pardon. With prophetic intuition, David knew who God was; otherwise he would never have been able to pray this prayer. Although he could not have understood the full significance of the matter, he reached out to Jesus' words: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."⁶⁴⁸

By saying: "No one living is righteous before you," David does not try to hide behind the sinfulness of the human race in general in order to diminish his own responsibility. He rather emphasizes the tragedy that the rotten condition he has discovered in himself is multiplied millions of times over the whole world.

It is our inner corruption that makes the pressure from outside upon us so unbearable. Jesus described hell as the place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."⁶⁴⁹ It is the worm of corruption inside us which makes us susceptible to the fire outside.

If, as in the previous psalm, David was still in the cave of Adullam, then the enemy would be, first of all, King Saul. It is clear, however, that more than Saul only oppresses David. The real enemy knew who David was and what God's plan was for the coming of the Messiah. Although Satan's understanding of this may not have been perfect, he understood that people who were important to God were important to him also. The Holy Spirit points prophetically to the experience David's Son would have when He entered the darkness of Gethsemane. Jesus' spirit grew faint within Him and His heart was dismayed in Him.

⁶⁴⁶ I John 1:9

⁶⁴⁷ The other Psalms of Penance are Ps. 32,38,51,102, and 130

⁶⁴⁸ John 5:24

⁶⁴⁹ See Mark 9:48

At moments like this, when the present is wrapped in darkness, it is good to “remember the days of long ago” and to recall the facts of the history of salvation and recollect what God has done in our lives. This denies the enemy entrance into your thought-life.

David must have suffered from a sense of guilt. We are not told what the reason for this was, but the confession of vs. 2 is clear enough. The enemy blows this sentiment out of proportion. “The days of long ago” are, probably, a reference to the beginning of Israel’s history, maybe even to the days of Abraham. Our faith rests on the fact that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”⁶⁵⁰ We can say, not only, that God will do for us what He did for Israel, but also, that the God who led Israel through the Red Sea is on our side. It is to Him that we spread out our hands.

David’s thirst for God is expressed in the same manner at other places in the Book of Psalms: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”⁶⁵¹ Jesus promises to quench this thirst for us. He said: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”⁶⁵²

God’s hiding His face in vs. 7 can also be seen as a prophecy about Jesus’ being forsaken by God on the cross. On the spiritual level it is impossible that God would hide from us. It is the sin within us that creates this kind of optical illusion. Adam hid from God when he sinned. It is our subjective observation that the sun rises and goes under. In reality it is our globe that comes up and goes down, or rather we who live on the globe do this. The only time God hid Himself from man was when Jesus hung on the cross. If we confess our sins, our optical illusion is immediately corrected. If God would real hide Himself from us, we would no longer be alive. A sense of being forsaken by God is a symptom of spiritual death. The enemy will whisper to us that God has abandoned us and he does this only to people who are spiritually alive.

The word “morning” in vs. 8 points, in the first place, to the time of day the sun rises. I write this early in the morning when it is still dark. These words have a special meaning for me. I pray that God will speak to me and He does. David wanted God to say to him at the moment he woke up: “I love you!” The experience Adam and Eve used to have “in the cool of the day” here takes place in the early morning. Stillness and fellowship with God in the early morning hours are the highlight of the day. There is nothing that stimulates our faith, that is our confidence in God, than to be able to say: “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”⁶⁵³

But “morning” is also a picture of the breaking through of God’s light in the darkness of this world. The night in which we live is not endless. We are on our way towards the light, as 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.”⁶⁵⁴ David lifts up his soul toward God and he asks for the way. In other words, he asks: “What should I do now?” “The way,” in this context, means more what David has to do than how he has to do it. The way in which he did it is already determined by the lifting up of the soul and by faith in God.

God did hear David’s prayer in vs. 9; He did deliver him from his enemies. Saul never succeeded in harming David. At the end of his life, David looked back upon this episode in his life in amazement and exuberant joy. This is expressed elsewhere in a magnificent way with: “I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.”⁶⁵⁵

For a child of God who sees himself placed against overwhelming odds, the wisest thing to do is to flee to God. God does not expect us to perform heroic acts, neither against men, nor against demonic powers. Our victory is in “the blood of the Lamb.” Revelation says: “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.”⁶⁵⁶

The prayer “Teach me to do your will” indicates that David saw a connection between protection and obedience. As in a marriage, submission and protection go together, so also in our fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit can make us obedient if we surrender ourselves to Him. He does not expect us to

⁶⁵⁰ Heb. 13:8

⁶⁵¹ Ps. 63:1

⁶⁵² John 7:37

⁶⁵³ Heb. 13:6

⁶⁵⁴ Prov. 4:18

⁶⁵⁵ Ps. 18:3

⁶⁵⁶ Rev. 12:11

produce obedience in our natural, rebellious state. Our only responsibility is to open the door for Him and to acknowledge Him as Lord of our life.

The psalm also shows us how our relationship with God determines our relationship with men, both with those we love and those who hate us. The prayer to be led “on level ground” sounds like a strange request for someone who is in a cave. The grotto in the mountains was an essential part of David’s safety. The phrase has, probably, a symbolic meaning. In vs. 11 David appeals to the Name of the LORD, that is the Name YHWH for his salvation. God had revealed Himself to Moses by that Name. It is the Name of His covenant with Israel. David appeals to this covenant that God had concluded with the nation and with him personally. As a woman who, rightfully, appeals to her husband for protection, so we have a right to God’s protection. God’s entire being is involved in this; His Name means Savior. The Name Jesus means “YHWH saves!” There needs to be no doubt whether God will deliver us to our enemies or not. Deliverance from oppression is as much an act of justice as forgiveness. David says more than he understood himself. He knew nothing of the victory of the cross. The blood of a sacrificial animal was merely a shadow of the reality. He saw that Saul could not harm him and, shortly after this prayer, his loneliness was ended by the coming of four hundred men. But he never knew why this happened to him. Yet, his use of the words “righteousness” and “unfailing love” or “mercy” is correct. David’s side of the covenant is expressed in the words “for I am your servant.” Our obedience sets God’s promises in motion.

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-FOUR
Of David.

- 1 Praise be to the LORD my Rock, who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle.*
- 2 He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me.*
- 3 O LORD, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him?*
- 4 Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow.*
- 5 Part your heavens, O LORD, and come down; touch the mountains, so that they smoke.*
- 6 Send forth lightning and scatter [the enemies]; shoot your arrows and rout them.*
- 7 Reach down your hand from on high; deliver me and rescue me from the mighty waters, from the hands of foreigners*
- 8 whose mouths are full of lies, whose right hands are deceitful.*
- 9 I will sing a new song to you, O God; on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you,*
- 10 to the One who gives victory to kings, who delivers his servant David from the deadly sword.*
- 11 Deliver me and rescue me from the hands of foreigners whose mouths are full of lies, whose right hands are deceitful.*
- 12 Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants, and our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace.*
- 13 Our barns will be filled with every kind of provision. Our sheep will increase by thousands, by tens of thousands in our fields;*
- 14 our oxen will draw heavy loads. There will be no breaching of walls, no going into captivity, no cry of distress in our streets.*
- 15 Blessed are the people of whom this is true; blessed are the people whose God is the LORD.*

This is a strange psalm. It is difficult to determine at what occasion it may have been written. We can hear sound of the cave in it, although less clearly than in the preceding psalm. It seems as if David looks back, after many years, and relives from a distance what he experienced before. Based on the fourth stanza, one translation carries the subtitle "Prayer for prosperity."

We suggest the following outline:

- I. A Prayer for Protection (verses 1,2)
- II. A Prayer for Deliverance (verses 3-8)
- III. A Prayer for Victory (verses 9-11)
- IV. A Prayer for Peace (verses 12-15)

I. Prayer for Protection (verses 1,2)

The first two verses may very well fit in the setting of the cave of Adullam. David is here, however, farther than in Psalm 142. He has come to the point where he sees the protection of the cave as a physical expression of a spiritual reality. He identifies the rock with God Himself. We find much of what is said in these two verses in Psalm 18 which David wrote at the end of his life.⁶⁵⁷

David uses six different names to describe God, all of which are an expression of the safety he experiences.

"My Rock" speaks of the spiritual protection David felt.

"My loving God" is a surprising expression. The Hebrew word *chadīy* is a form of *chesed*. The J.B. translates the word with "my love." The Interlinear Hebrew Bible renders it with "my goodness." As far as I know, this is the only time where God is thus addressed in the Bible. The primary meaning is, of course, that David considers himself to be the recipient of God's lovingkindness. The use of the personal pronoun "my" suggests, however, a transfer of this divine attribute upon David himself. This implies that David does not find any lovingkindness in himself.

"My fortress" is parallel to "my Rock." It emphasized the strategic importance of spiritual fellowship in the battle in which David finds himself involved. After all, this psalm is set against the background of a battle. We have to interpret all the names David uses for God against this background. This gives to the word "lovingkindness" a deeper meaning. It suggest that the war is waged against hatred

⁶⁵⁷ See Ps. 18:2,34,43,44

and malice. David saw in the wars he fought a model of the spiritual battle in which he is involved, just as he used the cave as a symbol for God's protection.

If there is any difference in the words "rock" and "stronghold," it is, probably in the strength.

"My deliverer" is the Old Testament word for the Greek word *soter*, "redeemer." At another place, David declared: "I am saved from my enemies."⁶⁵⁸ This would be the primary meaning here also. But the perspective is wider. Behind Saul stood the enemy of David's soul. God does not merely deliver us from the power of men but from the power of darkness itself.

"My shield" speaks of God's protection. We find the image used many times in the Book of Psalms. God protects us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The flaming arrows of the evil one are extinguished on the shield of faith of which the Apostle Paul speaks in Ephesians.⁶⁵⁹ Paul declares there that our faith plays an active role in our protection.

"Who subdues peoples under me." Our position in Jesus Christ elevates us above other human beings and makes us into kings. David never got used to the fact that people were subjugated to him. He realized that the source of this authority was not in himself. Power can be dangerous. If we don't understand that authority is always delegated, it can be our downfall. In David's life, we see two sides of his concept of power. The amazement that is expressed in vs. 2 is also found in Psalm 18.⁶⁶⁰ This shows a healthy vision on power. His adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah show the other side of the coin. What Jesus said about authority over evil spirits pertains to all human authority. We read: "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."⁶⁶¹ If we lose sight of the essential fact of our salvation which is registered in heaven, earthly authority is of no avail to us.

This thought forms the transition to the following stanza which deals with deliverance. The question "What is man that you care for him?" is found three times in the Bible; every time with a different emphasis. Job asks the question in connection with his suffering: "What is man that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention?"⁶⁶² David asks it in Psalm 8: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"⁶⁶³ in amazement that God placed man on the same rank with angels. Here, the question is put in the context of human sin. The question reflects that fact that man does not really know who he is and that he has little notion of his place in God's plan of creation.

In this psalm, David realizes how vulnerable he is in a hostile world. But his appeal to God for His intervention proves that he does not consider the situation to be normal. To his friend Jonathan, he had said: "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death."⁶⁶⁴ We seldom realize that this is always true for every human being. I had a friend who was killed in a motorcycle accident. When he mounted his motorbike, he did not know that he would stand before the Lord only a few minutes later. I almost lost my life in a few minutes when a robber stabbed me. We are so vulnerable! If the almighty God would not move heaven and earth in order to deliver us, we would be crushed to death hundreds of times each day.

The amazing thing is that David does expect God to "part your heavens... and come down,...[to] touch the mountains, so that they smoke, [and to] send forth lightning" in his behalf. He understood that much of the character of God to know that God would do all this to save him. In his testimony at the end of his life, he declares that God had, in fact, done that.⁶⁶⁵ It is likely that David expresses himself poetically and that no topographical volcanoes were involved but this does, in no way, diminish the supernatural aspect of the deliverance. Sometimes God does involve nature, as is evident from the standing still of the sun in answer to Joshua's prayer.⁶⁶⁶ We should not limit God because "the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him."⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁵⁸ Ps. 18:3

⁶⁵⁹ See Eph. 6:16

⁶⁶⁰ See Ps. 18:43-45

⁶⁶¹ Luke 10:20

⁶⁶² Job 7:17

⁶⁶³ Ps. 8:4

⁶⁶⁴ I Sam. 20:3

⁶⁶⁵ See Ps. 18:6-19

⁶⁶⁶ See Josh. 10:12-14

⁶⁶⁷ II Chr. 16:9

David calls his enemies “foreigners,” liars, and deceivers. Those names do not all apply to King Saul but they can be applied to one whom Jesus called “a murderer from the beginning,” and “the father of lies.”⁶⁶⁸ In the short stanza of the verses 9-11, David uses the same expressions to characterize the enemy. The keyword here is “victory.” God is “the One who gives victory to kings.” How one becomes a king we read in the doxology of Revelation: “To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”⁶⁶⁹ The basis is the love of God and the means is the blood of Jesus in which we have been washed of our sins.

It is this realization that makes David grab the lyre and compose a new song. This new song comes to us in Psalm 149. The new song is the song of resurrection from the dead. It means that, in Paul’s words, “the old has gone, the new has come!”⁶⁷⁰ The term “a new song” is found frequently in the Book of Psalms.⁶⁷¹ For David, the singing of this song was an act of faith, not of seeing. He had not yet experienced the deliverance from “the deadly sword.” But he had learned to know God as “the One who gives victory to kings.” This was enough for him to join his voice in the song of resurrection.

The fourth stanza (verses 12-15) expresses the peace that is the result of this deliverance. The scene is painted on a large screen depicting a happy family in a land of affluence and in a well-protected city. In typical Old Testament fashion a picture of material abundance is used to describe spiritual blessing. David no longer mentions his own needs. He has the whole kingdom in view. He realizes that God’s blessing of a nation consists in the blessing of the family. The boys are “guys like trees” and the girls are pictures of beauty carved in marble. There is no place for sin in this picture. We know however, that riches and abundance usually provide poor soil for the growth of spiritual fellowship. We ought, therefore, to remember that we are looking at an image. Our true riches is based upon the poverty of Christ. As the Apostle Paul says: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”⁶⁷²

God’s plan in the Old Testament was to take a nation and make them into a model of happiness and prosperity for other nations to see the result of the fact that “blessed are the people whose God is the LORD.” This would be a demonstration in pictures and in a language that others could understand. This would have expressed the priesthood to which God had called the people of Israel.

⁶⁶⁸ See John 8:44

⁶⁶⁹ Rev. 1:5^b,6 (NKJV)

⁶⁷⁰ II Cor. 5:17^b

⁶⁷¹ See Ps. 33:3;96:1;98:1;149:1

⁶⁷² II Cor. 8:9

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-FIVE

A psalm of praise. Of David.

- 1 I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever.**
- 2 Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever.**
- 3 Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.**
- 4 One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts.**
- 5 They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works.**
- 6 They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds.**
- 7 They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness.**
- 8 The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.**
- 9 The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.**
- 10 All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you.**
- 11 They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might,**
- 12 so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.**
- 13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.**
- 14 The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.**
- 15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time.**
- 16 You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.**
- 17 The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made.**
- 18 The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.**
- 19 He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.**
- 20 The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.**
- 21 My mouth will speak in praise of the LORD. Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever.**

This psalm is the last one in the book that bears the name of David. It is also the last acrostic psalm, using the 22 letter of the Hebrew alphabet as the beginning of every verse. In some translations the letter “nun” is missing. The missing verse existed in older manuscripts and it was rediscovered in the Qumram parchments, the Dead Sea scrolls that were found in 1947. It is not found in the KJV. The RSV inserts it as vs. 13^b, “The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.” The words, obviously, belong to the stanza that begins with vs. 14.

The psalm is a great song of praise. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes that most of the words David uses to describe the acts of God refer to redemption. One of the outstanding features of the psalm is the illusion of space David creates in calling upon the next generation to join into an antiphonal chorus. This makes this psalm into a three-dimensional poem. Thus form gives expression to content and we get the impression of standing between the centuries, as if we find ourselves already in eternity. David calls and the answer echoes back from a generation not yet born. The effect is very impressive.

Already in the second verse, David rises above the boundaries of his own life on earth. When he says: “Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever,” he reaches out beyond himself and he places one foot in eternity.

The Hebrew word, translated with “exalt” is *ruwm* which means “to raise.” It suggests that man can make God great. It is the same word Isaiah used when he said: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, *high* and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.”⁶⁷³ Objectively, man cannot add to or subtract from God’s greatness. In that sense, David cannot make God greater than He is. Acknowledgment of God’s greatness by man makes man greater. If we glorify God, His image in us becomes more clearly visible. Worship transforms us.

Yet, however strange and impossible this may sound, man’s praise does add something to the being of God. When God created man and placed him on this planet, He planted a seed. Our praise and worship are the fruit of the growing and flourishing of that seed. We will probably never fully understand how the eternal God reveals Himself in time and space. When we exalt God, we do nothing more than acknowledge reality. This in itself means deliverance from the ban of the lie. Sin distorts reality. Seeing

⁶⁷³ Isa. 6:1

God “high and exalted” proves that our eyes have been opened. It is an indication of forgiveness of sin. This opens also the gates of praise for us.

David does not analyze redemption in these verses, but redemption forms the background of all that is said. It is the content of God’s “awesome works” and “great deeds.” Acknowledgment of God and His redemption also breaks through the bonds of death. As we saw above, David praises God “for ever and ever.” This means that death is no longer the end of man’s existence. David may not have known about the resurrection in Jesus Christ, as we do, but he understood the essence of it. Praising God’s Name stands for the knowledge of His being. This will occupy us throughout eternity. While on earth, we can do no more than begin to make a feeble effort. Every generation has to rediscover these truths. David believes that the miracle will be repeated.

In vs. 3, David says that God’s greatness is fathomless. It takes intelligence to come to this conclusion. David demonstrates the greatness of his own intellect in the acknowledgment of his limitations and of the fact that God’s greatness infinitely surpasses his understanding. Not only a greater intellect than his own is needed for a greater understanding but also more than one generation of intellects. The sum of all spiritual experiences man has ever made, beginning with Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham till the end of world history only forms a small beginning of man’s knowledge of God. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: [We may have] “the power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”⁶⁷⁴ The thought makes me dizzy!

The accent of God’s greatness falls upon His works: His mighty acts and wonderful works. No specific facts are mentioned but every Israelite who heard these words must have thought of the exodus, what preceded it, and what followed. We think immediately of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As far as the Old Testament facts of salvation are concerned, it appears that people soon forgot what happened 25 years earlier. The theme of the Book of Judges is: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”⁶⁷⁵ Some parts of the history described there occurred when Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron was the high priest.⁶⁷⁶ The lesson of history is that people do not learn the lesson of history. Only when, from generation to generation, the Holy Spirit calls people out of death and makes them a new creation will the song of praise echo back over the centuries. David recreates this miracle in such a marvelous word-picture.

This prophecy (it is indeed a prophecy) not only speaks of praise but also of a testimony. God’s works do not need to be proclaimed before God as if He needs to be reminded of them. But our generation needs to know that there is a God in heaven who performs miracles on earth and who demonstrates righteousness. It is important that men in every generation get to know God and know, by personal experience, what He does.

This same theme is sung also in the second stanza but the accent is different. The first stanza uses words like “greatness,” and “glorious splendor.” The second stanza sets the tone with words like “gracious,” “rich in love,” and “compassionate.” This makes man’s weakness and sinfulness stand out clearer than in the first stanza. This brings us closer to the essence of redemption, that is redemption from sin.

In *The Tyndale Commentary*, Derek Kidner observes that vs. 8 is almost a literal quote from the record of God’s revelation of Himself to Moses in Exodus. We read that the Lord proclaimed: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” Kidner also demonstrates that this verse is one of the most quoted ones in the Old Testament.⁶⁷⁷

David also brings out the unity of all creation in the phrase: “The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.” When man lost his crown by falling in sin, all of creation fell with him. This is the reason all of creation shares in the restoration. Both the Apostle Paul and the prophet Isaiah make this clear. Isaiah says: “The 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. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the

⁶⁷⁴ Eph. 3:18,19

⁶⁷⁵ Judg. 21:25

⁶⁷⁶ See Judges 20:28

⁶⁷⁷ See Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2

sea.”⁶⁷⁸ And Paul writes: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”⁶⁷⁹ God’s goodness and compassion reaches out to all of creation. This is also why all of creation will participate in God’s praise. As Isaiah says: “The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”⁶⁸⁰ We conclude from this that the part of creation that is not endued with intelligence will praise God. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle wrote a beautiful poem about a little water bug that “writes” on the water. He asks the bug what he writes about, and the bug answers: “We write only one lesson. And can you not read it? We write, rewrite, and write again the holy Name of God.”⁶⁸¹ But the greater the intelligence, the loftier the praise! The four living creatures in Revelation never stop saying day and night: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.”⁶⁸² The multitude of their eyes with which they are covered represents their multidimensional comprehension and superior intelligence.

In the last three verses of this stanza, the word “kingdom” is used four times. Evidently, this is the topic of these verses. The New Testament elaborates further on the meaning of God’s kingdom. David only says that God’s kingdom is splendid and everlasting. In the annunciation to Mary, the angel says: “The Lord God will give him [Jesus] the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”⁶⁸³ The Apostle Paul develops the topic further when he says that Jesus will hand over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. “For (he says) he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he ‘has put everything under his feet.’ Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 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.”⁶⁸⁴ This kingdom is also sung about in Revelation.⁶⁸⁵ We conclude from this that the splendor of the kingdom pertains to the incarnation, as well as to the resurrection and to the end when He who sits on the throne will make all things new.

Then follows the verse that is missing in the older translations: “The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.” It seems to be a variation on the theme of vs. 9 – “The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.” This makes the transition to the last stanza less abrupt.

This last stanza depicts the intimate relationship between God and His creation in a way that is unparalleled in the Book of Psalms. We hear the same tender tone in Jesus’ words about the Father’s compassion about the man’s lot: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”⁶⁸⁶ God’s loving attitude demonstrates itself in that “The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.”

Sometimes, God’s compassion is not visible to the naked eye. In his book *Night*, Eli Wiesel tells how, in a Nazi concentration camp, a young boy was tortured to death while the inmates were forced to watch. Wiesel asked himself the question “Where is God in all this?” The author concluded that God Himself hung on those gallows. He said more than he himself understood. What he meant was that, as far as he was concerned, God was dead. We know that, since Jesus died for us on the cross, He dies, in a way, with everyone who is tortured. God’s upholding of all those who fall and His lifting up of all who are bowed down is not merely a gracious act of a monarch to his miserable subjects. In Jesus Christ, God emptied Himself, and humbled Himself, and became like us. God does not work from above but from

⁶⁷⁸ Isa. 11:6-9

⁶⁷⁹ Rom. 8:19-23

⁶⁸⁰ Isa. 11:9

⁶⁸¹ Guido Gezelle, “Het Schrijverke.”

⁶⁸² Rev. 4:7^b,8

⁶⁸³ Luke 1:32^b,33

⁶⁸⁴ I Cor. 15:24-28

⁶⁸⁵ See Rev. 12:10; 15:3,4; 19:6-8,16

⁶⁸⁶ Matt. 10:29,30

below. Jesus illustrates this in His healing of the woman who was bent over and could not straighten herself.⁶⁸⁷ He upholds us and lifts us up in that “He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”⁶⁸⁸

Every time we feed our pets, we act out by way of a weak shadow what God does universally and on a much higher plane. My pets recognized me as their master because I fed them every day at the same time. (Presently, I do not have any pets). The picture shows us what reality ought to be like. Often animal come closer to this reality than humans. Jesus had this image in mind when He spoke those moving words about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field in His Sermon on the Mount.⁶⁸⁹ We only approach this reality if we first seek God’s kingdom and His righteousness. In a movie entitled *Shenandoah Valley*, the actor Jimmy Stewart says a prayer before the meal in which he reminds God of the fact that the food that is on the table is more the result of his hard labor than of God’s blessing. In saying this, he translates the general feeling of modern man quite correctly. Elsewhere in the Book of Psalms, however, this matter is put in its right perspective with the addition: “When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust.”⁶⁹⁰

Vs. 16 goes one step beyond the physical feeding that provides satisfaction. When God opens His hand, He satisfies with more than only food. The Hebrew Interlinear Bible says literally: “Thou openest Thine hand and satisfiest the desire of every living thing.” The Hebrew word rendered with “desire” is *ratsown* which means “delight.” The act of eating is, of course, a natural function which provide satisfaction and joy, like the fulfillment of all the functions for which God created our bodies. But “delight” seems to suggest more than mere physical satisfaction. The man’s deepest hunger is not physical but spiritual. “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”⁶⁹¹ Our Lord Jesus Christ confirmed Moses’ words during His temptation in the desert. When God opens His hand, He satisfies our deepest longings. Man has, especially in this, the advantage that he can hear and understand the Word of God. The remainder of this psalm explains this truth.

Vs. 17 makes a distinction between God’s ways and His works. This distinction is more clearly expressed in the rendering of the NKJV: “The LORD is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works.” The NIV reads: “The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward all he has made.” The difference between God’s ways and His works is the distinction between what He does and the way in which He does it. It is rather easy to become ecstatic about God’s works. Creation and our redemption provide us with enough reason to become rapturous. But we rarely come to the point where we acknowledge that the way in which God reaches His goal is the only right one. Our lack of understanding is the main reason for this. We not only do not have all the facts at our disposal, but our comprehension is also totally insufficient. This last factor can, however, also be a contact point. In his Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul is driven to worship by the fact that God’s ways are unsearchable. We read: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”⁶⁹² The main point in the Epistle to the Romans is that God sees all of humanity as one person, represented by one individual. God deals with mankind as one person. He punishes all men in Adam and in Jesus Christ. In this manner, all can be justified before Him in Jesus Christ. All God’s ways are derived from this one way and they all lead back to it.

The psalmist’s observation in vs. 18 that God is near pertains more to man’s experience than to the divine attribute of His omnipresence. It is, of course, true that the subjective observation would have no basis if God’s omnipresence were not an objective fact. What the psalmist wants to say is that the person who calls upon God in truth becomes conscious of God’s presence.

In some instances, God’s nearness is experienced as a physical reality, as was the case with Abraham and Jacob,⁶⁹³ and for Moses and Isaiah. But this kind of experience does not seem to be meant in this psalm. The psalmist speaks of the spiritual perception that begins with calling on the Lord. We could even call this a psychological phenomenon without taking away anything from the reality of it. This does

⁶⁸⁷ See Luke 13:10-17

⁶⁸⁸ Isa. 53:4

⁶⁸⁹ See Matt. 6:25-34

⁶⁹⁰ Ps. 104:29

⁶⁹¹ See Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4

⁶⁹² Rom 11:33-36

⁶⁹³ See Gen. chapters 18,28,32

not place this verse in the realm of an “upper story” experience, in the way the existentialists refer to spiritual things. It remains true though that, for David, these words must have had another meaning than they do for modern man. He must have had more direct contact with the spirit world than we do. David did not yet have the benefit of the canon of the Scriptures.

First of all, it is usually quite a discovery for us, modern people, that calling on God is an option that is open to us. We have to get used to the fact that we can, in reality, speak to God and receive an answer. A dialogue is possible.

The second condition is truth. By accepting the lie, as Adam and Eve did, God’s presence becomes a frightening experience and after that it tends to become more and more vague. The realization of God’s presence comes back again only when the lie is broken in our lives by means of a confession of sin. Truth always begins with a confession. Life in fellowship with God in Jesus Christ is the only way we can live spiritually, both on earth and in heaven. This is the basis of all that follows in this psalm.

In a revolutionary manner, David reaches forward to the time when God’s presence in the temple would no longer be of any importance. He says here prophetically what Jesus would explain later in so many words to the Samaritan woman. Jesus said: “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”⁶⁹⁴ The coming of the Holy Spirit has made this a reality for us. In the new birth, our spirit is raised from the dead so that we can worship the Father with our spirit and in truth. David must have sensed this truth, but he cannot have understood the full meaning of it.

God’s presence does not eliminate the dangers that surround us. The cry for help continues also in this psalm. But His presence guarantees our salvation and our safe-keeping. But when David says: “He fulfills the desires of those who fear him” he suggests that more is involved than salvation only. The fulfillment of our desires involves the realization of our dreams. If we live in fellowship with God, He will satisfy us to the full. Elsewhere, David calls God the one “who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”⁶⁹⁵

Calling on God in truth goes together and grows together with loving God. Jesus calls this “the first and greatest commandment.” He says: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”⁶⁹⁶ Not only the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments but our whole existence also.

Just as God’s watching over or keeping of all who love Him does not mean that we will not be exposed to suffering, sorrow, or stress, so the destruction of the wicked does not mean that they will cease to exist. Both the righteous and the godless will enter eternity. Cessation of existence is a concept that is tied to time and space. Eternity has other dimensions. The fact that we cannot imagine this does, in no way, diminish the reality of it. God’s keeping has a deeper meaning than exemption from suffering. God keeps that for us and in us which will be of fundamental significance in eternity. At the end of our life on earth, it will become clear that that which is essential for life in fellowship with God has suffered no damage.

In the praise of the last verse, David establishes a connection between himself and all other creatures, and between the time in which he lived and eternity. All of creation simply praises God in being what it is. Only man has the special gift to put the fact of his existence in words. A flower praises God by being a flower. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle proved his superiority as a human being by saying about the flower: “You stand in the sunlight and all you do is being flower.”

⁶⁹⁴ John 4:23,24

⁶⁹⁵ Ps. 103:5

⁶⁹⁶ Matt. 22:37-40

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-SIX

- 1 Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD, O my soul.**
- 2 I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.**
- 3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save.**
- 4 When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.**
- 5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,**
- 6 the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them-- the LORD, who remains faithful forever.**
- 7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free,**
- 8 the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous.**
- 9 The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.**
- 10 The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD.**

This psalm is the first in a series of “Hallelujah Psalms” that concludes the Book of Psalms. In every one of these psalms, the accent of praise is different. The praise of this psalm confines itself to life on earth. In Psalm 147, YHWH is praised for His help; in Psalm 148 the rejoicing takes on a cosmic character; in Psalm 149 the church does the singing and the doxology of Psalm 150 is for “everything that has breath.”

In this psalm, the psalmist draws specifically the boundaries of his life on earth and he makes his song of praise rise from those limitations. This does not mean that he would not believe in the resurrection from the dead. But in putting the accent on life on earth, he demonstrates that God is the God of the “now and here.”

The Hebrew word *hallelujah* is plural. It places the “Praise the LORD, O my soul” the psalmist exhorts himself to praise God. The phrase is identical with the one used in Psalm 103.

As we saw earlier, praise never comes spontaneously to man. Sin has blurred man’s realization of the reason for his existence. We have to arouse ourselves from our lethargy in order to become what we ought to be. This brings us to the conclusion that praise always begins with an act of the will. The Jerusalem Bible renders vs. 2 with: “I mean to praise Jehovah.”

Praise is, secondly, an expression of trust. The context of this psalm confirms this. The lack of trust in princes supposes trust in God. It is important to keep in mind the limits the psalmist has set himself in this psalm. The topic is life on earth, or rather, staying alive on earth. The poet may have been concerned about the matter of making ends meet. There is also a note of disappointment in the advice not to trust people who are in authority. Evidently, the author tried it and experienced disappointments. The tendency to make friends with people of influence and to manipulate connections is widespread. We say: “It is not what you know but who you know!” Our problem is that we do not reach high enough. The person we trust as if he is almighty turns out to be an unreliable mortal.

The Hebrew has an interesting play on words between “man” and “earth.” The word for “man” is *'adam* and for “earth” *'adamah*. The reference here is to Genesis chapter 3, where God said to Adam: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”⁶⁹⁷

From the verses 6 and 7 we conclude that the poet supposed that his friend at the top would be faithful to him, provide justice, and still his hunger but this proves not to be the case. The “return to the earth” implies that the psalmist speaks about people in whose life the image of God was lost.

Not all authority is corrupt; there are some exceptions. The Netherlands owes its existence, and several centuries of freedom, and prosperity to the fact that William of Orange (the “father of the country”) had made a covenant with “the Potentate of all potentates.” But we can even be disappointed when we put our trust in people who trust God.

“Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob” is the last beatitude in the Book of Psalms. We repeat that the setting is life on earth in which man is faced with the struggle of survival. There is some irony in the title “the God of Jacob.” Jacob was not the hero of faith Abraham was. Jacob tried to keep his head above the water by deceit. He tried to make deals with God and he wanted to give God a hand in

⁶⁹⁷ Gen. 3:19

receiving the blessing of the firstborn. I suppose God smiles when He calls Himself “the God of Jacob.” When we call for help to “the God of Jacob,” we put ourselves on Jacob’s level and we confess our lack of confidence in God and our moral weakness. God is the God of those who worry! But if we go to Him for help, He immediately becomes “the God of Israel.” Because, as soon as we confess our weaknesses to Him, He declares us to be victors. Our deliverance consists in the fact that we confess our deception and that God helps us to become victorious over ourselves. This is the first kind of help and the most fundamental kind that God gives us. Our reaction to the discovery of who God is and who we are ourselves may be the same as that of Peter. We read in Luke’s Gospel: “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’”⁶⁹⁸

For our life on earth, it makes a tremendous difference if we acknowledge that God is our creator or not, and whether we understand that God is faithful toward His creation or not. Our God is not the God of the Deists who believe that after God created the universe He went home like a watchmaker who gives up the watch he sells.

We ought also to understand that the world in which we live is not like the world that God created. Man’s fall into sin has made our planet into a place of hunger and oppression. The verses 7-9 indicate that God stands on the side of life and righteousness. Our problem consists in the fact that we cannot always see that oppression and hunger cease. From the very beginning when sin entered, there has been hunger and terror in this world. The Bible tells us that this will be the case until the revelation of the Antichrist. Jesus warned His disciples: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”⁶⁹⁹

God’s help is not a short-term aid. There are occasions and individual cases in which God gives parts of His great plan of salvation in advance. God’s upholding the cause of the oppressed, His giving food to the hungry, and setting prisoners free, His giving sight to the blind, and lifting up those who are bowed down, is all accomplished in Jesus Christ. This is obvious from Jesus’ sermon on a text from Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth.⁷⁰⁰ From this sermon, we understand that although deliverance does occur during this life on earth, it is not geared to this life. Although there are incidents of deliverance from oppression on earth, the actual deliverance is eternal. Not all physical hunger on earth is stilled but in heaven we will never hunger or thirst again. It is also true that we can in faith appeal to God’s promises and that this often results in an avalanche of redemption and fulfillment. We often do not receive the help we want because we do not expect God to give it. “Blessed is he... whose hope is in the LORD his God!”

Redemption is also related to our justification. Vs. 8 reads: “The LORD loves the righteous.” This does not merely pertain to God’s feeling toward us but to the actual help He gives those who obey Him.

We need to take a closer look at the list the psalmist gives us. Prisons were not Israelite institutions. According to George Knight in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, people were only incarcerated in preparation for capital punishment. All other criminals had to pay fines. The mention of prisoners supposes an invasion by foreign powers or foreign influence in the life of Israel. The taking of Israel into Babylonian captivity is an example in case. Another form of imprisonment is demonic possession.

Blindness also has the double meaning of a physical handicap and a lack of spiritual discernment. In the lifting up of those who are bowed down, we see a picture of the restoration of human dignity. When Jesus healed the woman who was bent over and could not straighten herself, He said: “Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”⁷⁰¹

The fact that the righteous are mentioned in this context also suggests that not only physical suffering is meant. Sickness is placed in the framework of sin and unrighteousness. The alien, the fatherless, and the widow belong in the category of social injustice. At the same time, the words “fatherless” and “widow” evoke the shadow of death. The redemption in Jesus Christ penetrates to the roots of those needs in the forgiveness of sin and the resurrection of the dead.

There was in Israel a place for aliens. God had reminded His people of the fact that they were aliens in Egypt. We read admonitions in the Pentateuch like: “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.”⁷⁰² And: “When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens

⁶⁹⁸ Luke 5:8

⁶⁹⁹ John 16:33

⁷⁰⁰ See Isa. 61:1,2; Luke 4:16-22

⁷⁰¹ Luke 13:16

⁷⁰² Ex. 22:21

in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”⁷⁰³ The New Testament tells us that, in as much as we believe in Jesus Christ, we are all aliens in this world. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “As long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.”⁷⁰⁴ And “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰⁵ And Peter warns us with the words: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.”⁷⁰⁶

Just as the mention of the righteous emphasizes the spiritual aspect of salvation, so the mention of the wicked stresses the fact that redemption is exclusively for the children of the kingdom. The godless, those who deny the goodness of God’s character, do not partake of His grace. Not all modern atheists fall under this category. There are people who sincerely doubt the existence of God but who hold on to the moral standards that are derived from the character of God. We live in a world of confusion in which the propaganda of the enemy is often so loud that the voice of truth can often not be heard. How God will deal with the honest atheists, I do not know. It is clear, however, what will be the fate of the perverts and the sadists.

The NIV reads in vs. 9 that God “frustrates the ways of the wicked.” The Hebrew uses the word *avath* which can be translated with “to wrest.” The KJV renders it sometimes with “to make crooked.” It seems redundant for God to make a way crooked that is already twisted. Man causes the own hardening of his heart and God, sometimes, confirms what man has done already. This was the case of Pharaoh. We read in Exodus four times “Pharaoh hardened his heart,”⁷⁰⁷ before we read: “But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”⁷⁰⁸ When God frustrates man’s ways it means that man never reaches the goal he had set for himself.

This psalm that was written within the framework of life on earth break through in the last verse. “The LORD reigns forever” stresses both His kingship as well as His eternity. It is what the angel Gabriel announced to Mary: “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”⁷⁰⁹ These last words are addressed to this little spot on earth where David had built his house and where he fellowshiped with God. This made Zion a symbol of God’s total revelation on earth, the spot where the spotlight of heaven focussed on the earth.

Zion is addressed as a person; it becomes the people who live at the place where God reveals Himself and where they have fellowship with Him. The miracle of eternity that breaks through the boundaries of time and space repeats itself in every generation. Time and again, human beings, born on this planet, discover that they are found and saved by God. In that respect, time becomes an expression of eternity. There are, in the words of A. B. Simpson, *Days of Heaven on Earth*. Hallelujah!

⁷⁰³ Lev. 19:33,34

⁷⁰⁴ II Cor. 5:6

⁷⁰⁵ Phil. 3:20

⁷⁰⁶ I Peter 2:11

⁷⁰⁷ See Ex. 8:15,19,32; 9:7

⁷⁰⁸ Ex. 9:12

⁷⁰⁹ Luke 1:33

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-EIGHT

- 1 Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.*
- 2 Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts.*
- 3 Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.*
- 4 Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.*
- 5 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.*
- 6 He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away.*
- 7 Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,*
- 8 lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding,*
- 9 you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,*
- 10 wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds,*
- 11 kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth,*
- 12 young men and maidens, old men and children.*
- 13 Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.*
- 14 He has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his saints, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the LORD.*

This psalm speaks as much about God as about His creation, about the stars and about us. Sin does not cast its shadow over this psalm. It fits in the dispensation in which we live in which Jesus, “after he had provided purification for sins, ... sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”⁷¹⁰ This psalm follows the same design as the Incarnation of the Son of God, beginning in the highest heaven, coming down to earth, and lifting man up.

The Septuagint adds the names of Haggai and Zechariah to the title of this psalm as well as to the two preceding ones.

Our impression that this psalm moves from above to below is, of course, purely subjective. The call for praise comes from the earth and is directed to the highest heavens. This is an indication of the unique position of man. On the basis of what God has done for man, nothing is so fitted to call for praise as man is.

The two stanzas of this psalm follow the same outline. First, the place where God ought to be praised is determined. In vs. 1 it is the heavens and in vs. 7, the earth. Then it is indicated who should praise God. In verses 2-4 it is the angels, the celestial bodies, and “the waters above the sky.” In verses 7-12, it is the sea creatures, the elements of natures, the animal world and man. The lines in both stanzas go in opposite directions. The first line begins with intelligent creatures and ends in the water. The second stanza begins in the water and ends with man. There is no reason to believe that celestial bodies are endowed with intelligence but, of course, the mere expansion of space prevents us from knowing anything about this.

We could be baffled by the presumptuous and holy arrogance of man who, with a piping little voice, addresses heaven with a call to praise God. If a tiny ant addressed a similar call to mankind, it would have the same effect. Added to this, God has already been praised for eons in heaven more than anywhere else. Yet the very fact that this psalm is included in the written Word of God proves that the call is not futile and that it has been heard. When our voice speaks through the microphone of God’s glory, it is heard throughout the universe.

I once saw a TV show of a Dr. Seuss story in which a creature on earth heard a very soft voice that was calling. When he began to pay attention to the voice, he discovered a whole microcosm that was just as complete as the universe in which he lived. The story ends with a creature of this miniature microcosm who, in turn, hears a similar voice from yet another creation contained in his. This story depicts our position in God’s creation quite well. To the inhabitants of the heavens we must be like creatures living in a microcosm. We are like Gullivers in Lilliput in Jonathan Swift’s book *Gulliver’s Travels*. But this does not change the truth of our calling. It makes no difference to us whether the heavenly beings praise God uninterruptedly or not. We have discovered how vitally important this praise is and we want all of creation to join in. This makes the cosmic hymn of praise our example to follow.

So far, we have not been able to see what the effect of all this is. The fact that the voice of man is heard throughout the universe elevates man above himself. We ought never to lose sight of the fact, though,

⁷¹⁰ Heb. 1:3

that our elevation is caused by God's glory and not by something in us. The psalm correctly begins in heaven and comes down to earth; the movement is symbolic.

We should take a closer look at the contents of the call. *Hallelujah!* This is the most essential word in human language. It is a combination of the two Hebrew words *halal* and *Jah*. *Jah* is the abbreviation of *Yahweh*. *Strong's Concordance* defines *halal* as "to be clear, to shine,... to make a show, to boast,... to celebrate." The praise of God is nowhere portrayed so clearly as in John's vision in Revelation where John states: "There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.... In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back.... Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.' Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'"⁷¹¹

We can say in a sense that all of this is holy nonsense because there is no glory apart from God's glory and all honor and power comes from God to begin with. No created being can give glory, honor and power to God as if it is something that comes to God from somewhere other than from God Himself. Yet, this praise is more than a mere acknowledgment of what already exists. It is true that God is the source of all that can be called glory, honor, and power. He possesses all those attributes in an eternal and unlimited measure. But He also shares them with His creation and, in praising God, the creature gives those things back to God. King David said: "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand."⁷¹² All this is so beautifully expressed in the casting down of the elders' crowns before the throne of God.

"Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise him in the heights above" not only means that praise originates in heaven and descends from there to the earth but also, and particularly, that real praise belongs in heaven. What we see on earth are only images of the reality; heaven is the original. Not only the tabernacle and the temple where shadows of this reality but the whole ceremony that was performed was a shadow also. It is true that God became man and revealed Himself "in the likeness of sinful flesh"⁷¹³ but that did not make the glory of God mortal. Jesus could say to Philip: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."⁷¹⁴ Only, our seeing here is imperfect. The essence of praise is the same in heaven as on earth but we have not seen the reality yet. It is because God is being praised in heaven and will be praised by us there that we can praise Him on earth now. So it is essential for us to "Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise him in the heights above."

Angels are undoubtedly the most intelligent and the strongest of God's creatures. Man may rank higher than the angels in the order of creation but we are inferior to them in intelligence and physical strength. The psalmist addresses his call, first of all, to those heavenly creatures. This call is not superfluous. First of all, praise is never automatic. Angels have a free will as men do; otherwise praise in heaven would be meaningless. It is stated in the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."⁷¹⁵ That prayer does not reduce man to a robot. The fall of Lucifer and his demons proves that heavenly beings also are free to obey or disobey.

It could be that the psalmist had more insight in the spirit world than we do. I believe that we know more about the powers of darkness in the heavenly places than we do of God's heavenly hosts. Jesus' words "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"⁷¹⁶ indicate this. The experience of Elisha's servant is a good illustration. When that man saw the city of Samaria surrounded by enemy troops the prophet told him: " 'Don't be afraid... Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of

⁷¹¹ See Rev. 4:2-9

⁷¹² I Chr. 29:14

⁷¹³ Rom. 8:3 (ASV)

⁷¹⁴ John 14:9

⁷¹⁵ Matt. 6:10

⁷¹⁶ Matt. 26:53

horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”⁷¹⁷ We also know very little of the relationship between God’s angels and ourselves. Both Jesus and Elisha help us understand that angels are “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.”⁷¹⁸

Then the psalmist lets his gaze rove from the invisible world to the visible. The fact that the boundaries of the universe are hidden from our view does not make it invisible. As we stated above, we assume that, in this instance, we are not dealing with intelligence as we know it. It could be that the suns, moons, and stars that inhabit the universe are cells in a cosmic brain, but such a thought is pure speculation. The praise of those celestial bodies consists mainly in the fact that they are what they are. The Flemish poet Guido Gezelle expressed this in such an incomparable way in his poem about the flowers: “O wild and genuine beauty of flowers along the canal! You stand there in the sunlight and all you do is being flowers!” That is the kind of hymn of praise the sun, moon, and stars offer up to God. This awesome hymn takes our breath away. The energy of the sun and the stars with their multinuclear reactions, the infinite distances that separates them from each other, and the speed with which they orbit are concepts that surpass our comprehension. We experience such notions as a song of praise to their maker.

We assume that “you highest heavens,” or “you heaven of heavens” as the Hebrew reads stands for the sum of all solar systems. If the expression “you waters above the skies” does not speak of the clouds, it is difficult to determine scientifically what is meant. It could be that the psalmist speaks about the stratosphere, but it is more likely that the masses of water that surrounded the earth before the flood and that served as a thermostat for the whole planet are meant. Their static obedience is here seen as a compliment to the Creator.

The second stanza is sung on earth. It begins in the depths of the ocean and climbs up to the peaks of the mountains. The psalmist paints all of nature with a few strokes of his brush. He includes both the animal world and all the elements that compose this world. The “great sea creatures” is the translation of the Hebrew *tanniyn* which the KJV renders with “dragon.” It could be that the term refers to an animal that is now extinct. “Sea serpent” and “whale” are also acceptable translations. This speaks again of creatures that praise God simply by what they are. Their shape, mass, and function are the honor of the Creator. We know very little of the marvels of the depths of the ocean, beside the fact that they are marvels. The NIV translates the Hebrew word *’esh* which literally means “fire” with “lightning” which is probably the poet’s intention. The connection between “lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds” is the fact that God created them all. When a person turns to God, the first discovery he makes is usually that there is a definite unity between him and nature that surrounds him. The mountains and the trees, the animals and man have the same origin. They are all the product of the same hand. The uniqueness of man consists in the fact that he is conscious of this unity. This awareness is sometimes evinced vaguely in some animal, but the rest of lifeless nature has no consciousness. Sin has caused a tremendous dichotomy in this unity. The mountains have never obeyed man’s command: “Go, throw yourself into the sea.”⁷¹⁹ And the animal world no longer recognizes man as its lord. We are no longer the kings of the earth.

The fact that the psalmist addresses us as if we are kings is an indication that sin is a transitory phase. If we see in the title “kings of the earth” the original position in which God had placed Adam before the fall, then the words “you princes and all rulers on earth” apply, undoubtedly, to the present situation. God’s plan was never that one human being would rule over another human being. Governments were instituted after man fell into sin. Although the psalmist may speak as if sin does not play any role in the praising of God, sin’s shadow still falls over this picture.

Humanity is depicted in a variety of shapes and colors. Kings, princes, and rulers suggest a certain ripeness and a more advanced age. Young men, maiden, and children are the youth on the other end of the spectrum. The way in which the latter are mentioned suggests that they are young and still single and, probably, romantically in love. The solemnity of the royal court, the severity of the courtroom, and the strolling of a boy and a girl in the moonlight are all meant to praise and glorify God. The psalmist has succeeded in painting all the various aspects of life on our planet in six short verses.

Up to this point, we have not asked the question why God ought to be praised. We have only seen who had to do it and how it had to be done. The psalmist gives two reasons. In vs. 5 he says: “for he commanded and they were created.” It is God’s command that brought them into being and that determined their conduct. In vs. 13 the case is more complicated. “For his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above

⁷¹⁷ II Kings 6:16-17

⁷¹⁸ Heb. 1:14

⁷¹⁹ Matt. 21:21

the earth and the heavens.” There is, first of all, the Name of God and in connection with that the revelation of His glory. This culminates in what the psalmist calls “He has raised up for his people a horn” and the consequences of this act.

The fact that God is the creator of the universe and that all the laws of light, of gravity, of magnetism, and all that determines the functioning of the celestial bodies are the product of His mind is reason enough for us to fall down in worship before Him. Every astronomer, physicist, chemist, mathematician, or whatever other science exists will have to admit that he is only at the beginning of all there is to know in his field. God used those arguments to convince Job.⁷²⁰ Every man of science ought to confess with Peter: “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”⁷²¹

The argumentation on earth is even more convincing than what can be observed in the universe. Astronauts tell us that our planet is the only one that possesses color in our solar system. All the other celestial bodies are black-and-white. Color is the expression of God’s glory. John saw a rainbow that encircled the throne of God.⁷²² God’s Name stands for God’s character and the essence of His character is glory. The Seraphs in Isaiah called to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”⁷²³ God’s majesty, His greatness, and His might are proof of the link between the earth and the universe of which we are part.

What is unique, however, is that God “has raised up for his people a horn.” As far as we know, such a thing has never happened on any other planet in the universe. We interpret the word “horn” in the light of Zechariah’s hymn of praise: “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.”⁷²⁴ Zechariah, undoubtedly, quoted this psalm as he spoke about the coming of the Messiah. The exclusive position of Israel in this world is solely based on the fact that the Savior of the world was born from them. The unique feature of our planet is that God became man on this earth, that He dwelt among us, and that the blood of an eternal covenant was shed on our soil. C. S. Lewis brings this out so beautifully in his book *Out of a Silent Planet*. What God did here has elevated man to a level that surpasses everything else. We have to remember that God’s unique meddling in human affairs began with man’s fall into sin. That should keep us from becoming proud about that which is our deepest shame. The fact that we have been redeemed from this condition enables us to call upon heaven and earth to shout with us a thundering HALLELUJAH.

⁷²⁰ See Job ch. 38 etc.

⁷²¹ Luke 5:8

⁷²² See Rev. 4:3

⁷²³ Isa. 6:3

⁷²⁴ Luke 1:69

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FORTY-NINE

- 1 Praise the LORD. Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints.**
2 Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King.
3 Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp.
4 For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation.
5 Let the saints rejoice in this honor and sing for joy on their beds.
6 May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands,
7 to inflict vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples,
8 to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron,
9 to carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints. Praise the LORD.

This *Hallelujah* Psalm is a new song, sung by the church of Jesus Christ. It is a prophecy about the new song that will be sung in heaven.⁷²⁵ The expression “new song” is found at other places also in the Book of Psalms.⁷²⁶ This “new song” is the song of a new creation. It is related to the resurrection from the dead, both our resurrection as well as the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is in this “new song” something that sounds disquieting to us, *viz.* the judgment and, especially, the fact that judgment is a part of the glory. This gives a totally new dimension to this psalm. There is nothing weak or feeble in *hallelujah*. It is awesome and shattering. There is in God’s glory something that makes man want to flee. We come back, over and over again, to the fact that, in the tension of the presence in which we live, we will either have to flee toward God or, otherwise, there will come a time when we will flee from Him. This is the double edge of the Word of God. This psalm is written for those for whom God a refuge and strength. It makes them partakers of His majesty and executors of His judgment. It is the highest honor to be appointed to the Supreme Court but those who belong to it receive the power of life and death. This honor has an appalling side.

On the other hand, we have to say that the right to judge does not entail that we take responsibility for other people’s fate. We are also sinners; we do not, as sinless people, pronounce judgment over sinners. The difference is not between guilty and not guilty but between being pardoned and rejecting pardon. The sin that causes man to perish is not believing in Jesus Christ as the One who atoned for the sins of the world. Speaking about the Holy Spirit, Jesus said to His disciples: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.”⁷²⁷

But we are running ahead of ourselves. The psalmist begins this psalm with a “what” not a “why.” The song of praise has to be intoned by the saints. The Hebrew word translated with “saints” is *chaciyd* which is derived from *chacad* meaning “to bow the neck.” The KJV renders it with “saint.” The Berkley Version uses “godly.” The RSV: “faithful.” The word refers, obviously, to those who take their relationship with God seriously. The psalmist does not speak about individuals but about the church. He envisions, probably, more than Israel as a nation. The nation of Israel did not consist, exclusively, of people who loved the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their strength. The more they boasted about their election, the farther they removed themselves from God.

When Israel rejoices in their Maker, they do much more than recognize that God is the Creator of man. God is Israel’s Maker in the sense that He called Abraham, and delivered Israel out of the slavery of Egypt, and gave them identity as a nation in the conquest of Canaan, and entrusted her with the law of His self-revelation. This theme was taken up by Psalm 147⁷²⁸ and continued in Psalm 148.⁷²⁹ In this psalm, we find the culmination of this theme. The topic is Israel as a theocracy. God is their King. In a sense, Israel never was a genuine theocracy. They were never a nation composed of members who completely accepted God’s reign over their individual lives. The theme of the Book of Judges is: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.”⁷³⁰ That verse says that God was not recognized *de facto* as King in Israel.

⁷²⁵ See Rev. 5:9; 14:3

⁷²⁶ See Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9

⁷²⁷ John 16:8-11

⁷²⁸ See Ps. 147:19,20

⁷²⁹ See Ps. 148:14

⁷³⁰ Judges 21:25

The Israel mentioned in this psalm is the group of people that has surrendered to God's reign. They are, what the Apostle Paul calls: "the Israel of God."⁷³¹ They are the new creation in Jesus Christ. The new song is sung by those who have the Word of God and who "hear the word of God and obey it."⁷³² These are the ones who are invited to dance, sing, and playing the orchestra. It is an exuberant ecstasy of dance and song. There is nothing sedate in this joy.

Vs. 4 gives a two-fold reason for this. There is the fact that the Lord takes delight in His people. We mean something to Him. We make Him happy. It is often easier for some people to love God than to accept the fact that God loves them. This is especially the case for those who have received the wrong signals of love in their youth. We have to understand, however, that we would never be able to love God if He had not loved us first. This miracle amazes us every time we think of it. God loves me! He takes delight in me!

The second reason is: "He crowns the humble with salvation." The KJV renders this with: "He will beautify the meek with salvation," and the RSV reads: "He adorns the humble with victory." The Hebrew word *`anav* can be translated with "depressed" as well as with "humble." It corresponds to what Jesus calls "the poor in spirit" in the Sermon on the Mount.⁷³³ The depressed condition of man is the result of sin and humility consists in confession of sin. God elevates those who confess their sins to the highest possible level. This miracle of being elevated by God's grace never ceases to amaze us. Mary expressed this so beautifully in her Magnificat, as she says: "He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."⁷³⁴ In this world, people of the higher ranks in society, those who come from wealthy families, usually rise to the top. But in the Kingdom of Heaven the promotions go to those who Paul qualifies with "not many... wise by human standards; not many... influential; not many... of noble birth." And the Apostle continues with: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."⁷³⁵ Jesus Himself set the tone by being born in a stable and by dying on a cross. Heaven chooses that which is lowly. That is the contents of humility. The real power belongs to the victims of evil. God elevates what the world rejects.

The ecstasy in vs. 5 lasts 24 hours. It is so great that it keeps us from sleep. *The Tyndale Commentary* observes: "The *couches* may refer quite simply to the fact of being able to lie down at night without fear and with a good conscience (cf. 4:8; Ho. 7:14). But the picture may be of reclining at a festal meal (cf. also the 'hymn' sung in Mk. 14:26), especially if the theme of such a festival was the final victory of God." But the *Commentary* rejects the notion that the word would mean "prayer-mats."

The watershed in this psalm is in vs. 6. Praise is a double edged sword. It has opposite effects with different people. The Apostle Paul explains this as follows: "We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life."⁷³⁶ The way the sword cuts depends on how people react to our praise of God. We do not harm those who, in their hearts, long for forgiveness of sin and rehabilitation. Those who reject the Word of God throw themselves upon their sword as King Saul of old did.⁷³⁷ The essence of God's wrath on man is that a sinful person is confronted with the Word of God. This causes the image of God in man which has become a caricature to be placed next to the original. Man reacts to this by crying out 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!"⁷³⁸

What it amounts to is that, when we are saved by the Gospel, God appoints us as judges and juries over our fellowmen and over the heavenly powers. David says in the First Psalm: "The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous."⁷³⁹ And Paul extends this by saying: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not

⁷³¹ See Gal. 6:16

⁷³² Luke 11:28

⁷³³ See Matt. 5:3

⁷³⁴ Luke 1:48

⁷³⁵ I Cor. 1:26,27

⁷³⁶ II Cor. 2:15,16

⁷³⁷ See I Sam. 31:4

⁷³⁸ Rev. 6:16

⁷³⁹ Ps. 1:5

competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels?”⁷⁴⁰ And Jesus explains: “The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.”⁷⁴¹

The psalmist treats this subject as if he is speaking about a military campaign. At one point in history, when Israel conquered Canaan, this was the way it happened, or ought to have happened. But when this psalm was written, all this was ancient history. We can, therefore, see in the “kings” and the “nobles” the evil princes that stand behind human rulers, like “the prince of Persia,” and “the prince of Greece” about whom Daniel speaks.⁷⁴² Jesus did what the psalmist says here when “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits.”⁷⁴³ This authority is “the glory of all his saints.”

The Tyndale Commentary notes here: Our equivalent of binding *kings with chains* (8) is to ‘take every thought captive to obey Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:5; cf. Eph. 6:12; Heb. 4:12). The Apocalypse, for all its fiery imagery of final judgment, describes the church’s victory as congruous with that of Cavalry. ‘They have conquered...by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death’ (Rev. 12:11). This is *the judgment written* by the cross against ‘the ruler of this world’ (Jn. 16:11), who is the power behind the kings of verse 8. God has appointed *glory for all his faithful ones* at a higher level than was clearly visible in the Old Testament. Such are the battle honors of the genuinely holy war.” The revenge of this psalm, therefore, is much sweeter than appears at first sight.

⁷⁴⁰ I Cor. 6:2,3

⁷⁴¹ Matt. 12:41

⁷⁴² See Daniel 10:20

⁷⁴³ Matt. 10:1

PSALM ONE HUNDRED FIFTY

- 1 Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.**
- 2 Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.**
- 3 Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre,**
- 4 praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute,**
- 5 praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.**
- 6 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.**

Each of the five Books of Psalms ends with a doxology.

- The First Book with – Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.⁷⁴⁴
- The Second Book with – Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.⁷⁴⁵
- The Third Book with – Praise be to the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.⁷⁴⁶
- And the Fourth Book with – Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the LORD.⁷⁴⁷

The doxology that concludes the Book of Psalm is this whole psalm. It is a “Hallelujah for Choir and Orchestra.” It is the greatest and loudest hymn of praise in the whole Bible. It is a mighty fortissimo that brings the Book of Psalm to a triumphant end.

Yet, we have to point out also that this psalm is not a hymn of praise in the strictest sense of the word. It is a call to praise God. God is never addressed personally in this psalm but the addressed are “Everything that has breath.” This constitutes a fundamental difference between this doxology and the ones that concluded the previous four books. The call to praise suggest that the *Hallelujah* ought to be like this, not that it actually is so.

It is regrettable that most English versions translate the word *Hallelujah* with “Praise the Lord.” It would have been better if it had been left un-translated. Let us, therefore, hang on to the original *Hallelujah*.

“*Hallelujah*, Praise God in his sanctuary.” We see here again the same kind of holy arrogance as in Psalm 148. A human being on earth calls upon heaven to praise God. There is also a sanctuary on earth. In the Old Testament it was the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle or the temple. It was the place God had chosen to reveal Himself. The implication is that God ought to be praised at the place of His choosing and in the way He prescribes. It is not up to us to praise God where and how we like. For us New Testament Christians, it means that we ought to praise God in Jesus Christ. He is God revealed in the flesh. Even more, God’s sanctuary is the body of Christ, which is the church. That means that this psalm also constitutes a New Testament call to praise. The psalmist’s primary intention, however, is that God should be praised in heaven. The parallel phrase in vs. 1 “Praise him in his mighty heavens” makes this clear.

The psalmist was probably thinking of the atmosphere that surrounds our planet. We do not know what concept the poet had of space. For us modern men who know more about the infinity space with its multiple solar systems, this call acquires an even deeper meaning. The distances of space measured in light-years surpasses our comprehension. Our dizziness in itself constitutes a praise to God. J. B. Phillips has written a book entitled *Your God is too Small*. If we recognize that our God created the universe and that He fills it with Himself, He can hardly be too small. The God we praise is the God of the mighty heavens. Millions of light-years are as one day to Him.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of the Pleiades and of the Orion. God asked Job the question: “Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up [God’s] dominion over the earth?”⁷⁴⁸

⁷⁴⁴ Ps. 41:13

⁷⁴⁵ Ps. 72:18,19

⁷⁴⁶ Ps. 89:52

⁷⁴⁷ Ps. 106:48

⁷⁴⁸ Job 38:31-33

The psalmist speaks about God's acts of power in the most general terms. He clearly includes all of God's deeds. He is the creator of heaven and earth but also the savior of fallen mankind. He is the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. The psalmist did not know yet the mightiest of God's act when he said: "Praise him for his acts of power."

We, as human beings, will never come to the end of our amazement about God's greatness. His perfect character, and glory, and the infinity of all his attributes will, throughout all eternity, be for us an inexhaustible source of adoration. We will penetrate deeper and deeper into the meaning of "holy, holy, holy is YHWH Elohim. When we share in His glory, we will only begin to sound the depths of His holiness. In this life, we don't even have a definition of holiness. We can only define holiness in negative terms, as without sin, without stain, etc. The only thing we can determine on earth is that we have nothing we can use as a standard to measure holiness. Even this very hiatus makes us realize that we are dealing with a God who is infinitely great. The image of God within us keeps us from disregarding God because we cannot define Him. It is particularly the fact that we are related to Him that makes us fall on our knees, realizing that God defies all concepts and definitions. If we deny this, we deny our own humanness.

Here comes the orchestra. Eight instruments are mentioned plus dancing. The first instrument is the trumpet, or rather, the *shophar* which is a rams horn. The *nebel* is a lyre, or a lute, and *kinnowr* is a harp or zither. The *toph* is a tambourine. The word *men* means a musical chord and *uwgab* a reed-instrument of music, like the flute. Whether the fact that the first instrument mentioned is the rams horn has any theological significance is open for discussion. The instrument is the part of an animal that was killed, which suggest a sacrifice that was laid on the altar. Even if this is not the underlying thought behind the use of the horn, it remains true that all praise is based on the fact that the Lamb is slain. The sequence of the praise in Revelation emphasizes this fact also.⁷⁴⁹ The words "sin" and "atonement" are not used in this psalm but the "acts of power," or "mighty acts" (NKJV), and the mention of the rams horn point in that direction.

The lute and zither are soft-sounding instruments. David's playing of the harp had a soothing influence on the demon-possessed King Saul.⁷⁵⁰ The prophet Elisha called in the help of a harpist. We read: "While the harpist was playing, the hand of the LORD came upon Elisha."⁷⁵¹ There is, in the presence of God, a place for quietness and peace in praise. Quietness ought not to be absent from our worship.

In contrast to this, we find the exuberance of "tambourine and dancing." That is more a matter of rhythm than of melody. The first time tambourine and dancing are mentioned in the Bible is in the Song of Moses. We read: "Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing."⁷⁵² We may, therefore, assume that, although harps are only mentioned in that context, the same demonstration of exuberance will be seen at the singing of "the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb."⁷⁵³ In our praise, we are often as far removed from the tambourines and dancing as we are from the miracle at the Red Sea.

The strings and flute make us return again to the softer joy about God's goodness and greatness. The strings were probably plucked, rather than played with a bow as with the modern violin. I have a vision of Mozart's concert for harp and flute which is one of the most joyous pieces of music I know.

Clashing and resounding cymbals are loud and noisy. There are, obviously, two kinds of cymbals, the ones that are played horizontally and others vertically. The Dutch poet, Gerard Achterberg wrote a beautiful poem about a charwoman going to heaven. He says: "God will find her on His floor, going on the golden streets of His city, hitting her dustpan with her broom. Because symbols become cymbals in the hour of death...."

Apart from such deep thoughts, we have to realize that one needs the ability to play different instruments. We have to exercise our gifts in order to praise God as virtuosos. Praise is an art that has to be practiced. We have to invest time and effort into our gift. God has given us a gift of praise.

But there is also a song of praise that comes effortlessly. "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD." There is not one living human being that does not have breath. Breath and life are identical. Breathing is the most fundamental function of the human body. "The LORD God formed the man from the

⁷⁴⁹ See Rev chapters 4,5

⁷⁵⁰ See I Sam. 16:23

⁷⁵¹ II Kings 3:15,16

⁷⁵² Ex. 15:20

⁷⁵³ See Rev. 15:3

dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”⁷⁵⁴ God’s breath also made man a spiritual being. Breathing, therefore, means more than merely breathing in oxygen and breathing out carbohydrates. It also means worshipping God in spirit and in truth. “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD” is, at the same time the most unsophisticated form of worship as well as “Life on the Highest Plane.” Our spirit died when Adam fell in sin and it is resurrected from the dead in the regeneration through the Holy Spirit. This is the reason we can praise God with our breath. Let everything that has breath realize what is involved in the call of this psalm and answer with *Hallelujah*!

Nabire, Irian Jaya, Indonesia, May 23 1992.

⁷⁵⁴ Gen. 2:7