



*Good News*  
**Bible Reading Program**

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— September 2005 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-3 Sept	79) Lamenting prayer over enemy invasion and devastation; 80) Prayer for national restoration	Psalms 79–80
4-8 Sept	81) Israel admonished to heed God; 82) God will judge the rulers of the earth and bring true justice; 83) Prayer for help against an international enemy coalition	Psalms 81–83
9-14 Sept	84) Yearning to dwell in God's house; 85) Prayer for restoration after captivity; 86) Prayer for mercy and help against enemies; 87) God's special love for Zion	Psalms 84–87
15-17 Sept	88) Lamenting plea for deliverance from life-threatening affliction; 89) Prayer for God to uphold the Davidic covenant in the midst of defeat	Psalms 88–89
18-20 Sept	90) Prayer for God's compassion on His mortal servants; 91) Safety of dwelling in God's presence	Psalms 90–91
21-25 Sept	92) Thanks to God for His faithfulness, whereby the righteous will triumph and the wicked will perish; 93) The eternal and invincible reign of God; 94) Prayer for God to bring justice on the wicked, with confidence that He upholds the righteous	Psalms 92–94
26-30 Sept	FALL FESTIVAL BREAK (Continues through October 31)	Personal study

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<b>Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading</b>
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**“Restore Us, O God” (Psalms 79–80)****September 1-3**

**Psalm 79**, which begins the second cluster of psalms in Book III, is a lament over a devastating attack on Jerusalem and its temple. As with Psalm 74, this setting raises questions over Asaph's authorship noted in the superscription since Asaph would have seen no such invasion unless he lived well over a century to witness Pharaoh Shishak's invasion in the fifth year of Solomon's son Rehoboam (ca. 925 B.C.). Refer back to the Bible Reading Program's comments introducing Psalm 74 to see various suggestions for resolving this matter—the likeliest perhaps being that Asaph, as a seer, was foretelling the future.

Asaph may have been writing in Psalm 79 of Shishak's invasion, but it is likely that even later destruction was also being prophesied, such as that wreaked by the Babylonians (586 B.C.) and, later still, by the Romans (A.D. 70). The invasion and temple defilement by the Greek Syrians during the time of the Maccabees (ca. 168 B.C.) could also be represented here—as could the destruction and defilement of the end time yet to come.

Note verse 2 in this regard: “The dead bodies of Your servants they [the invaders] have given as food for the birds of the heavens, the flesh of Your saints to the beasts of the earth.” God through Jeremiah later warned of what His people would experience at the hands of the Babylonian invaders in similar terms: “Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth” (Jeremiah 34:20; compare 7:33; 16:4; 19:7). Of course, Jeremiah's prophecy, in a dual sense, was foretelling both immediate and end-time devastation.

The word “saints” in Psalm 79:2 means “holy ones.” This could perhaps refer to God's holy nation generally or more specifically to priests at the temple, yet it may have referred, as it would today, to spiritually converted people. An end-time setting would indicate the latter—and other prophecies do show that even some of God's end-time saints will be slain in the coming time of tribulation along with the people of Israelite nations generally.

The wording of verse 4, about being a reproach and target of scorn and derision, is very similar to that of Psalm 44:13.

Asaph asks “how long” this terrible situation will continue (verse 5). Will God be angry with His people forever? Will His “jealousy burn like a fire”?—that is, will His anger over His people's unfaithfulness utterly consume them? Things appeared so bad as to seem like this might be the case. So the psalm asks God for mercy, deliverance, atonement and salvation (verses 8-9). And it appeals to God to be true to His name as the Savior of His people—to defend His own reputation, as the enemy taunts, “Where is their God?” (verse 10).

The psalm is also a call for just retribution on the enemy and all nations that oppose God and His people: “Pour out Your wrath on the nations that do not know You...for they have devoured Jacob” (verses 6-7). It asks for God to act as His people's divine Kinsman-Redeemer and Avenger of Blood, avenging the deaths of His slain servants (verse 10) and rescuing those who will likewise die at the hands of the enemy if He doesn't act (verse 11). Again, God's reputation is shown to be at stake: “Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the reproach they have hurled at you, O Lord” (verse 12, NIV). “The sevenfold restitution expresses a concern for full justice...the judgment must be equal to the severity of the reproach of God's name!” (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 12).

Asaph at last expresses confidence that God, as a caring shepherd over His flock (see Psalms 23; 80), will act in His people's favor—so that they may praise Him for all time (79:13).

Where the superscription of **Psalm 80** has “Set to ‘The Lilies’ [Hebrew *Shoshannim*]. A Testimony [*Eduth*] of Asaph,” this could be rendered “Set to ‘The Lilies of Testimony.’ Of Asaph.” The NIV has “The Lilies of the Covenant.” Compare the superscription of Psalm 60, which has, “Set to ‘Lily of the Testimony’” (*Shushan Eduth*). As in other cases throughout the Psalter, the first part of the superscription of each of these psalms may be a postscript of the preceding psalm.

As in the previous psalm (79), the nation is in distress—plundered by enemies (compare 80:12-13). And as before, it may be that Asaph was prophesying of national invasion beyond his lifetime—perhaps

even of the end time still to come. Yet, just as Psalm 79 ends with reliance on God as the Shepherd of His people (see verse 13), so Psalm 80 opens with an appeal to the Shepherd of Israel who leads Joseph (the leading birthright people and therefore representative of the nation as a whole) like a flock (verse 1; compare Psalm 23; John 10).

God, who dwells between the cherubim—as represented on the earthly copy of God’s throne, the mercy seat atop the Ark of the Covenant (see Exodus 25:17-22)—is asked to “shine forth” (Psalm 80:1), showing His glory through His intervening power (verse 2). Note the beginning of verse 2: “Before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh.” The psalm is here essentially pleading, “March against the [enemy] nations as you marched in the midst of your army from Sinai into the promised land (in that march the ark of the covenant advanced in front of the troops of these three tribes; see Nu 10:21-24...)” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 80:2).

The central theme of the psalm is clear from the repeated refrain asking, “Restore us...” (verses 3, 7, 19), with building intensity in calling on God: “...O God” (verse 3), “...O God of hosts” (verse 7) and “...O LORD God of hosts” (verse 19). The rest of the repeated refrain, “Cause Your face to shine [i.e., smile favorably on us], and we shall be saved” (same verses), is essentially drawn from the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:25: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.” We have previously noted the use of this language in other psalms as well (see Psalms 4:6; 44:3; 67:1; 119:135). Here in Psalm 80 the people had been experiencing the opposite—the rebuke of God’s countenance (His angry expression) causing them to perish (80:16).

“How long,” Asaph asks (as is common in laments), will God be angry and refuse to answer His people’s prayers? (verse 4; compare 13:1-2; 79:5). In the desert wilderness, God, as His people’s caring Shepherd, fed them with manna and gave them water to drink from the rock. But now, figuratively, He has given His people their tearful misery to eat and drink (80:5). They have become a source of contention and mockery to neighboring countries (verse 6)—rather than the blessing and positive example they were intended to be. So again the plea of restoration is raised (verse 7).

In verses 8-16 Asaph likens Israel to a vine and vineyard, imagery found in other passages (see Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jeremiah 2:21; 12:10; Ezekiel 15:1-8; 17:6-8; 19:10-14; Hosea 10:1; 14:7). God bringing the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land is pictured as transplanting the vine (Psalm 80:8). His driving out of the nations before them (same verse) is compared to a caring vinedresser clearing the ground for the vine (verse 9; compare Isaiah 5:2). The vine filled the land (Psalm 80:9), growing to immense stature so that hills and tall trees, symbolic of other national powers (compare Ezekiel 17), were overshadowed as the vine grew (Psalm 80:10). It spread from the Sea (the Mediterranean) to the River (the Euphrates) (verse 11), representing Israel’s dominion reaching this extent, as it did during the reigns of David and Solomon.

Yet things have dramatically changed. God has broken down His vine’s hedges—its protective fence (referring to His own divine protection)—and allowed others to plunder it (verse 12). The boar and wild beasts (unclean animals here representing foreign invaders) uproot and devour it. Because of God’s anger it is burned with fire and cut down (verse 16). Compare God’s later words, probably adapted from Psalm 80, in Isaiah 5:5: “And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.”

The psalm calls on God to look at the sorry state of the vine now and to “visit” it (Psalm 80:14)—to show it care and restore it as it was. There is a play on words in the last several verses here. The Hebrew word for vineyard in verse 15 “is used only here in the Bible; it literally means ‘root-stock’” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 4-17). Then we see the word “branch” in the same verse—giving us the common pairing of *root and branch*. Yet the Hebrew word for branch here is *ben*, meaning “son”—the same word translated “son” in verse 17 in the expression “son of man.”

The nation of Israel was not just as a mere plant to God as a vinedresser but was God’s own son (see Exodus 4:22)—intended to serve as His “right-hand man” (see Psalm 80:17), a model nation to properly represent Him to the world (as a vine bearing godly fruit). Yet the imagery here likely pointed to Israel’s Davidic ruler as well, the particular “son of man” (meaning human being) who was to lead the nation in setting the proper example. Moreover, the words here no doubt look to the ultimate “Branch” who would

come from the vine of Israel and the line of David—the Messiah. He too would be, in a unique way, God’s own Son.

Jesus would later tell His followers that He is the true vine, that God the Father is the vinedresser and that they, abiding in Him as the vine, are the branches (John 15:1-8). Jesus Himself was brought out of Egypt and replanted in the Promised Land, preaching throughout the breadth of the land. He suffered terribly for sin at the hands of enemies (not His own sin but that of others). He was brutalized and died. But He rose again—and through His death and resurrection all may be saved. Indeed, it is through this Son and His followers that the vine of Israel would be reconstituted in a spiritual sense and revived—so that it would never turn from God again (see Psalm 80:18). The physical Israelites will be restored to God’s favor or grace through being grafted into spiritual Israel (compare Romans 11; Galatians 6:16).

Thus, as the final refrain calls for again (Psalm 80:19), Israel will be restored, God will smile favorably on His people and they shall be saved.

### **Appeals for Repentance, Justice and Deliverance From Foes (Psalms 81–83) September 4-8**

The middle of the superscription of **Psalm 81**, which may be part of a postscript to Psalm 80, contains the Hebrew phrase *al gittith*. We saw this earlier in the superscription of Psalm 8, and it reappears in Psalm 84. The NIV leaves it mostly untranslated as “According to *gittith*,” whereas the New King James Version renders it as, “On an instrument of Gath.” The *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* comments, “The Hebrew word perhaps refers to either a winepress (‘song of the winepress’) or the Philistine city of Gath (‘Gittite lyre or music’; see 2Sa 15:18)” (note on Psalm 8 title).

Asaph composed Psalm 81 as a festival song (verses 1-3)—albeit one in which national enemies remain a serious concern (see verses 14-15), as in other psalms of Asaph in Book III.

The people were to “sing aloud,” to “make a joyful shout,” to “raise a song,” to “strike the timbrel,” to play “the pleasant harp with the lute” (verses 1-2), to “blow the trumpet” (the *shofar* or ram’s horn) because it was a statute and law of God to do so (verses 3-4)—revealed by God at the time of the Exodus (verse 5). It is important to recognize the congregational nature of worship here. As commentator George Knight remarks on these verses: “You cannot hold a festival all by yourself. It is God’s will, however, that we should hold festivals. These verbs *sing aloud*, *shout for joy* and so on are all expressed in the plural” (*Psalms*, comments on Psalm 81). The word for “statute” (verse 4) or “decree” (NIV) “refers in its original usage to something that is meant to be imperishable for it has been chiseled in stone. God then ‘demands’ our regular worship. In his wisdom he knows that it is our regular participation in congregational worship that keeps us right with himself. Public worship is God’s good idea, not ours” (same comments).

Verse 3 causes some confusion as to the timing of this particular celebration and trumpet blowing. Some take it to mean every New Moon (new month), every full moon and every sacred festival day. However, there was no law or statute to blow the ram’s horn or celebrate at all of these times. Indeed, in the law God gave through Moses the blast of the ram’s horn was commanded for only one festival, the Feast of Trumpets (see Leviticus 23:24; Numbers 29:1). This Holy Day actually falls on a New Moon—and is the only annual festival that does. Yet what of the mention of the full moon in Psalm 81:3? Some see other annual festivals indicated here. Passover and the First Day of Unleavened Bread come at the time of the full moon in the first month of the Hebrew sacred calendar. The beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles does as well—and many see verse 3 as indicating the entire fall festival period in the seventh month, from the Feast of Trumpets through Tabernacles. However, the word translated “full moon” can simply mean “full” or “fullness,” and could here imply the completion of a month—thus the beginning of a new one. The Ferrar Fenton Translation makes no mention of the full moon—only the New Moon. So it may well be that the Feast of Trumpets is exclusively meant here, though the call to celebration and reflection on God’s deliverance fits with all of God’s festivals.

Note again the timing of God’s revelation of the statute in verse 5: “This He established in Joseph [representative of all Israel] as a testimony, when He went throughout the land of Egypt.” This translation would indicate the time that God sent the plagues against Egypt. However, nothing is recorded in Moses’ writings about God revealing the command to blow the shofar at the Feast of Trumpets until Israel was later gathered at Mount Sinai. It is possible that He gave Moses an earlier revelation while in Egypt. Yet it seems more likely that a very general time frame is meant—that is to say, God gave the Israelites this statute long ago around the time that He destroyed Egypt to free them. Alternatively, some versions

translate verse 5 as saying that God established the statute when Joseph (i.e., Israel) went out of Egypt (compare Tanakh, New and Revised English Bible, New American Bible, Fenton).

The end of verse 5 says, “I heard a language [literally, lip] I did not understand.” There is some dispute as to who is speaking here. In the remainder of the psalm, from verses 6-16, it is clearly God who is speaking, referring to Himself as “I.” That would seem to argue for the “I” at the end of verse 5 also being God. Yet how could the omniscient God not understand the Egyptian language? For this reason, many take the “I” in verse 5 to refer to each Israelite singing the song—following the Jewish understanding that each and every Jew even today was personally and individually delivered from ancient Egyptian bondage.

Yet the word rendered “understand” in verse 5, *yada*, has the general meaning of “know.” As Strong’s Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary notes, this word can mean “acknowledge...regard, have respect [for]” (*Abingdon Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Strong’s No. 3045). Indeed, just as God says He does not “know” those who do not obey Him, He could just as well say that He does not “know” (acknowledge or regard) the speech of those who defy Him. Consider that Egypt’s language and speech was thoroughly polluted with idolatrous references. “As in [Psalm] 114:1, there is a disdain for the history, culture, and language of Egypt” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 3-5).

In Psalm 81:7, God answering in “the secret place of thunder” is evidently a reference to the giving of His law and covenant at Mount Sinai, when “there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.... Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire... And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice” (Exodus 19:16-19; compare 20:18). Thus, it would seem that in the “memorial of blowing of trumpets” at the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:24), the Israelites were to recall this earlier trumpet blast when God came down in power and glory, descending with thunder and fire, as a prelude to giving His law. Interestingly, the Feast of Trumpets primarily represents the time of Christ’s return, when He will come in great power and glory, in a devouring fire, as a prelude to revealing His law anew to Israel and all nations. Moses gave the point: “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin” (Exodus 20:20)—as they had at Meribah, when they questioned whether God was among them after having experienced the Exodus (17:1-7; Psalm 81:7).

In verses 8-10, God reminds the people of what He told them at Sinai—and implicitly holds out His offer of covenant relationship anew. In verse 9, He reiterates the first of the Ten Commandments—that there be no foreign gods among His people (see Exodus 20:3). And in verse 10 of Psalm 81, He repeats the preamble to the Ten Commandments: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (see Exodus 20:2). This great episode should have been enough to convince them to trust and obey Him. God promised to be His people’s provider (Psalm 81:10b).

Historically, Israel failed to listen (verse 11), so God allowed them to go their own way (verse 12)—although that’s not what He wanted (verse 13). If His people would obey, He would subdue their enemies (verse 14). It seems likely that God inspired Asaph to write this psalm while Israel was experiencing problems from enemies—perhaps while David was still battling foreign nations. And the words would certainly take on greater urgency in later times of foreign oppression.

In verse 15, the Israelites’ enemies are referred to as *God’s* enemies—“the haters of the LORD” (compare 83:1-4). The NKJV says that when God subdues them, they “would pretend submission to Him” (81:15). The NIV alternatively says they “would cringe before him.” Then note the latter phrase in verse 15: “But their fate would endure forever.” The Hebrew word translated “fate” here actually means “time.” Most see this as meaning judgment on the enemies. But “their” might refer back to the Israelites, just as “them” in the next verse does—in which case the verse would mean that obedient Israelites would endure for all time.

God’s desire is to give His people the very best of everything (verse 16)—and He eventually will if they will only heed Him and walk in His ways. The Feast of Trumpets and the other fall festivals picture the ushering in of a time when Israel will repent and all God’s promises will come to fruition. Even other nations will be grafted into Israel to learn God’s way and share in the promises as well. This is certainly a wonderful reason to joyfully celebrate.

In **Psalm 82**, Asaph delivers from God “a word of judgment on unjust rulers and judges.... [He shows] God presiding over his heavenly court [verse 1].... As the Great King (see...Ps 47) and the Judge of all the earth (see 94:2; Ge 18:25; 1Sa 2:10) who ‘loves justice’ (99:4) and judges the nations in righteousness (see 9:8; 96:13; 98:9), he is seen calling to account those responsible for defending the weak and oppressed on earth” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 82).

Observe in verses 1 and 6 the term “gods” (Hebrew *elohim*). This plural word can refer to a plurality of gods (usually false gods) or in a singular sense to the one God (or God family) comprising more than one Being—God the Father and God the Son, Jesus Christ. To learn more about this terminology and the nature of God, see our free booklet *Who Is God?*

Here the term “gods” refers to human beings—“children of the Most High” (verse 6). Consider that when God created the plants and animals of the earth in Genesis 1, He made them to reproduce each “according to its kind.” But in the same context, God said of humanity, “Let Us [the Father and the preincarnate Christ] make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness” (verse 26)—language denoting producing a child in one’s image (compare 5:3). So man was made according to the God-kind. Yet this initially is in an incomplete sense of resembling God in appearance on a physical level and having an intelligent and creative mind (though still unimaginably inferior to God’s). God ultimately intends for man to be a spiritual creation completely in His likeness.

Jesus would later use Psalm 82:6 to confound the Jewish religious authorities who were upset because He declared Himself the Son of God. Reminding them that their own law (Scripture) referred to human beings as “gods,” he asked them why they were so upset at Him for merely saying He was the *Son* of God (John 10:31-37).

One godlike characteristic human beings were given at man’s initial creation was that of having dominion over the earth—representing Him as ruler over creation (Genesis 1:26-28). For many, this dominion would extend over other human beings. Yet for the most part, people have not taken after God’s nature in the way they have fulfilled this responsibility. Rather, they have taken advantage of and abused each other. Psalm 82 addresses this failing. It is in fact a message for everyone—but applies all the more to those who are in positions of power, who have the capacity to help others in the ways called for in verses 2-4.

Verse 5 speaks of the colossal failure of human misrule. Commenting on this verse, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* notes: “They ought to have shared in the wisdom of God (see 1Ki 3:9; Pr 8:14-16; Isa 11:12), but they are utterly devoid of true understanding of moral issues or of the moral order that God’s rule sustains (see Isa 44:18; Jer 3:15; 9:24).... When such people are the wardens of justice, the whole world order crumbles (see 11:3; 75:3...)”

Clearly the human beings addressed in Psalm 82 as gods are not truly gods in an ultimate sense—as God says they will die as mere mortal men, falling “like every other ruler” (verse 7, NIV). Yet for those who submit to God’s ways, other passages show that men can receive eternal life and divine glory as spirit-born members of the God family.

Thankfully, while the current societal order will fall to pieces, the ultimate world order God has ordained will stand (75:3; 93:1). As the concluding verse of Psalm 82 calls for, He will intervene and set all things right in all nations. For all nations will at last be His, not just as His property but as His true children in His likeness—not only of form, but of character.

**Supplementary Reading:** “You Are Gods,” The Surprising Sayings of Jesus Christ series, *The Good News*, July–Aug. 2002, pp. 28-29).

**Psalm 83**, the last of Asaph’s psalms and the concluding psalm of the second cluster of Book III, implores God to rouse Himself against a confederacy of national enemies conspiring to wipe out Israel—these nations here declared to be *God’s* enemies (compare 81:14-15).

We earlier read Psalm 83 in the Bible Reading Program along with the account of the chariots of Mesopotamia helping the Ammonites against David’s army (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 2 Samuel 10; 1 Chronicles 19; Psalm 60; Psalm 108; Psalm 83). This may be what is meant in Psalm 83:8: “Assyria also has joined with them; they have helped the children of Lot.” The nations of Ammon and Moab were both descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot. Yet there is a larger coalition mentioned in verses 5-7, containing nations not mentioned in 2 Samuel 10 or 1 Chronicles 19. However, some of these,

having been subdued by David in earlier campaigns, could have been in revolt on this later occasion (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalm 60). Of course, considering that other prophecies of various nations here describe them rising up together against Israel in the end time, Psalm 83 may well be an end-time prophecy of “Asaph the seer” (see 2 Chronicles 29:30). Perhaps the song is dual in meaning—with an ancient coalition prefiguring a similar confederacy of the last days.

In the list of conspiring enemies, the foremost and perennial enemy of Israel is given first—Edom (Psalm 83:6), the nation descended from Jacob’s brother Esau. David subdued the Edomites prior to the fight with Mesopotamian forces (see 2 Samuel 8; 1 Chronicles 18). But since the Syrians were also earlier subdued and rebelled at the time of the later conflict, it is possible that the same thing happened with the Edomites. In an end-time setting, which seems applicable here, the Edomites may be found among the Palestinians in Israel and Jordan, among the Turks, among the Iraqis and other Middle Eastern peoples and, due to immigration, in growing numbers in Europe. (For more on the Edomites and their modern identity, see the Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah, Isaiah 34 and 63, Jeremiah 49:7-22 and Ezekiel 35.)

The Ishmaelites, listed second (Psalm 83:6), are the Arabs generally—descended from Abraham’s first son Ishmael. The Arab nations of today stretch from across North Africa to Iraq.

Third on the list, Moab (same verse), as mentioned above, was, along with Ammon, descended from Lot (see verse 8). As with the Edomites, David subdued the Moabites prior to the fight with Mesopotamia’s chariots (see 2 Samuel 8; 1 Chronicles 18). But, as with Edom, it may be that the Moabites rebelled during the later conflict. The Moabites are probably to be found today among the Palestinians in Jordan and Israel and among other Middle Eastern peoples.

Listed fourth are the Hagrites (verse 6). The Israelite tribes of Reuben and Gad fought against the Hagrites in the days of Saul (1 Chronicles 5:10, 18-19). As was noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on 1 Chronicles 5, the name Hagrites perhaps denotes descendants of Ishmael’s mother Hagar (and thus Ishmaelite or related tribes). The conflict with the Trans-Jordanian tribes would make these north-ranging Arabs. Assyrian inscriptions mention Hagrites as part of an Aramean (i.e., Syrian) confederacy (*Zondervan*, note on Psalm 83:6). Thus, the Hagrites are perhaps to be identified in modern times with the Arabs of Syria.

Fifth is Gebal (verse 7). As *The Nelson Study Bible* notes on Ezekiel 27:9, Gebal was an important Phoenician port city “between Sidon and Arvad (see Josh. 13:5; 1 Kin. 5:18). It was called Byblos by the Greeks and Romans, and Gubla by the Assyrians and Babylonians.” The Phoenician city is today known as Jbail or Jubayl in Lebanon, 25 miles north of Beirut. Yet the name Gebal, related to the Arabic *Jebel*, is simply the word for “mountain,” and many believe another location could be meant. “Some interpreters...conclude that the reference here is to a place or region in Edom [southern Jordan], south of the Dead Sea near Petra” (*Zondervan*, note on verse 7).

Sixth on the list is Ammon (same verse). It was the conflict with Ammon that led to the fight against Mesopotamia’s forces. The Ammonite capital, Rabbah, is now Amman, the capital city of Jordan. Like the related Moabites, the Ammonites today are probably to be found among the Palestinians in Jordan and Israel and among other Middle Eastern peoples.

Seventh is Amalek (same verse). The Amalekites were a hostile Edomite people of southern Canaan (Numbers 13:29) who ambushed the stragglers in the Israelites’ rear ranks when they came out of Egypt. For this ruthlessness God said He would have war with them from generation to generation and eventually cause them to be wiped out (Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19). Though suppressed under Saul and David, the Amalekites remained. They appear to have eventually ranged over a large territory—some migrating all the way up into Central Asia (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah and Esther 3). The Amalekites today may be among the Palestinians, Central Asian Turks and other Middle Eastern peoples.

Philistia, land of the Philistines, eighth on the list (Psalm 83:7), was located along the southwest coast of Israel. David had subdued the Philistines prior to the engagement with the Mesopotamian forces (see 2 Samuel 8; 1 Chronicles 18). But, as with Edom and Moab, it could be that the Philistines revolted at the time of the fight against Mesopotamia. A significant portion of the area of ancient Philistia is today the Palestinian Gaza Strip—Gaza being one of the ancient Philistine cities. The Philistines gave their

name to Palestine, the name used by the Greeks and Romans for the land of Israel. And there may be some Philistines among the Palestinians of today.

Listed ninth are “the inhabitants of Tyre” (Psalm 83:7). It might seem problematic for this to apply to the time Asaph wrote—as King Hiram of Tyre was closely allied to David and Solomon. The same problem exists for a Phoenician Gebal if that is the city intended, as Gebal was under Tyre’s dominion. Yet it could be that there were rogue elements in Tyre favorable to the Mesopotamians against Israel. Perhaps this is why the wording “*inhabitants of Tyre*” is used instead of just Tyre. On the other hand, it could be that the psalm simply did not concern events of Asaph’s time—that it was instead exclusively a prophecy of the end time. In a modern setting, Lebanon could be indicated. However, modern descendants of the Phoenician Tyrians, along with modern descendants of the Babylonians, may be found in southern Europe (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 13:1–14:2). And ancient Tyre prefigured the end-time European-centered Babylonian commercial system of the last days (see Ezekiel 27; Revelation 18).

Listed tenth and last is Assyria (Psalm 83:8). This was probably the principal Mesopotamian power involved in the conflict with David. In a modern setting, the land of Assyria could perhaps indicate northern Iraq. However, it could be that the modern descendants of the ancient Assyrians are intended—apparently, as noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 10:5-34, to be found among the Germanic people of Central Europe. As the same comments note, the early Catholic theologian Jerome applied Psalm 83:8 to the Germanic tribes invading western Europe along the Rhine.

In modern times, all the various Middle Eastern peoples listed here have fiercely opposed the people of Israel (foremost among “Israel” being the United States and Britain) and Judah (the Jewish people, including the modern Israeli state)—constantly plotting and conspiring against them and at times actually fighting them militarily or through terrorism, with many shrieking “Death to Israel!” and “Israel into the sea!” After the Arab states came together in the Arab League at the end of World War II, one of its first major actions was a joint attack on the Israeli state when it was established in 1948. Conflict has erupted numerous times since, with Israel fighting several wars for survival against overwhelming odds.

As for European involvement, Germany fought America and Britain in World Wars I and II and waged the terrible Holocaust against the Jews. The Germans were allied with the Ottoman Turks in World War I and with anti-Semitic Arabs in World War II—the Muslim Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al Husseini, finding common cause with the Nazis. As pointed out in a recent article, “In late March 1933, al-Husseini contacted the German consul general in Jerusalem and requested German help in eliminating Jewish settlements in Palestine—offering, in exchange, a pan-Islamic jihad in alliance with Germany against Jews around the world” (David Dalin, “Hitler’s Mufti,” *Human Events*, Aug. 3, 2005). And since the formation of the state of Israel shortly after World War II, Germany and other European nations have politically and economically supported the Palestinian cause against what they see as Israeli “occupation” and “oppression.”

This decades-long hostility (with its intermittent wars and intifadas) may be what is meant in Psalm 83, though the song could parallel other end-time prophecies in foretelling a more concerted and severe onslaught closer to the end of the age.

Asaph calls on God to deal with the enemy forces as He dealt with seemingly overwhelming enemies before (verses 9-12). “As with Midian” (verse 9) refers to God’s victory accomplished through Gideon in Judges 7. “As with Sisera, as with Jabin at the Brook Kishon” (Psalm 83:9) refers to God’s victory accomplished through Deborah and Barak in Judges 4–5. Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna (Psalm 83:11) were leaders of the Midianites killed by Gideon and his men (Judges 7:25–8:21).

Asaph then calls for judgment on the enemy nations—remarkably for the cause of redemption. He asks that God would pursue, frighten and shame the enemies so that they would repent and seek a relationship with God (verse 13-16). He further prays that they be dismayed, confounded forever and shamed and that they perish (verse 17). Is there a contradiction here? Some think Asaph seeks for the enemies to repent but, if they still refuse, for them to then be destroyed. That may be, but the passage is not directly worded that way.

We should realize that the word translated “forever” in verse 17 does not necessarily mean for all eternity as in modern English usage (compare Exodus 21:6). Indeed verse 18, which says that the punishment is so that the enemies will know that God is “the Most High over all the earth,” appears to

hint at the second resurrection. For how will these enemies know anything if they are dead forever? While the lesson will of course be learned by those left alive, a straightforward reading of these verses would seem to say that the lesson is for those who perish. The desire in verse 18, then, seems to be that the mortal defeat the enemies experience from God in this age will convince them of His sovereignty when they are raised in the future—leading them to the repentance mentioned in verse 16. (Jesus spoke of this resurrection to repentance in Matthew 11:20-24 and 12:41-42, and the Bible mentions it in several other references. To learn more about God’s plan to offer salvation to all human beings who lived without a proper understand of His ways, see our free booklet *What Happens After Death?*)

**“Righteousness...Shall Make His Footsteps Our Pathway” (Psalms 84–87) September 9-14**

As in the superscriptions of Psalms 8 and 81, *al gittith* in the superscription of **Psalm 84** denotes either a song of the winepress or, as in the NKJV, one played “on an instrument of Gath”—Gittite being the adjective form of this Philistine city.

Psalm 84, “the first of the six psalms that make up the final group of Book III...expresses yearning for fellowship with God, who dwells in his temple in Zion and from alone come security and blessing. References to God as [‘LORD of hosts’ or] ‘LORD Almighty’ [NIV] and a prayer for ‘our shield,’ the Lord’s ‘anointed,’ form distinctive links with the final psalm of the group (for the former see 84:1, 3, 8, 12 and 89:8; for the latter see 84:9 and 89:18, 38, 51). The five psalms thus introduced [85–89] are four cries out of distress arranged around a central song (Ps 87) that celebrates God’s special love of Zion and the care he has for all its citizens. Of these four, the first (Ps 85) and the last (Ps 89) are communal prayers, and the remaining two (Ps 89; 88) are prayers of individuals. They all make much of God’s [‘mercy and truth’ (NKJV) or] ‘love and faithfulness’ [NIV] (see 85:7, 10-11; 86:5, 13, 15; 88:11; 89:1-2, 5, 8, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49) and his ‘saving’ help (see 85:4, 7, 9; 86:2, 16; 88:1; 89:26). And three of them share another key concept, ‘righteousness’ (see 85:10-11, 13; 88:12; 89:14)” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalms 84–89).

Of this final cluster of six psalms, four are labeled in the superscriptions as coming from the sons of Korah. Psalm 84, one of these Korahite psalms, is “a prayer of longing for the house of the Lord. In tone and perspective it stands close to Ps 42 [another Korahite psalm] and may reflect similar circumstances. If so, the author (presumably a Levite who normally functioned in the temple service), now barred from access to God’s house [perhaps during a time of national calamity]...gives voice to his longing for the sweet nearness to God in his temple that he had known in the past. References to God and his temple and to the ‘blessedness’ (see vv. 4-5, 12) of those having free access to both dominates the prayer and highlights its central themes” (note on Psalm 84).

In verses 1-2, the psalmist’s unsatisfied longing leaves him faint, his whole being aching to be in God’s presence. While this could be merely figurative, it could just as well be literal. Perhaps through long prayer, fasting and mourning, he really was weak to the point of fainting.

In verse 3, “the psalmist is jealous of the small birds that have such unhindered access to the temple and the altar. They are able even to build their nests there for their young—the place where Israel was to have communion with God” (note on verse 3). These birds have found a home with God, which the psalmist himself desires. What a great blessing it is to have God’s house as your home (verse 4). We should recognize that the house of God in these verses is also representative today of God’s Church and, in an ultimate sense, of God’s Kingdom and family for all eternity.

In verse 5, the words translated “whose heart is set on pilgrimage” literally mean “‘in whose hearts are (the) highways,’ i.e. the highways the Israelites took to observe the religious festivals at Jerusalem (Zion, v. 7)” (note on verse 5). The pilgrimage here is also figurative—that of following the pathway of return to God and of pressing onward to His Kingdom. On this journey, as we see in verse 6, even difficult circumstances (represented by the Valley of Baca or Weeping) will be washed over with God’s blessings (symbolized by springs, rain and pools). We should recall here Psalm 23, where God as our Shepherd leads us through the valley of death-darkness (verse 4) on the way to dwelling in His house forever (verse 6).

The journeying pilgrims “go from strength to strength” (84:7). *The Nelson Study Bible* comments: “As one nears the temple, the rigors of the journey become tolerable, for the joy of the approaching arrival strengthens the soul” (note on verses 5-7). Even so, as God’s people today continue through life, they build character and rejoice more and more as the time draws ever closer when God’s Kingdom will

be established on the earth. “God’s saints on their hopeful way to Zion experience anew the bountiful hand of God as their ancestors did on their way through the Desert of Sinai to the promised land (see 78:15-16; 105:41; 114:8)—and as their descendants would on their return to Zion from Babylonian exile (see Isa 41:17-20; 43:19-20; 49:10)” (*Zondervan*, note on Psalm 84:6)—the return from Babylonian exile in the end time being the primary focus in these passages. Spiritual Israel, the Church, follows the highway to God today. Physical Israel and the other nations on earth will follow at Christ’s return.

In verses 8-9 the phrases “our shield” and “Your anointed” refer to the king of Israel (see 89:18, 20). Why would this prayer for the king be included here by the psalmist? “Only as God blesses the king in Jerusalem [perhaps in giving him victory against enemies preventing journey to the temple] will the psalmist once more realize his great desire to return to his accustomed service in the temple” (note on verses 8-11). Of course, in an ultimate sense, the figure of the anointed king looked forward to the future Messiah, whom God will send to establish His Kingdom.

The psalmist concludes that the privilege of spending a single day in God’s house is better than a thousand days anywhere else (verse 10). He moreover says that just being a doorkeeper (often considered to be a menial servant) in God’s house is worth more than living (presumably the life of luxury) among the wicked (same verse). As a point of consistency, helping to validate the psalm’s superscription, we should note that it was the Korahites who served as doorkeepers or gatekeepers at the tabernacle and temple (1 Chronicles 9:17-27; 26:1-19). This was in fact a “trusted office” (9:22, 26).

Some reckon from Psalm 84:10 that the post of “doorkeeper” will be a position held by some of God’s saints in His coming Kingdom—those on the bottom rung, it is derogatorily inferred. First of all, we should recognize that such a position of responsibility would not be a bad thing, as is commonly implied. Yet, secondly, we are told that *angels* rather than glorified human beings will serve as gatekeepers of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:12). And thirdly, the psalmist appears to have been referring to his own particular service or simply using metaphoric language to draw a contrast—or both. In no way is the passage meant to teach that “some will be only mere doorkeepers in God’s Kingdom.” Yet we *are* told something here about *whatever* positions God’s people occupy in His Kingdom: “No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11).

Verse 12 assures us that happiness comes through trusting in God. Be assured that He will deliver on His promises. Whatever circumstances prompted the composition of Psalm 84, this song, given its current placement in the Psalter, “now voices the devotion to and reliance on God that motivate the remaining prayers of the group it introduces” (note on Psalm 84).

**Psalm 85**, another psalm of the sons of Korah, is a lamenting plea for national restoration. Its specific setting is unknown. God has here forgiven His people and returned them from captivity (verses 1-3) but the effects of His wrath—as the lingering consequences of their sins—are still being felt (verses 4-7). This could describe the end of some foreign oppression during the period of the judges. Or it could conceivably apply to the time of King Hezekiah’s reforms following the captivity and return of 200,000 Jews at the hands of the northern kingdom of Israel in alliance with Syria during the reign of Hezekiah’s father Ahaz (see 2 Chronicles 28). Yet it could also fit with the later return from Babylonian captivity. “Many believe that vv. 1-3 refer to the return from exile and that the troubles experienced are those alluded to by Nehemiah and Malachi. Verse 12 suggests that a drought has ravaged the land and may reflect the drought with which the Lord chastened his people in the time of Haggai (see Hag 1:5-11)” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 85).

After pleading for revival, mercy and salvation (verses 6-7), the psalmist states that he will hear what God has to say, trusting that God will “speak peace” to His people—that is, with peaceful intent or directing them in the way to peace—as long as they don’t ignore His words and turn back to the foolishness of their sins (verse 8). God’s salvation, prayed for in verse 7, is available to those who fear Him (verse 9)—that is, who with the appropriate mind frame of awe and respect will heed and follow whatever God says.

In verse 10, “the union of God’s mercy and truth and His righteousness and peace describes the way things ought to be, or the state of peace spoken of in v. 8. The blending of the ideals of truth and righteousness in v. 11 suggest a vision of the kingdom of God (see Is. 11)” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 10-13). As noted above, verse 12 may indicate a period of drought and assurance, on one level, that the land will yield physical produce. Yet the picture here is primarily figurative, as verse 11 shows

truth as the crop that is produced—thanks to the figurative sunlight and rain of God’s righteousness from above.

Truth springing out of the earth may also be a messianic reference (compare Isaiah 53:2). Notice the final words of Psalm 85, wherein God’s righteous footsteps become the path for us to follow (verse 13). Jesus the Messiah has set the example for us of how to live, that we “should follow His steps” (1 Peter 2:21). And this pathway, as the highway to Zion in the previous psalm (84:5-7), leads to the glorious Kingdom of God—so that all of us may be part of the harvest of truth.

**Psalm 86** is a prayerful lament of David, wherein he cries out to God for mercy. This is the only psalm in Book III with David’s name in the title. Certain key phrases are found in other psalms of David. “I am poor and needy” (verse 2), referring to his lowly, humbled state and need for God’s saving help, is also found in Psalm 40:17 (repeated in 70:5). “To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul” (86:4) is also found in Psalm 25:1 (compare 143:8). And “Teach me Your way, O LORD” (86:11), showing his deep longing to know and follow God’s laws, is also found in Psalm 27:11.

David doesn’t give the specifics of his affliction but it is dire—as he perceived himself headed toward “the depths of Sheol” (verse 13), that is, the grave. And his predicament involved a proud mob of violent, godless men who sought his life (verse 14). David is troubled by his situation “all day long” (verse 3), and its remedy requires God’s forgiveness (verse 5). A number of other psalms of David follow this familiar pattern.

In the NKJV translation of verse 2, David prays, “Preserve my life, for I am holy.” The word translated “holy” here is not the typical Hebrew word meaning holy, *qodesh* or *kadesh*. Rather, the Hebrew word here is *hasid*, translated “godly” in Psalm 4:3: “But know that the LORD has set apart for Himself him who is *godly*.” However, the word *hasid* is closely related to the word *hesed*, used in Psalm 86 for God’s mercy, lovingkindness or covenant faithfulness. In context of the rest of verse 2, David seems to be stressing his relationship to God—that he is loyal and faithful to God. The NIV translates his words as, “...for I am devoted to you.” Thus, David is not saying he is worthy of saving because of some self-inherent goodness. He is instead basing His plea on the relationship He has with God—one of mutual covenant faithfulness.

“Among the gods there is none like You, O LORD,” David declares in verse 8, answering the rhetorical question posed in Exodus 15:11. None of the pagan gods of the surrounding nations are even real—though real demonic spirits may pose as them (compare 1 Corinthians 10:20). That David does not believe in pagan gods is clear, for he states, “You alone are God”—appropriately spelled in English with a capital G (verse 10). He foresees the time when the nations worshipping false gods will learn about their true Creator and glorify Him (verse 9)—which we see more about in the next psalm.

Besides expressing his desire to know and follow God’s teachings (verse 11), David also asks for an “undivided” heart so that he can properly fear God and sincerely praise Him (verses 11-12). And note that he is confident that he will be able to do so forevermore (verse 12) because, as he is sure, God will have delivered him from his life-threatening situation (verse 13).

The description of God’s compassion and mercy in verse 15 appears drawn from God’s description of Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6.

David concludes Psalm 86 with a final plea for mercy, strengthening and deliverance (verse 16), asking for a positive sign on his behalf (verse 17)—not to help him believe, as he already does, but so that his enemies will be put to shame.

**Psalm 87**, another Korahite psalm in the final cluster of Book III, is a song of Zion—yet a remarkably unusual one in that other nations are included in the ranks of Zion’s citizenry. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, in its introductory note on this psalm, says that it’s “difficult to postulate an original life-situation for the psalm. It may well have been associated with any of the three pilgrimage festivals, when Israel together with proselytes [from other nations] joined together in the worship of God at the temple.” While there may have been some application for that time, the psalm when composed was clearly forward-looking—prophesying of the future. Thematically, this psalm follows David’s remark in the previous psalm about all nations eventually coming to worship the true God (86:9).

“The holy mountains” of 87:1, where sits the foundation of God’s worship system and from where He will ultimately rule all nations, refers either to Israel and Judah or to the hills of Jerusalem. If the

former, verse 2 narrows the focus to Zion. If the latter, verse 2 simply defines the mountains as those of Zion. “The LORD loves the gates of Zion” because they form the entrance to the temple through which His people have a relationship with Him. *The Nelson Study Bible* states that “the verb *loves* includes the idea of choice (see Deut. 6:5) as well as emotion. God chose Jerusalem, and He also has an enduring affection for the city” (note on verses 2-3).

In verse 4, the end of the phrase “I will make mention of Rahab [i.e., Egypt (see Isaiah 30:7)] and Babylon to those who know Me” could be translated as “...AS those who know Me” (note on Psalm 87:4)—or perhaps “...AS OF those who know Me.” The NIV renders verse 4 this way: “I will record Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush [i.e., Ethiopia or perhaps all of east and southern Africa]—and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’” This is saying that people born in other nations, even nations that were troublesome to Israel, will be considered as “born in Zion” once they repent and worship the true God. Verse 6 affirms, “The LORD will record, when He registers the peoples: this one was born there.”

This process begins with the Church of God today: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Hebrews 12:22)—spiritual Zion according to the New Covenant, “the Jerusalem above...which is the mother of us all” (Galatians 4:26). The New Testament describes the gentile nations generally as “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers of the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Yet those who come into God’s Church have a drastically changed status—to that of being “no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (verse 19). Through Jesus Christ, they become “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

Then, when Christ returns, these will all be spiritually born of Zion in the resurrection. As Isaiah 66:8 says: “Shall the earth be made to give birth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once? For as soon as Zion was in labor, she gave birth to her children.”

Afterward, God’s holy mountain, His Kingdom, will grow from Zion to fill the entire earth—so that all nations will become part of Israel in a spiritual sense. All will be born in Zion. How marvelous is God’s plan for all people! It is a cause for singing and rejoicing (Psalm 87:7). The phrase “all my springs are in you” (same verse), or “all my fountains are in you” (NIV), calls to mind the “river whose streams shall make glad the city of God” (46:4), the life-giving river of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:1-5), the “fountain of life” (Jeremiah 2:13) and the “wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3), from which living water will be drawn with joy.

Occurring as it does near the end of Book III, which contains a number of psalms about Israel’s devastation at the hands of enemy nations (previewing the time of the great tribulation ahead), perhaps this psalm was placed here to remind God’s people to not focus on wishing ill on their enemies but to long for the day when all will be reconciled, dwelling happily together in the family of God.

### **Despondent Prayer; The Davidic Covenant Renounced? (Psalms 88–89) September 15-17**

There is some question as to the authorship of **Psalms 88** and 89. The superscription of Psalm 88 describes it as a song of the sons of Korah (the last of 11 Korahite psalms in the Psalter) as well as a *maskil*—an instructive psalm or “contemplation” (NKJV)—of Heman the Ezrahite. Psalm 89 is labeled as a *maskil* of Ethan the Ezrahite. Many take these names to refer to David’s Levitical choir leaders Heman and Ethan (the latter apparently also known as Jeduthun). Indeed, Heman the singer, grandson of Samuel and choir leader of the Levitical clan of Kohath, was a descendant of Korah (see 1 Chronicles 6:33-38). Yet note 1 Kings 4:31, which says that Solomon was wiser than “Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Chalcol, and Darda.” These men were evidently descendants not of Levi but of Judah’s son Zerah: “The sons of Zerah were Zimri, Ethan, Heman, Calcol, and Dara” (1 Chronicles 2:6). The distinction Ethan the Ezrahite here appears to denote Ethan the Zarhite or Zerahite (recall that Hebrew was originally written with no vowels). How do we make sense of this?

Some think traditions have become confused and that the superscriptions of Psalms 88 and 89 are in error—that the designation “Ezrahite” was wrongly added to the Heman and Ethan in these psalm titles. But that is not necessarily so. First of all, it is entirely possible that the Heman and Ethan here are not David’s Levitical music leaders at all but instead the illustrious descendants of Zerah. If so, it could be, in the case of Psalm 88, that the sons of Korah took the Zerahite Heman’s written poem and set it to

music—turning it into a song (making it “a psalm of the sons of Korah”). On the other hand, the Heman here could well be David’s Levitical choir leader, a descendant of Korah. Note that Korah himself was the son of Izhar, one of Kohath’s four sons (see 1 Chronicles 6:37-38, 18). Perhaps the descendants of Izhar were referred to as the Kohathite sub-clan of the Izrahites or Ezrahites. However, such an explanation would *not* apply to David’s music leader Ethan, who was a descendant of Levi’s son Merari. Considering all this, perhaps the Heman of Psalm 88 was David’s music leader, the Izrahite, while the Ethan of Psalm 89 was the famous Zerahite and not the Merarite choir leader (more on this in the comments on Psalm 89).

Besides attribution, the superscription of Psalm 88 also contains the phrase *le-mahalath le-annoth*. Recall that Psalm 53’s superscription contains the phrase *le-mahalath*. As noted before in the Bible Reading Program, this phrase has been variously interpreted as “On sickness,” “On suffering,” “To pipings” (on wind instruments) or “To dances” (or some sort of choreography). The second part here, *le-annoth*, is thought to mean “of humblings or “of afflictions.” It is not clear whether both parts are to be understood independently or taken together as a combined phrase (such as “On suffering of afflictions”). Also, one or both parts together could indicate either the subject matter of the psalm or another tune to which the psalm is set.

Heman, whatever his specific identity, is in Psalm 88 enduring some grave, life-threatening trial. Verse 15 in fact says that he has experienced life-threatening affliction for *years*—since his youth. It is not clear whether he means that he has been enduring the same, continuing trial ever since then or that he has experienced numerous similar dire circumstances over the years. The latter seems more likely, though his recurring problems may stem from the same root causes having never abated.

In his despair, Heman voices a desperate complaint against God: “Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?” (verse 14). He cries out to God day and night (verses 1, 9, 13), pleading for Him to hear (verse 2). He feels death is inevitable and close. He is as good as dead already, “adrift among the dead” (verse 5), cut off from God, no longer remembered by Him (same verse).

Indeed, he perceives his circumstances as coming *from* God: “You have laid me in the lowest pit” (verse 6). “You have afflicted me with all Your waves” (verse 7)—that is, of wrath and terrors (compare verses 16-17). “You have caused my friends to abandon me; you have made me repulsive to them.... I am worn out from the burden of your punishments” (verses 8, 15, Today’s English Version). Heman can’t escape his misery: “I am shut up, and I cannot get out” (verse 8).

He has called on God every day and worshipped Him with outspread hands (verse 9). Is it to no avail? Is he to die like the wicked? Will God wait to intervene until after he is already dead? (compare verse 10a). Of course, God certainly *can* intervene for those who have already died through resurrecting them—and He *will* ultimately resurrect all His people in the future. But this thought was far from the psalmist. For how would letting him die at this time bring God glory in the present? If dead, without consciousness, Heman could not declare God’s lovingkindness, faithfulness and righteousness to others (see verse 10b-12). In other words, he was no use to God dead. This recalls David’s reasoning in Psalms 6:4-5 and 30:8-9.

The psalm ends gloomily with the situation unresolved: “You have made even my closest friends abandon me, and darkness is my only companion” (88:18, TEV). Nevertheless, there is a glimmer of hope in this darkest of laments based on the way it opens, for Heman begins the psalm by addressing the Lord as “the God who saves me” (verse 1, NIV) or “God of my salvation” (NKJV). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* says: “Though the psalm ends on a lament, faith triumphs, because in everything the psalmist has learned to look to ‘the God who saves’ (v. 1). The ‘darkness’ (v. 18; cf. v. 12) of grief is reminiscent of death; but as long as there is life, hope remains focused on the Lord. [One particular commentator] is right when he writes, ‘Psalm 88 stands as a mark of realism of biblical faith. It has a pastoral use, because there are situations in which easy, cheap talk of resolution must be avoided’” (note on verses 15-18).

The *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* points out in its note on the closing cluster of Book III (Psalms 84–89): “The final two prayers (Ps 88; 89) both end unrelieved by the usual expression of confidence that God will hear and act.... However, the editors of Book III have placed them under the near shadow of Ps 87, the more distant shadow of Ps 84 and the still more distant shadow of Ps 82. From these psalms they should not be dissociated.”

**Psalm 89** begins as a psalm of praise for God's covenant with David, the Lord here seen sharing His dominion over creation with His earthly regent (verses 1-37), but ends as a lament over the apparent downfall of the Davidic dynasty (verses 38-51)—with a doxology (expression of praise) appended at the end to close Book III of the Psalter (verse 52).

This *maskil*—instructive psalm or “contemplation”—was composed by Ethan the Ezrahite. As mentioned above, his identity is disputed. Some believe this refers to David's Levitical choir leader Ethan (also apparently known as Jeduthun), but it more likely seems to refer to the Ethan the Ezrahite of 1 Kings 4:30-31, a descendant of Judah's son Zerah (compare 1 Chronicles 2:6). It should be observed that the earliest time that could conceivably fit with the latter section of this psalm is that of Pharaoh Shishak's invasion during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. Perhaps David's choir leader Ethan could have lived until this time, as was postulated in the Bible Reading Program's comments on Psalms 73–74 with regard to Asaph and his psalms about national invasion—though it seems unlikely that both choir leaders would have lived into their early 100s. (Of course, whether Asaph lived that long is not known. His psalms could have been exclusively prophecies—as could the conclusion of this psalm.) Ethan the Ezrahite in 1 Kings 4 appears to have lived at the time of or prior to Solomon—though it could be that he lived long afterward and that the comparison here between Solomon and him (and the other noted Zerahites) could have been a much later addition to the account of Solomon in the book of Kings.

One possibility worth considering is that Ethan the Ezrahite wrote only the first part of Psalm 89 (verses 1-37) as a positive psalm during the time of David or Solomon and that another author added the downturn of the final section (verses 38-51) at a much later time—perhaps even as late as the fall of the Kingdom of Judah to Babylon. Most, however, take the psalm as a unified composition—with a long setup to give the background for the lament of the final section. Of course, regardless of how the psalm came together, it is presented to us as a unified whole in the Psalter.

Ethan begins with a celebration of God's mercy (*hesed* or covenant love) and faithfulness, which he will sing of “forever...to all generations” (verses 1). God's merciful love stands firm forever, having been established “in the very heavens” (verse 2). This evidently is all aimed toward the covenant with David in verses 3-4 of a perpetual dynasty, which the prophet Nathan had revealed to David (see 2 Samuel 7:12-17). Evidently much more was said to David than is recorded in 2 Samuel 7. The establishment of the promise in the heavens is explained in more detail in verses 29 and 36-37 of Psalm 89, where it is said that David's dynasty will persist as long as heaven, sun and moon. This is related to God's statement through Jeremiah that His covenant with David was as unbreakable as the pattern of day and night and as the ordinances of heaven and earth (see Jeremiah 33:19-21, 25-26). God, moreover, explicitly swore to David that His dynasty would rule in all generations (Psalm 89:3-4). This creates a problem for many modern interpreters, as we will later consider.

Verses 5-17, concerning God's might and power, may appear to be a digression in the psalm. Yet this description of the Almighty Sovereign of heaven and earth is central to the psalm for a number of reasons. First of all, it illustrates His capacity to keep His promises—to fulfill the terms of the covenant He has made. Secondly, we are made to understand that God, on His throne of righteousness and justice (verse 14), is the true and ultimate King. He was actually Israel's King to start with (1 Samuel 12:12). The human king of Israel belongs to Him (Psalm 89:18)—serving as His viceroy, governing for Him on His throne. Note 1 Chronicles 29:23: “Then Solomon sat on the *throne of the LORD* as king instead of David his father.” Furthermore, we should bear in mind that the One known to the Israelites as God in the Old Testament was in fact the preincarnate Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 10:4). He would later be born as a human being of David's lineage and, later still, come in glory to take back His throne to Himself as Israel's King forever—in ultimate fulfillment of the promise of the Anointed King, the Messiah.

*The Nelson Study Bible* notes on Psalm 89:9-10: “Rahab [pictured elsewhere as a river- or sea-monster] is a title for Egypt (87:4 [compare Isaiah 30:7]). The sea and Rahab [here] refer to God's great victories: in the beginning, His control of His creation; in the historic past, His victory over Egypt; and in the future, His complete triumph over Satan, sin, and death (Is. 27:1; 51:9). The psalmists regularly assert God's complete control of creation (see 24:1). Nothing can challenge God's majestic rule over the entire universe.” Compare also Psalm 93:2-4. (And for more on the term Rahab, see the Bible Reading Program comments on Job 25–26.)

In Psalm 89:12, Mount Hermon is the snow-covered, 10,000-foot peak on Israel's northern border with Lebanon. Mount Tabor here, though only 1,800 feet, nevertheless rises grandly above the flatter land around it in the Galilee region. The majesty of these mountains serves but to praise the great God who made them. His arm and hand, symbolizing His strength and authority, is strong and high (verse 13).

The words "joyful sound" in verse 15 are translated from the Hebrew word *teruah*, the same word translated "blowing of trumpets" with respect to the Feast of Trumpets (see Leviticus 23:24). It refers to a great awakening blast on the shofar or ram's horn—like a shout or alarm. Perhaps the idea in Psalm 89:15 is that, in a figurative sense, all creation blares the majesty and power of God—and that those who perceive this are blessed. Responding to God, these people experience His favor, righteousness, empowerment and exaltation (verses 15-17). The horn in verse 17 is a symbol of strength (see verse 24; 75:10; 92:10-11; 132:17).

Verse 18 of Psalm 89 returns to the subject of the human king, who serves God as the people's defensive "shield" (see 84:9). This provides a transition back into a discussion of the Davidic covenant.

In Psalm 89:19, the Masoretic Text says God spoke in vision to a plurality of "holy ones" rather than the singular "holy one." This does not necessarily mean that multiple people received the vision, especially as the vision itself is singular. The statement more likely means that the one receiving the vision, presumably Nathan, communicated what he received to all of God's people.

With God's mighty arm and hand mentioned earlier, He now establishes and strengthens David as His anointed king (verses 20-21). He and those who follow Him to the throne would prevail against enemies (verses 22-24). As God ruled the sea (verse 9), He would now bestow sovereignty over the seas and rivers to the Davidic dynasty (verse 25). During the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel's borders were extended from the River Euphrates in the north to the River or Brook of Egypt in the south. And in alliance with Hiram of Tyre and later Egypt, Israel came to exercise dominion over maritime commerce in the Mediterranean and Red Seas. In the future, the Davidic dynasty's dominion over the seas would be even greater, as we will see.

The king of Israel would experience a special Father-son relationship with God (verse 26)—being as God's firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth (verse 27). David and Solomon did become the greatest kings of their time. Yet there was still more in store for the Davidic dynasty, which was to go on forever (verse 29).

Verses 30-34 show that God's promise to David was not ultimately contingent on the faithfulness of his descendants. If they disobeyed God, He would punish them but would not bring David's dynasty to an end. Verses 35-37 make it certain that God's promise is absolute and irrevocable.

All of this serves to introduce the shocking contrast of the final section. Things looked bleak for the royal descendant of David—whoever he was at the time described here. He was evidently guilty of sin for which God was angry (verse 38). And it appeared that God, despite His promises, had renounced His covenant to uphold the dynasty (verse 39). Broken defenses, ruined strongholds, plunder by enemies who are exalted, turning back the edge of the king's sword and not sustaining him in the battle (verses 40-43)—all of this point to a time of national invasion and the suffering of crushing military defeat. As mentioned earlier, the earliest time that would fit such circumstances was the invasion of Pharaoh Shishak during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. Yet this could refer to a later invasion and defeat—perhaps even the final cessation of the Davidic dynasty in Judah at the time of the Babylonian invasion. Note the dreadful scale of the events. The psalm says the Davidic crown and throne have been cast down to the ground (verses 39, 44). The dynasty appeared doomed.

How could this be? Had not God utterly sworn that such a thing could never happen? Yet it looked like God was flouting every promise He had made to David regarding his throne and dynasty. How long will God let this horrible situation continue, the psalmist asks (verse 46). Life is so short—will he live to see the end of this situation? (verses 47-48). Where is the lovingkindness (the *hesed*) sworn to David, as noted at the beginning of the psalm? (verse 49; compare verses 1-3). The psalmist concludes by praying that God will think on the heavy burden of shameful reproach—the terrible mocking—that all His people, including His anointed king, are now being made to suffer from enemies (verses 50-51).

As hopeless as the end of the psalm may seem, it is not utterly so. For implicit in the question of how long this situation will go on is the thought that God may yet intervene. Indeed, why bother praying if there is no hope that He will act? Moreover, as much as the psalm ends in lament and confusion, we

should recall that most of the psalm—the first part—speaks in glowing terms of God and His faithfulness. Looking back at the first verse gives us the real focus of the psalm—God’s merciful love and faithfulness is eternal and will be extolled forever. This is the lens through which the difficult circumstances at the end of the psalm are to be viewed.

How, then, do we reconcile this? An important clue is found in verse 4. God said David’s throne would be built up to all generations—that is, one of his dynastic descendants would rule in all generations. Yet nowhere is it promised that there would be no breaks in the reigns of David’s descendants. In fact, the punishing of the kings for transgression (see verse 32) could evidently include the temporary cessation of the Davidic throne—as long as a generation did not pass without David’s throne being reestablished.

Yet what of the Davidic dynasty seemingly terminating with Zedekiah at the time of Babylon’s invasion? Most Bible commentators today would be hard pressed to explain this in light of the Davidic covenant. Some think the throne was reestablished with the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. But Jesus was born more than 500 years later—after which many generations had passed, despite God’s promise that David’s throne would rule in all generations. Moreover, Jesus did not come to reign on David’s throne at His first coming. He will do that when He later returns. So, have more than 2,500 years now gone by without a descendant of David ruling on his throne? Has God voided His covenant with David and broken His promises after all?

The answer is no. The Davidic throne was in fact transferred from Judah to Israel at the time of Babylon’s invasion (compare Ezekiel 17). This entailed planting David’s lineage in the British Isles—as Israelite tribes were in the process of migrating there (see our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*). Shocking though it may seem, the royal dynasty of Great Britain today is the continuation of the line of David. Britain’s monarchs have been the highest of the earth (see Psalm 89:27)—with historical dominion over the sea (see verse 25). To trace this amazing story, be sure to read our online publication *The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future* at [www.ucg.org/brp/materials/](http://www.ucg.org/brp/materials/).

Finally, we should realize that, as previously mentioned, David’s descendant Jesus Christ is going to come back and reassume His rightful place as King over Israel as well as all nations. Through Him, the ultimate Anointed One (Messiah) and firstborn of God who will rule supreme over all the earth’s kings, the sublime promises to David will come to fullest fruition—and His omnipotent reign will last for all eternity to come.

With the compilation of the Psalter, Psalm 89 in its final form concludes with the grateful praise of verse 52, bringing Book III to a positive ending.

### **“You Have Been Our Dwelling Place in All Generations” (Psalms 90–91) September 18-20**

We come now to Book IV of the Psalter, which, as pointed out in the Bible Reading Program’s introduction to Psalms, appears to have originally been joined with Book V in a single collection. As the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* notes, this section of the Psalter begins with Psalms 90–100, “a series of 11 psalms arranged within the frame ‘you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations’ (90:1) and ‘his faithfulness continues through all generations’ (100:5)—a series that begins with prayer and ends with praise. The first two of these psalms (90–91) are thematically connected (point and counterpoint); the next three (92–94) form a trilogy that serves as a transition to the final thematic cluster (95–99). At the very middle, Ps 95 anticipates the four following psalms and adds a warning for the celebrants of Yahweh’s reign that echoes the warning of Moses in Dt 6:13-18. Evidently the editors of the Psalter intended readers of this group of psalms to hear echoes of the voice of Moses as interceder (Ps 90) and as admonisher (95:8-11), through which ministries (shared also by Aaron and Samuel) Israel had been blessed under the reign of the Great King, Yahweh” (note on Psalms 90–100). We should also bear in mind that Books IV and V look forward to the coming reign of God over all the earth.

**Psalm 90** is the only psalm attributed to Moses in the book of Psalms (although he wrote two other songs that we know of, found in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32). This attribution makes Psalm 90 the psalm of oldest recorded origin. It is “a prayer to the everlasting God to have compassion on his servants, who through the ages have known him to be their safe haven (v. 1; see also 91:9) but who also painfully experience his wrath because of their sin and his sentence of death that cuts short their lives—a plea that through this long night of his displeasure God will teach them true wisdom (see v. 12...) and, in the

morning after, bless them in equal measure with expressions of his love so that joy may yet fill their days and the days of their children and their daily labors be blessed. This psalm has many links with Ps 39” (note on Psalm 90).

The translation of verse 3 is disputed. Where the KJV and NKJV have “destruction,” other modern versions have “dust.” The word here literally denotes “powder,” though it can have the sense of “being crushed” or, as a footnote in the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh says, “contrition” (being broken and humbled). Paired with the word “return” in the next line, the idea in the KJV and NKJV seems to be that God has punished people for sin, bringing them to destruction or humbling, and then commands them to “Return” (to Him), this being the Old Testament term for “Repent.” Just as God would here be telling the people to return to Him in verse 3, Moses in verse 13 asks God to “Return” to His people—not in repentance but in attentive care. Yet those who advocate the word “dust” in verse 3 see the pairing with “return” as meaning that God commands mortal human beings to return to dust (i.e., to the ground), recalling the curse of Genesis 3:19. Moreover, this is seen to fit better with the imagery of people quickly perishing in the verses that follow (Psalm 90:4-6). It should be noted, however, that Moses used a very different word for dust in Genesis 3. And the context of quickly perishing could just as well mean, “Repent, for you don’t have much time.”

Life can sometimes seem long to people—like they have plenty of time to do whatever they will do. But a human lifetime, indeed, as long a time as human beings have been around, is only a very short period in God’s eternal perspective. Moses says that a thousand years (just over the longest time that anyone had ever lived, perhaps hearkening back to Adam, Methuselah and Noah, who lived to be 930, 969 and 950 respectively) are gone as yesterday (a single day) to God—or as an even shorter period of time, a watch in the night having been about four hours in the Old Testament period (verse 4). Early rabbinic tradition came to view this verse, juxtaposed with God’s Sabbath command about resting from daily toil, as meaning that the thousands of years of human history are represented by the days of the week—6,000 years of man’s sin and futile toil followed by a 1,000-year Sabbath of God’s rule. The apostle Peter appears to have been referring to Psalm 90:4 when He wrote of Christ’s coming at the end of human history: “But beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise” (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The NIV apparently gives the correct sense of the beginning of verse 5 in Psalm 90: “You sweep men away in the sleep of death.” The latter part of the verse and verse 6 compare human life to grass springing up in the morning and, in the heat of the sun, withering by the end of the day. This should not be construed literally to mean that grass lives only one day—though it sometimes does live only a few days in the Middle Eastern deserts. This is rather a figurative picture, keeping with the imagery of human life as beginning and ending within a single “day.”

Verse 8 is a reminder that God sees all of our sins—even our secret ones. We may hide things from other people, but we can’t hide them from God—and His perspective is the one that ultimately counts.

In verse 9 Moses laments, “All our days pass away under your wrath” (NIV)—so that “we finish our years like a sigh.” In its note on verse 7, *The Nelson Study Bible* states regarding being consumed by God’s anger and wrath: “The allusion is to the anger of God against the unbelieving Israelites in the wilderness (see Num. 13; 14). An entire generation spent their lives wandering in the wilderness because of their unbelief and rebellion.” Other commentators, however, suggest that the context is not the wilderness experience of Israel but life outside the Garden of Eden. “If fellowship with God could be pictured as life lived together in a Garden, then it was sin that had excluded humanity from such a wonderful life (Gen. 3:22-24). Accordingly man now lives outside the Garden under the wrath of God” (George Knight, *Psalms*, comments on Psalm 90).

The latter idea here seems to fit better with the age limits Moses cites in verse 10. He presents a typical human life span as 70 years and points out that it may be extended to 80 if someone’s physical constitution permits. This is not to cap human life at 80, but it does seem to label 80 as being a rather old age for people. Yet consider that Moses himself was already 80 at the time of the Exodus. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, he lived to be 120—and his brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, were even older when they died around that time. It seems odd that at such an age, looking back over the years of wilderness wandering, Moses would be saying that life might be stretched to 80. This fact would seem to support Moses having written this psalm closer to the time of the Exodus, when he perhaps did not

expect to live to be 120—so that, as mentioned above, God’s judgment in the psalm would refer to the whole of human experience since the Garden of Eden rather than merely Israel’s years of wandering.

In any case, Moses’ point in verse 10 is that human life is brief and that, even if it’s longer than usual, it’s still filled with labor and sorrow. It brings to mind Jacob’s statement to the Egyptian pharaoh: “The days of the years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage” (Genesis 47:9).

*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states that the beginning of Psalm 90:11 is meant in the sense of a “strong affirmation: ‘Nobody knows the power of your anger!’” The rest of the verse apparently means that the fear of God is justified because of what His wrath can result in. The point is that man should live carefully, with awe and respect for God, fearing to disobey Him. Moses in verse 12 asks God to “teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” The idea here, the central point of the psalm for our sakes, is that we come to recognize how short our time is, to value the time we have so as to use it wisely (compare Ephesians 5:15-16; Colossians 4:5).

In Psalm 90:13, Moses pleads with God to return—meaning, as mentioned earlier, to revisit His servants with help and care. He interjects with the question common to laments, “How long?” (verse 13)—how long will it be until God does what he is asking. When will God return and satisfy us with His unfailing love so that we may be glad and rejoice? (verse 14). Moses asks that God make us glad in proportion to the affliction He has laid on us in this life (verse 15). In fact, He will ultimately go far beyond that. For as the apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:18, “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

Moses prays that God’s beauty (verse 17), the wonderful vision of His work and glory (verse 16), would be upon us, giving our lives and work a sense of continuity and meaning. His loving intervention for us establishes true value and purpose for life. “Frail, limited, and sinful as man is, the love of God can transform what is weak to His own glory” (*Expositor’s*, note on verse 17).

*The Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, in its introductory note on Psalm 90, states: “So that the melancholy depiction of the human state here might not stand alone, the editors of the Psalter have followed it immediately with a psalm that speaks in counterpoint of the happy condition of those who ‘dwell in the shelter of the Most High’ (91:1 [compare 90:1]) and ‘make the Most High {their} dwelling’ (91:9; see also 92:13). To isolate Ps 90 from this context is to distort its intended function in the Psalter collection. See also Ps 103.”

**Psalm 91** is without attribution in the Hebrew Masoretic Text. The Greek Septuagint version adds a superscription saying that the psalm is “of David.” We should note a thematic connection between the previous psalm and this one. Psalm 90 begins with the words, “Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations” (verse 1). This psalm begins, “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty” (91:1; compare verse 9). *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible* refers to Psalm 91 as “a glowing testimony to the security of those who trust in God—set beside Ps 90 as a counterpoint to the dismal depiction of the human condition found there” (note on Psalm 91).

The first two verses present four different designations for God: *Elyown* (“Most High”); *Shaddai* (“Almighty” though perhaps meaning All-Nourishing or All-Sufficient as the root *shad* means “breast”); *Yahweh* (translated “the LORD” but meaning “He Is That He Is,” signifying Eternal, Ever-living or Self-Existent); and *Elohi* (“My God” or “My Strong One”). These distinctions communicate various aspects of God’s nature. Note in verse 14 that God sets on high those who have known His name—not referring to Hebrew pronunciation but to understanding who He is and what He is all about, which His names help to reveal. (Many people have been led to believe that there is a single sacred Hebrew name for God that must always be used when addressing Him, a doctrine that contradicts what the Bible reveals. For more on this, see “The Sacred Name—Is a Christian Required to Use It?” at [www.ucg.org/reprints/index.htm](http://www.ucg.org/reprints/index.htm).)

Dwelling “in the secret place of the Most High” (verse 1) recalls David’s words in Psalms 27:5 and 31:20, which mention God hiding His people in the secret place of His presence within His tabernacle or pavilion. Abiding “under the shadow of the Almighty” (Psalm 91:1) is related to verse 4: “And He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge.” This is a figurative picture of God as a mother bird sheltering its young—imagery found elsewhere in David’s psalms (61:4; 63:7). As noted before, the word for “wings” can also denote “skirts” or the borders of a garment—with the

imagery of a man taking a woman under his wing as symbolic of marriage (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Ruth). It is likely that parent-child and husband-wife metaphors are being blended in these various references to show the great care God has in protecting His people—as the imagery is also blended with the idea of God being the defensive refuge and fortress of His people (compare 61:3-4; 91:2, 4). Psalm 91:3 says God will deliver His people “from the snare of the fowler”—that is, traps laid by bird catchers (see also 124:7)—again comparing God’s people to young birds.

The psalmist goes on to explain various ways that God’s people will be kept from harm. It is important to focus on this and hold tight to the scriptural promises here. However, we must recognize that while God’s people have His certain promise of protection, this does not mean that no harm of any kind will ever come to them in this life. Note verse 7, where thousands will fall around you but you yourself as a servant of God will not be touched. This has often been the experience of God’s people, just as declared here. But the verse does not say that God’s people will *never* be touched by peril or death. Verse 10 should be understood in the context of verse 7—that when many around God’s people fall, they will be spared. Here, too, it is not stated that no calamity will *ever* befall those who serve God. The psalm itself points out that they will experience trouble in life (verse 15). Consider what happened to Job, David, Paul and others—and even to Jesus Christ, the quintessential righteous person.

Verses 11-12 say that God has commissioned His angels with protecting His people—that they will carry you through life “lest you dash your foot against a stone.” So do God’s people never stub their toes? That is not what is meant here. It does *not* say, “...so that you will *never* dash your foot against a stone.” Rather, the point is that God’s angels often intervene to protect us, sometimes even from seemingly minor harm. In the monumental confrontation between Jesus and Satan prior to the start of Jesus’ ministry, the devil resorted to quoting Scripture, twisting it to suit his aims. And he chose these verses among others to make his challenge. He told Jesus to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the temple because Psalm 91:11-12 promised that God’s angels would be there to catch Him (Matthew 4:5-6). Jesus countered, “It is also written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (verse 7, NIV)—quoting Deuteronomy 6:16, referring to the negative sense of challenging God’s grace. Clearly God’s promise of protection does not mean that we may arrogantly presume on His favor through trying to set the terms of how He must intervene for us (by deliberately placing ourselves in harm’s way).

Besides helping us to better understand Psalm 91, Jesus’ response teaches us something else about comprehending the Bible in general by His words “it is *also* written.” We should not base our understanding of a biblical subject on just one or a few verses when there are others that bear on the matter. Rather, we are to consider all of the verses that bear on a matter and deduce the truth from the whole of pertinent Scripture.

With all this in perspective, let’s notice more specifically what Psalm 91 tells us. Verse 3 does not say that we will never fall into an enemy trap or experience deadly illness. Yet we can take confidence that God says here that He will *deliver* us from these. Sometimes this means keeping us from them (perhaps most of the time), but it may mean rescuing us after a period of affliction. And at times ultimate deliverance—salvation—is in view. Even if we should die, God will later resurrect us to be utterly impervious to harm, just as He is.

Verses 5-6 do not say that we will never experience terrifying situations, disease or devastation though He often spares us from these. But when these do come, confidence in God’s care and His overall plan will help us to not “be afraid”—that is, to not live in fear. Even this does not mean that we will never go through doubting moments of worry and fright. Rather, the idea is that, if we earnestly seek God, our lives will not be characterized by fear but by faith (compare 94:19).

In the concluding verses, God Himself speaks within the words of the psalm (91:14-16). Verse 15 assures us that He will answer our prayers and that, whatever troubles do befall us, He will be *with* us in them—helping us to endure them. Moreover, we see again here that God will deliver us (verses 14-15), if not immediately then over time—and certainly when we are later resurrected to be in His Kingdom. “Long life” and “salvation” in the final verse applies most fully to that future time. God often does bless His people with longevity and deliverance in this life, but consider that Jesus Christ, the most righteous person to ever live, died at age 33. The ultimate long and satisfying life is that which is still to come—in contrast to the brevity and sorrow of life today as presented in Psalm 90.

**“The LORD Reigns” (Psalms 92–94)****September 21-25**

No author is given for **Psalm 92**, though some suggest that verses 10-11 may imply that one of the Davidic kings composed it. The psalm is described in the superscription as “A Song for the Sabbath day,” the only psalm designated this way in the Psalter. *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible* notes on this title: “In the postexilic liturgy [worship service] of the temple, this psalm came to be sung at the time of the morning sacrifice on the Sabbath. (The rest of the weekly schedule was: first day, Ps 24; second day, Ps 48; third day, Ps 82; fourth day, Ps 94; fifth day, Ps 81; sixth day, Ps 93.)” This schedule is reflected in both the Talmud and the psalm headings in the Greek Septuagint (see *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, footnote on 92:1 and introductory note on Psalm 24). While the weekly Sabbath is a memorial to God’s creation, culminating in mankind, it also looks forward to His completion of man’s creation in the age to come. As shown in Hebrews 3–4, the Sabbath represents the time of God’s Kingdom.

Psalm 90 began the present cluster of psalms with the troubles of life in this age, seeking God’s compassion on those who abide in Him and looking forward to future reward. Psalm 91 followed with God’s deliverance of those who dwell with Him, to be fully realized in an ultimate sense at the end of the present age. Now, Psalm 92 further progresses into God’s ultimate deliverance of His people (those planted in His house), along with judgment on the wicked. This ties in well with the Sabbath as representative of the time when God’s Kingdom will be established on earth. And it all serves to introduce Books IV and V of the Psalter, which in general look forward to that wonderful time.

*Zondervan’s* introductory note on Psalm 92 calls it “a joyful celebration of the righteous rule of God. Its testimony to the prosperity of the righteous, ‘planted in the house of the LORD’ (v. 13), links it thematically with Ps 91...while its joy over God’s righteous reign relates it to the cluster of psalms that follow (Ps 93–100; see especially Ps 94). There are, in fact, reasons to believe that the editors of the Psalter brought together Ps 92–94 as a trilogy that serves as a bridge between Ps 90–91 and 95–99.”

The psalmist sums up the reasons for praising God as His great works and His deep thoughts (verses 4-5). Senseless, foolish men don’t grasp the enormity of God’s work or the scope of His thinking. The psalmist draws on the metaphor of grass, used in Psalm 90:5-6 for the brevity of human life, to particularly describe the fate of evildoers: they will flourish briefly, be scattered and then perish (92:7-9).

God has lifted up the psalmist’s “horn,” symbolic of his strength (verse 10; compare 75:4-5; 89:18, 24; 132:17). This imagery transitions to that of anointing oil, which was poured from a horn (see 1 Samuel 16:13). As noted above, the mention in Psalm 92 of anointing (verse 10) and evil enemies brought down (verse 11; compare 54:7; 59:10) has led some to see a king as the psalm’s author—though priests were also anointed, as were some prophets, and these had enemies too. In any case, many view the reference here as prefiguring the future Anointed One or Messiah.

In its note on the conclusion of Psalm 92 (verses 12-15), *Expositor’s* states: “How different is the tone of these verses from the lament of 90:5-6! The wicked are easily swept away whereas the ‘righteous’ (...cf. 1:6) are likened to a ‘palm tree’ and to ‘a cedar of Lebanon’ ([Psalm 92] v. 12). Both trees are symbolic of strength, longevity, and desirability (cf. v. 14; Isa 2:13; 65:22; Hos 14:5-6; Zech 11:2). The metaphorical representation of trees growing and bearing fruit ‘in the courts’ of the Lord ([Psalm 92] v. 13; cf. 84:2, 10) suggests the closeness of the righteous to their God (cf. Isa 61:3; Jer 32:41). For a similar expression, see [Psalm] 52:8, where the psalmist [i.e., David] compares himself to ‘an olive tree flourishing in the house of God.’ For the imagery of fruitfulness and vigor, see 1:3. Whereas the wicked perish prematurely, the godly rejoice in the promise that the Lord’s favor rests on them even in old age”—indeed, *especially* in old age, meaning even beyond this physical life in perpetual spirit existence. As previously mentioned, the ultimate Anointed One died young in physical terms, at age 33, but, now resurrected, He will live on forever and ever—as will all those firmly planted in God’s house (today signifying His spiritual temple, His Church, and ultimately meaning His eternal Kingdom and family).

Like Psalms 91 and 92, **Psalms 93-100** are without attribution in the Hebrew Masoretic Text. However, the Greek Septuagint translation titles Psalms 93–99 as being “of David.” Indeed, two of these clearly are. The New Testament attributes Davidic authorship to Psalm 95 (see Hebrews 4:7). And Psalm 96 is taken from David’s song to celebrate the ark’s placement in the tabernacle in Jerusalem (compare 1 Chronicles 16:23-33).

One of the royal psalms (those which celebrate God as King), Psalm 93, as the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* notes, is “a hymn to the eternal, universal and invincible reign of the Lord, a theme it shares with Ps

47; 95–99. Together these hymns offer a majestic confession of faith in and hope for the kingdom of God on earth. They were probably composed for the liturgy of a high religious festival [likely the Feast of Trumpets or Tabernacles] in which the kingship of the Lord—over the cosmic order, over the nations and in a special sense over Israel—was annually celebrated.... And implicitly, where not explicitly, the Lord’s kingship is hailed in contrast to the claims of all other gods; he is ‘the great King above all gods’ (95:3).... Ps 93 appears to have been separated from Ps 95-99 to serve as a thematic pivot between Ps 92 and 94 (as Ps 47 was used as a pivot between Ps 46 and 48). It celebrates Yahweh’s secure cosmic rule that grounds his righteous and effective rule over human affairs—which is the joy (Ps 92) and the hope (Ps 94) of those who rely on him for protection against the assaults of the godless fools who live by violence.”

Psalm 93 opens with the key of the royal psalms: “The LORD reigns” (verse 1; compare 96:10; 97:1; 99:1). *The Nelson Study Bible* comments: “In general, the royal psalms speak of the Lord as King in three different ways. He is King over creation, for He is the Creator (74:12-17). He is King over the Israelites (44:4), for He is their Savior. And He is the coming King, for He will eventually judge everyone (47:7, 8). Sometimes in people’s minds God’s kingdom is narrowly identified with the coming glorious rule of Jesus: God’s present reign is ignored. But sometimes [in fact, more typically] the opposite is true. God’s present rule can be emphasized so much that Jesus’ coming is disregarded. The royal psalms consistently balance these two ideas: ‘The LORD reigns’ (93:1), but the Lord is also coming to establish His permanent rule (24:9 [compare 96:13; 98:9])” (“INDepth: The Royal Psalms,” sidebar on Psalm 93). Indeed, these go hand in hand. It is God’s perpetual sovereignty on His throne “from everlasting” (verse 2; compare 90:2)—His eternal omnipotence—that enables, and gives surety to the promises of, His unending reign to come.

Psalm 93:1-2 describes God robed in military victory regalia, His establishment of the world as unmovable (unable to be wrested from His control) and the persistence of His throne from past eternity. It is in this context that verses 3-4 speak of the rising “floods” and the “mighty waves of the sea.” The threefold repetition of “floods” creates a poetic sense of waves pounding on the shore. Yet God is higher and mightier—and, given the context of verses 1-2, victorious over them. This recalls Psalm 89:9: “You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, You still them.” And Psalm 29:10: “The LORD sat enthroned at the Flood, and the LORD sits as King forever.” This all may reflect on one level God’s power of creation that brought the world out of primordial chaos, when “darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). It likely also applies to when man later witnessed the vast destructive powers of the waters in the global Flood of Noah’s day. Stories of that episode left people with the concept of the flooding waves as irresistible cosmic forces of destruction. Yet God is high above these forces—and is able to control them. And He rules the waves of the sea even now, having set the boundaries of how far they may come over the land (Job 38:8, 11). In other passages, floods, waters and seas also represent peoples and nations—including invading armies. God stands above all peoples and forces, ever the victor.

Some have noted a similarity in the descriptions here to the Canaanite god Baal, who “was supposed to have been victorious over the waters” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Psalm 93:3-4). Yet we should recognize that Baal was merely a counterfeit of the true God in some respects. Scripture sets the record straight in relating who is truly victorious over the waters—Almighty God. Moreover, consider God’s testimonies and holiness in verse 5. *The Nelson Study Bible* notes on this verse: “While this psalm uses language resembling [to some degree] the worship of Baal to emphasize the greatness of God (Ps. 29), it also glorifies God with praises never attributed to Baal. None of the accolades of Baal speak of his *testimonies*. But God is superior to Baal, for he is faithful to His word. He is the gracious God who speaks to his people; He is the holy God of Scripture who is approached by His people; and he is the eternal God whom we worship, as did the people of ancient Israel.”

The transition to verse 5 in Psalm 93 is interesting. Whereas verses 1-4 present God’s revelation of His power and might through creation (compare Revelation 1:20), verse 5 of Psalm 93 says that God is also revealed through Scripture and His house. Such a transition from God’s revelation of Himself through creation to revelation through His law and testimony is also found in Psalm 19:1-8. Psalm 93:5 declares that God’s scriptural testimonies are trustworthy. They are as rock-solid and as firmly established as the world (compare verse 1). As for God’s house, in the time of the psalm’s composition it would have

referred to either the tabernacle or temple of God—showing that God was revealed to His people through the worship system practiced there. God’s house today, through which His holiness is revealed, is His Church. And, of course, His house in an ultimate sense signifies His eternal Kingdom and family.

“**Psalm 94** is a royal psalm, since the phrase ‘Judge of the earth’ (v. 2) is equivalent to ‘King’ (50:4-6). The righteous call for the divine Judge to punish evil in the world (82:8; 96:13; 98:9)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Psalm 94). It is also a lament over present conditions, wherein the psalmist—David if the Septuagint’s attribution is correct—pleads for the time of divine intervention in world affairs described in the surrounding psalms. The double repetition of statements and thoughts throughout magnifies the urgency and impact of the psalm.

The song begins by doubly stressing that vengeance belongs to God and asking that He would take action and punish the proud (verses 1-2; compare 79:10; Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19). Of course, we must understand that God’s “vengeance” is not a hateful tit-for-tat lashing out but the exercise of perfect justice tempered, as circumstances warrant, with patience and mercy. The psalmist twice cries out with the common lament phrase “how long,” aching to know how long the world must endure wicked people perpetrating their evil ways. Verses 5-6 mention the harm they do to the weak of society. God commanded that special care be shown to those in need, but the wicked afflict and murder them! And all the while they are blasphemous in their arrogant attitude, thinking they are getting away with something despite God—as if He has no understanding of what’s going on (verses 4, 7).

But *they* are the ones who need to understand—that He knows exactly what is going on. He is the One who invented seeing and hearing and the means to experiencing them! And He sees and hears everything (verses 8-9). He will teach the nations a powerful lesson about who He is and His acute awareness through the correction He administers (verse 10). The thoughts of man are nothing next to what He knows and what He can bring to pass (compare verse 11).

Far better than instruction from severe correction is to be instructed from God’s law (verse 12)—as those who submit to Him are. Learning the teachings of Scripture gives us “rest”—i.e., comfort and peace—until the time that God chooses to bring His judgment on the wicked (verse 13). For through God’s Word we come to understand that He will not abandon His people (verse 14) and that just judgment will at some point return (verse 15)—in an ultimate sense when God’s Kingdom is at last established on the earth.

In verse 16, the psalmist rhetorically asks twice who will act for him against evildoers. The answer, of course, as the next few verses make clear, is God. Indeed, in verse 17 the psalmist declares that God has already helped him—otherwise he would be dead. This is true for all of us even now. Consider that if God did not restrain Satan and his demons, they would surely have already exterminated mankind, and God’s people in particular. The psalmist knows that God is there to help him even when he thinks he’s falling (verse 18). In the midst of the worry and fear that all experience, the psalmist knows that God provides him with comfort and true happiness to make it through life (verse 19).

In verse 20 the psalmist asks, “Shall the throne of iniquity, which devises evil by law, have fellowship with You?” The question is obviously rhetorical, as the answer is surely no. But whom is the psalmist talking about here? Most take the reference here to evil people in positions of power generally. That could be. Yet if the psalmist is David or one of his royal successors, he could instead be referring to himself. That is, he would be rhetorically asking, “If my rule as king were evil, could I have fellowship with You?” Again, the answer would be no. And the fellowship he has with God would testify to the righteousness of his reign—classing him among the innocent whom the wicked oppose (see verse 21).

In verse 22, the psalmist reaffirms his confidence in God’s ongoing protection (compare verse 17). And he closes in verse 23 with the assurance that God has brought on the wicked their own iniquity and will yet bring this to fullness in final judgment. Here we see that God’s laws exact their own penalty on those who live in defiance of them. The present life of the wicked is not so rosy as it might appear at a glance. And in the end, those who persist in evil will—as is twice stated in keeping with the repetition through the psalm—be destroyed.

This then sets the stage for the Kingdom of God, wherein only the righteous may rule and flourish.

**FALL FESTIVAL BREAK (Personal study)****September 26–October 31**

*We are pausing for the last week of September and for the month of October to allow time for preparation for and the observance of God's autumn festivals, which symbolize the time of Jesus Christ's return to the earth—also taking into consideration time needed afterward to travel home from the Feast of Tabernacles, catch up on errands and settle back into routines.*

*The Feast of Trumpets this year is observed from sunset Monday, October 3, to sunset Tuesday, October 4. The Day of Atonement is observed from sunset Wednesday, October 12, to sunset Thursday, October 13. The seven-day Feast of Tabernacles begins sunset Monday, October 17, with the Eighth Day, the final holy day of the year, observed from sunset Monday, October 24, through sunset Tuesday, October 25.*

*To learn more about God's annual festivals as recorded in Leviticus 23, please send for, download or read online our free booklet God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind. The Bible Reading Program resumes November 1.*

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