



Good News
Bible Reading Program

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

— July 2005 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-4 July	36) Man's wickedness and God's mercy and goodness; 37) The reward of the righteous and end of the wicked	Psalms 36–37
5-7 July	38–39) Prayers for relief from chastening illness and enemies	Psalms 38–39
8-10 July	40) Prayer for relief from adversities and enemies; 41) Prayer for healing	Psalms 40–41
11-15 July	42–43) Yearning for God in the face of enemy oppression; 44) Collective prayer for deliverance from enemy oppression; 45) The divine King and His bride	Psalms 42–45
16-19 July	46) God the refuge of His people; 47) God triumphant over the nations; 48) Mount Zion, the city of the great King	Psalms 46–48
20-22 July	49) The foolishness of trusting in wealth; 50) God the Judge of His people	Psalms 49–50
23-26 July	51) Prayer of repentance; 52) The wicked who trust in wealth destroyed, the righteous who trust in God's mercy saved; 53) The foolishness of godless and corrupt mankind	Psalms 51–53
27-31 July	54) Prayer for help against enemies; 55) Trusting God for help through betrayal and conspiracy; 56) Trusting God for relief from enemies; 57) Trusting God for refuge from enemies	Psalms 54–57

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading
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**“Those Blessed by Him Shall Inherit the Earth,
But Those Cursed by Him Shall Be Cut Off” (Psalms 36–37)**

July 1-4

Psalm 35 concluded with reference to the prosperity of God's *servant*—i.e., David (verse 27). Now, the superscription of **Psalm 36** refers to David as “the servant of the LORD.” The psalm begins by addressing the nature of wickedness, but this is soon contrasted with God's faithfulness and righteousness and His rewarding of His servants such as David with an abundance of true prosperity.

The word “oracle” in verse 1 can simply mean “utterance.” The actual order of the verse is “An oracle of transgression of the wicked within my heart.” Some see “of the wicked” as actually meaning “to the wicked.” However, the psalm's focus on God rewarding the righteous and the request for the righteous to be kept from wickedness goes against that being the aim of the psalm. Some translations give “within my heart” as “within *his* heart,” thinking the wicked person is intended. However, the Hebrew *lebi* in the Masoretic Text does mean “my heart.” Simply put, David is expressing his deep thoughts about the sinful way of the wicked.

David's consideration of the sinful course of the wicked (verses 2-4) is followed by contemplation of God's mercy, faithfulness, righteousness, justice and unfailing love (verses 5-7). “The contrast of these verses with the previous ones is extreme. Just as the revelation of the depravity in vv. 1-4 is awful, the revelation of the Lord's love is even more wonderful.... The contrasts continue with David ranging from the highest mountains to the depths of the sea to describe the perfect character of God. The height of the great mountains can be compared to how great God's righteousness is; the depths of the seas can be compared with how mysterious and inaccessible God's true judgments are” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 5-6).

Like nestlings seeking shelter and nourishment from a mother bird, so may people find protection and provision from God (verse 7). If the wicked would only cease from their headlong pursuit of fleeting self-gratification through sin and turn to God, they would find true and abundant satisfaction through the fullness of life in His family (verse 8). For the righteous “drink from the river of [God's] pleasures.” What a beautiful word picture this is—of an endless, flowing supply of joyful experience forevermore! This river flows from the “fountain of life”—God's Holy Spirit bringing eternal salvation and all its rewards (see also Isaiah 12:3; 55:1-2; Jeremiah 2:13; John 7:37-39).

It is only in God's “light” that we “see light” (Psalm 36:9). In context, this may mean that we don't even really know what it means to live and be happy until we experience life in the way God intended. Rather than groping in the blindness of human plotting to find our way, the truth of God reveals the path to ultimate and lasting bliss. On the other hand, the idea here could be that it is through God shining on us (favoring and guiding us) that we will live to see a bright outcome for our lives (compare 37:3-6; see also Isaiah 60:19-20).

In closing, David prays that God's loyal love will continue for those who “know” Him and are thereby “upright in heart” (Psalm 36:10). Indeed, truly knowing God implies more than knowing *about* Him. It means having a relationship with Him, which is based on obedience to His laws (see 1 John 2:3-4; John 15:14). To have a relationship, we have to spend quality time with God through prayer, Bible study and contemplative meditation. Even fellowship with likeminded believers is an important way to fellowship with the Father and Christ (1 John 1:3)—as the Father and Christ dwell in faithful believers through the Holy Spirit.

David further asks for protection from the wicked who refuse to submit to God's way (Psalm 36:11)—perhaps thinking of some who were scheming to overthrow him. And he concludes with a final consideration (or prophetic glimpse) of the doom of the wicked (verse 12), which we see more about in the next psalm.

Psalm 37 ends an apparent grouping of four related psalms (34–37). Like Psalm 34, this one is an alphabetic acrostic, though in this case two verses are usually devoted to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Because the acrostic style makes it easier to memorize the songs that use it, some see these as “classroom” or “teaching” psalms. This is particularly the case with Psalm 37, as it is essentially a series of related proverbs or wise sayings. (Observe that verse 1 is nearly identical to Proverbs 24:19.)

David's message in the proverbs of Psalm 37 is rather similar to what he said in Psalm 36. The *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* notes in its introduction to Psalm 37: "This psalm's dominant theme is related to the contrast between the wicked and the righteous reflected in Ps 36. The central issue addressed is: Who will 'inherit the land' (vv. 9, 11, 22, 29), i.e., live on to enjoy the blessings of the Lord in the promised land? Will the wicked, who plot (v. 12), scheme (vv. 7, 32), [intentionally] default on debts (v. 21), use raw power to gain advantage (v. 14) and seem thereby to flourish (vv. 7, 16, 35)? Or will the righteous, who trust in the Lord (vv. 3, 5, 7, 34) and are humble (v. 11), blameless (vv. 18, 37), generous (vv. 21, 26), upright (v. 37) and peaceable (v. 37), and from whose mouth is heard the moral wisdom that reflects meditation on God's law (vv. 30-31)?"

Where the NIV has the "land" as the inheritance (verses 9, 11, 22, 29, 34), the KJV and NKJV have "earth" (except in verses 29 and 34, though the Hebrew is the same). Either is correct, especially when we realize that the Promised Land of God's Kingdom will encompass the entire earth, not just the land of Israel. Note that the inheritance will be dwelt in "forever" (verses 18, 29). Through these verses we see that the eternal inheritors will be "those who wait on the LORD" (hoping and trusting in Him), "the meek" (those who are humble and teachable), "those blessed by Him" (those who are faithful in their dealings, as implied by the previous verse) and "the righteous" (verse 29). These are of course all the same people—who with their inheritance will receive eternal life, deliverance from enemies, salvation and peace.

Jesus Christ quoted from verse 11 in His famous Sermon on the Mount. Giving what are referred to as the Beatitudes, Jesus in Matthew 5:5 said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Some may be surprised to learn that this is not an exclusively New Testament teaching. Once again we see that, far from inventing a new religion as many now think, Jesus was building on the teachings of the Old Testament.

The phrase "the LORD knows the days of the upright" (Psalm 37:18) has "several meanings: (1) God knows our circumstances and provides for us; (2) God knows how long we will live and will sustain us to the end (90:12); (3) God knows that our days on earth [in this age] are only the beginning of our days with Him in eternity" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 37:18).

Psalm 37 also sets forth what lies in store for those who do *not* serve God and live according to His teachings. An individual has only two choices when it comes to directing his life—the way of blessing and life or the way of cursing and death (see Deuteronomy 30:15-20). The way of righteousness, of obeying God through outflowing love to Him and others (summarized as the way of *give*), is the one that leads to blessings and life (Psalm 37:3-6). The other choice, the selfish way of disobedience or wickedness (summarized as the way of *get*), leads to misery and death (verses 10, 34-36). The wicked will be cut off—to perish and be forgotten. David uses the metaphor of grass to describe man's brief life on earth. Grass flourishes for a while, then is cut down and withers. So, too, will evil men perish as surely as mown grass withers (verse 2). In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also spoke about "the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven" (Matthew 6:30).

Another idea David expresses here is that fretting about life is harmful (Psalm 37:1, 7-8). He warns against worry, being overly anxious or succumbing to envy and anger. A righteous person looks to God instead. The literal rendering of verse 5 instructs us to roll our lives over onto God. He will direct a righteous man's steps, picking him up when he falls (verses 23-24) and taking care of his needs (verses 25-26). We see, then, that the righteous at times will fall; they aren't guaranteed trouble-free lives. Yet, "though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him with His hand" (verse 24). With wisdom and love, God shapes a person through trials. In that light, verse 25 should not be misunderstood to mean that God's people never suffer physical deficiency—but that God will always provide for them. Though they may at times have to ask others for help, as David himself did on occasion, they are not destitute beggars in a hopeless sense (and certainly not over the long haul of life). Trusting God, they "feed on His faithfulness" (verse 3). Indeed, even if they lack, the righteous are far better off than the wicked (verse 16)—and are even generous givers of whatever they do have (verse 26).

Jesus observed in the Sermon on the Mount that it is futile to worry. A man can't change his circumstances by worrying. God knows our needs and will take care of them if we remain committed to Him (Matthew 6:25-33). Indeed, Jesus said in this context that one's focus should be on God's Kingdom and righteousness (verse 33)—which is, not coincidentally, also the focus of Psalm 37.

Trusting God, as Psalm 37 instructs, requires one to wait on Him and to do good (verses 3-5, 7; compare 1 Peter 5:6-7). As we wait for resolution to problems, as we wait for the return of Jesus Christ, we have work to do: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). If we remain faithful to Him and continue to trust Him, God will remain faithful to us—to provide help for today and to save us in the end (Psalm 37:39-40).

“O LORD.... Remove Your Plague From Me” (Psalms 38–39)

July 5-7

Psalm 38 begins a group of four related psalms that closes Book I (i.e., Psalms 38–41). These four psalms are linked by central themes. All are confessions of sin in the midst of troubles—the troubles in at least three of these being serious illness and enemies (while the other, Psalm 40, concerns enemies rising during a time of distress, which could also be related to a time of illness).

As the sicknesses in these psalms are a result of sin on David’s part, it is possible that they are all one and the same sickness resulting from the same sin. It could be, as suggested in the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalm 6, that the plague David suffers is the one he prayed to come on him in place of the populace after he sinned in the numbering of Israel (see 2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21). However, the Bible does not actually say whether or not David was then afflicted. The sicknesses in these psalms could well concern another time. The betrayal in Psalm 41 may hint at the time of national rebellion under Absalom with the assistance of David’s friend and counselor Ahithophel (if deep depression contributed to David becoming physically ill at that time, though the Bible does not tell us).

The NIV translation of Psalm 38’s superscription refers to the psalm as a “petition.” The King James and New King James give the more literal rendering of this verbal phrase (which is also found in the superscription of Psalm 70) as “To bring to remembrance.” Though God knows our needs, He nevertheless expects us to remind Him of them in prayer—perhaps to remind *ourselves* of our need for Him and His help.

David confesses his sin, which he labels foolishness, and asks for relief from God’s heavy hand. God chastens him *because* of His sin (verses 3, 5). Sickness is not always due to a person’s sins (see Job 1–2; John 9:1-3). But sometimes it is, as the numerous instances of God sending plague as punishment attests. Proverbs 3:11-12 explains that God’s chastening is done out of love—just as a father disciplines his son. The book of Hebrews quotes these verses (12:5-6) and goes on to comment further, explaining how it all works toward a positive outcome (verses 7-11).

The ordeal leaves David weak from festering sores (verse 5) and inflammation (verse 7). He is depressed by guilt (verse 4) and a lack of peace (verse 8). In verse 10, David speaks of his failing strength and the light having gone out of his eyes. We saw similar expressions in 6:7 and 13:3. In its note on 6:7, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* says: “In the vivid language of the O[ld] T[estament] the eyes are dimmed by failing strength (see 38:10; 1Sa 14:27, 29...Jer 14:6), by grief (often associated with affliction: 31:9; 88:9; Job 17:7; La 2:11) and by longings unsatisfied or hope deferred (see 69:3; 119:82, 123; Dt 28:32; Isa 38:14).” This idiom has passed over into English. We sometimes speak of the light, spark or sparkle having left someone’s eye—meaning the person has no further sense of joy in living.

Friends and family won’t come near David in his illness (verse 11). Enemies conspire against him (verse 12). Isolated and absorbed in his suffering, he has no way to know what’s going on and no one to talk to—like a deaf and mute person (verses 13-14). His silence may also be part of a conscious effort to avoid saying something rash or foolish to or before others and thereby sinning further, as he says in the next psalm (39:1-2).

But David hopes in God to hear and answer His prayer (38:15). His silence is only before other people. To God He pours out His heart, confessing his sin and pleading with God to deliver him soon (verses 15-22). Indeed, if the other sickness psalms concern this period, then David had much to say to God as He composed these prayerful hymns.

The middle of the superscription of **Psalm 39**, which may be part of a postscript to the previous psalm, says “To Jeduthun,” referring to “one of David’s three choir leaders (1Ch 16:41-42; 25:1, 6; 2Ch 5:12; called his ‘seer’ in 2Ch 35:15). Jeduthun is probably also Ethan of 1Ch 6:44 [and] 15:19; if so, he represented the family of Merari, even as Asaph did the family of Gershon and Heman the family of Kohath, the three sons of Levi (see 1Ch 6:16, 33, 39, 43-44)” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 39 title). The end of the superscription, “A Psalm of David,” no doubt goes with Psalm 39.

In this prayer David is “deeply troubled by the fragility of human life. He is reminded of this by the present illness through which God is rebuking him (vv. 10-11) for his ‘transgression’ (v. 8)” (note on Psalm 39).

As the psalm opens, we see that David has made a determination to not speak aloud, presumably of his anguish, lest this make its way to his or God’s enemies. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* notes on verse 2 that he “fears that he may be misunderstood or that he may speak irreverently and give occasion to the enemy. For the sake of God, he vowed to be silent in his suffering.” Yet verses 8-9 make it appear that David did not want to admit to detractors that his sickness was a result of God punishing him for sin. So the sin he was now guarding against could have been that of defending his reputation against criticism that might have been just (if not coming from hypocrites). Whatever the reasoning, it may help to explain his silence in the previous psalm, especially if it concerns the same illness (see Psalm 38:13-14).

At last, David says that he had to vent his anguish and frustration (verse 3). But it seems that he does the venting to God (verse 4). He begins by basically asking, “Okay, when am I going to die? How much time do I have left?” (as it seemed this could be the end)—and complaining that human life is fleeting, like the few inches of a handbreadth in length and a wisp of vapor in substance (verses 4-6, 11). All that people did seemed so pointless (verse 6). This is the theme running through the book of Ecclesiastes.

Still, David hopes in and prays for God’s healing (verses 7, 10, 12-13). He notes that he has lived not as one tied to this world but as a “stranger” or “alien” (a foreigner to this evil world) and a “sojourner” (a traveler or passing guest). And this has not been on his own but rather, as he says to God, “with You” (verse 12). The book of Hebrews says that God’s saints “all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland...a better, that is, a heavenly country” (Hebrew 11:13-16; compare 1 Peter 2:11-12). So in saying what he did, David was not only reminding God of his relationship with Him, but he was also expressing his hope in God’s Kingdom. If it was time for him to die, he trusted in His future with God.

Yet David is not resigned to death. He still prays that God will remove His gaze so that he may regain strength and *not* die (Psalm 39:13). This does not mean, as some commentators suggest, that David is praying for God to leave him alone. For on his own David could never recover. Rather, we should understand the terminology in light of Psalm 80:16, which says that God’s people perish at the rebuke of His countenance. The idea is that when He gazes on them in anger, they wither and are consumed. So Psalm 80 repeatedly asks that God would cause His face to shine—to smile favorably. David is likewise pleading for God to turn away His angry gaze of judgment—and, as stated in verse 7, he is hopeful that God will.

“I Am Poor and Needy; Yet the LORD Thinks Upon Me” (Psalms 40–41)

July 8-10

In its note on Psalms 40–41, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* states: “Book I of the Psalter closes with two psalms containing ‘Blessed is the man who’ statements (40:4; 41:1), thus balancing the two psalms with which the book begins (1:1; 2:12). In this way, the whole of Book I is framed by declarations of the blessedness of those who ‘delight in the law of the LORD’ (1:2), who ‘take refuge in him’ (2:12), who ‘do not look to the proud’ but make the Lord their ‘trust’ (40:4) and who have ‘regard for the weak’ (41:1)—a concise instruction in godliness.”

Some Bible commentators have proposed that **Psalm 40** itself is actually two separate psalms combined into one—a conclusion deriving from the fact that verses 1-10 praise and thank God for deliverance He has brought while verses 11-17 lament and plead with Him for deliverance that has not yet come. Moreover, most of this latter section (verses 13-17) is substantively identical to Psalm 70. Yet we may recall that Psalm 27 was also a combination of thanksgiving and lament. As in that psalm, the idea here may be recalling God’s past deliverance to muster confidence that He will deliver David from his present circumstances. *Zondervan* states in its introductory note on Psalm 40: “The prayer begins with praise of God for his past mercies (vv. 1-5...) and a testimony to the king’s own faithfulness to the Lord (vv. 6-10...). These form the grounds for his present appeal for help (vv. 11-17...).”

Psalm 70 is probably best explained as a borrowing of part of the lyrics of the appeal section of Psalm 40 to stand on their own as a different song—or at least a special rendition. (The tune was probably different since the words have been altered somewhat.)

As we will see, David’s words in Psalm 40 foreshadowed the circumstances of the Messiah, Jesus

Christ, as the book of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40:6-8 as referring to Him.

In verse 1, “the Hebrew translated *I waited patiently* is literally ‘waiting I waited’ (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 1). Though time was moving on and no rescue seemed forthcoming, David still trusted. He would not give up hope in God’s deliverance. And his confidence was well placed—for God *did* deliver him.

The “horrible pit” of verse 2 could represent death. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “The ‘pit’ is a frequent synonym of Sheol, the grave (88:3; Prov.1:12; Isa.14:15). In the ‘pit’ people are powerless (88:4), held down by the slime and mud (40:2)” (note on Psalm 88). Yet here in Psalm 40 it may simply represent a seemingly inescapable situation into which he was sinking lower and lower (compare 69:2)—as contrasted with him then being lifted from the mud and set upon a rock (40:2). Perhaps a double metaphor is intended. Jesus may have been alluding in part to this verse when He spoke of establishing His Church on a rock (i.e., Himself) so that the gates of Hades (the grave) would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). And given the messianic prophecy of this psalm, we may also see in all these verses Jesus thinking of times God the Father had previously delivered Him as He prayed to God while enduring His final trial.

David next states that God “has put a new song in my mouth” (Psalm 40:3a). God may have inspired him to compose an entirely new psalm. Or David may have meant that God gave him a sense of renewed wonder and appreciation accompanied with renewed energy and joy (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 33:3). And from David’s praise and rejoicing, many would realize what God had done and would be led to place *their* trust in Him (40:3b)—the key to blessing and happiness (verse 4).

David declares that no one can understand the enormity of God’s works or of His thinking (verse 5). How many thoughts He has. How He organizes His thoughts. What He thinks about each of us. “The things You planned for us no one can recount to you; were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare” (verse 5, NIV; compare 139:17-18). God does reveal some of His thoughts and intents concerning His people—and they are wonderful: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you...thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

David then mentions his understanding of what God is really looking for from people. It was not the physical sacrifices of the sacrificial system but a desire to follow His way—a desire David himself had (Psalm 40:6-8). The words here, describing various offerings in the sacrificial system generally, may have followed his presentation of a ritual offering. Verse 6 should not be understood to mean that there was no actual requirement for physical sacrifices. There certainly was at that time—but only as part of a desire to obey God. What God required was not the sacrifices and offerings in and of themselves—but a heart of obedience from which sacrifices and offerings would naturally flow as God so determined. David surely remembered the story of Samuel correcting Saul for failing to grasp what God thinks is important: “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22; compare also Psalm 51:16-17; Jeremiah 7:22-23). We will see more about this in going through Psalms 50 and 51.

David recognizes in Psalm 40 that rather than just a token physical offering, what God really wants is the devotion of David’s entire self. So David offers himself as an offering (compare Romans 12:1; 2 Corinthians 8:5). He says, “Behold I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me” (Psalm 40:7). What was David talking about? It concerned having God’s law written in his heart (verse 8). Perhaps he realized that the Torah (the Law) and indeed all of Scripture was written for him personally, just as it is for all of us—to describe the character that he and all of us must have. But in David’s case there may have been more to it. As the Lord’s anointed king, David had to write out on a scroll his own personal copy of the Book of the Law, keeping it with him and reading it all his days, internalizing it and living by it for the sake of himself, his kingdom and his family (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). So David expressed his continuing commitment to fulfill all of it.

Of course, the One who completely and absolutely fulfills all of Scripture’s requirements, including the sacrifices and the ultimate role of Anointed King—who presented Himself before God as the very quintessence of all offerings—is Jesus Christ. And in the book of Hebrews we see Psalm 40:6-8 quoted as the words of Jesus (Hebrews 10:1-10)—as they in fact were, David having been inspired by Him—and are told that the entire sacrificial system pointed to Christ’s ultimate sacrifice. Jesus lived His life wholly dedicated to God and then offered Himself as the true atoning sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. Psalm

40 is thus a messianic psalm—making the rest of it likely applicable to Jesus as well.

It should be noted that the second line of verse 6 as translated from the Hebrew Masoretic Text, “My ears you have opened [or ‘dug’ or ‘pierced’]” (to hear and accept God’s law, it would seem), is not quoted this way in the New Testament. Rather, the same translation found in the Greek Septuagint is given: “But a body You have prepared for me” (see Hebrews 10:5)—that is, to offer up to God. In a footnote on Psalm 40:6, *Expositor’s* says that the Septuagint rendering “represents a paraphrastic interpretation of a difficult Hebrew phrase” (that is, it paraphrases what seems to be the point here based on surrounding clauses). Even if not technically accurate (though it could be), the Septuagint rendering used in the New Testament is true and is certainly implied in context—that God wanted not animal bodies but David’s own body presented as an offering for serving God’s purposes (and, in ultimate fulfillment, that the body of Jesus Christ was to be the consummation of sacrificial offering—in both life and death).

David goes on in Psalm 40 to remind God of what he has done since being saved from death. “O LORD, you Yourself know...” he says at the end of verse 9. And what had he done? Besides determining to continue in obedience to God, as we saw in verses 6-8, we further read that he saw the need to spread the word about God and His deliverance. David was the king of Israel and a prophet. He had a great responsibility to teach His people. “I have proclaimed the good news of righteousness in the great assembly” (verse 9a). That is, he hadn’t kept it to himself but had proclaimed it to the throngs at the temple gathered for worship.

Interestingly, the phrase “proclaimed the good news” is found in the New Testament as “preached the gospel”—and Jesus Christ, prophesied in this psalm, certainly did that (as did those He commissioned with the same task). Note that David uses the phrase “good news of righteousness.” *Expositor’s* notes on verses 9-10: “The Lord’s righteousness (*sedeq*) is expressed in any act ordered on behalf of his people’s welfare and the execution of his kingdom purposes. By his righteous acts they are delivered, prosper, and enjoy the benefits of the covenant relationship.... Righteousness in this sense is synonymous with ‘salvation’ in the broadest sense. The nature of God’s righteous acts is explicated by the other perfections. He is faithful to his covenant people, in accordance with his promises (33:4), resulting in the ‘salvation’ of his people.”

David further stated how he declared God’s faithfulness and salvation and hadn’t concealed the truth from anyone (40:10). We should realize that one important way David proclaimed all this is through these very psalms we are studying. He composed them to be performed publicly—so the people could learn from them, learn to sing them and join in. And again, we should further consider that the One who inspired not just Psalm 40 but all the psalms was the living Word of God, who later became Jesus Christ.

In the remaining verses (11-17), David makes his present appeal, seeing his troubles as the result of his sins (verse 12) and enemies who want to destroy him (verses 13-15). Though it is not specifically stated, it could be that his present crisis is serious illness, as in the other three psalms of Book I’s concluding group of four—his weakened state and isolation giving opportunity to his enemies to rise up.

Jesus Christ, we realize, committed no sins—but He took the sins of the whole world onto Himself when He was crucified. In that light, it is interesting in verse 12 that David does not ask for forgiveness (as Christ did not need to). David merely speaks of his iniquities overwhelming him. Perhaps David had already repented but still saw what was happening as the consequences of his sins. Yet when applied to Christ, this would mean that the sins of others (including David’s)—now committed to Christ as the sin-bearer—were bringing on Him the horrible consequences He had to face at the end of His human life. And of course Jesus had to face taunting enemies just as David had to (verses 13-15).

In verse 16 David declares that even in the midst of troubles, those who love God and His salvation should “say continually, ‘The LORD be magnified!’” This gives further explanation to the first part of the psalm and argues in favor of Psalm 40 being one psalm.

David closes in verse 17 with a final appeal. The reference to himself as “poor” is not meant materially (see also 34:6; 41:1). The sense here is of being lowly and oppressed—of being “weak” instead of powerful (see 41:1, NIV). David is speaking of his condition of humility and abasement (and perhaps poor health)—and, as he also says here, his grave need for help. The help he needs can come only from God, and he prays that God will intervene quickly—as Jesus must have prayed during His final ordeal (and as all of us should pray during our trials today).

Like Psalms 38 and 39 (and perhaps 40), David composed **Psalm 41** when he was severely ill. And

like Psalm 40, this song contains a prophetic foreshadowing of events in the life of the Messiah.

Before asking God to heal him in verse 4, David first lays a foundation for that request: “Blessed is he who considers the poor” (verse 1)—or “weak” (NIV). God will deliver, preserve, bless, protect, strengthen and—directly pertinent to David’s situation—“sustain him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness” (verse 3, NIV). David is a compassionate man. It is his practice to pray, fast and mourn for others when they are sick (Psalm 35:13-14). He trusts that God will intervene for him now in his own need (41:3).

Indeed, note that the final verse of the previous psalm reflected on God thinking on David himself in his poor and needy state (40:17). Such concern for others in need is the heart of godly character, which God’s people must emulate. David well understood this, being a “man after [God’s] own heart” (Acts 13:22). The qualities of mercy and compassion figure prominently in the New Testament. The apostle James declares that showing concern for others is an essential element in true religion: “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). Jesus taught, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7). He gave His disciples a sobering parable on the subject of compassion (Matthew 18:21-35) and stated that mercy (the word here denoting compassion or pity) is one of the weightier matters of God’s law (Matthew 23:23).

Yet as important as it is for all to have concern for the weak—for the lowly and downtrodden—it is especially so of a king such as David, whose duty is to emulate God’s righteous rule in defending the powerless (compare Psalm 72:2, 4, 12-14; 82:3-4; Proverbs 29:14; 31:8-9; Isaiah 11:4; Jeremiah 22:16). Again, David well knew this—and lived accordingly (as did and does Jesus Christ, who is prefigured in this psalm).

David then prays for mercy and healing, confessing his sin. When we consider parallels with Jesus in this psalm, we realize that He did not sin. Yet the great suffering and anguish that came upon Him at the end of His physical life was the result of bearing the penalty of sin—not His own but that of the rest of mankind (David’s included).

David speaks of enemies relishing the thought of his imminent death (verses 5-8), which Christ also endured.

We then arrive at verse 9, which ties directly to the life of Jesus. David speaks of betrayal by a “familiar friend,” a close companion, who dined with him. Some have suggested that the reference here and in Psalm 55:12-14 is to David’s friend and counselor Ahithophel, who joined Absalom’s rebellion against David. This seems a rather likely explanation—although the Bible does not mention David being severely ill at that time (though it would not be surprising for deep anguish and depression on that occasion to have made him physically sick). Since the companion is not named, and since the Bible does not record every detail of David’s life, it’s of course possible that this was a different friend on a different occasion—the illness, as previously mentioned, perhaps being the plague that struck after the numbering of Israel.

Whatever the case, the most significant meaning here is not actually David’s personal situation at all—but the fact that this was a prophecy of what would happen in the life of Christ. *The Nelson Study Bible* notes on Psalm 41:9: “The outrage of betrayal by one so close is nearly unbearable (Matt. 26:14-16). The fulfillment of this verse in the experience of Jesus and Judas is remarkable. Not only did the two eat a meal together (Matt. 26:21-25; Mark 14:18-21; Luke 22:21), but Jesus also called Judas a ‘friend’ at the moment of betrayal (Matt. 26:50). Moreover Jesus quoted this verse, noting its fulfillment in Judas (John 13:18).”

In Psalm 41:10, “Raise me up” was again David’s prayer for healing—to be brought up from his sickbed. Yet “in another sense [given the clear messianic context of this psalm], these words look forward to Jesus’ resurrection (16:10, 11; 118:17, 18)” (note on Psalm 41:10-12). David expresses his belief in eternal life when He says confidently of God’s salvation: “You...set me before Your face forever” (verse 12).

The psalm closes in verse 13 with the doxology (word of praise) that was most likely appended to the end of the psalm sometime later in compiling Book I of the Psalter or in even later arrangement.

Downcast but Hoping in God; A Royal Wedding (Psalms 42–45)

July 11-15

Like Book I, Book II of Psalms is primarily a collection of Davidic prayers (compare 72:20).

However, the book begins with psalms possibly composed by others—Psalms 42–49 by the sons of Korah (i.e., descendants of the Levite leader Korah who rebelled against Moses in Numbers 16) and Psalm 50 by Asaph (one of the musical leaders David appointed). However, it could be that the Hebrew *le-* before these names means “for” and not “of”—so that perhaps David wrote them for these others to perform (or perhaps David composed the music and these others wrote the lyrics or vice versa).

“‘Sons of Korah’ refers to the Levitical choir made up of the descendants of Korah appointed by David to serve in the temple liturgy [i.e., rites of public worship]. The Korahites represented the Levitical family of Kohath son of Levi. Their leader in the days of David was Heman...just as Asaph led the choir of the Gershonites and Jeduthun (Ethan) the choir of the Merarites (see 1Ch 6:31-47...). This is the first of a collection of seven psalms ascribed to the ‘Sons of Korah’ (Ps 42–49); four more occur in Book III (Ps 84–85; 87–88)” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 42 title).

It is interesting to observe that “Book II of the Psalter begins with three prayers [Psalms 42–44]...and an attached royal psalm [45] in perfect balance with the ending of Book II [Psalms 69-71 and 72]” (note on Psalms 42-45). In composition, however, it should be observed, as is widely acknowledged, that **Psalms 42 and 43** seem to have originally constituted a single psalm. Note the same basic lengthy refrain throughout (see 42:5, 11; 43:5) at the end of three stanzas of comparable length (five, six and five verses), the repetition of “Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” (42:9; 43:2), the running theme of longing to appear before God at His tabernacle (42:2, 4; 43:3-4) and, given all this, the absence of a superscription at the beginning of 43. The full psalm was likely divided to fit a particular worship schedule at the tabernacle or temple—and perhaps to achieve the parallel book arrangement mentioned above.

The superscriptions of Psalm 42 (with 43), 44 and 45 all contain the obscure Hebrew designation *maskil*. As noted on Psalm 32, this term may be derived from a word meaning “wisdom” or “instruction,” yet in all psalm title occurrences the NKJV translates this word as “Contemplation.” Psalm 42 (with 43) is written from the perspective of a single composer—though “sons of Korah” may denote a group effort in either writing or performing (though it could just mean the psalm came from among them as one out of a collection of their psalms, with different psalms in the collection having been composed by different individuals). For the purposes of commentary, we will assume a single author for each psalm.

The psalmist here, then, who is also a harpist (43:4), is unhappy and troubled. With constant tears (42:3), he expresses an intense yearning for God: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (verse 2). Just as a deer in times of drought searches desperately for water, the psalmist longs to be in the presence of God (verse 1).

It appears that he is prevented from going to God’s tabernacle for festival worship as he used to (42:2, 4; 43:3-4). This may be because of enemy oppression, perhaps even capture in war (42:9; 43:2), which would parallel the experience of those in the related psalm that follows, Psalm 44. It could be in 42–43, however, that enemies are not the reason the psalmist can’t go to the tabernacle—that they are merely taunting him for whatever it is that is preventing him, such as sickness or disability. He could even have been on the run from someone who wanted to kill him over something he didn’t do (compare 43:1). Perhaps he was a fugitive at one of the far northern cities of refuge.

Verses 6-7 of Psalm 42 may indicate that the psalmist is located in northern Israel near the cascading waters of the upper Jordan, where they rush down from Mount Hermon. “Some have suggested that ‘Mount Mizar’ [otherwise unknown] is an additional reference to ‘the heights of Hermon,’ calling that high peak the ‘little mountain’ (literal translation) in comparison with Mount Zion [the spiritual height where the psalmist wishes to be]” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on verse 6). Others, however, believe that “the land of the Jordan” in context here means the whole land of Israel and that the psalmist is writing “from” or “far away from” it.

It seems likely that the “ungodly nation” in 43:1 refers to a people hostile to Israel among whom the psalmist is exiled—perhaps the Syrians to the north before David subdued them. (The later Assyrian and Babylonian captivities would seem to be too late for placement in Book II though that is not impossible—especially as there could have been later rearrangement. In any case, this was probably a popular song during the Babylonian Exile.) Again, foreign captivity would parallel the situation of Psalm 44. On the other hand, “ungodly nation” could at times refer to Israel itself (compare Isaiah 10:6; Amos 9:8), which, if so, in this case would mean the psalmist’s own people were persecuting him, as so often happened to

God's faithful servants.

Whoever the psalmists' enemies are, they taunt him incessantly about his faith, asking, "Where is your God?" (Psalm 42:3, 10). He feels depressed, saying to himself, "My soul is downcast within me" (verse 6), over God's apparent silence and delay in helping him—praying to God, "Why do you cast me off?" (43:2) and "Why have you forgotten me?" (verse 9).

"The psalms have always proved to be a great source of solace and encouragement to God's people throughout the centuries [as] we are able to watch noble souls struggling with themselves. They talk to themselves and to their souls, baring their hearts, analyzing their problems, chiding and encouraging themselves. Sometimes they are elated, at other times depressed, but they are always honest with themselves" (David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, 1965, p. 9).

In verse 7, deep calling to deep at the noise of God's waterfalls could refer to the cascading Jordan. Yet it might refer to a thunderstorm of rain pouring down from the deep of the heavens above to flow to the deep of the oceans below, the latter hinted at in the waves at the end of the verse. The imagery of a torrent of water from above, with God's waves crashing over the psalmist, is meant figuratively to signify being overwhelmed by circumstances God has brought or allowed.

Yet the psalmist continues to talk himself through each wave of discouragement: "The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with me—a prayer to the God of my life" (verse 8).

Rather than giving in to his fears, the psalmist asks himself in the psalm's refrain why he is so downcast when God is his God, strength and help (compare verses 5, 11; 43:5). He stirs himself to continue to trust in and wait on God: "Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance" (42:5)—that is, he knows God will smile on him and encourage him. In the final clause in the other two occurrences of the refrain, the psalmist refers to God as "the help of my countenance and my God" (verse 11; 43:5). A worried, depressed person has a hard time hiding his feelings. When he is unduly introverted, negative emotions show on his face. When he turns away from himself and focuses on God, his face begins to look better. He loses "that drawn, haggard, vexed, troubled, perplexed, introspective appearance, and [he begins] to look composed and calm, balanced and bright" (Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, p. 13).

In the final stanza, Psalm 43, the psalmist addresses God as both Attorney and Judge. To God as Attorney, he says, "*Plead my cause* against an ungodly nation" (verse 1). To the Judge he says, "Vindicate me, O God" (same verse)—which could here mean either to declare him innocent of false accusations or to prove him right for trusting in God to save him. He prays that God will intervene to enable him to return to Jerusalem and is confident that God will—considering God to be his "exceeding joy" (verses 3-4).

This song can be of great encouragement when difficult circumstances prevent us from attending worship services in fellowship with other believers. We can of course still come before God in the spirit. We should also remember that even if circumstances such as health were to bar us from Sabbath and festival services for the rest of our physical lives, all who remain faithful to God will one day join together in worshiping Him at Jerusalem for all eternity.

Psalm 44, another *maskil* of the sons of Korah, is written as a community lament and plea. The perspective throughout is normally first-person plural (i.e., we, our, us), yet verses 4, 6 and 15 use first-person singular (I, my and me). It could be that the singular usage is intended to denote the nation collectively—or just to have each person singing the prayerful song identify with it personally. It is also conceivable that these verses were intended to be solo parts. Or they may simply indicate a single author praying collectively throughout the psalm using "we" but sometimes speaking personally using "I"—just as each of us does in our own prayers today. For instance, you as an individual might pray collectively, "*Our Father...give us...our daily bread,*" and yet also ask personally in the same prayer, "Help *me* to do your will."

The occasion of this psalm is a time of military defeat wherein people have been captured by the enemy (see verses 9-12). It may be one of those taken captive who wrote the song in Psalms 42-43.

Psalm 44 begins with the people rehearsing a portion of Israel's history that their parents taught them (verse 1)—that their ancestors didn't gain the Promised Land because of their own military strength and actions, but because God drove out the nations who lived there and planted the Israelite ancestors there

instead (verses 2-3). The psalm further eschews trust in military might and expresses faith that God, as Israel's King and commander, is the One through whom the nation will gain victory against its enemies now and in the future—just as in the past (verses 4-8).

Yet for the moment things look terribly bleak—in the face of military defeat, scattering, shame and enemy taunts (verses 9-16, 19). The song bemoans God having sold His people away for almost nothing (verse 12). Despite this, the people have remained faithful to God and His covenant, mindful that He would know of any idolatry on their part (verses 17-18, 20-21).

Indeed, the song maintains that it is because of the people's refusal to compromise with God's way that they are suffering and in danger among their enemies (verse 22). The statement here about being sheep for the slaughter applied in the greatest sense to the Messiah, who would come as the Lamb of God to be sacrificed, as the prophet Isaiah foretold in similar wording (see Isaiah 53:7). Yet this metaphorical description would also characterize all Christ's followers, His flock, who would be persecuted for their faith. And in fact the apostle Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 in this very regard (see Romans 8:36)—speaking of the fact that we endure this for the sake of the wonderful outcome God has in mind for us.

The people beseech God to awake out of sleep and rise up to help them (verses 23, 26). Since they know He does not actually sleep (see Psalm 121:4), their words here have a sense of pleading with God to focus His awareness on their need and to rouse Himself into action. And where the song spoke before of God having sold His people away (44:12), it ends with a plea for Him to redeem them (verse 26)—to buy them back.

Psalm 45, another *maskil* of the Korahites, is, according to its superscription, a love song set to the tune of another song. The perspective is first-person singular (see "My" and "I" in verse 1), with the psalmist unusually declaring his excitement over the writing of the psalm. This is evidently a royal wedding song—celebrating a marriage of David or one of his later successors but with a very clear focus on God's marriage to His chosen nation (ultimately the Messiah and His Bride, the Church). The song may have become customary for royal weddings.

In verses 2-9 the psalmist addresses the king. Verses 2-5 portray him as a mighty warrior and majestic, just and godly ruler. As Israel's king ruling at God's appointment, David enjoyed glory, majesty, prosperity, blessings and military victories. Yet David was only a stand-in for Israel's true King, God Himself. And this God who interacted with Israel as its divine King was the One who would later be born into the world as Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 10:4 and our free booklet *Who Is God?*). The glories laid out in Psalm 45 were fulfilled in Him when the psalmist wrote: "God has blessed You forever" (verse 2); "O Mighty One" (verse 3); "You are fairer than the sons of men" (verse 2). And they will find complete expression when Jesus takes over David's throne at His return and reigns over all mankind.

In verse 6 we find the direct statement, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." Since it is clear in context that this is the same person being addressed throughout verses 2-9—the King—some have thought that the psalmist is referring to the human king as God. Others, seeing this as rather problematic, which it certainly is, do not accept the verse as written and assume some missing words must be read into it. The confusion here is cleared up if we realize that the psalmist is throughout these verses primarily addressing the true King, God, in His marriage to Israel—and the physical ruler in only a secondary, representative sense.

Yet many do not like what the next verse then implies. To "God" the King (verse 6), the psalmist says, "Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You..." (verse 7). Thus there are *two* Persons referred to here as God. In fact, it could even read, "Therefore, God, Your God has anointed you..." making the point even clearer. The New Testament quotes verses 6-7 to prove the divinity of Christ (see Hebrews 1:8-9). That is, God the Father anointed God the Son (Jesus Christ).

Indeed, the title *Christ* means "Anointed"—equivalent to the Hebrew derivative *Messiah*. Anointing with oil represented special consecration for service to God—this being symbolic of the application of God's Spirit. David and his successors were all anointed—yet his *ultimate* successor bore the title of Anointed (Messiah or Christ) in a special way.

Verses 7-8 of Psalm 45 speak of the anointing with fragrant oils making the king glad. That is, he enjoyed the feeling and the smells. Yet this would seem to be symbolic of the Messiah receiving joy through the consecration and application of God's Holy Spirit through various experiences. This also tells

us something about the Messiah's personality. Because He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), some have the impression that Jesus went through His human life always mournful, dour and gravely serious. Yet here we learn that Jesus was "anointed with the oil of *gladness* more than [His] companions"—the truth expressed here being that Jesus was actually happier and more joyful than other people. And, of course, why would He not be? For He lived God's law perfectly—the way of true happiness in life—and He understood God's plan and purpose in detail in full faith without worry or fear. The sorrows He experienced from and for others were within this overall context.

In verse 9, "kings' daughters" evidently refers to the queen's attendants (see verse 14) and may signify a representation of other nations at the wedding (just as "daughter of Tyre" in verse 12 does not refer to an actual daughter but a national power). Perhaps verse 9 means that of all the women before Him on earth, the King has chosen the queen, who is dressed in "gold from Ophir" (meaning from Africa, India or the Americas—denoting the finest quality). On a higher level, this would mean that of all the nations on earth, God has chosen Israel. Yet the psalm does not seem to be merely reflecting on the past relationship of God (the preincarnate Christ) and the physical nation of Israel. Rather, the focus appears to be forward-looking to the future marriage of Christ to *spiritual* Israel, the Church, chosen from among all nations and adorned in the true riches of godly character.

In verses 10-12 the psalmist addresses the bride. He tells her to shift her allegiance from her father's house and people to the king—her Lord. She is even to worship Him, again showing that the King here is divine, as only God is worthy of worship (compare Revelation 19:10; 22:8-9). Those of God's Church are to put our relationship with Jesus Christ above our loyalty to human parents—and we are to forsake entirely all ties with our former spiritual "father," Satan the Devil (compare John 8:44).

The "daughter of Tyre" (Psalm 45:12), besides meaning the city of Tyre at the time of David and his successors, is likely the end-time power bloc of Ezekiel 27, also referred to in Revelation 18 as Babylon. Those who escape its destruction at the end will present a gift or offering in honor of the messianic King and His glorified Bride.

Verses 13-17 of Psalm 45 again address the King. Verses 13-14 speak of the preparation of the queen's bridal attire. Related imagery is found in Revelation 19:7-8: "For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."

The final two verses (Psalm 45:16-17) speak of children as a product of the king and queen's marriage who will continue as royal leaders in Israel. In the greater picture, the marriage of the Lamb brings sons and daughters into the family of God, resulting in praise of God forever and ever.

"The City of the Great King...He Is Known As Her Refuge" (Psalms 46–48) July 16-19

We come now to the next grouping of psalms, also composed by or for the sons of Korah. As *The Nelson Study Bible* states: "There is reason to believe that Ps. 46–48 form a trilogy that focuses on God's special love for Jerusalem...three great psalms of praise to God for his kingship and his love for the holy city.... [which] has led many scholars to speak of these psalms as 'Songs of Zion'" (notes on Psalms 46; 48). The *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* explains: "Following the cluster of psalms that introduce Book II of the Psalter (...Ps 42–45), the next thematically related cluster of psalms all express confidence in the security of God's people in the midst of a threatening world. Ps 46 and 48 focus on the security of Jerusalem, 'the city of {our} God' (46:4; 48:1), and Ps 47 on the worldwide reign of 'the great King' (47:2) whose royal city Jerusalem is (48:2)" (note on Psalms 46–48).

The superscription of **Psalm 46** says this song is "for Alamothe" or "according to *alamoth*" (NIV). Note the occurrence of this word in 1 Chronicles 15:20, where a list of Levitical musicians is said to perform "with strings according to Alamothe." The word appears to mean "maidens" or "young women." Some have suggested that it is a musical notation for soprano voices or high-pitched flutes or pipes. Others see it as a reference to women assigned to play accompaniment on tambourines (Psalm 68:25).

The *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* suggests that in public worship, "the citizens of Jerusalem (or the Levitical choir in their stead) apparently sang the opening stanza (vv. 1-3) and the responses (vv. 7, 11) [i.e., the repeated refrain], while the Levitical leader of the liturgy probably sang the second and third stanzas (vv. 4-6, 8-10)" (note on Psalm 46).

Each stanza here ends with the Hebrew word *Selah*, which, as noted before, may indicate a musical interlude. "This term is derived from the verb *salal*, 'to lift up.' It occurs in 39 psalms and in the 'psalm

of Habakkuk' (Hab. 3). No one is certain of the exact meaning of this word—that is, what is to be lifted up. Some think that *Selah* is an emphatic word, marking a point in the psalm for 'lifting up' one's thoughts to God. But most scholars think it is simply some form of musical notation, such as a marker of a musical interlude, a pause, or a change of key" (*Nelson Study Bible*, WordFocus on Psalm 39:5).

The opening stanza of Psalm 46 begins powerfully: "God is our refuge and strength" (verse 1). The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther appropriately translated these words in his famous hymn as "A mighty fortress is our God." It could be rephrased to say that God is "our impenetrable defense" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note no verse 1).

Three times the psalmist repeats the theme that God is with His people to help and defend them—in the opening words and in the repeated refrain (verses 1, 7, 11). Because of this extraordinary assurance, he confidently asserts, "We will not fear" (verse 2). The poet intensifies this confidence in the first stanza, maintaining that it will endure through the worst of circumstances: even if the earth gives way and the mountains tumble into the sea; even if the oceans surge and roar; even if tidal waves rattle the mountains (verses 2-3). It matters not—there is still no cause to fear.

The song's second stanza mentions a river that brings happiness to God's city and tabernacle (verse 4). "Jerusalem had no river, unlike Thebes (Na 3:8), Damascus (2Ki 5:12), Nineveh (Na 2:6, 8) or Babylon (137:1)—yet she had a 'river.' Here the 'river' of [Psalm] 36:8 [of God's pleasures flowing from Him as the fountain of life]...serves as a metaphor for the continual outpouring of the sustaining and refreshing blessings of God, which make the city of God like the Garden of Eden (see [46:] v. 5; Ge 2:10; Isa 33:21; 51:3; cf. also Eze 31:4-9)" (*Zondervan*, note on Psalm 46:4).

This would also seem to be prophetic. Later prophecies foretell an actual river that will eventually flow out of Jerusalem when Christ returns to rule the earth—the river also symbolizing the outpouring of God's Spirit and blessings (Ezekiel 47:1-12; Zechariah 14:8). Flowing from beneath the temple and dividing to east and west, the river's water will miraculously heal all it touches. Ever-bearing fruit trees with healing leaves will grow along its banks. Truly this river "will make glad the city of God." Jerusalem, then a peaceful city, will be the location of God's temple and the seat of Christ's rule on earth.

The great blessing of the city of God is that "God is in the midst of her" (Psalm 46:5). Today we have the same blessing. For spiritual Jerusalem or Zion is the Church of God, also referred to as the spiritual temple of God. Ephesians 2:20-22 explains in this context that the Church is "a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." And no power in heaven or earth can separate us from Him and His love for us (Romans 8:31-39).

The judgment on the nations at the end of the second stanza and through the third likely refers in part to God's past victories on behalf of His people. But the primary picture here is of Christ's return in power and glory to establish God's Kingdom, when He will defeat the physical and spiritual forces arrayed against Him and truly "make wars cease to the end of the earth" (Psalm 46:9).

In verse 10, God Himself is quoted within the words of the psalm, calling for stillness and to know that He is God. This message appears to be directed to God's enemies, telling them to give up their vain fight against Him. Yet it might relate to delivering a court judgment, telling all the world to be quiet and hear the sentence from the Judge (see Habakkuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; Zechariah 2:13). Or it could perhaps be a word of encouragement to God's people, as when Moses told the Israelites at the Red Sea: "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today.... The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:13-14).

On the other hand, some interpret these words in Psalm 46:10 in conjunction with the call in verses 8-9 to come and behold God's works of destroying the enemy and bringing peace. That is, that *after* the victory is accomplished the people are to settle down and think about what has transpired, reaching the conclusion that God is God.

Whatever the specific intent here, it is clear that God will be exalted among all nations and His people will find an eternally secure future with Him. This psalm is a great comfort to all who trust in God for daily help and protection, for deliverance from hardship and trials and for ultimate salvation.

In theme, **Psalm 47** follows right on from the previous psalm. Where Psalm 46 ended with God coming in the person of Jesus Christ to establish His authority and peace throughout the earth, Psalm 47 speaks of not only the subduing of the nations (verse 3) but also of the enthronement of God (again, Jesus Christ) as the Great King over the entire earth. While God is already the King of all creation, this psalm

focuses on His future intervention to assume direct rule over the kingdoms of mankind (compare Revelation 11:15).

“This psalm belongs to a group of hymns to the Great King found elsewhere clustered in Ps 92–100. Here it serves to link Ps 46 and 48, identifying the God who reigns in Zion as ‘the great king over all the earth’ (v. 2; see v. 7; 48:2...)” (*Zondervan*, note on Psalm 47).

The clapping of hands and shout in verse 1 is to applaud Christ’s victory as well as His coronation and enthronement (as when Joash was crowned king of Judah in 2 Kings 11:12). God having “gone up” (Hebrew *alah*) in Psalm 47:5 speaks in context of His ascending the throne—where we afterward find Him seated (verse 8). The words “greatly exalted” at the end of verse 9 are also translated from the word *alah*. Furthermore, in verse 5 we again see the shout of verse 1 as well as the sound of a trumpet or ram’s horn. Such a trumpet blast was part of Solomon’s coronation (see 1 Kings 1:32-39). It seems likely that trumpets and applause were regular features in the crowning of Davidic kings—as it will be in the enthronement of the ultimate King in David’s lineage, Jesus Christ. In later Jewish worship, Psalm 47 became associated with the Feast of Trumpets—symbolic of the future time described here.

In verse 7, where the NKJV has “understanding,” the Hebrew word is actually *maskil*, a term seen in the titles of other psalms (most recently other Korahite psalms, 42–45) that may designate an instructional psalm or, as the NKJV usually translates this, contemplation.

Verse 9 tells us that in His reign over the whole world, “the shields of the earth [will] belong to God.” Nations will no longer strive to thwart God’s power. They will lay down their armaments and take up implements of peace (Isaiah 2:4). It should be noted, however, that the Greek Septuagint translators instead of “shields” understood this as “kings”—perhaps because kings served as the protectors of their people (compare 89:18). In any case, all will submit to God’s rule.

Psalm 48 locates the Great King’s throne in Mount Zion—Jerusalem. It is referred to as God’s “holy mountain” (verse 1), yet this should also be understood as figurative of God’s Kingdom—a mountain being symbolic of a kingdom in prophecy (compare Daniel 2:35, 44-45; Isaiah 2:2-4).

Note the phrase in Psalm 48:2, “beautiful in elevation” or “beautiful in its loftiness” (NIV). Neither the original fortress of Zion, David’s city, nor the Temple Mount area he later incorporated, formed the highest peak in the area. Today the Mount of Olives looks down over Jerusalem and the Temple Mount—as it did then. However, we should understand that the general area of Jerusalem was of higher elevation than the surrounding land of Judah and central Israel so that people in pilgrimage to the holy city would ascend to it.

Nevertheless, the main idea here concerns Jerusalem’s spiritual exaltation. As the city of God’s tabernacle and temple, and of the throne of God’s anointed king over Israel and Judah, Jerusalem was the peak spiritual location on earth—and it will be on a much grander scale in the future. Even today, Jewish immigration to the Holy Land from anywhere in the world is referred to as *aliyah*—“ascent.”

In the same vein, another focus of the passage is the physical city of Jerusalem as representative of the city of God now presently in heaven to later descend: “Mount Zion...the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22; see Revelation 21–22). The reference to the “sides of the north” in verse 2 could signify the Temple Mount and royal palace being on the north side of David’s city. Yet it may also signify the heavenly “mount of the congregation on the *farthest* sides of the north...above the heights of the clouds” (see Isaiah 14:13-14).

The verses here would also appear to portray on some level the spiritual Zion or Jerusalem of today—the Church of God, wherein God now dwells through His Spirit and which He greatly blesses and protects (compare Hebrews 12:22-23).

Yet the primary focus of Psalm 48 is the future time of Christ’s reign over all nations as in the previous psalm, when Jerusalem, as the capital of God’s Kingdom, will truly be “the joy of the whole earth” (verse 2). God in the person of Christ will literally dwell bodily in Jerusalem’s palaces or citadels—governing the earth from there.

That this is the principal backdrop we discern from the message of the previous two psalms as well as the apparent time setting of Psalm 48:4-7. “This section describes from a different point of view the final battle [at Christ’s return] referred to in Ps. 2; 110. Psalm 48 describes the approach and hasty retreat of the errant kings. The connection between this text and Ps. 2 is heightened by the use of an unusual Hebrew word for *fear*—a term meaning ‘trembling’ or ‘quaking terror’—which is found in both places

(2:11)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on 48:4-7). The imagery of God breaking ships of Tarshish in verse 7 is later found in Ezekiel 27, where the figure is meant to symbolize the destruction of ancient Tyre and its commercial system as well as, chiefly, the destruction of end-time Tyre, the international power bloc also known as Babylon—the parallel account of its destruction being found in Revelation 18 (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezekiel 27).

Beyond the wars and assaults, Jerusalem will be safe because God will be her refuge (Psalm 48:3)—repeating the message of Psalm 46. Coming to the splendor and magnificence of God’s holy city, and the wonderful way of life proclaimed from there, visiting pilgrims will remark, “As we have heard, so we have seen...” (48:8). These words call to mind the reaction of the Queen of Sheba in visiting King Solomon: “It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. However I did not believe the words until I came and saw with my own eyes; and indeed the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard” (1 Kings 10:6-7). How much more will this be true of Jerusalem during the reign of the Great King, Jesus Christ.

Visitors are encouraged to walk about and enjoy the city’s awesome beauty (Psalm 48:12-13). Parents will tell their children that the city, a bastion of righteousness and justice, exemplifies the Everlasting God (see verse 14). Just as God provides evidence that He is the Creator (Romans 1:18-20), in Jerusalem He provides evidence that He is the King. In its note on Psalm 48:9-11, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states that Jerusalem will be “a God-given visual aid, encouraging [visitors] to imagine and to reflect on the long history of God’s involvement with Israel and of the evidences of his ‘unfailing love’ (*hesed*).”

Though verses 9-14 paint a vivid picture of the future, the words here also applied well to the experience of the Israelites in ancient times as they came to Jerusalem and its temple to worship. Just the same, these words can have immediacy for us today as we ponder being part of spiritual Zion, God’s Church, and what that entails—and as we consider what God will yet do for us in the wonderful age to come.

Finally it should be pointed out that some have objected to the last words of this psalm, which in the NKJV state that God “will be our guide *even* to death.” If the interpolated word “even” is left out, this would seem to make God “our guide to death”—as if to say He leads us to death. This may be why the Septuagint translators changed the final words to “forever,” which is used earlier in the verse. However, the phrase “even to death” is certainly true—that God is with us and guides us through all our lives even to the point of death. Of course, God will ultimately guide us even *beyond* death. It may be, as some have argued, that “to death” is actually part of a postscript to this psalm or of a prescript to the next, a cue phrase meaning set to the tune of another song titled “Death”—perhaps an abbreviated form of “Death of the Son,” mentioned in the superscription of Psalm 9.

“Now Consider This, You Who Forget God” (Psalms 49–50)

July 20-22

In its note on Psalms 49–53, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* says: “This cluster of psalms presents a striking contrast [from the previous grouping] that brings the Psalter’s call for godliness into sharp focus. On the one hand, we meet two psalms that face each other: (1) as God’s summons to his people to come before him and hear his verdict concerning their lives (Ps 50), and (2) as a penitent’s humble prayer for forgiveness and cleansing (Ps 51). On the other hand, these are bracketed by two psalms (49; 52) that denounce those who trust in their wealth (49:6; 52:7) and make their ‘boast’ either in that wealth (49:6) or in the ‘evil’ practices by which they obtained it (52:1). These descriptions of the ungodly are found nowhere else in the Psalter. In the first of these framing psalms, such people are characterized as ‘foolish’ and ‘senseless’ (49:10). So it is appropriate that this four-psalm segment of the Psalter has appended to it in climax [Psalm 53] a somewhat revised repetition of Ps 14 with its denunciation of the fools whose thoughts and ways are God-less. Placed immediately after Ps 46–48, these five psalms serve as a stern reminder that only those who put their trust in the Lord have reason to celebrate the security of ‘the city of our God’ (48:1, 8...).”

In the first psalm of this new cluster, **Psalm 49**, itself the last in the sequence of Korahite psalms beginning Book II of the Psalter, the psalmist declares that he has a message of universal importance: “Give ear, all inhabitants of the world.” He aims to resolve the “dark saying” (verse 4) or perplexing “riddle” of life (see NIV) concerning the apparent blessing of godless people who care more about money and possessions than about God (compare Job 21; Psalm 73).

Such people often pursue wealth at the expense of others. The psalmist asks himself, “Why should I fear in the days of evil, when the iniquity at my heels [i.e., those who trip me up] surrounds me? Those who trust in their wealth...” (Psalm 49:5-6). The psalmist realizes that these people are not as blessed as they think. “Wealth cannot buy escape from death—not even one’s family ‘redeemer’ can accomplish it” (*Zondervan*, note on verses 7-9).

The psalmist poignantly remarks, “For the redemption of their souls is costly” (verses 8-9). That is, it was more than a mere man could pay. This insight had prophetic significance. For God would actually pay the costly price in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ to make it possible for all people to have eternal life (John 3:16).

Just as anyone can, materially driven people can see, as Psalm 49:10 states, that all people, even the wise, die and leave their wealth to others (compare Ecclesiastes 7:2; 9:5; 2:18, 21). So those focused on money and possessions seek solace in what they leave behind—in establishing a legacy, leaving an inheritance, naming their estates and territories after themselves—all in a vain attempt to immortalize at least some aspect of themselves (verse 11).

But this pursuit is pointless in the face of the gaping mouth of death—into which people who think like this nevertheless go helplessly as sheep (verse 14). This metaphor of death (Hebrew *muwt*) as a monster feeding on people like sheep helps to verify the historical setting of the writing of the psalms, as it has also been found in Canaanite literature—one document warning people to not approach *Mot* (Death) “or he will put you like a lamb into his mouth” (see *Zondervan*, note on verse 14). This was therefore imagery familiar to Israelite culture.

Dominion will ultimately go to the righteous (same verse). Indeed, the psalmist is confident that God will redeem him from the power of the grave and receive him (verse 15). This does not refer merely to God’s general protection of His people throughout their physical lives—for the focus, as verse 9 makes clear, is on living eternally. Verse 15, then, is a prophecy of the resurrection, wherein the righteous will inherit from God the rule and possession of all things.

In the similar refrains of verses 12 and 20, those who live in pursuit of riches are described as perishing like beasts. Since all human beings die just as animals and all, unlike animals, are destined to be resurrected, what does this mean? It must reflect the fact that the godless, like animals, die without genuine feeling of hope. They have no confident assurance of eternity with God in the same way the psalmist has. Those whom God has not called in this age do not know His plans for their future—that they will be resurrected and given an opportunity to repent and change. And those whom God *has* called and given His Spirit but then reject His way and pursue selfishness *do* know their future—that they will utterly perish.

Psalm 49 makes the sobering point that when a rich man dies “he shall carry nothing away” (verse 17)—that is, nothing of earthly value. No money, no glory, no praise and no honor will descend with Him into the grave. The apostle Paul spoke similarly in 1 Timothy 6:6-10 when he warned us against the danger of materialism: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain *we can carry nothing out*. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

Psalm 50 is the first of 12 psalms in the Psalter attributed to Asaph, one of David’s music leaders (see 1 Chronicles 23:2-5)—with only this one occurring in Book II and the other 11 in Book III. It seems most likely that Asaph composed these. However, as noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalms 42–45, it could also be that David wrote these, or just this first one, for Asaph to perform (or one composed the music and the other the lyrics). Yet this particular psalm “may have been separated from the other psalms of Asaph (73–83) in order to be paired with Ps 51 in the cluster of Ps 49–53” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 50 title)—the idea being that Psalm 50 is a divine calling to account followed by a repentant response in Psalm 51 (where the sacrifices God desires are reiterated).

In Psalm 50 God delivers a summons and declares that He is the supreme Judge. Where the NKJV speaks of God *calling* the earth and the heavens in verses 1 and 4, the NIV properly renders this as God *summoning* them—or their inhabitants—into His presence for the purpose of judgment. Note verse 4: “He

summons the heavens above and the earth, that he may judge his people” (NIV). In verse 1, the summoning of the earth from the rising to the setting of the sun simply means that His summons reaches around the entire world.

Verses 2-3 speak of God shining forth from Zion, “the perfection of beauty,” and the coming of God with fire and storm. This would seem to tie the psalm back to Psalms 46–48, which describe God’s coming in great power to put down His enemies and His ascension to the throne in Zion in its lofty beauty to rule over all the earth (compare also Isaiah 29:6). At that time, He will gather His saints (see Psalm 50:5; Isaiah 40:11; Isaiah 56:8) and will institute righteous judgment (Psalm 50:6; Daniel 2:20; 4:34-35; Psalm 75). He will then instruct Israel in the ways of righteousness and warn of the consequences of hypocrisy (Psalm 50:7-23).

Yet just as in Psalm 48, there is likely a measure of duality all these verses. For God shining forth out of Zion could relate to the proclamation of His truth and call to repentance through His Church in this age as well as the law and judgment going forth from Zion in the Kingdom. The gathering of saints for judgment (Psalm 50:4-6) may relate to God’s judgment beginning with the Church today (see 1 Peter 4:17)—not in the sense of final sentencing but of an evaluation process through their lives. Alternatively, it may refer to the Church being gathered for the work of delivering God’s judgments to the world—especially to physical Israel (see Psalm 50:7).

Yet if the mention of God’s saints having made a covenant with Him by sacrifice (verse 5) is related to the discussion of sacrifice in verses 7-15, it is possible that the same people are intended. That is, it could be that the saints or holy ones bound to God in covenant refers to the faithful of Israel—in ancient times meaning those who persisted in God’s covenant and today referring to the elect remnant of Israel according to grace, God’s Church.

Getting into the meat of the psalm’s message starting in verse 7, note that God is the one speaking—and He has something to say against His people. It is a rebuke. Not for their sacrifices per se, as God has commanded these and they are certainly to offer them (verse 8). The problem is that the people had lost the perspective of *why* God had set up the sacrificial system in the first place. God didn’t need their sacrifices (verses 9-13). They were not doing Him a favor by giving them. All the animals already belong to Him (verses 10-11).

In verse 12, God says, “If I were hungry, I would not tell you.” This is figurative, as God does not get hungry. The stress should be on the word “you.” He is saying that He does not need to go to *them* to be provided for. What physical things could they possibly give Him since He already owns everything? “For the world is mine,” He declares, “and all its fullness.”

Indeed, the whole point of the sacrificial system was to show the people how much they needed God—His forgiveness and spiritual help—not the other way around. It also afforded them an opportunity for obedience and character development.

And this God *did* want. The offerings of the heart—these were and are the true offerings that God desires as a prelude to any physical offerings, as was noted earlier in the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalm 40. God wants a relationship with His people, wherein they live before Him in humility and obedience and He blesses and provides for them (50:14-15). As God says in Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (see also Matthew 9:13; 12:7). We will see this reiterated in the next psalm.

These words are as important to us as they were to the ancient Israelites. We do not offer burnt offerings today, but we do give offerings—of money and service. Yet these things, as important and required as they are, can become a wrong focus in a number of ways. We may start to think that we are upholding the Church or work of God with our tithes and efforts and develop a wrong sort of pride over that. We must never make the mistake of thinking that God needs what we have or is dependent on what we do. The reason He instructs us to give is to benefit us, to help train us for even greater service. Another pitfall is to get so wrapped up in the ritual aspects of prayer, Bible study, Sabbath services, Holy Day observance, etc., that we neglect to consider our utter dependence on God, to humbly repent of our sins or to serve the well being of others. Indeed, even serving others can fall into this category too if it does not flow from a genuine heart of love but, rather, from a desire to appear spiritual (compare 1 Corinthians 13:3).

This brings us to verse 16 of Psalm 50. Some commit to God’s laws with their mouths but then turn

around and flagrantly violate them as a matter of course (verses 16-20). This is not talking about the wicked of the world in general—but of those who profess to have a relationship with God.

God in His mercy does not immediately destroy such people. But sadly, they tend to take from this that He must be okay with what they're doing (verse 21). In their drift from God they basically forget what He's all about (verse 22). Yet God says He's going to set them straight on the matter (verse 21)—and warns them of dire consequences if they will not consider His words and, by implication, repent (verse 22). Of course, they must desire to change. What power can release a person from sin who doesn't want to be released? Who can help a person who doesn't understand he needs help? "So are the paths of all who forget God; and the hope of the hypocrite shall perish, whose confidence shall be cut off" (Job 8:13).

Those who remember God and glorify Him will see His salvation (verse 23). The NRSV translates this verse as: "Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God." Herein is assurance offered to those who serve God with a proper attitude—and hope offered to those who have drifted from Him. They can repent. God wants to save them. That's the reason He warns them. And He shows them the way to repent in the next psalm—along with a restatement of the kind of sacrifices He is truly looking for.

Godly Repentance; The Destruction of the Godless (Psalms 51–53)

July 23-26

We return now to psalms attributed to David, with **Psalm 51** being the first in Book II of the Psalter that bears his name. We read this psalm earlier in conjunction with the event described in the superscription—that of the prophet Nathan confronting David after his sin of adultery and murder (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 2 Samuel 11 as well as 2 Samuel 12:1-13; Psalm 51; 2 Samuel 12:13-31; 1 Chronicles 20:1-3). David immediately confesses, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:9, 13). And here in his psalm of repentance, David provides a model of repentant prayer for all of God's people when they sin. It may have been placed here in the Psalter as a response to the calling to account and instruction on sacrifices God gives in Psalm 50.

In Psalm 51, David doesn't justify his actions or try to improve his position. He appeals to God for mercy, *hesed*—God's unending, steadfast love (verse 1). David agonizingly faces what he has done and confesses it to God using all the basic Hebrew words for sin. The word "transgressions" (verse 1) is from the Hebrew *pasha*, meaning transgression in the sense of rebellion or revolt. "Iniquity" in verse 2 is from *awon*, meaning perversity, wickedness or fault. The word for "evil" in verse 4 is *ra'*, meaning something bad, wrong or hurtful. And the word for "sin" in these verses, *hata*, means to miss the mark. All essentially imply deviating from a standard—that is, from God's standard.

In verse 4, David says to God, "Against You, You only, have I sinned." This might seem odd, for David appears also to have sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, other soldiers who were killed in the battle in which Uriah died, and the nation of Israel, over which David had a responsibility to govern righteously. Jesus later said that one person can sin against another (Matthew 18:15). So what did David mean?

Some take it to be a matter of comparison. That is to say, what he did against these others is nothing compared to what he has done against God. Yet the answer is probably more a matter of nuance in perspective. Sin, we must consider, is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4, KJV). Since God is the one who defines the law's standards, any violation of the law is against Him. Acting against another person is sin because *God* has set the rules of conduct forbidding this. The standard we have violated, the mark we have missed, is God's. In this sense, sin itself can only be against God, the Lawgiver. It would certainly be proper to say that one has sinned in acting against another person. And it is easy to see that the statement could be shortened to say that one has sinned against another person. But here we should realize that while the affected person is the object of the action that is sin, he is not the object of the sin (or transgressing) itself, as it was not his law that was transgressed but God's.

David's statement in Psalm 51:5 has caused much confusion: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." This does not mean David's mother sinned in conceiving him. Nor does it mean that David was born stained with "original sin," as many maintain. Rather the Hebrew prefixed preposition *b'*, usually translated "in," can also mean "into." As Gesenius' *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* says in one of its definitions of this word, it often occurs "with verbs of motion, when the movement *to* a place results in rest *in* it, *into*." Thus, David is most likely stating that he was brought forth *into* iniquity and *into* sin. As with all human beings, sin had

characterized his life from a young age.

In verse 6, David says that God desires “truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part...to know wisdom.” It is one thing to know God’s truth in an academic sense. It is quite another to also live by it in our inward thoughts and motivations. This, David knew, is what God really wants. And whenever we repent, we must consider what it is that God wants from us. It comes down to an educated change and a lifelong commitment—and that we follow through.

David asks God to “blot out,” to “wash” and to “cleans[e]” him (verses 2, 9)—to thoroughly scrub him clean from His spiritual uncleanness (verses 6-7). In its note on verse 7, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “The unclean, such as lepers, used to present themselves before the priest on the occasion of their purification. The priest, being satisfied that the unclean person had met the requirements for purification, would take a bunch of ‘hyssop’ and sprinkle the person with water, symbolic of ritual cleansing. Here the psalmist [David] petitions the Lord to be his priest by taking the hyssop and by declaring him cleansed from all sin.”

In this cleansing, David prays that God would create in him a clean heart and would renew a steadfast, faithful spirit within Him (verse 10). David realized he could not be faithful on His own. He needed God’s constant help. So he pleads to remain in God’s presence and to continue to have God’s Holy Spirit to help him—not himself cast out and that Spirit taken away as he knew he deserved (verse 11).

Guilt over what he had done was always present in David’s mind (verse 3). It took the joy and gladness out of life (verse 8). David figuratively refers to God having broken his bones (same verse), meaning that the overwhelming guilt he had from considering his sin in light of God’s laws made him feel hobbled or crushed and greatly humbled. He prays to be forgiven and relieved of this guilt (verse 14)—and that His joy would return (verse 12).

David declares what he will do when God restores him. He will teach others God’s ways (verse 13), He will sing about God’s righteousness (verse 14)—no doubt in public psalms—and he will openly proclaim God’s praise (verse 15). David was thinking outwardly, not selfishly about only himself. When we ask God for restoration, an important part of our motivation should be so that we can better serve Him and others.

In verses 16-19 we return to a major theme of Psalm 50—the kind of sacrifices God really wants (also touched on in Psalm 40). At the time he wrote, David was required to bring physical sacrifices to the tabernacle. And he no doubt did on this occasion soon after his confession before Nathan. Perhaps Psalm 51 was written as a song to accompany the sacrifice. Verse 16’s statement about God not desiring sacrifice “or else I would give it” should not be understood to imply that David would *not* bring a sacrifice. The point is that he’ll give God whatever God wants—he’ll do whatever it takes—to be right with Him.

But David knows that God does not desire any physical sacrifices apart from the inner sacrifices of a right heart and mind—“broken,” meaning humble, and “contrite,” meaning repentant and obedient (verse 17). David used these same terms in Psalm 34:18. And the prophet Isaiah would later use them as well (Isaiah 66:2)—again in the context of the kind of sacrifices and service God is truly looking for. Psalm 51:19 uses the words “sacrifices of righteousness”—showing that it involves living the right way of life.

David concludes by asking God to “do good” to Zion or Jerusalem and to build its walls—meaning to bless and protect the people—including leading them to a right mindset—so that the people and their physical offerings would please Him (verses 18-19). This shows that God *is* pleased with physical offerings—but only when part of an inward devotion to Him and life of obedience. The holy city is likely here representative of the entire nation—and in a prophetic sense of spiritual Zion, the Church, as well as God’s Kingdom in the world to come.

It should be noted that Psalm 51 has, thematically, many points of contact with Psalm 25.

Psalm 52 is a *maskil* (perhaps meaning instructive psalm or, as the NKJV translates it, “contemplation”) of David—the first of four of these in a row. We earlier read this psalm in harmony with the story of the event mentioned in the superscription—when Doeg the Edomite, a servant of King Saul, told Saul of the high priest Ahimelech giving provisions to David and his men (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 1 Samuel 22:6-23; Psalm 52). Recall that Saul then ordered his men to execute Ahimelech and the other priests at Nob—which his men refused to do, whereupon Doeg carried

out Saul's order, slaughtering 85 priests plus additional men, women, children, infants and animals living in the city (verses 18-19). To the one son who escaped, David lamented that he was to blame for having put the priests in jeopardy (verse 22).

In Psalm 52, written on that occasion, David questions the intelligence of any "mighty" man that would boast about doing evil since God's love and goodness will not be thwarted. Those who use their tongue for evil—such as in lying and passing on information to hurt innocent people—will be destroyed.

Doeg was apparently a wealthy man (verse 7)—perhaps having his pockets lined through spying and other misdeeds. Saul may have rewarded him handsomely after his massacre of the priests. Yet it is foolish to trust in money and evil accomplishments. This verse connects Psalm 52 with Psalm 49, concerning "those who trust in their wealth and boast in the multitude of their riches" (verse 6). Both psalms show that this is the way to destruction.

In contrast to the wicked, who will be uprooted from the land of the living (52:5), David says that he is like an olive tree (verse 8), which lives for hundreds of years. Indeed, planted securely "in the house of God"—ultimately not the ancient tabernacle but the family and Kingdom of God—he and the rest of the saints will flourish under the attentive care of the Master "forever and ever" (verses 8-9). The picture of the righteous as flourishing green trees ties back to the imagery of Psalm 1.

Psalm 53 is another *maskil* of David. "To Mahalath" in the superscription, which may be part of a postscript to Psalm 52 (and also found in the superscription of Psalm 88 as part of a longer phrase), could represent the psalm being set to the tune of another song. Yet it might mean something else. The words have been variously interpreted as "On sickness," "On suffering," "To pipings" (on wind instruments) or "To dances" (or some sort of choreography).

Psalm 53 repeats much of Psalm 14 with some minor variation (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalm 14). The placement of nearly the same psalm here provides a further commentary on the sort of arrogant godless fool described in Psalms 49 and 52—and thus brings the cluster of psalms beginning with 49 to a close. It also helps to demonstrate that originally the various books of the Psalter were probably separate collections or hymnals.

One noticeable difference between the two psalms is that here the word *Elohim* ("God") is used throughout rather than YHWH (the Eternal or "LORD").

The other significant difference occurs in verse 5. As the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* notes on this verse, it "differs considerably from 14:5-6, though the basic thought remains the same: God overwhelms the godless who attack his people. Here the verbs are in the past tense (perhaps to express the certainty of their downfall)." As to God scattering the bones of the enemy, it means "over the battlefield of their defeat, their bodies left unburied like something loathsome (see Isa 14:18-20; Jer 8:2...)" (same note). However, it could also be that so many will be destroyed at the end that they will not be able to be buried for some time, such as when the godless army of Gog is destroyed (see Ezekiel 39:11-16).

The closing verse of Psalm 14 and of 53 are identical in expressing a great yearning for salvation, rejoicing and gladness when God restores His people to their land. This speaks prophetically of the future establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

"Be Merciful to Me, O God, for Man Would Swallow Me Up" (Psalms 54–57) July 27-31

Psalm 54 is the third *maskil* of David out of four in a row. *Neginoth* in the superscription, which may be part of the postscript of Psalm 53, is probably correctly rendered in the NKJV as "stringed instruments" (and in the next superscription, which may be part of the postscript of *this* psalm).

Psalm 54 begins a cluster of seven prayers of David for help against enemies and betrayal at the center of Book II of the Psalter (Psalms 54–60). Note in going through these psalms that the main weapon of the enemy in most of them is the mouth. We earlier read Psalm 54 in conjunction with the account of the event mentioned in the superscription—when the people of Ziph informed Saul that David was hiding in that area (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 1 Samuel 23:15-29; Psalm 54).

These informants put David's life in danger, as Saul was out to kill him. So David prays for God to save him by His "name" (verse 1), meaning everything God's identity implies—who He is and what He stands for. He further asks God to vindicate him (same verse)—the context here meaning either to prove David right for trusting God (by God coming through for him) or to prove David, though a fugitive, *in* the right (by saving him and judging his enemies).

The "strangers" who have risen against David (verse 3) apparently refers to the Ziphite informants.

And the “oppressors” seeking his life (same verse) would seem to refer to Saul and his officers. None of these, David says, are following God.

In verses 4-5, David declares his confidence in God to help him and his supporters and to punish his enemies. He prays, “Cut them off in Your truth.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states: “The resolution of the prayer lies in the conviction that God is just. He will not permit his children to suffer without vindication. The imprecation [or curse] is not vindictive but expressive of trust in divine justice. Evil must be repaid. The people of God believed in the boomerang effect of sin: ‘Let evil recoil [i.e., come back on those who perpetrate it]’” (note on verse 5).

Trusting in God’s deliverance, David says he will “freely sacrifice” to God (verse 6)—or “sacrifice a freewill offering” (NIV). This refers to a peace offering (see Leviticus 7:11-18; 22:18-30; Numbers 15:1-10), “given only when the worshipper wanted to say an extra-special thanks to God for his gracious, saving love” (George Knight, *Psalms*, Daily Study Bible Series, comments on Psalm 54).

God’s name, hearkening back to verse 1, is good—and worthy of praise (verse 6). Verse 7 may mean that deliverance has come in the midst of the song’s composition, though it perhaps more likely means that David has foreseen it clearly. Rather than including the NKJV’s interpolated words “*its desire*,” a better sense might simply be “My eye has seen *what will come* upon my enemies.”

Psalm 55 is the last *maskil* of David in a sequence of four. As before, the word *Neginoth* in the superscription, perhaps part of a postscript to Psalm 54, is probably correctly translated in the NKJV as “strung instruments.”

David cries out to God in this song about many enemies acting against him, though his focus is on one in particular. The psalm addresses the pain of being betrayed by a friend—one David knew well who even worshiped God at the tabernacle alongside him (verses 12-14). Besides being painful on its own, a betraying friend is an enemy with vital knowledge—an adversary particularly adept at causing harm and inflicting pain. David addresses both elements here when he says, “If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him” (verse 12, NIV).

The friend having “broken his covenant” (verse 20) could mean an informal one of friendship or a formal oath of loyalty to David as king—perhaps part of an oath of office. The man’s loyalty and slick speech, David says, were a pretense—all part of a calculated plan to stab him in the back (verse 21).

David doesn’t name the friend, but many believe the person meant here was his counselor and prime minister Ahithophel, who betrayed him in joining and essentially directing Absalom’s rebellion (see 2 Samuel 15–17). Further, many see a connection between Psalm 55 and Psalm 41:9: “Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.” However, Psalm 41 also concerns an illness that befell David—and there is no record of him being ill when Absalom rebelled (though, as pointed out previously, it is not hard to imagine that his deep depression could have made him physically sick). It could be that Psalm 41 and Psalm 55 concern two different friends at different times—or that both concern the same friend but not Ahithophel. In any case, these two psalms are certainly linked by theme if not by occasion. That being so, we should recall that Psalm 41:9 is quoted in the New Testament as a prophecy of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot. The betrayal in Psalm 55 would seem to prefigure this as well, as many have recognized.

The NKJV translates David’s prayer in verse 15 as: “Let death seize them; let them go down alive into hell”—that is, not just the one treacherous friend but others who were set against him also. In no way does this refer to people descending into a burning hellfire and remaining conscious. Rather, the word translated “hell” here simply means, as the NIV renders it, “grave.” In using the word “alive,” David could conceivably be calling for what happened to Korah and the other rebels against Moses in the wilderness when the earth opened up and swallowed them—whereupon they were instantly killed. Yet it seems likely that he simply means for their deaths to come while they are in full vigor and not after they have lain on their sickbeds in old age. David later expresses his belief that this will happen when he says near the end of the psalm, “Bloodthirsty and deceitful men shall not live out half their days” (verse 23).

How are we to understand David’s call for death on his enemies, as it may seem very unchristian in light of Jesus’ instruction to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors? One book explains regarding such imprecations (callings for curse or judgment on others) in the psalms: “These invocations are not mere outbursts of a vengeful spirit; they are, instead, prayers addressed to God. These earnest pleadings to God ask that he step in and right some matters so grossly distorted that if his help does not come, all hope

for justice is lost.

“These hard sayings are legitimate expressions of the longings of Old Testament saints for the vindication that only God’s righteousness can bring. They are not statements of personal vendetta, but utterances of zeal for the kingdom of God and his glory. The attacks that provoked these prayers were not just from personal enemies; rather, they were rightly seen as attacks against God and especially his representatives in the promised line of the Messiah. Thus, David and his office bore the brunt of most of these attacks, and this was tantamount to an attack on God and his kingdom!

“It is frightening to realize that a righteous person may, from time to time, be in the presence of evil and have little or no reaction to it. But in these psalms we have the reverse of the situation. These prayers express a fierce abhorrence of sin and a desire to see God’s name and cause triumph. Therefore, those whom the saints opposed in these prayers were the fearful embodiments of wickedness.

“Since David was the author of far more imprecatory psalms than anyone else, let it also be noted that David exhibited just the opposite of a vindictive or vengeful spirit in his own life. He was personally assaulted time and time again by people like Shimei, Doeg, Saul and his own son Absalom. Never once did he attempt to effect his own vindication or lift his hand to exercise what many may have regarded as his royal prerogative....

“Finally, these imprecations only repeat in prayer what God had already stated elsewhere would be the fate of those who were impenitent and who were persistently opposing God and his kingdom. In almost every instance, each expression used in one of these prayers of malediction may be found in plain prose statements of what will happen to those sinners who persist in opposing God” (Walter Kaiser Jr., Peter Davids, F.F. Bruce and Manfred Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 1996, comments on Psalm 137:8-9).

David, we should also remember, was a prophet expressing God’s judgment. Furthermore, here in Psalm 55 he even seems to make allowance for repentance when he says that it is such people’s *lack* of repentance that is the basis for their punishment: “God, who is enthroned forever, will hear them [i.e., the evil they say and do] and afflict them...men who never change their ways and have no fear of God” (verse 19, NIV).

Conversely, David has confidence that God will sustain His faithful people. He tells the righteous to “cast your burden on the LORD, and He shall sustain you” (verse 22). The apostle Peter later says the same in 1 Peter 5:6-7: “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

Psalm 56 is the first of five Davidic psalms in a row bearing the title *mikhtam* (56–60). As explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalm 16 (another *mikhtam*), the meaning of this word is uncertain. It may mean a writing or inscription—and could perhaps denote something first written as a poem (though we know from the examples here that these were set to music, at least at some point, and some express a desire to play instruments or sing). As noted previously, these *mikhtams* are all written in the face of great danger.

We earlier read Psalm 56 in conjunction with the account of David fleeing from Saul into Philistine territory and being taken into custody by the Philistines at Gath—the event mentioned in the superscription (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 1 Samuel 21:1-12; Psalm 56). This was immediately before David feigned madness to escape from the Philistines, after which he composed Psalm 34 in thanks to God.

David complains that his enemies are many and that they hound him all day (56:2). Having been on the run from Saul, it is likely that David was thinking a great deal about him and his forces and not just the Philistines—though they were certainly included.

David talks through his fears in prayer: “Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You.... In God I have put my trust; I will not fear. What can flesh do to me?” (verses 3-4; compare the same basic refrain in verses 4 and 10-11; see also 118:6). It was fear of Saul that had driven David from Israel and into Philistine territory. So he was clearly learning some lessons here.

David then once more describes the actions of his enemies (Psalm 56:5-7) before again expressing trust in God to help him. *The Nelson Study Bible* says that “alternating passages of pain and faith are a characteristic of the lament psalms...[and] the poet typically complains about lies, the misuse of language, and deceit” (notes on Psalm 56:3-4 and verse 5).

Thinking about his life on the run and all his suffering, David knows that God is aware and keeps track of it (verse 8). David realizes God is *for* him—on his side (verse 9; compare Romans 8:31). God has been faithful to him in saving and helping him (Psalm 56:13)—and David will be faithful to God (verse 12).

Psalm 57 is the second in the sequence of five *miktams* here. We earlier read it along with the account mentioned in the superscription—when David “fled from Saul into the cave.” Actually, David hid in a cave on two occasions we know of—once in Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1-5), the setting of Psalm 142, and once in the oasis of En Gedi (1 Samuel 24:1-7), which is evidently the setting of this psalm. In En Gedi, David in a miraculous circumstance spared Saul when he could easily have killed him and was afterward blessed with a period of respite. This was in answer to David’s prayer recorded here (see the earlier Bible Reading Program comments on Psalm 57; 1 Samuel 24).

David cries out for mercy, trusting God will save him (Psalm 57:1-3). The imagery in verse 1 of finding refuge under God’s wings as a young bird finds protection under the wings of its mother is also found elsewhere in Psalms (17:8; 36:7; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4).

As David fervently prays for help, he is not yet out of peril from those who seek to harm him (verses 4, 6). But he sees a new day dawning (verse 8). Note the repeated refrain of praise (verses 5, 11). And indeed, God would soon rescue him, as 1 Samuel 24 shows.

The end of Psalm 57 (verses 7-11), with its exuberant expression of joy and praise, is used in Book V of the Psalter as the beginning of Psalm 108 (verses 1-5), while the end of Psalm 108 is taken from Psalm 60, the last of the sequence of *miktams* here.

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