



Good News
Bible Reading Program

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

— March 2006 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-3 Mar	No readings	No readings
4-8 Mar	135) Praise God for His great works in nature and for His people; 136) Thanks to God for His creation, deliverance and enduring loving mercy; 137) Remembering Zion in exile	Psalms 135–137
9-15 Mar	138) Praise to God for giving strength and revival; 139) Prayer for the all-knowing God to punish the wicked and to examine and lead His servant; 140) Prayer for deliverance from evil, violent enemies; 141) Cry to be kept from wickedness and wicked schemes	Psalms 138–141
16-22 Mar	142) Cry for deliverance from stronger persecutors; 143) Plea for deliverance from enemies; 144) Prayer for rescue from deceitful foreigners; 145) Praise for God's greatness and grace	Psalms 142–145
23-26 Mar	146) Praise to God who helps those in need; 147) Praise to God for His providential care and Word	Psalms 146–147
27-31 Mar	148) Praise to God from all creation; 149) Praise to God from His people, who will receive salvation and share in executing judgment; 150) Let all that live join in the orchestra of praise to God	Psalms 148–150

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

No Readings

March 1-3

There are no assigned readings for the first three days of this month.

“To Him Who Alone Does Great Wonders” (Psalms 135–137)

March 4-8

Psalms 135–137 form the concluding section of what some Jewish traditions label the Great Hallel (or “Praise”)—following the beginning section, the songs of ascents (120–134). As noted in the Bible Reading Program’s introduction to the Great Hallel and songs of ascents, some traditions list the Great Hallel as Psalms 120–136, while others confine it to only Psalm 136.

Psalm 135, an unattributed psalm of praise for the one true Creator God in contrast to worthless idols, is well placed after Psalm 134, the concluding song of ascents. Recall its closing statement about “the LORD who made heaven and earth” (verse 3), repeating wording used in other songs of ascents (see 121:2; 124:8). Indeed, Psalm 134 introduces Psalm 135 in other ways too, as we will see. And we should also note that Psalm 135 repeats themes and language from another Hallel collection, the Egyptian Hallel (113–118). An apparent quotation of Jeremiah 10:13 (and 51:16) in Psalm 135:7, combined with clear indications that this song was intended for temple worship, has led many to conclude that the psalm was written after the Jewish exile in Babylon. However, it is possible that the repeated verse in Jeremiah was quoted from Psalm 135.

The psalm opens with five calls to praise the Lord (verses 1-3) and closes with five calls to bless the Lord (verses 19-21)—continuing from Psalm 134’s repeated call to bless the Lord (verses 1-2).

Verse 1 of Psalm 135 is basically identical to the opening verse of the Egyptian Hallel, 113:1, except that the second and third lines are transposed. The next verse (135:2), wherein the call to praise God is given to those who “stand in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God,” continues thematically from, again, the first two verses of 134. Here it is evident that festival worship is still in mind, as in the songs of ascents. Moreover, God’s “house” also signified His holy nation of Israel (compare verse 4). And of course, we today should further understand God’s “house” to represent His Church, His spiritual nation, as well as His eternal Kingdom and family. The description of Israel as a “special treasure” (verse 4; compare Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2) applies in a higher sense to God’s spiritually elect people (compare Malachi 3:16-17).

Note in Psalm 135:3 the use of the terms “good” and “pleasant,” as in Psalm 133:1, where these terms describe the unity of God’s people. Here in Psalm 135, the word *good* applies to God as a cause for praise. Yet it is not entirely clear what the word *pleasant* refers to, whether to God (in which case the translation should be “for He is pleasant”) or to singing praises or to God’s name (in line with the NKJV translation of “for it is pleasant”). If God is intended, the idea would be that God is pleasing to experience (compare the use of both words in 147:1). The praising of God’s name is also paralleled in the opening of Psalm 113 (verse 2).

Verses 5-7 of Psalm 135 constitute a stanza about God as Sovereign Creator. God doing as He pleases in verse 6 is reminiscent of Psalm 115:3 in the Egyptian Hallel—especially as a section of Psalm 115 is worded much the same as a later section of this song. Psalm 135:7, as already mentioned, may have been taken from Jeremiah 10:13, part of a passage wherein God is shown by His power in creation to be superior to futile idols (see verses 11-16). Yet as also mentioned, it could be the other way around—that these words, found in Jeremiah 51:13 as well, were quoted from Psalm 135.

The next stanza, verses 8-12, presents God as Israel’s Deliverer. It is interesting to note that praise for God as Creator followed by praise for Him as Deliverer is also found in the next psalm, Psalm 136. Indeed, the language about destroying the firstborn of Egypt, the slaying of Kings Sihon and Og, and Israel receiving its land as a heritage is essentially found there also (compare 135:8-12; 136:10-22).

Through God’s mighty acts and intervention, His “name” and “fame” (*zeker*, “remembrance”) endure for all time (verse 13). Indeed, even though people often forget to consider God and His directives, most people understand on some level that He exists. Moreover, God’s name will live forever as generations pass on the story of His saving acts, as those who love Him continue to praise Him, and as He completes His great plan of salvation—bringing all mankind into a relationship with Him (and ultimately

removing those who reject Him). God's judgment and mercy in dealing with His people is the subject of verse 14.

The words of verses 15-18 are very close to those found in Psalm 115:4-8. The common assumption is that the passage in Psalm 135 is taken from Psalm 115, though the reverse could be true. Regarding the wording here, see the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalm 115.

Interestingly, Psalm 115 addressed Israel, the house of Aaron (the priesthood), and all those who fear the Lord (verses 9-11) and noted that God would bless each of these three groups (verses 12-13). Psalm 118, another psalm of the Egyptian Hallel, called on each of these three groups to declare that God's mercy or unfailing love endures forever (verses 2-4). And now in Psalm 135, we see each of these groups called on to, in turn, bless the Lord—with the addition of addressing a fourth group, the house of Levi, thus distinguishing all those involved in the temple service or perhaps the non-priestly Levitical choir, as it may be that different choirs sang different stanzas of this song. In all likelihood the final declaration of blessing in verse 21 and the concluding *Hallelujah* ("Praise the LORD") were sung by all.

Note also here that as God blessed His people from Zion (134:3), so His people are to bless Him from Zion (135:21). Again, the focus here is on worship at Jerusalem, where God dwells, making this a song of Zion. Besides the obvious meaning, again tying this song to temple festival worship and the songs of ascents, we should also understand Zion in the broader sense of representing God's nation, His Church, His millennial capital, His Kingdom, and His heavenly city. These are all to resound with praise for the Eternal God.

Psalm 136, a song of thanksgiving, is known in some traditions as the Great Hallel (or "Praise") on its own, while others reckon the psalm as the last of the Great Hallel collection. Though the psalm is unattributed, its opening words and repeated refrain—"Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy [*hesed*, loyal love or devotion] endures forever" (verse 1)—are known to have originally come from the song King David composed for the celebration of bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (see 1 Chronicles 16:34). The same words are also found at the beginning of Psalms 106 and 107 and at the beginning and end of Psalm 118.

The refrain—"For His mercy endures forever"—was sung by the Israelite congregation and the Levitical choir at the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 7:3, 6) and later by King Jehoshaphat's singers before Judah's army (20:21). It seems likely that the accounts of these occasions are abbreviated, so that Psalm 136 may have been sung in these instances, as it appears to be written in the form of an antiphonal exchange—that is, back-and-forth, responsive singing—either between two choirs or between a choir and the congregation or as a litany between a worship leader and a choir or the congregation. In the latter case, the choir or congregation would sing the repeated refrain.

Note again the occurrence of the entire formula—both the call to thanks and the refrain—at the opening and closing of Psalm 118. This song, we may recall, concludes the Egyptian Hallel (113–118), so named for the customary use of this collection of psalms in the observance of Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread, celebrating Israel's deliverance from Egypt. As it was likely seen as an amplification of Psalm 118's opening and closing formula, Psalm 136 eventually also became part of the traditional Passover liturgy, being sung after the Egyptian Hallel. Furthermore, as *The Nelson Study Bible* says, "This psalm, known as the 'Great Hallel,' was often recited in the temple as the Passover lambs were being slain" (note on Psalm 136).

The link between Psalms 118 and 136 is paralleled by the link between Psalms 113 and 115 (two other Egyptian Hallel songs) and Psalm 135 (reckoned among the Great Hallel in some traditions). Recall, furthermore, that besides the Passover role, the Egyptian Hallel also played a major role in the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles—as did the Great Hallel, especially when reckoned as a collection beginning with the songs of ascents.

Psalm 136 opens with three calls to thanksgiving and closes with another (verses 1-3, 26). We should note that though this song is classed as or among the Great Hallel, the word *hallel* or "praise" is not found within it. Rather, the giving of thanks to God in song, publicly expressing gratitude to Him for His works, is itself an important form of praise. Note the following parallel. Psalm 136:1 begins, "Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!" Similarly, the previous psalm states: "Praise the LORD [*Hallelujah*], for the LORD is good" (135:3). To praise is to speak well of, and Psalm 136 has much to say in praise of God—even though the word "praise" is not actually used.

Besides God's goodness, the opening calls to thanks also acknowledge God's supremacy, with the titles "God of gods" and "Lord of lords" (verses 2-3). The meaning of the latter terminology is easy to ascertain—that is, all who are "lords" (or masters, as this term designates) are ruled over by the supreme Sovereign Lord and Master, God. Yet many argue that the first title here is merely a figurative superlative, as a literal interpretation would seem to admit the existence of other gods (compare also 135:5; 138:1). It could, however, be taken literally to mean that God is the God over all who are *called* gods—including demons posing as pagan deities (compare Deuteronomy 32:17) and pagan rulers falsely claiming divinity. Moreover, God Himself elsewhere refers to human beings made in His image, who are supposed to rule for Him in the created realm, as gods (Psalm 82:1, 6). And in the eternal realm to come, those who are glorified will share in God's divinity—yet He will forever still be their God, and above all.

The three opening calls to thanks are all followed by the powerful refrain, which is repeated in every line of the psalm for a total of 26 times—perhaps because 26 is "the numerical value of the divine name Yahweh (when the Hebrew letters were used as numbers)" (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 136). As noted above, the word in the refrain translated "mercy" in the KJV and NKJV is the Hebrew *hesed*, sometimes rendered "loyal love," "steadfast love," "covenant faithfulness," "lovingkindness" or "graciousness."

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words has this to say: "The Septuagint [the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible] nearly always renders *hesed* with *eleos* ('mercy'), and that usage is reflected in the New Testament. Modern translations, in contrast, generally prefer renditions close to the word 'grace'.... In general, one may identify three basic meanings of the word, which always interact: 'strength,' 'steadfastness,' and 'love.' Any understanding of the word that fails to suggest all three inevitably loses some of its richness. 'Love' by itself easily becomes sentimentalized or universalized apart from the covenant. Yet 'strength' or 'steadfastness' suggests only the fulfillment of a legal or other obligation. The word refers primarily to mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations between the parties of a relationship.... But *hesed* is not only a matter of obligation; it is also of generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty, but also of mercy. The weaker party seeks the protection and blessing of the patron and protector, but he may not lay absolute claim to it. The stronger party remains committed to his promise, but retains his freedom, especially with regard to the manner in which he will implement those promises. *Hesed* implies personal involvement beyond the rule of law. Marital love is often related to *hesed*. Marriage is certainly a legal matter.... Yet the relationship, if sound, far transcends mere legalities.... Hence, 'devotion' is sometimes the single English word best capable of capturing the nuance of the original" ("Loving-kindness," Old Testament Section).

Hesed is "the most significant term used in the Psalms to describe the character of God" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 1-2). And since God's character never changes, this awesome attribute of His character is, like Him, eternal—as the refrain repeatedly affirms.

As the refrain is given in response to every act of God recounted in the psalm, we are to understand that all His acts here—the "great wonders" exclusive to Him (verse 4)—are born out of this sublime character trait. God created the universe and the earth (verses 4-9) as a habitation for mankind—out of loving devotion for those He would yet create and bring into a relationship with Him. Out of His loyal love and mercy came His deliverance of His people Israel from Egypt and from enemies on the way to Canaan—so that they would receive the land He promised them as a heritage or inheritance (verses 10-22). And it is due to God's unfailing love and grace that He continues to deliver—and that He provides sustenance to all (verses 23-25).

The structure of praising God for His works in creation and then for His works in delivering Israel in the Exodus and on the subsequent journey to the Promised Land is also found in the previous psalm (see 135:5-12). In fact, as was noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on that psalm, the wording of the latter aspect is very similar, providing evidence that one of these psalms influenced the composition of the other. "Slew mighty kings" (135:10) occurs in Psalm 136 as "slew famous kings" (verse 18). In both cases this is followed by mention of "Sihon king of the Amorites" and "Og king of Bashan" (135:11; 136:19-20), who were defeated by Israel (see Numbers 21:21-35; Deuteronomy 2:26-3:11) and whose land on the east side of the Jordan was taken over by the Israelite tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh (see Numbers 32; Deuteronomy 3:12-22). It is likely that the "famous kings" of Psalm 136:18

is also intended to include the kings of Canaan on the west side of the Jordan (as in 135:11), so that “their lands as a heritage...to Israel” (136:21-22) would include the land of Canaan (compare 135:11-12).

Considering the focus of Psalm 136 on God’s loving acts of salvation, we should recall the psalm’s festival association—for God’s annual festivals outline His plan to redeem and save mankind. God’s deliverance of Israel is a central focus in this plan, for all people must become part of Israel in a spiritual sense to ultimately be saved.

The psalm ends in verse 26 as it began—with another call to thank God and a final resounding affirmation, through the refrain, of His eternal steadfast love.

Psalm 137 is a song of Zion expressing desire for God’s holy city while in exile in the land of Babylon. In that sense, it is reminiscent of the opening of the songs of ascents in Psalm 120, where the desire is to be delivered from a hostile foreign environment to travel to Jerusalem, as expressed in other songs of ascents, to be in fellowship with God. “Here [in Psalm 137] speaks the same deep love of Zion as that found in Ps 42–43; 46; 48; 84; 122; 126 [these latter two being songs of ascents]. The editors of the Psalter attached this song to the Great Hallel as a closing expression of supreme devotion to the city at the center of Israel’s worship of the Lord” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, note on Psalm 137). We earlier read this psalm in conjunction with the biblical narratives of the Babylonian Exile and prophecies delivered at that time. We now read it again in the context of the Psalter’s arrangement. The comments that follow are repeated from the earlier Bible Reading Program comments on this song.

Psalm 137, which is not attributed to a particular author, appears to have been composed during the Babylonian exile. Even if it was written afterward, it nonetheless sums up the feelings of many of the Jews in captivity. It is a deeply mournful song, full of longing for their homeland, where they had some semblance of contact with God through His holy city and temple. Now they are far away, adrift, without mooring. They could no longer sing the joyful songs of past days. They “hung up their harps” on the trees—that is, they put away their musical instruments.

The Babylonians, however, asked for some music. While they may have actually wanted to hear some rousing hymns from the famed Jerusalem temple, it is also possible that this was simply a taunt—as in, “Let’s hear some victory songs now...ha, ha.” Whatever the case, in reflecting on the psalms of past days, recalling the former glory of their nation, all the Jews could do was sit by the great rivers of Babylon and weep. “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” they groaned (verse 4). How could they sing praises to God for His help and deliverance against enemies when their nation and temple lay in ruins and they themselves were captives? Would not this just be more reason for their captors to mock? And were they, unclean sinners banished from God’s land, even worthy to sing His songs?

In any case, the psalmist, speaking for the nation, resolves to keep Jerusalem in the forefront of his mind—to never forget and to never cease hoping for restoration. Were the harps retrieved from where they were hung to sing at least this particular song? There is, of course, no way to know. But the sentiment was surely widespread.

In thinking of what had befallen their homeland, the utter horror and misery of what had occurred, there was no way to avoid recalling those who had carried out the destruction—the Babylonians. Moreover, they were urged on by the longtime foe of God’s people, Edom. A special plea is made to God in verse 7 to keep in mind Edom’s cruel enmity. And a pronouncement is then made against the Babylonians—that God will bring back on their heads what they have done to the Jews. It may well be that when the Babylonians asked for a song of Zion from the exiles, this very one was composed in response. It would have served as a rather shocking rebuke against any mocking and ridicule.

Today many grimace at the ending of this psalm, wondering how it squares with God’s loving character. This is due to a misunderstanding of the wording here and of God’s plan in general. First of all, the “one” who is “happy” at destroying the Babylonians in verses 8-9 is not specifically declared to be God. It may simply mean the national power that would later overthrow Babylon—the Persian Empire. The verses would then seem to constitute a prophetic declaration rather than an appeal. In fact, it seems likely that there is even a dual prophetic application here—to ancient Babylon as well as its *end-time* counterpart, the phrase “*daughter of Babylon*” perhaps hinting at this. Edom and Babylon will both play similar roles in the overthrow of Israel and Judah in the last days—and they will both suffer subsequent destruction themselves as repayment.

Of course, it is entirely possible that God *is* meant as the one repaying Babylon with destruction. If so, His being “happy” at doing so would not mean He sadistically relishes punishing human beings. The terminology in that case would have to be understood as His receiving “satisfaction” in a legal sense—that is, God’s righteous *justice* being satisfied through just recompense. Babylon’s “little ones” or “children,” who are to be dashed against the rock, would in this case most likely mean Babylon’s citizenry in general (the city or empire being portrayed as a woman, as already noted).

Moreover, being dashed against a rock is likely a figurative, rather than literal, expression denoting destruction. As the book *Hard Sayings of the Bible* notes on these verses: “One thing Babylon was devoid of was rocks or rocky cliffs against which anything could be dashed. In fact there were not any stones available for building, contrary to the rocky terrain of most of Palestine. All building had to depend on the production of sun-dried mud bricks and the use of bituminous pitch for mortar. Therefore when the psalmist speaks of ‘dashing...against the rocks,’ he is speaking figuratively and metaphorically” (Walter Kaiser Jr., Peter Davids, F.F. Bruce, Manfred Brauch, 1996, pp. 281-282).

Interestingly, “the verb [translated “dashes”] in its Greek form is found only in Psalm 137:9 (in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew text) and in the lament of our Lord over Jerusalem in Luke 19:44” (p. 281). In this verse Christ speaks to Jerusalem as if she is a mother, saying, “They [enemies] will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls.” Again, children appear to denote the citizenry in general.

Of course, infants would die too—in both Babylon and Jerusalem. Yet all, children as well as adults, will be raised in the second resurrection to be taught God’s ways and given the opportunity for lasting repentance, as explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezekiel 37. Indeed, repentance and conformity with His will, resulting in great blessing, is what God desires—what makes Him truly happy. He assures us in other scriptures that He takes no pleasure in punishing people for sin, but that they would turn and live. This passage is no exception.

“Keep Me, O LORD, From the Hands of the Wicked” (Psalms 138–141)

March 9-15

Just before the final five praise hymns that close the book of Psalms (146–150), those responsible for its final compilation placed a collection of eight psalms attributed in their titles to King David (138–145). This serves to tie the whole Psalter together, as David composed most of its first two books. The final Davidic collection, as the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* comments, “is framed by songs of praise (Ps 138; 145). The first of these extols the greatness of the Lord’s glory as displayed in his answering the prayer (‘call’) of the ‘lowly’ when suffering at the hands of the ‘proud.’ The last, employing a grand and intricately woven alphabetic acrostic design, extols the ‘glorious majesty’ of the Lord as displayed in his benevolent care over all his creatures—especially those who ‘call’ on him (look to him in every need). Within this frame have been placed six prayers—with certain interlocking themes” (note on Psalms 138–145)—the first (139) taking a stand against the wicked and the five others (140–144) seeking deliverance from wicked foes.

In **Psalm 138** David wholeheartedly praises God for imbuing him with confidence that God will help him against threatening enemies. Given the prophecy of all kings of the earth coming to praise God (verse 4), the song clearly looks forward to the time of the setting up of God’s Kingdom with the future coming of the Messiah for ultimate fulfillment.

David says in verse 1 that He will sing praises to God “before the gods.” As in Psalm 135:5 and 136:2, the identity of the “gods” here could refer to foreign kings falsely claiming divinity or perhaps to human rulers who, as the offspring of the true God commissioned to represent Him in dominion, can bear this title in a sense (compare 82:1, 6). The reference could also be to demons, the powers behind the thrones of pagan nations who sometimes posed as the false gods these nations worshipped (compare Deuteronomy 32:17). Then again, as this song looks forward to the time of Christ’s reign over all nations, the term “gods” here may designate the resurrected saints of God who will reign with Him and share in His divine glory (see “You Are Gods,” *The Good News*, July–Aug. 2002, pp. 28-29).

In Psalm 138:2 David says that He will worship toward God’s holy temple. He said the same thing in Psalm 5:7. While the Jerusalem temple was not built until after David’s death, this does not rule out David as the composer of these psalms. Some point out that the word for temple here was a general one that could refer to the tabernacle structure David built for the ark in Jerusalem. Moreover, it is possible

that David was referring to God's temple in heaven. We should also consider that David was looking forward to the time of God's Kingdom, when a temple will evidently stand in Jerusalem, as seen in the concluding chapters of the book of Ezekiel. Another thought to bear in mind is that David may have composed these songs to be sung in temple worship after his death. Alternatively, it is possible that others edited them to fit later circumstances, though, as we've seen, there is no need to assume this.

David says He will praise God "for Your lovingkindness and Your truth" (138:2). The word lovingkindness is translated from the important Hebrew term *hesed*, which can also mean "mercy," "grace," "loyal love" or "devotion." The word rendered "truth," *emet*, besides defining reality as opposed to falsehood, is also understood to refer to the quality of being true to one's word—faithfulness. These words for mercy and truth are often paired together. The NIV translates them as "love" and "faithfulness." We also find this terminology in the New Testament as "grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Continuing from this description of God's character, David further states, "For You have magnified Your word above all Your name" (Psalm 138:2, NKJV). Different versions give an alternate rendering, with translators unable to reconcile how God's word could be above His name—signifying His identity and reputation. Following the Hebrew arrangement, the actual word order is "For You have magnified above all Your name Your word" (J.P. Green, *The Interlinear Bible*). The NIV renders it this way: "For you have exalted above all things your name and your word." However, there is no "and" specified in the Hebrew here, though it could perhaps be interpolated. More importantly, the KJV and NKJV translation does make sense—and conveys a wonderful message. The meaning seems to be that God does not put who He is above what He has said. Rather, what He has said comes first. Consider that the Almighty Sovereign God could go back on every promise He has made and no one could do a thing about it. Yet God of His own will has set His word above all the prerogatives associated with His divine supremacy—that is, He has obligated Himself to abide by everything He has declared. This is truly awesome to ponder. It should lead us all to join with David in wholehearted worship and praise.

In verse 3, David recounts his own experience of God's faithfulness in having his prayer answered. It is not clear if the day of David crying out refers to a particular instance or if he is describing a regular pattern. Whichever is intended, David is thankful for God intervening and strengthening his resolve and confidence.

As noted above, all kings of the earth coming to praise God and sing of His ways in verses 4-5 is a prophecy of the future messianic era. "David, as a king who believed in God, looked forward to a day when all the kings of the earth would share his experience" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 4-6). In the meantime, God, despite His high and lofty station, regards the lowly and humble in spirit—as the mighty of the earth today are typically arrogant and cut off from a relationship with Him (verse 6).

The mighty and proud evidently include David's wrathful enemies, mentioned in verse 7. David here trusts in God to deliver him from them in terms reminiscent of the words he wrote in Psalm 23:3-4.

In verse 8, David says, "The LORD will perfect *that which* concerns me" (the italics here and in the following citations signifying interpolated text not in the original Hebrew). Essentially the same thing is written in Psalm 57:2, where David says that God "performs *all things* for me"—the word translated "performs" being the same Hebrew verb translated "perfect" in 138:8. It can also mean "complete" or "fulfill," as in the NIV translation: "The LORD will fulfill *his purpose* for me." David had faith that God would save him from his enemies in order to fulfill God's reason for his existence. God would not let anything cut short the work He had begun in him—a tremendous promise that also applies to us (compare Philippians 1:6).

David ends with a declaration similar to the refrain of Psalm 136 and a closing plea, uttered in great confidence as we've seen, that God not abandon the work He was doing in him. As a final observation, it may be that the notation at the beginning of the superscription of Psalm 139, "For the Chief Musician," is actually a postscript for Psalm 138.

In **Psalm 139** David acknowledges, in great wonder and awe, God's omniscient care in guiding his life and expresses his solidarity with God against the wicked.

God has searched within David and his life and knows everything there is to know about him. He carefully investigates each facet of David's life to discern all his actions—from when he gets up in the morning to when he goes to bed at night (verses 1-2a). God is thus familiar with all David's patterns, habits, preferences and ways of doing things. Moreover, God looks penetratingly into David's heart to

discern his inner motives and secret thoughts (verse 2b). In fact, God knows David so well that He anticipates his words before they are spoken (verse 4). God has an exhaustive knowledge of David—just as He has of us (see Hebrews 4:13).

The beginning of Psalm 139:3 is variously translated: “Thou compassest [i.e., encompass] my path” (KJV); “You comprehend my path” (NKJV); “You discern my going out” (NIV); “You search out my path” (NRSV); “You sift my path” (J.P. Green’s Literal Translation). The latter is probably the correct sense (Strong’s No. 2219). *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* renders the phrase as “You have winnowed me” (note on verses 1-6). The idea is apparently that God sifts all our actions, “putting them through a sieve, as it were, so as to discover every detail about them, what has motivated them, what effect they have upon me and upon others, in fact, everything conceivable about them” (George Knight, *Psalms*, Vol. 2, The Daily Study Bible Series, comments on verses 1-6).

Yet the purpose of God’s intimate knowledge of His servants is not to play “gotcha” and condemn us. Rather, as verse 5 makes plain, God’s intention is to protect and guard us—to keep and hold onto us, to steady and guide us, as the objects of His care. God’s all-knowing understanding and concern is just too mind-boggling for David to take in (verse 6).

In verses 7-12, David remarks on the fact that there is nowhere he can go to be out from under God’s watchful oversight—for God is everywhere (omnipresent) through His infinite Spirit (see verse 7). There is no way to be concealed from Him. He can see and reach everywhere, all the time, day and night, light or dark. For some this might seem a negative thing—that is, there is no escape! But David clearly did not mean it that way, for he says that no matter where he is, God will lead him and uphold him (verse 10). He is greatly *encouraged* by the fact that God is all-seeing and all-knowing. Incidentally, the word “hell” in verse 8 is translated from the Hebrew *sheol*, meaning pit or grave, thus explaining David’s statement about making his “bed” there (i.e., his deathbed). So nothing, not even the grave, will separate us from God’s caring oversight of our lives—for His intervening hand will lead us even from death (compare Romans 8:35-39).

In verses 13-16 of Psalm 139, David reflects on the fact that God’s care in his life was there from its very beginning, acknowledging God’s oversight in his conception and prenatal development. Where the NKJV says that God “covered” David in his mother’s womb (verse 13), other translations render this “knit me together” (NIV) or “wove me.” The Hebrew here literally means *entwined*, implying weaving but perhaps the weaving of a fence or cover of protection (Strong’s No. 5526). In any case, David praises the miracle of life and birth of which he is the product (verses 14-15).

In this he remarks that God saw him “made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth” (verse 15). The location here is not meant literally, but is rather a metaphor for a dark, mysterious, unsearchable and unfathomable place. Such is God’s workshop in the cells of the human embryo within the womb! The unformed “substance” in the next verse is a reference to the embryo.

In the latter part of verse 16 David says that all the days prepared for him were written in God’s book before these days commenced. What does this mean? Some would use this verse to argue that every day of David’s life was completely mapped out in advance—and to argue that the same applies to us. This, however, violates the principle of free will and choice—which we find repeatedly in Scripture (compare Deuteronomy 30:19). Furthermore, “all...the days” does not have to mean each and every day but could mean the days taken as a whole—a lifetime. Based on this, others might argue that the verse means merely that David’s lifespan was generally predetermined from his genetics since conception. While possible, it seems likely that more is intended.

Commentaries typically maintain that David used the metaphor of a book to portray God’s exquisitely detailed plans for each person—plans He has in mind before a person’s birth. Elements of David’s life, at least in a general sense (particularly his reign over Israel), seems to have been plotted out by God ahead of time (while still allowing David free will as to whether to serve God or reject Him). And this plan may have been written in an actual spiritual record, rather than this signifying a mere metaphor. David in another psalm remarked that his tears were written in God’s book (Psalm 56:8), which seems to be the same as the book of remembrance for those who fear God in Malachi 3:16. This may or may not be synonymous with another book David mentions, the book of the living (69:28), apparently equivalent to the Book of Life, God’s heavenly registry of the righteous (see Exodus 32:32-33; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:23; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15, 17; 22:19). David’s reference in Psalm 139

could also be to the “Scripture of Truth,” the Bible of heaven as it were, wherein a lengthy prophecy of the future was already inscribed before it was given to Daniel to write down in his own book as God’s written revelation to us (see Daniel 10:21).

The theme of one’s purpose in life is a key topic in the Bible. Note what God announced to the Jewish nation in exile: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). Indeed, David remarks in the next verse of Psalm 139 on how precious and countless are God’s thoughts toward *him* (verses 17-18).

The end of verse 18 then states, “When I awake, I am still with you.” Perhaps the point is that David is amazed to consider that every day he wakes, he is still in God’s care—returning to the thought at the beginning of the psalm of God observing His “sitting down and...rising up” (verse 2). Yet some suggest that he is speaking in a future tense of his resurrection—remarking in the context of verse 16 that after the passing of his days, he will awake from death and even still be with God.

Enraptured as he is with God’s intimate and all-seeing care in his life—demonstrative of God’s care for all His servants—David still can’t help but think about the wicked who, despite God’s wonderful intentions over which he’s been musing, still cause trouble for him and all of God’s people (as highlighted in the next five psalms). As he closes Psalm 139, David expresses the wish that God would justly deal with this outstanding problem. God has, in fact, already pronounced a death sentence in His law against the bloodthirsty and the blasphemous. David is here supporting the carrying out of that sentence (verses 19-20).

David then unequivocally declares that he hates those who hate God and rebel against Him, loathing them and hating them with a perfect or complete hatred (verses 21-22). Many today are disturbed at such language in light of Jesus Christ’s instruction in the New Testament: “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you in and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). Indeed, caring for one’s enemy was also an Old Testament directive (compare Exodus 23:4-5; Proverbs 25:21).

But we should consider a number of factors here. First, as in other psalms, the hatred David is speaking of in Psalm 139 should be understood primarily in the sense of rejection and strong aversion. Note his words in verse 19 calling on the bloodthirsty to get away from him. That is, David wants nothing to do with them. He won’t support them or make common cause with them. He will not befriend them or accept their friendship, for he counts them as his enemies (verse 22). This is a second point to emphasize. David’s hatred here does not equate to personally taking vengeance or even mistreatment on a personal level. It equates to counting the wicked as his enemies. He opposes them. If they are *God’s* enemies, then they are *his* enemies. That brings us to a third factor to note here. David is not declaring hatred for those who merely bear him personal ill will, but for those who hate and rise up against God. Of course, those who bore David animosity usually did so on the basis of opposition to God and His law—yet it was this rather than personal hurt that was the basis for David’s declared hatred against them. In essence, David was declaring his complete solidarity with God against God’s enemies.

None of this, by the way, precludes following the New Testament instruction to pray for one’s persecutors and to do good to them. Even given the strong words David spoke, he still could and may well have followed what Christ would later explain—as he clearly did in his dealings with Saul. Indeed, we should be careful to not misconstrue Christ’s teaching in this regard. Consider that praying for one’s persecutors obviously does not mean praying for their success in persecution. It primarily means praying for their long-term well-being, realizing that God intends to eventually lead them to repentance. It may include praying that He will lead them to repent *soon*—at least of their present antagonism and offending behavior. Barring that outcome, praying for enemies could even mean asking God to exercise judgment on them to stop them from their evil and greater guilt. Doing good to persecutors, loving our enemies, does not mean supporting them in their evil plans or making common cause with them. Recall what Jehu the seer said to King Jehoshaphat of Judah for his joint operations with evil King Ahab of Israel: “Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Therefore the wrath of the LORD is upon you” (2 Chronicles 19:2). As is stated here, we are not to “love” the haters of God in this sense. Rather, we are to oppose them.

David ends with a prayer that God will search his heart and investigate his anxieties to see “if there is any wicked way in me” (Psalm 139:24). Some commentators relate his request to his declared abhorrence

of God's enemies—the idea being that he is asking God to search his heart to see if his expressed thoughts are the product of a righteous stand with God or born out of personal concerns. Other commentators understand the verse as a general request that God examine him for *any* wickedness—that is, having discussed wickedness in others, that God check to see if there is wickedness to be dealt with in *him*. David deeply desires to be led out of wickedness and, as he says in verse 24, into the way that leads to everlasting life.

As a final note, if the first part of the superscription of this psalm, “To the Chief Musician,” actually belongs to the previous psalm as a postscript, then the same phrase at the beginning of the superscription of the *next* psalm may actually be the postscript of this psalm.

We now come within the final collection of Davidic psalms (138–145) to its central sequence of five prayers in which David seeks deliverance from wicked enemies (140–144). The first of these, **Psalm 140**, is a lamenting plea for preservation from the plotting of evil, violent men and a call for divine retribution. The structure of the psalm is easy to discern. There are four stanzas (verses 1-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-11), the first three ending with “Selah” and the last followed by a two-verse conclusion (verses 12-13).

The first two stanzas set up the problem David is faced with. It is interesting to note that the same words are used for the second line in both the first and second stanzas: “Preserve me from violent men” (verses 1, 4). The violent here may intend physical brutality, but their method of attack is verbal—through deceit and slander (see verse 3; compare verses 9, 11). David experienced a number of such incidents in his life.

In the third stanza, David says he has appealed to the Lord in complete trust (verse 6-7). He knows that the One who has “covered” or shielded (NIV) his head in actual physical battles will protect him in this current “battle” (verse 7). With this confidence, he asks that God not grant success to the schemes of his enemies (verse 8). As noted in regard to the previous psalm, Jesus’ instruction in the New Testament to bless and pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44) does not mean praying for their success in opposing and harming us.

In the fourth stanza David calls for a curse on the offenders. Whereas God covered or protected David’s head in past battles (again, see verse 7), David calls for the head of his enemies to be covered only with the evil of their own lips—that is, for their scheming and slander against him to come back on them. Indeed, this is the decreed penalty in the law for bearing false witness against another (see Deuteronomy 19:16-21). David as God’s prophet is pronouncing this judgment. In another psalm, David foretold that burning coals and fire would rain down on the wicked (Psalm 11:6), as Sodom and Gomorrah experienced (Genesis 19:24). Here that same penalty is called for (Psalm 140:10), though the sense may be figurative of a calamitous divine judgment. As David’s enemies tried to trip him up to cause him to fall into traps (verse 5), David calls for *them* to fall into deep pits “that they rise not up again” (verse 10). This too may be figurative—of being sunk into ineffectiveness. If it implies their deaths, then their not rising again would refer to them no longer being alive to cause trouble in the present world—not to them never being in a future resurrection. The next psalm likewise calls for the wicked to fall into their own nets (141:9-10).

David ends Psalm 140 in verses 12-13 on a confident note, assured that God will bring justice to the needy and afflicted and that God’s people will dwell with Him in perpetual gratitude.

Psalm 141 is the second in the sequence of five psalms of David seeking deliverance from the wicked. David also prays here that he be kept from taking part with them in their evildoings.

He begins with an urgent call for God to hear his plea (verse 1) and declares his intention to present his prayer, with hands raised toward heaven, as incense and as the evening sacrifice, desiring that God accept it as such (verse 2).

Incense was burned on the golden altar within the tabernacle—later the temple—every morning and evening to infuse the sanctuary with a sweet smell (see Exodus 30:1-10). Furthermore, frankincense was included with burnt offerings (see 30:1-10, 34-38; Leviticus 2:2)—adding fragrance to the savor of the sacrificial meat being cooked. Later in Scripture, the burning of incense is said to represent the prayers of God’s people ascending to Him (Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4).

The evening sacrifice was a regular daily burnt offering “for a sweet aroma” (Numbers 28:3-8), symbolizing, along with the morning sacrifice, regular and ongoing devotion to God. In considering the

analogy, realize that “the evening sacrifice took time, it took care, it took preparation, it was extremely costly, every action in it was clearly thought out and performed in logical sequence” (George Knight, *Psalms*, comments on Psalm 141:1-10).

David’s specification of the *evening* sacrifice rather than the morning one or both may indicate that he spoke or composed this prayer in the evening—perhaps at the time of the evening sacrifice. It could even be that David routinely gave this or a like prayer as part of his reflection at the end of the day over an extended period of time—that is, it may have become his own personal evening sacrifice. It is worth noting that “both Ezra (Ezra 9) and Daniel (Dan. 9) prayed at the time of the evening offering. After the second temple was built, this psalm was read when the evening sacrifices were offered and the lamps were lit in the holy place” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Exultant: Psalms 90–150*, note on Psalm 141:1-2).

Before praying for God to deal with the wicked and to rescue him from them, David first turns to the issue of his own human proclivities, asking God to help him avoid any deviation toward wickedness in his own character. This includes safeguarding his speech (verse 3)—for control over one’s tongue through God’s help is a huge part of godly character (compare James 3). It also means not eating of the wicked’s “delicacies” (Psalm 141:4) or “dainties” (KJV). David is likely saying one of two things here. Either he does not want to get drawn into enjoying the “finer things” that come as a product of living the evil lifestyle common among the rich and powerful. Or he does not want to be someone who is welcomed as a guest among such people—dining in their homes and enjoying their hospitality.

If he starts leaning this way at all, David prays that the “righteous”—either a godly person or the righteous *One*, God—will as a kindness “strike” him (knock some sense into him) through rebuke. This will be like fine oil on the head, a gesture of rich hospitality that he *will not* refuse (verse 5)—in contrast to the fineries of the wicked that he *intends to* refuse.

The Hebrew text then becomes somewhat difficult to understand—from the end of verse 5 through verse 7. Translators have rendered this section in various ways over the centuries. The primary controversy centers on to whom these verses are referring.

Many believe the last line of verse 5 refers to the righteous—that David is praying for them “in their calamities” (KJV). However, the plural “their” more likely seems to refer back to the workers of iniquity in verse 4 (since the “righteous...him” in verse 5 is singular). And the KJV “in their calamities” is reinterpreted as “in [the face of] their evils.” This is the sense followed in most modern versions.

If that is correct, then verse 6 (which some take to refer to the sufferings of the righteous) would, as seems more likely, also refer to the wicked: “When their judges [the leaders of the wicked] are overthrown in stony places, they [the wicked] shall hear my words; for they [my words] are sweet” (KJV). The word translated “sweet” can also mean “pleasing” or “agreeable.” Some take this to mean that the general populace of the wicked will actually be willing to listen to David after their rulers fall. Others believe the meaning is that the wicked are going to be forced by the fall of their leaders to see that David’s words were “well spoken” (NIV)—whether that’s agreeable to them or not.

Moving on to verse 7, there is again scholarly disagreement. Whose bones are scattered at the mouth of the grave? David mentions “*our* bones,” though many prefer to have him say “*their* bones”—that is, those of the wicked. The NIV adds to the beginning of this statement the words “They will say” and interprets verse 7 as quoting the wicked—the description here seeming to fit the wicked rulers cast down in verse 6. Then again, others see no evidence for any quotation in verse 7 and understand David to be referring figuratively to the devastated state of himself and others of the righteous who are persecuted by the wicked (compare 143:3, 7)—giving the basis for the stated judgment on the wicked in the previous verse (141:6) and the reason for his call for deliverance and justice in the next verses (8-10).

In these concluding verses, David turns his eyes to God, his only refuge from the intrigues of the wicked (verses 8-9). Similar to the previous psalm, he asks that the wicked be caught up in their own plotting (verse 10; compare 140:5, 9-10)—while he is set free into safety.

“The LORD Preserves All Who Love Him” (Psalms 142–145)

March 16-22

Psalm 142 is a *maskil*, an instructive psalm or “contemplation” (NKJV), the third prayer in the sequence of five in which David asks for deliverance from persecutors. The occasion here, as the title notes, is “when he was in the cave.” This could refer to either of two episodes when David fled from King Saul. One was into the cave at Adullam (1 Samuel 22:1, 4), 16 miles southwest of Jerusalem, and the other was into the cave at En Gedi (24:1-22), the oasis near the Dead Sea. Another psalm is linked with

the episode at En Gedi (Psalm 57). And that episode does not fit the sense of abject loneliness and abandonment described in Psalm 142. It appears far more likely that David's time at Adullam is the subject of this psalm, as we will see. We earlier read this psalm in conjunction with the biblical account of that period (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 1 Samuel 22:1-5; Psalm 142; 1 Chronicles 12:8-18).

David desperately pours out his heart to God. As if the secret plotting against him were not enough, he now feels alone and forsaken, lamenting that there is no one at his right hand—that no one acknowledges him and no one cares about him (verse 4). *The Nelson Study Bible* comments: "With enemies on every path, David screams to God that he is defenseless. The armed soldier in ancient Israel probably would have had his spear or sword in his right hand and his shield in his left. The shield of one man would protect the right side of his neighbor. David cries that there is no one on his right side" (note on verses 3-5). *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* adds, "The 'right' signifies the place where one's witness or legal council stood (cf. 16:8; 109:31; 110:5; 121:5)" (note on verses 3c-4).

This situation might not at first glance seem to match the details of David's experience at Adullam, for 1 Samuel 22 says that his family gathered to him there and that a large group of malcontents soon banded together there under his leadership—a formidable force of 400 men that later surged to 600, with this base camp being referred to in 1 Chronicles 12 as a stronghold. Yet realize that David first arrived there by himself. We should therefore understand Psalm 142 as describing his feelings between the first and second sentences of 1 Samuel 22:1—before his family and others showed up, when he was all alone.

Of course, David understood that he was not *totally* alone. With no other human being to lean on, David still has Someone to turn to. He cries out to God, "You are my refuge" (Psalm 142:5; compare Psalm 46) and "my portion in the land of the living" (142:5). Thus, even in his despair as a fugitive hiding out in a cave, David still views God as His share in life, which he is still blessed to be living.

Moreover, David has faith that God will send help and abundance his way, including a support crowd (verse 7). How wonderful it is to know that this is just what happened not long after David prayed his heartfelt prayer. On top of that, he eventually became the king of Israel. And more important still, he will ultimately share possession of the universe as a divine king in God's eternal royal family—as will all of us who continue to follow God.

Psalm 143 is the fourth in the sequence of five psalms of David (within the collection of eight) wherein David prays for deliverance from enemies. It is classified as one of the seven penitential psalms (6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143). These psalms have in common an acknowledgment of sin (32:5; 38:18; 51:2-4; 130:3) and/or a reference to deserved punishment (6:1; 38:1; 102:10; 143:2).

In this psalm, David doesn't acknowledge specific sins but is clearly aware of his own failings, asking to be passed over in judgment. He knows that such judgment would find him guilty, as he, like everyone, has sinned (compare Psalm 143:2; Romans 3:10, 23). So he pleads for mercy, basing his appeal on God's faithfulness and righteousness (Psalm 143:1) in dealing with one who is His servant (verse 2; compare verses 11-12).

David further implies that he is unable to withstand judgment given his already-overwhelmed state, crushed to the depths of despair by enemy persecution that brought him seemingly near death (verses 3-4, 7). Although David is probably referring to a human enemy (verse 3) and enemies (verse 12) who have persistently hounded him, he may have in mind as well the spiritual Adversary, Satan the devil, and his demons, who are also associated with darkness and the pit (see Ephesians 6:12; Revelation 20:1-2).

David likens his yearning for God to dry ground that needs rain (verse 6). Interestingly, rain in other passages symbolizes God's Word and teachings (Isaiah 55:6-13; Deuteronomy 32:1-3), the Holy Spirit (44:3-4), righteousness (Hosea 10:12) and the coming of God (6:1, 3). David needs all of this. In desperation he cries out for God's immediate intervention. He cannot rely on his own overwhelmed and failing spirit (Psalm 143:4, 7), referring to his weakened strength of mind. He requires the help of God's good Spirit (see verse 10). He needs an understanding of how to go forward (verse 8), rescue from his enemies (verse 9), instruction in righteousness (verse 10), and relief and empowerment (verse 11).

As in the opening of the psalm (verses 1-2), David again bases his plea for help (including justice on enemies) on the fact that he is God's servant (verses 11-12)—stressing here God's *hesed*, rendered "mercy" (verse 12, NKJV) but also translatable as "loyal love" or "devotion." The point is that God has

made promises of steadfast love and help to those who are His servants—even, as verse 11 implies, staking His name, His reputation, on this.

Psalm 144 is the last in the sequence here of five psalms of David seeking rescue from foes, in this case referring to treacherous foreign enemies in a time of war or the threat of war. It contains a number of similarities with David's great victory song found in 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18. As the victory song evidently came late in David's life, after all his foes were subdued, and Psalm 144 was written while David still needed deliverance from foreign enemies, it would appear that the victory song borrowed elements from Psalm 144 rather than the other way around. In fact, there is more in the specific wording of both songs to confirm this, as we will see.

Psalm 144 opens with David praising God as his "Rock" (verse 1a), the word here also meaning "strength," which could mean a stronghold or fortress. The same word appears at the beginning of Psalm 18 as "strength" (verse 1), but it is paired in the next verse with another word meaning "rock" (verse 2; compare 2 Samuel 22:2). Note also the references to God as "fortress" and "high tower" (Psalm 144:2; compare 18:2; 2 Samuel 22:2-3).

In Psalm 144:2 David refers to God as He "who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle" (144:1b). Compare the victory song: "He teaches my hands to make war" (Psalm 18:34; 2 Samuel 22:35). Thus David credits God for making him a successful warrior-king. *The Nelson Study Bible* suggests: "It is also possible that this psalm was used in the training of the army (as was Ps. 149). Warfare in ancient Israel was tied closely to the worship of God. Deliverance from the enemy was not just a task for tough soldiers, it was a matter of active piety" (introductory note on Psalm 144). As God's earthly kingdom at that time, Israel and its human ruler battled foreign enemies at God's command. Christians today, who wait for God's future Kingdom, do not have this responsibility and therefore do not participate in physical warfare (compare John 18:36). Of course, God does teach us to fight spiritual battles against our spiritual enemies.

Verse 3 of Psalm 144, asking what is man (the Hebrew here connoting *mortal* man) that God should care for him, is nearly the same as Psalm 8:4. Actually, David evidently took this wording, as found in both psalms, from Job 7:17-18. In fact, the previous clause of that passage, "For my days are but a breath" (verse 16), is echoed in the next words of Psalm 144: "Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow" (verse 4). "The Hebrew word translated 'breath' [here and in Job 7:16] is *habel*, the name of one of Adam's sons (Abel), and the word translated 'vanity' thirty-eight times in Ecclesiastes. (See also 39:4-6, 22; 62:9; 78:33, 94:11.) The 'shadow' image is found in 102:11, 109:23, Job 8:9 and 14:2, and Ecclesiastes 6:12 and 8:13" (Wiersbe, *Be Exultant*, note on Psalm 144:1-4).

This presentation of the frailty of human existence sets up David's plea for God's powerful intervention. The imagery of the bowing down of the heavens, the flashing forth of lightning bolts as arrows and the rescue from great waters representative of foreign adversaries (verses 5-7) is all found in the victory song as well (compare 18:9, 14, 16-17; 2 Samuel 22:10, 15, 17-18). However, Psalm 144 asks for these things to happen, while the victory song shows them as already accomplished. Thus, the victory song is essentially praise and thanks for God answering the plea of Psalm 144—further demonstrating the order in which these psalms were composed.

Verse 8 and the recapitulation of the plea for deliverance in verse 11 seem to imply that the foreign enemies are violating some treaty or other agreement they had made with Israel.

David, anticipating deliverance and victory, says he will sing a new song to God (verse 9; compare 33:2-3; 40:3). This could refer to singing an old song with renewed joy and zeal. Yet in this case it may well refer to the composition of a completely new song—the best fit seeming to be the victory song of Psalm 18 and 2 Samuel 22. In the context of this new song is the reference to God as "the One who gives salvation to kings, who delivers David His servant from the deadly sword" (Psalm 144:10). Considering that the names of the psalmists are rarely included in the lyrics of the psalms, compare the victory song: "Great deliverance He gives to His king, and shows mercy to His anointed, to David and his descendants forevermore" (18:50; compare 2 Samuel 22:51).

Praying for God's deliverance in faith, David can foresee strong, healthy children, prosperity, peace and contentment for God's nation (Psalm 144:12-15). Such happiness, as verse 15 makes clear, is the reward of the people of God—both in this age and, in an ultimate sense, in the age to come.

It would be beneficial to read Psalm 18 or 2 Samuel 22 following Psalm 144 to see the intervention of God in answering David's prayer.

Psalm 145, the last of the final collection of eight Davidic psalms (138–145), is a grand hymn of praise for God the Great King and His majestic reign and gracious acts—including the deliverance of His people. It serves as the closing frame of the five prayers of David seeking rescue from wicked enemies (140–144)—perhaps placed here as grateful and worshipful praise in collective response to God's intervention in all these past situations and His faithfulness to continue intervening (compare 145:18-20). The hymn also serves to transition to the final five untitled psalms of *Hallelujah* ("Praise the LORD") that close the book of Psalms (146–150). This psalm is specifically titled a "praise" or *tehillah* (derived from *hallel*)—the only psalm so titled. From the plural form of this word, *tehillim*, has come the traditional Hebrew name for the book of Psalms—*Sefer Tehillim* or "Book of Praises."

David composed Psalm 145 in the form of an alphabetic acrostic, with each succeeding verse beginning with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet—with the exception, according to the Masoretic Text, of the letter *nun*. A number of modern versions, based on other texts, include an additional verse corresponding to this letter after verse 13 (though not numbered as a separate verse). However, this does not appear to be justified. As *John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible* comments: "This psalm is written alphabetically, as is observed on the title of it; but the letter 'nun' is here wanting.... Nor is the order always strictly observed in alphabetical psalms; in the thirty-seventh psalm the letter 'ain' is wanting, and three [letters] in the twenty-fifth psalm. The Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions, supply this defect here, by inserting these words, 'the Lord is faithful in all his words, and holy in all his works,' as if they were begun with the word *Nman*, but they seem to be taken from Ps 145:17, with a little alteration" (note on verse 13).

David begins his hymn of praise with a powerful declaration that he will *extol* (exalt or lift up), *bless* and *praise* God every day forever and ever (verses 1-2)—demonstrating an understanding that he himself will live forever to render this worship. He then states the theme of his psalm: "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable" (verse 3; compare Romans 11:33). David can compose praise from uncountable manifestations of God's greatness: His nature, His creation, His plan of salvation, His dealings with mankind.

In verses 4-12 David mentions a number of ways that praise for God will be promulgated. He starts by declaring that praise for God's awesome works will resound from one generation to the next (verse 4). This is accomplished as stories of God's great acts are taught to succeeding generations. The passing on of such knowledge is primarily the responsibility of parents (compare Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:7).

Another means of transmitting this knowledge is through the recording of God's acts for posterity, as was done in the Scriptures. In fact, observe next in Psalm 145 the back and forth of "I will meditate" (verse 5) and "Men shall speak" (verse 6a), "I will declare" (verse 6b) and "They shall utter" (verse 7). Modern Bible versions often eliminate these shifts, but they are clearly present in the Hebrew. Perhaps the idea here is that David is declaring God's praises in this and other psalms—which others in later generations will sing and talk about.

David then inserts here God's revelation of Himself through His character, essentially repeating God's description of Himself to Moses as gracious, compassionate, full of mercy or loving devotion, slow to anger, and good (verses 8-9; compare Exodus 34:6-7). Similar wording may also be found in other psalms (e.g., 86:5, 15; 111:4; 112:4).

In the next verse (Psalm 145:10a), David says that all of God's works will praise Him, echoing Psalm 19:1-3, where the evidence of God's creative handiwork in the heavens "declares" God's glory.

And a further method of the transmission of God's praise is through the speaking of His saints—His sanctified people—whose task it is to proclaim His Kingdom and mighty acts to the sons of men, the people of this world (verses 10a-12). This is primarily accomplished today, as the New Testament makes clear, through the Church's proclamation of the gospel of the Kingdom. Yet in an ultimate sense, this may picture the saints, when resurrected and glorified as kings and priests in God's future Kingdom, teaching the gospel to all nations.

Verse 13, it should be noted, stresses the eternal nature of God's Kingdom and dominion. We should realize that Scripture presents God's Kingdom in three ways. In the first two senses it is a present reality. God is particularly the King of His people—both ancient Israel and spiritual Israel, His Church, today.

Moreover, God is of course always and ever the King of the universe—Sovereign over all His created realm. Yet for the time being, God permits resistance to His rule. And this brings us to the third, future sense of God’s Kingdom. When Jesus Christ returns, He will set up God’s Kingdom over all nations, enforcing its laws throughout the world and leading everyone to accept God’s sovereignty or be removed. All these senses of God’s reign appear in the remainder of the psalm.

Verses 14-16 illustrate God’s compassion and goodness as, through His sovereign rule, He helps the needy and provides sustenance for all living things. Note that the word “gracious” in verse 8 is translated from *hannun*, meaning stooping in kindness to help (Strong’s No. 2587, from 2603). In verse 17 the word translated “gracious” is *hasid* (Strong’s No. 2623)—an adjective form of *hesed* (No. 2617), meaning loyal love or devotion. Indeed, in verses 17-20 we see God’s loyal love to His devoted people. He will answer their prayers and save them.

While the deliverance and preservation of God’s people in these verses happens today, the ultimate fulfillment of this passage will come with the establishment of God’s Kingdom on earth in the future, when the wicked who refuse to come under God’s loving authority will be destroyed (verse 20) and David’s praise will be part of a vast chorus of all people praising God for all time (verse 21).

“Praise Your God, O Zion!” (Psalms 146–147)

March 23-26

We come now to the concluding section of the book of Psalms, the final Hallel (“Praise”) collection (Psalms 146–150)—the other two being the Egyptian Hallel (113–118) and the Great Hallel (120–136). In this final cluster of five untitled and unattributed hymns, each is bracketed at beginning and end by shouts of *Hallelujah!* (“Praise YAH,” typically appearing as “Praise the LORD”)—perhaps added by the final editors of the Psalter (see in comparison Psalms 105–106 and 111–117).

The *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* comments: “The Psalter collection [the whole book of Psalms] begins with two psalms that address the reader and whose function is to identify those to whom the collections [of the Psalter] specifically belong [that is, those who fit the profile of the righteous as portrayed in the Psalms—the holy congregation of God] (see...Ps 1–2). Here, at the collection’s end, that congregation gives voice to its final themes. They are the themes of praise—and calls to praise—of Zion’s heavenly King (see 146:10; 147:12; 149:2), the Maker, Sustainer and Lord over all creation (see 146:6; 147:4, 8-9, 15-18; 148:5-6); the one sure hope of those who in their need and vulnerability look to him for help (see 146:5-9; 147:2-3, 6, 11, 13-14; 149:4); the Lord of history whose commitment to his people is their security and the guarantee that, as his kingdom people (see especially 147:19-20), they will ultimately triumph over all the forces of this world arrayed against them (see 146:3, 10; 147:2, 6, 10, 13-14; 148:14; 149:4-9)” (introductory note on Psalms 146–150).

The psalms of this final section are typically thought to have been composed following the Jewish return from Babylonian Exile. However, there is no way to really know whether this is the case. It does seem likely that these psalms were at least arranged as a concluding group at that time. The Latin Vulgate translation follows the Greek Septuagint in attributing Psalms 146 and 147 (with the latter divided into two psalms) to the postexilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah respectively. However, there is no other evidence to corroborate this.

Psalm 146, the first in the final Hallel collection, is, as the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* notes, “a hymn in praise of Zion’s heavenly King, with special focus on his powerful and trustworthy care for Zion’s citizens who look to him when oppressed, broken or vulnerable. It has many thematic links with Ps 33; 62; 145.” Indeed, there are a number of very close links to the latter, the previous psalm, as we will see—thus providing a good transition from the Davidic collection (138–145) to the final collection of psalms (146–150).

Following the opening general declaration of *Hallelujah* or “Praise the Lord,” the psalmist gives the same imperative to himself (verse 1)—and all who sing the song thus proclaim this directive to themselves as well. “O my soul” here is simply a way of speaking to oneself. For a similar directive, compare the opening and closing of Psalms 103 and 104.

Psalm 146:3-5 echoes 118:8-9 in calling on people to not trust in mortal human beings no matter what their station in life but rather to look to God. Of course, we have to trust people to a certain extent as part of life. The point here is that other human beings should not be our ultimate source of trust. For that we must rely on God (compare also Jeremiah 17:5, 7).

Incidentally, note that the New King James Version translates the end of verse 4 to say that when a human being dies and his spirit leaves his body, at the same time “his plans perish.” The NIV says, “his plans come to nothing,” and other modern translations follow suit. However, the earlier King James Version renders this literally to say “his *thoughts* perish.” While thoughts can certainly include plans, there is no valid basis here for limiting the scope of the word. Rather, the basis in this case is one of doctrinal bias, and this is a good example of how such bias can influence translation. No doubt later translators found the literal wording untenable given their belief in the immortality of the human soul wherein consciousness continues apart from the body—a doctrine not supported by Scripture. The Bible instead teaches that at death a person’s thoughts do in fact cease: “The dead know nothing.... There is no work or device or knowledge in the grave where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). Death is elsewhere portrayed in Scripture as an unconscious sleep. Life after death is not as a disembodied consciousness but will come only through a future resurrection of the dead to a new body.

Returning now to the progression of the psalm, let’s note again that verse 5 gives the contrast to verses 3-4. Rather than trusting in mortal man, “happy” or “blessed” (NIV) is the person who relies on God for help. The remainder of the psalm then explains why this is so, showing that God—the Almighty Creator, Sustainer and Deliverer, who faithfully loves and cares for those in need, and who (in contrast to dying) lives and reigns forever—can truly be counted on.

“The LORD raises those who are bowed down” (verse 8) is essentially repeated from the previous psalm (compare 145:14). God giving food to the hungry (146:7) is also found in the previous psalm (145:15-16). Furthermore, God caring for the righteous and upending the wicked is found in both songs (145:17-20; 146:8-9)—as is the focus on God reigning forever (145:13; 146:10).

As in many psalms, God is identified with His nation of Israel. Note in verse 5 that He is the “God of Jacob,” and in verse 10 that He is referred to “Your God, O Zion.” Israel and Zion are the special recipients of God’s attentive care and blessings. We will see this focus in the next psalm as well. Yet we should recognize, as throughout the Psalter, that these names can apply to God’s spiritual people as well—His Church. Moreover the ultimate fulfillment of the help promised in both psalms will come with the future establishment of the Kingdom of God over all nations—who must all become part of Israel in a spiritual sense.

Psalm 147, the second of the final five Hallelujah Psalms, praises the Almighty Creator and Provider for His special devotion to His chosen nation, thanking Him for gathering Israel’s exiles to Jerusalem, blessing them with peace and abundance and teaching them His statutes and judgments. The Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible divides the composition into two separate psalms (verses 1-11, 12-20). However, besides the unity maintained in the Hebrew text tradition and the cohesiveness of the subject matter, it has been argued that there is “a good defense for the unity [of the work] by a careful analysis of the structural components, repetition, and parallelism” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, introductory note on Psalm 147).

Thanking God in a psalm for the gathering of Israel’s outcasts (verse 2) would seem to suggest some actual experience of this as a present reality when the song was composed. The return of exiles here is paired with the “building up” of Jerusalem (see same verse), which probably refers to increasing population in addition to the restoration of buildings and institutions. Many commentators believe this psalm was composed following the return of the Jewish exiles from captivity in Babylon, which seems a reasonable conclusion. A number try to further pin down the setting, believing that the reference to Jerusalem’s gates being strengthened in verse 13 hints at the work of Nehemiah in rebuilding the city walls and gates. Some even suggest that this psalm was the one sung at the dedication of the rebuilt walls (see Nehemiah 12:27-43). There is, however, no way to know this, especially as God’s strengthening of Zion’s gates may be a figurative expression of His protection.

Even with a historical context for Psalm 147, the return of Israel’s outcasts should not be limited to the small Jewish return from ancient Babylon. Rather verse 2 is evidently meant in an ongoing sense. As time went on, God would further build up Jerusalem and gather the exiles—including those not only of Judah but of all Israel. As we know from other passages, this would happen in stages. Outcasts of Israel would first return to God in a spiritual sense—the forerunners in this return forming spiritual Zion or Jerusalem, the Church of God. Romans 11 explains that the Israelites were broken off from God’s covenant nation for disobedience, yet they would be grafted back in, in a spiritual return, through

repentance—along with gentiles who would also become part of Israel spiritually. As also explained in that chapter, those returning are the elect according to grace—again, God’s Church. And this is a forerunner of a greater return of all Israel in the future—that return being both spiritual and geographic—as shown in numerous prophecies. There is no way to know whether the psalmist himself understood all this—but God, who inspired the psalm, certainly did.

The future gathering of all Israel to the Promised Land will occur when Jesus Christ returns in power and glory: “For the LORD shall build up Zion; He shall appear in His glory. He shall regard the prayer of the destitute, and shall not despise their prayer. This will be written for the generation to come, that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD” (Psalm 102:16-18). Psalm 147:3 speaks similarly of God healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds—God’s most important rebuilding work being within the human heart. In an ultimate sense these words apply to the wonderful time of God’s intervention to come. Yet there was a vital measure of application for the returned exiles at the time of the song’s composition—and so it is with us today. Indeed, this was part of the mission of the Messiah (Isaiah 61:1-2), and Jesus has already embarked on this mission (Luke 4:16-21) as He builds His Church, spiritual Zion, the Israel of God.

The psalm then abruptly turns to the matter of just who is doing this great work. It is the same One who made the vast universe and who also takes care of it (Psalm 147:4-9). Verses 4-6 are evidently taken in part from Isaiah 40, which mentions God counting the stars and calling them all by name (verse 26), as well as His understanding being unsearchable (verse 28) and His giving power to the weak who wait on Him (verses 29-31). As noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Isaiah 40:26, the concept of God counting and naming all the stars is staggering beyond comprehension. For given that there are at least a hundred billion galaxies of a hundred billion stars each, naming each star at a rate of one per second would take more than 21,000 times the 15-billion-year age that scientists claim for the universe. “Great [*indeed*] is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite” (Psalm 147:5).

Thus He certainly knows how to care for those in need and render judgment on those who defy Him (compare verse 6). This contrast of verse 6—lifting the humble (tying back to verse 3) and casting down the wicked—parallels statements in the previous two psalms (145:14-20; 146:7-9).

Psalm 147:7-9 calls for thanks to God for not only His creation but for causing life to flourish through His care and provision. Giving food to the animals (verse 9a) recalls God providing for all living things in Psalm 145:15-16. The imagery of feeding the crying young ravens (147:9b) is drawn from God’s own words in Job 38:41. As the Bible Reading Program commented on that verse, Job was to understand that God’s point was about more than animals. Rather, as Jesus said to human beings about God providing for the birds, “Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26).

The next verse, Psalm 147:10, should not be taken to mean that God doesn’t enjoy horses and their powerful strength or that he is unhappy with His creation of human legs. Rather, these things are elements in which people placed undue trust—horses and the strength and endurance of men’s legs being military assets. Consider Psalm 33:16-17: “No king is saved by the multitude of an army; a mighty man is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a vain hope for safety; neither shall it deliver any by its great strength.” There is only one reliable source of deliverance: “Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the LORD our God” (20:7). The point of Psalm 147:10-11 is that God is not looking for powerful people or armies to prop Him up. He doesn’t need that at all. Instead, He wants humble people who realize *their* need for *Him*—who properly fear Him and rely on His *hesed*, His mercy or loving devotion.

For the exiles who returned from ancient Babylon this was a sorely needed message. They were weak militarily and beset by neighboring enemies. God says essentially: “Look, you don’t need to be some elite fighting force to be My people. You just look to *Me*, and *I’ll* take care of whatever needs to be taken care of.” We see this in the next verses, where the people of Jerusalem are told to praise *God*—for *He* has strengthened their gates, *He* has blessed their children, *He* gives them peace on their borders and *He* abundantly provides them with the best crops (147:12-14).

Verses 15-18 illustrate again God’s rule over nature, the imagery in this case being one of winter weather. Stress is put on the elements of creation being immediately responsive to God’s commands (verses 15, 18)—a pattern that should be followed by God’s people, as implied in verses 19-20. There are perhaps other spiritual lessons here as well. It is hard to bear the bitter cold (verse 17). But in God’s time,

seasonally, warm breezes come, the cold is broken, ice accumulation melts and water flows (verse 18)—again demonstrating God’s providence, and this on His time schedule. This is something to consider when times are hard. Know that there’s a point to it and that circumstances will ultimately vastly improve, culminating in refreshment and fulfillment.

Finally, far more important than the physical help and sustenance God has given to Israel is the blessing of His instructions—the code of conduct laid out in His Word. The words in verses 19-20 (coupled with the last verse of the next song, 148:14) echo those of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:7-8: “For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?” God has not blessed any other nation in this way. In fact, for other nations to participate in this exclusive relationship, they must become part of Israel in a spiritual sense.

Of course, just understanding God’s laws is not enough. We must, as the natural realm, *obey* the commands God gives if they are to do us any good. Yet in our case He has given us the choice of whether to obey Him or not. Rejection of God’s commands excludes a person from God’s chosen covenant nation. Thus, for the returning outcasts, true return to God resulting in His healing and help requires embracing God’s laws and living by them. The same applies to us.

“Praise Him, All His Hosts!” (Psalms 148–150)

March 27-31

Third in the series of five concluding Hallelujah Psalms, **Psalm 148** is a creation hymn in which the whole of the created realm is called on to praise the Creator. “Whatever its original liturgical purpose, its placement here at the center of the five concluding hymns serves to complete the scope of the calls to praise with which the Psalter closes.... Two similarly constructed stanzas call on all creatures in the heavens (vv. 1-6) and all creatures beneath the heavens [i.e., on earth] (vv. 7-14) to join in the chorus of praise.... Both stanzas end with a couplet setting forth the motivation for praise. The second of these (vv. 12-14), made up of extended lines, clearly constitutes the climax” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, introductory note on Psalm 148).

It is interesting to note that the word “praise” (*hallel*) is used 13 times in the psalm—once in the opening *Hallelu Yah* (“Praise the LORD”) frame, once in the closing frame and 11 times in between. This is parallel in count to the final, closing psalm of the Psalter, Psalm 150. Yet while the final psalm is rather uniform in all its calls to praise, listing them in short statements one after the other (as we will later examine), Psalm 148 follows that pattern in only its first part. Observe in this song that the opening call to praise is followed by seven short calls to praise in the imperative (or command) mood (verses 1-4), followed then by one in the jussive subjunctive mood—that is, in the form of “let them” (verse 5). The second section of the psalm begins with a single imperative call to praise (verse 7), which is followed much later by another in the form of “let them” (verse 13) and then the use of “praise” as a noun (verse 14)—ending with the final closing call to praise.

The worship of God begins in the heavens (verse 1) with God’s angels (verse 2), the celestial bodies (verse 3), and the “waters above the skies” (verse 4, NIV)—seemingly referring to the vapor of the earth’s atmosphere (compare Genesis 1:7). Thus all three “heavens” mentioned in the Bible appear to be represented in this passage—the “heaven” of God’s throne, the “heaven” of outer space and the “heaven” of earth’s atmosphere. Note in this regard that the apostle Paul refers to the heaven of God’s throne as the “third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2).

In Psalm 148:2, the word “hosts” seems to be paralleled with angels—which would follow the pattern of Psalm 103:20-21. Yet this term (translated from the Hebrew *sabaoth*) in a broader sense designates groupings of forces or powers, such as armies (sometimes including Israel’s armies). The word can even refer to the sun, moon and stars (Deuteronomy 4:19; Psalm 33:6; Jeremiah 33:22). As these are mentioned next in Psalm 148:3, perhaps “hosts” is being used as a transitional term between angels and the heavenly bodies—especially as angels are compared to stars in other passages (see Job 38:7; Revelation 1:20). Indeed, as the call to the hosts in Psalm 148:2 is the central one of the seven calls to praise (following the opening call), the term perhaps applies here to all the heavenly powers, both throngs of angels and the multitude of the stars that light the physical universe. The praise of the heavenly bodies is silent but undeniable, as their beauty, grandeur, enduring patterns of movement, and seemingly numberless count speak volumes about the One who made them (see Psalm 19:1-6).

In the closing couplet of this section, God's creation of all these things through the power of His word along with His perpetual establishment of them through natural laws is the basis for praise (Psalm 148:5-6).

The next section starts with a call to praise from the earth (verse 7). Rather than constantly repeating the word "praise" as in the first section, the opening call to praise God in verse 7 is issued collectively to all things listed in verses 7-12. As the previous section left off with the waters above the heavens, this section begins with the waters below the heavens in the mention of "great sea creatures and all ocean depths" (verse 7b, NIV).

Next mentioned is a diversity of weather phenomenon (verse 8)—classed not in the heavenly realm but with things on earth because their impact is felt on the ground. "Fire" here is most likely a reference to "lightning" (NIV), as in other passages. Note that these things are pictured as "fulfilling His word"—their existence and the fact that they follow laws He has set, as well as His direct command at times, serving to glorify God (compare 147:15-18).

Mountains, trees and animals in all their natural wonder also join in the chorus of praise (148:9-10). Though they cannot speak, they all declare the design of the Master Designer.

We then come at last to the pinnacle of God's earthly creation, mankind, described here as all nations and their leaders (verse 11) as well as all individual human beings—male and female, young and old (verse 12).

In the conclusion of this section (verses 13-14), two reasons are given for all to join in the praise of the name of the "LORD" (i.e., YHWH—"He Is Who He Is"). First is that His name alone is exalted above the earth and heavens just described (verse 13). His name designates Him alone, in contrast to the created realm, as eternal and uncreated, having life in Himself. Moreover, He is the very Creator and Sovereign Ruler of all His creation.

The second basis for praise here is God's exalting of the "horn" (symbolizing strength) of His covenant people, His saints, for He has empowered them to declare His praise on behalf of the whole earthly creation (verse 14)—in this psalm and throughout the entire Psalter. The word translated "saints" here is *hasidim*, the singular form of this word being related to *hesed*, used of God's loving devotion. The saints here, then, are those who are faithfully devoted to God in return—the pious. (From this word, incidentally, derives the designation "Hasidic" Jews, denoting the orthodox Jewish community.) The faithful here are further defined as "the children of Israel, a people near to Him" (same verse). This special relationship was spotlighted at the end of the previous psalm (147:20), the focus there being on God giving His statutes and judgments to Israel and not any other nation. That blessing and the special status here of being near to God are both found in Deuteronomy 4:7-8. "Israel" in the psalm's conclusion should be understood in the ideal sense of those who remain in covenant with God, as opposed to those who are cut off through disobedience. Today, "the Israel of God" is synonymous with the Church of God (compare Galatians 6:16). Thus true Christians serve as God's priesthood and spiritual nation to declare His praises on behalf of all the earth.

The concluding focus on Israel and the *hasidim* serves to introduce the next psalm, as we will see.

Psalm 149, the fourth hymn in the concluding Hallel collection, is a royal psalm praising Israel's divine King for granting to His people salvation and the high honor of executing His judgment on the nations for their defiance of His rule. This psalm follows from the conclusion of the previous one, with emphasis on the role of Israel and the focus on His "saints" or *hasidim*, meaning devoted ones, the Hebrew word being used here three times—in the first, middle and last verses (verses 1, 5, 9). And as in the former case, "Israel" and the "saints" (in addition to the "children of Zion" in this psalm) should not be limited to God's physical nation. Rather, the truly devoted and obedient people of God are principally in view here—spiritual Israel, the Church of God. This is especially so, given the primarily end-time focus of the song (as implied by the granting of salvation and the execution of vengeance on the nations).

The psalm begins with a call to praise God with a "new song" (verse 1; compare 33:3; 40:3; 96:1). This does not require a song never heard or sung before. The sense can be that of singing with renewed awareness of what God has done. Even old psalms can be sung as *new* because the congregation always has fresh reasons for expressing gratitude.

Note that the song is to be sung in "the assembly of saints" (149:1). As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* points out, this statement in the closing frame of the book of Psalms ties back to the opening

frame: “The phrase is equivalent to ‘congregation of the righteous’ (1:5), and it may be that Psalm 149 is a formal closure of the Psalter, climaxed by the great praise psalm, Psalm 150” (note on 149:1-5). There is a *further* tie back to the opening as well. As noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Psalms 1 and 2, these two untitled psalms together apparently form the opening frame of the Psalter. Psalm 1 lays out the character of the righteous while Psalm 2 is a royal psalm focusing on the Messiah coming to conquer the world and set up His Kingdom. So it seems appropriate to read Psalm 149, the next-to-last psalm, in light of that second opening psalm.

The first part of Psalm 149 communicates a sense of celebration, including praising God with dance, singing with timbrels (tambourines) and harps (verse 3)—celebratory elements that are all invoked in the next and final psalm, as we will see.

Israel rejoices because “the LORD takes pleasure in His people” and “will beautify the humble with salvation” (149:4). God’s people are thus equated with those who have a humble, respectful attitude before Him, parallel to what we read just two psalms earlier within the same Hallel collection: “The LORD takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy [*hesed*]” (Psalm 147:11). Here, again, we see that their hope will be rewarded with being “beautified” with salvation (149:4). The word here can also mean “adorned” and thus recalls other verses about being clothed with salvation (Psalm 132:16; Isaiah 61:10). The “salvation” here could signify God saving His people from life-threatening circumstances in the here and now, yet the ultimate picture is certainly that of salvation in His coming Kingdom. The ancient Israelites in singing this song would have understood both aspects.

The saints singing for joy on their beds (Psalm 149:5) contrasts greatly with past circumstances: “The ‘beds,’ which had before been soaked with tears, share in the joy of the Lord’s deliverance (cf. 4:4; 6:6; 63:6; Hos 7:14)” (*Expositor’s*, note on Psalm 149:1-5).

The latter part of the psalm praises God for giving His people a role in executing judgment on the nations (verses 6-9). This applied in part to Old Testament Israel, as the nation fought against the Canaanites, the Philistines and other enemies: “Under the particular administration of the emerging [earthly] kingdom of God put in place in the inauguration of the Sinai covenant...she [Israel] was armed to execute God’s sentence of judgment on the world powers that have launched attacks against the kingdom of God. Under that arrangement, she served as the earthly contingent of the armies [or hosts] of the King of heaven” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, introductory note on Psalm 149). *The Nelson Study Bible* says that Psalm 149 “was used by the army of Israel as well as by the people in their worship of God.... [At verse 6] the focus of the psalm switches from the congregation at worship to the army in training. Israel’s army was to be the vanguard for the battle of the Lord. Their training was to have a strong component of praise and worship of God” (introductory note on Psalm 149 and note on verse 6).

Yet we should once again recognize that the “saints” in this and other psalms is primarily a reference to the spiritually converted people of God—spiritual Zion, the Church. Of course, the Church in this age is not to take up arms and fight, because Christ’s Kingdom for which we wait is not of this world (see John 18:36). Yet when Jesus returns to set His Kingdom up on this earth, His saints, then glorified in divine power, *will* fight alongside Him—as this psalm makes clear. Indeed, as the patriarch Enoch prophesied, “The Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all” (Jude 14-15). The two-edged sword here (Psalm 149:6) would seem to parallel the book of Revelation’s figurative portrayal of a sharp sword coming out of Christ’s mouth at His return (Revelation 19:15; compare 1:16; Isaiah 11:4-5; 49:2). And the imagery of a two-edged sword is used to represent the Word of God (compare Hebrews 4:12-13).

“The written judgment” (Psalm 149:9) refers to the “punishments” and “vengeance” (verse 7) recorded in God’s Word by the prophets. As *Expositor’s* notes on verses 6-9, “The ‘sentence’ [NIV] (*mishpat*, ‘judgment’) decrees that on the day of the Lord, the wicked (individuals, nations, and kings) will be fully judged for the deeds done against God and against his people (cf. Isa 24:21-22; 41:15-16; 45:14; 65:6; Ezek 38–39; Joel 3:9-16, 19-21; Mic 4:13; Zech 14; 2 Thess 1:5-10).”

The saints will then reign with Christ during the Millennium (see Revelation 20:6), continuing to rule by God’s laws.

With **Psalm 150**, the fifth and final concluding Hallelujah Psalm, we come to the end of the book of Psalms. As in Psalm 148, the word “praise” (*hallel*) is used here 13 times. Yet this psalm more closely follows the pattern of only the first part of Psalm 148. In this case we see, within the framing *Hallelujahs*

at the beginning and end, 10 imperative calls to praise God (150:1-5) followed by a single summary call to praise in the jussive subjunctive mood—that is, in the form of “let them” (see verse 6). As these calls are brief and without expressive praise, the entire psalm has the form of an extended doxology (a doxology being a brief expression of praise). Recall that Books I through IV of the Psalter each end with a short doxology evidently added to the last psalm in each book (see 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48). Now at the end of Book V, the entirety of Psalm 150 appears to perform the same function—and it may have been composed specifically to close the Psalter.

Though brief, Psalm 150 encompasses many elements of the book of Psalms. As the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* comments in its introductory note on the song, “This final call to praise moves powerfully by stages from place [verse 1] to themes [verse 2] to orchestra [verses 3-4] to choir [verse 6], framed with Hallelujahs.”

Verse 1 tells us *where* God should be praised—in His sanctuary and in His mighty firmament. The sanctuary is God’s temple, meaning His physical temple in Jerusalem and also His spiritual temple on earth, His Church, as well as His heavenly temple. The “firmament” here signifies heaven or the sky (see Genesis 1:6-8), and the meaning in this case is probably the entire, vast universe.

Verse 2 of Psalm 150 tells us *why* God should be praised—“for His mighty acts” (for *what* He does) and “for His excellent greatness” (for *who* and *what* He is).

Verses 3-5 tell us *how* God should be praised—with the whole orchestra (eight instruments: wind, string, percussion), with dancing aptly placed at the middle” (*Zondervan*, note on verses 3-5)—recalling the celebratory elements of the previous psalm (compare 149:3). Perhaps the idea here is simply to joyfully praise God with whatever we have to praise Him.

And finally, verse 6 of Psalm 150 tells us *who* should praise God—the choir of all that have life and breath. As *The Nelson Study Bible* remarks on this verse: “The very breath that God gives us should be used to praise Him. As long as we live we should praise our Creator (146:1,2). By His breath God created all things (33:6), and by our breath we should adore Him. The Book of Psalms begins with God’s blessing on the righteous (1:1) and concludes with all of creation blessing its loving Creator.”

In all that we think, in all that we say, in all that we do, let it be to the praise of our great and loving God, our Almighty Maker and Savior and King, the infinite and majestic Lord of all creation. And let us all sing with joyful hearts, *Hallelujah! Praise the Lord.*

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