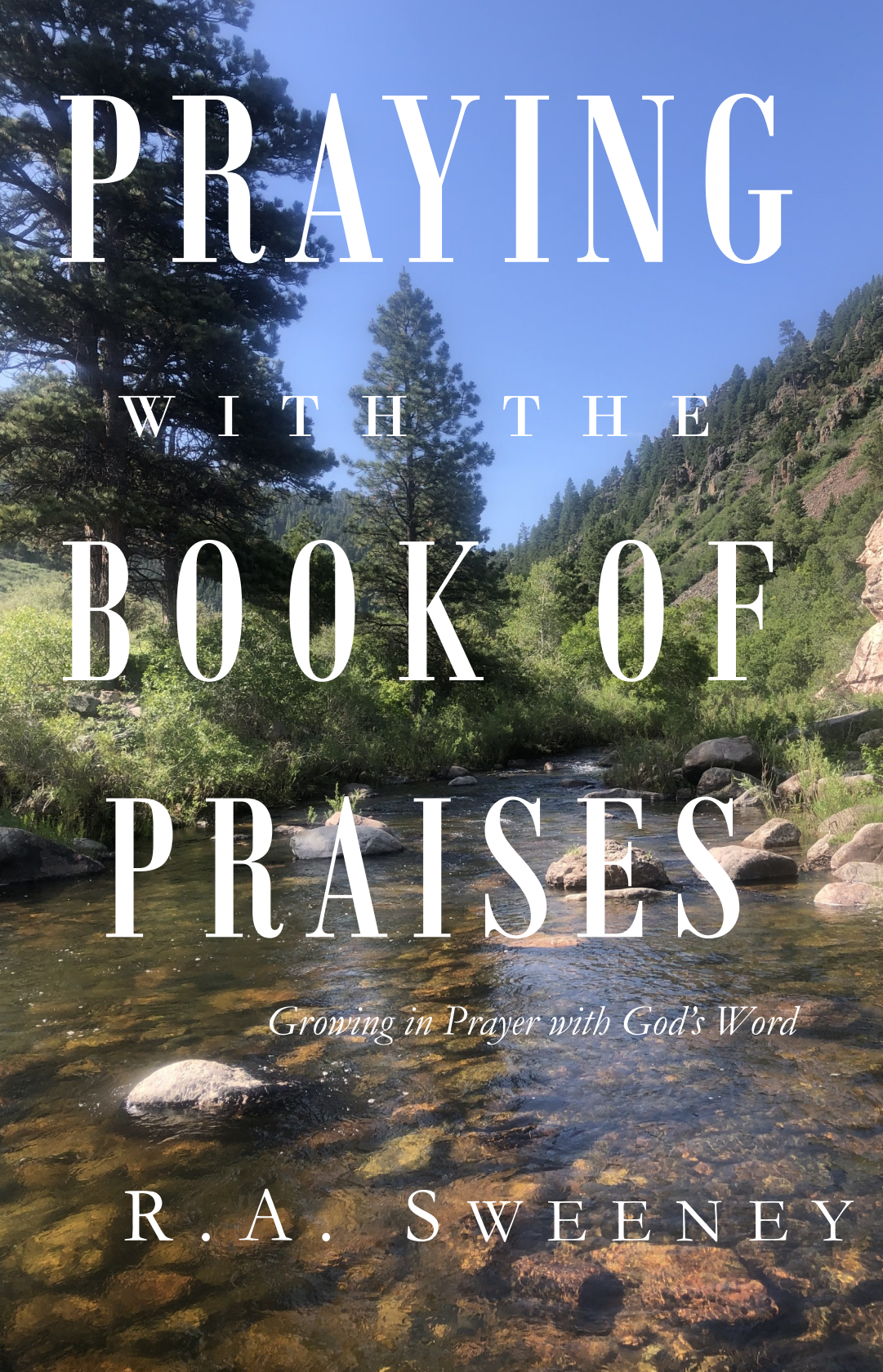




PRAYING

W I T H T H E

BOOK OF

PRAISES

Growing in Prayer with God's Word

R . A . S W E E N E Y

PRAYING WITH THE BOOK OF PRAISES

Growing in Prayer with God's Word

R.A. SWEENEY



Davek Le'lohim
Books

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NOTE ON BOOK ORDERING

Many readers may be wondering what is the *Book of Praises*? In what I was taught to call the *Protestant Ordering* of the Bible, the Old Testament is broken down into the *Torah* (or usually called the Pentateuch), the history books, the writings, and then the prophets. This is a perfectly fine way of reading, and I think, in certain ways, it is a better way to read these books than I am following.

I follow the *Tanak* ordering of the Scriptures. This is the way the Jews in Jesus's time would have read them, and there is actually a lot of evidence in the way Jesus spoke to suggest He read the Old Testament in Tanak ordering as well. If I want to understand the Scriptures the way that He understands them, I want to look at them the way He does. And I do think ordering and grouping do shape the way we read these texts. Regardless of how Jesus read these texts, I do think the organization of the Tanak is a better fit for the way we are examining prayers.

Tanak is actually an acronym—TNK—with vowels added. The TNK stands for *Torah*, which means “wisdom-teaching” or “instruction,” *Nevi'im*, which means “prophets,” and *Ketuvim*, which means “writings.” In this ordering, the Torah and the Pentateuch are identical, but the historical books are distributed between the prophets and the writings. Even then, some of what the Protestant Order would consider to be prophetic books are also in

the writings.

The *Ketuvim*, or Writings, are comprised of a wide variety of books throughout all the parts of the Protestant Ordering. The Ketuvim begins with what we call the book of Psalms, though in Hebrew it is *Sefer Tehillim*, or the “Book of Praises.” Due to the huge number of prayers in the Psalms, the book of Psalms was taken as its own piece, and the remainder of the Ketuvim will be discussed in the following book.

INTRODUCTION

This book has been so fun to write. I enjoyed the first three books in the series, but this one is my favorite thus far.

Chief among the reasons I have so enjoyed this book is that I translated the entire book of Psalms from Hebrew myself. If it seems like this was the first time I have ever read the Psalms, it's because I have never read them in the original Hebrew before. All the quoted text of the Psalms is my own translation. It has been an amazing journey.

My strategy in interpretation has been to stick to the root of individual words as much as possible. I have tried to render coherent sentences as much as possible, but my priority was remaining true to the specific root ideas. I think this will bring the Psalms to life in a new way and demonstrate meaning in them you might have missed in more coherent translations.

While I am excited about the translation, my goal in this book remains to look at individual prayers to further our own growth. All the translating, all the explaining, and all the reflecting come together to help us understand the prayers and apply them better in our lives. It has been a huge blessing for me to compile these case studies, and it is my hope that you are as encouraged as I have been.

I want to lay out a couple of ideas as groundwork before we jump in. The Psalms is a large book of poems. Many are prayers, though many are not. They seem to bounce around from one idea to another. Since they do not flow in a narrative pattern, it is unfair to expect them to follow in a linear sequence—that isn't what this book is for. So how, then, do we think of this collection?

First, think of the book as a large essay or lecture. You will notice that the book of Psalms is divided into five books. (These book divisions are not part of the original Hebrew text and have been added for organization later on in history.) The Bible Project has made compelling arguments to actually break the Psalms into seven sections¹. They argue that the first two psalms serve as an introduction to the book of Psalms. They set out the purpose and main idea of the entire collection. Book 1 of the Psalms, in their way of organizing, begins in Psalm 3. The rest of the breakdown of the book divisions remains the same until you reach the end of Book 5. They argued that the last five psalms (146–150) form a conclusion to the book of Psalms. I would argue that this conclusion actually starts in Psalm 145, with this poem serving as a topic sentence of the concluding paragraph. This framework—a small introduction, five paragraphs of body, and a conclusion—is a helpful way of seeing the Psalms as a complete work, rather than a collection of random works.

The other framework that I want to put into our minds as we begin comes from an idea I got from

Professor James K. A. Smith. He is a big proponent of liturgies and having liturgical practice in our worship. If you are unfamiliar, liturgy is having structured practices of worship that we follow. This can take the form of scripted prayers that we repeat at certain times, like you find in my book *Prayers from the Time of Jesus*, or activities and practices we ritually engage in. Many faith traditions and contexts rail pretty hard against liturgy, but we all have them in some form or another. They are essentially just habits of how we practice our spiritual life.

Smith argues against the idea held by many Christians that liturgy is the opposite of allowing us to be guided by the Spirit. Smith's argument is that instead of hampering being guided by the Spirit, liturgy serves as "an apprenticeship from the Spirit"². By this, he means that liturgy is any type of Spirit-filled practice that trains us in how we are to follow the Spirit in that way. It builds muscle memory. It helps us wear paths into the ground. Liturgy is what grows us into wise followers of the Spirit.

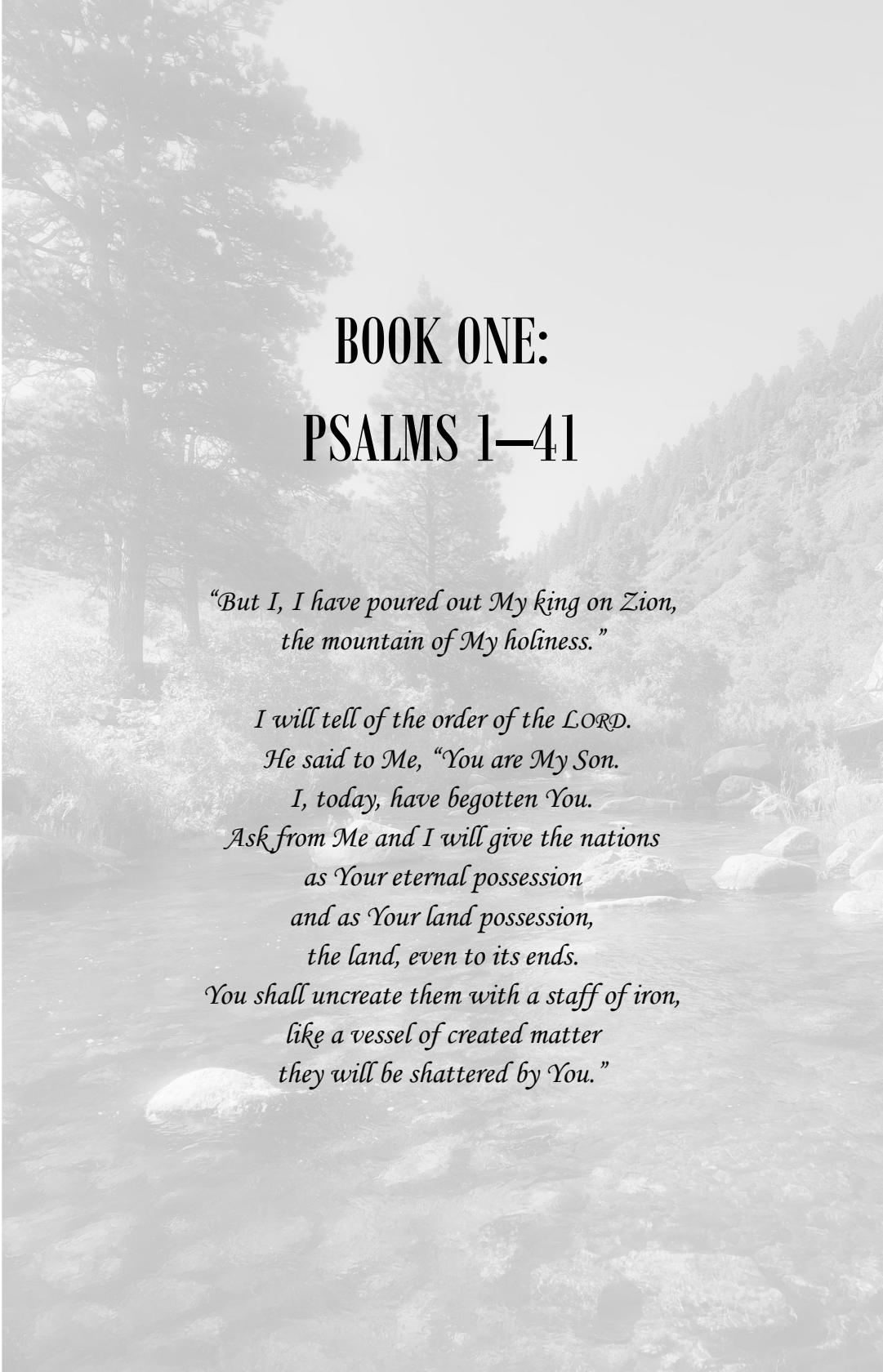
As we approach the Psalms, I want us to combine these two frameworks. Take the introduction and see where we are headed. Recognize that the Spirit has given us those psalms as a starting point and a directional statement. Then, walk in the book of Psalms God gave us as our apprenticeship in how to pray and praise Him. Each step builds upon the previous and builds toward the conclusion. Allow the apprenticeship to work through these five stages of the rhetorical organization the Spirit

has put into the Psalms. Develop the muscle memory and wear the paths into the ground by following the apprenticeship program we are given as we work toward the conclusion of the design. And once you get to the conclusion, it becomes a springboard for where to take your walk from there.

Enter the world of the Psalms. Walk in the lives of the psalmists and experience their prayers like never before. Meditate on them day and night. And grow closer to God through prayer in the process.

*Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of all creation;
the King to be praised for all to hear!*

~ A Traditional Ancient Jewish Prayer of Praise for the
God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob³



BOOK ONE: PSALMS 1–41

*“But I, I have poured out My king on Zion,
the mountain of My holiness.”*

I will tell of the order of the LORD.

He said to Me, “You are My Son.

I, today, have begotten You.

Ask from Me and I will give the nations

as Your eternal possession

and as Your land possession,

the land, even to its ends.

You shall uncreate them with a staff of iron,

like a vessel of created matter

they will be shattered by You.”

*And now, kings, have wisdom.
Receive disciplining chastisement judges of the land.
Serve the LORD with awe
and shake with emotion in trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest He become angry
and you follow the way to perishing.
For soon His anger will be burning.*

The good life belongs to all who take refuge in Him.
~ Psalm 2:6–12

Psalm 3

As we approach this first psalm that features a prayer, the context of the psalm is very important. Depending on your Bible, it might be set up a little differently. But, somewhere at the beginning of the psalm shows that David wrote this when he was fleeing from his son Absalom. (Whose name means “Father of Peace.”) If you do not know the story, it is in 2 Samuel 15–19 with seeds of foreshadowing in the previous chapters as well. I think the context is extra relevant here in understanding the prayer toward the end. In Hebrew, the context says “A Psalm of David when he fled *from the face* of Absalom, his son.” The part about the face is important but often left out in translation.

David started his prayer by lamenting his multiplied afflictions and abundant adversaries. But I am reminded that, in Matthew 5:5, Jesus said that those who are afflicted have the good life because the earth would become their eternal possession. Certainly, David fit that bill. Apparently, the taunts against David at this time (perhaps thinking of Shimei¹) claimed that God could not provide any real salvation for Him. David brought these problems before God.

After explaining the problem, David prayed through what he knew to be true. He knew that God was his shield. During his time battling predators as a shepherd, in his battle with Goliath, while on the run from Saul, and in a million other ways, he had found God

to be trustworthy as Someone who would protect him. He knew God was his significance. He had been the runt of the litter of a family from a small town. His family was descended from a Moabite widow. She married into the tribe of a faithless man who slept with his own daughter-in-law. He, in turn, was the son of a lying cheat. And so on back to Adam who rejected God's commission to rule the world as God's human partner. Needless to say, David only had fame, power, and authority because God made him significant, not because he was significant in himself. He knew that God was the One who brought him joy and dignity. And in this knowledge, David prayed, and God heard him.

After that, he could sleep easily because he knew God was protecting him. He knew this because God had struck all those who hated David on the cheek and shattered the teeth of wicked men and women. This language ties back to the idea of David fleeing from Absalom's face. But instead of fleeing from Absalom's face, David asked God to slap his face in shame and to shatter his teeth, signifying destroying his power. Because David knew God had done these things, he begged God to stand up for him.

He, then, concluded by countering the taunt against him about God's empty salvation by saying God is the owner of rescue, and he rejoiced in God's gift of prosperity for His people.

This hits a little like a prayer of fear or worry at first, but really, it is a prayer of confidence and trust.

David had problems, but he rested in what he knew about God and asked God to rescue him, just like God always rescues the afflicted.

David prayed this way when his own son mounted a coup, he lost his entire kingdom, and his family and friends were trying to kill him. Do you pray with this level of confidence in your own life? I imagine this type of confidence and trust in God would be easier in your life than in David's at this moment. Let us sit with that and pray.

*Get up Lord! Rescue me, my God!
For You have struck all who hate me on the cheek.
The teeth of the unrighteous ones You have shattered.
To the Lord belongs the rescue.
May Your prosperity be upon Your people!*

~ Psalm 3:7–8



Psalm 4

It is cool how this prayer plays out. We don't know what David was in distress about in this particular instance. We know from the story of his life that he was often in uncomfortable and distressing spots. I am sure that the reason we have so many psalms praying over unknown distresses is to make them relatable to our own situations. I have never had someone throw a spear at me, but I have had people hate me. So, having fewer details makes them more relatable.

David began the prayer with two requests for God's help. But in between those requests, he said that God had previously freed him from his afflictions. David reflected on his past situations and the ways God had cared for him as motivation to come before him with this request.

Then, the prayer shifts a bit to focus on others, presumably the ones who were afflicting him. In that focus shift, David shared his lament to God over the ways the Enemy had deceived his adversaries into unrighteousness.

But after the lament, David turned his message back to himself. He reminded himself of his hope in God's promise of a redeemer. He reminded himself of how to deal with this situation: hold in the anger and frustration, bring it before God and speak it to Him in private, and then be silent in order to hear God speak back and rest in Him.

This is why David brought sacrifices to God. This is why God brought him such joy. This is why David could lie down and sleep in completeness and peace. He knew he could bring these complaints to God. He knew that God would rescue him from his afflictions, exactly as he prayed in verse 1.

What is also really cool is that, after this situation, David felt the need to make a song out of it. This isn't simply the notes he took to pray about. He set this to music to be prayed.

To me, this strikes at the issue of faith. Do we trust God enough to bring our distress before Him? Do we trust Him enough to remember His past acts of favor toward us and trust that He delights in repeating acts of generosity? Do we trust God enough to hold in our emotions to the point of physical trembling, so that we do not lash out at others? Do we trust God enough to hand over those distresses for Him to deal with? Do we trust God enough to rest in integrity and peace knowing that He will provide enough for us?

*But know that the LORD has differentiated for Himself
one He loyally loves.*

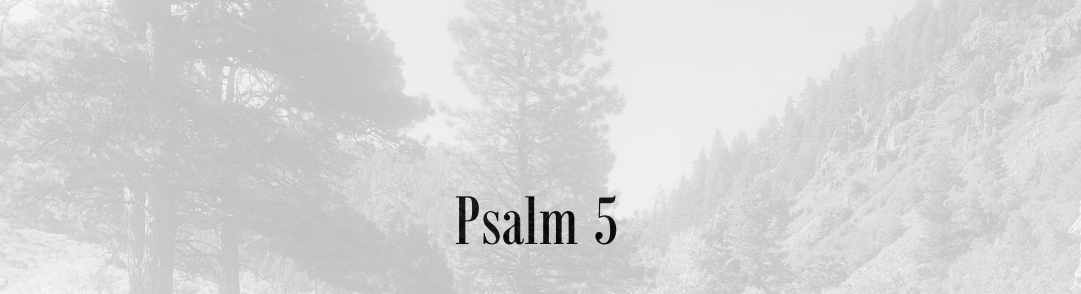
The LORD hears when I call to Him.

Tremble with emotion and do not fail.

*Speak it from your heart
from your bed and be silent. Selah.*

*Sacrifice the sacrifices of righteousness
and seek refuge in the LORD.
Many are saying, "Who will make us see good?
Lift up upon us the light of Your face, LORD!"
You have given joy in my heart
more than when the grain of the people is increased
and the sweet wine of the people is abundant.
In perfect peace both
I will lay down and sleep,
for You, LORD, alone
make me dwell in a refuge.*

~ Psalm 4:3—8



Psalm 5

David came before God in need with this psalm. I assume David knew that God is always listening to those who cry to Him, but David began by asking for God's focused attention. At first, this seemed foolish to me, but then, as I reflected, it became encouraging. This is a relationship-building request. David would have known he didn't need to ask this, but he felt the need to ask anyway. He was desperate for God and began with this as an expression of his desperation. It didn't make sense, but it allowed him to communicate his emotion to God. It is like a big sigh before beginning to discuss a weighty topic.

David progressed by demonstrating a huge amount of faith. He said he was going to set his request in order before God (Our English translations often say he would "offer a sacrifice" here.) and watch expectantly. The language literally says that he would lean forward in expectancy as he waited. His confidence was based in his understanding of God. God was David's hope because God and badness have no overlap. They are completely irreconcilable. That was the source of help David was after.

His prayer then moved into a kind of confession. David admitted that God did not dwell with the boastful, those who live in morally crooked ways, or those who are hateful and deceitful. In response to that admission, David leaned upon God's abundant loyal love as the means by which he had the confidence to enter God's

presence in prayer. He couldn't come in his own righteousness, but his unrighteousness could be overshadowed by God's loyal love.

Only at this point do we see the request begin. David asked for God to lead (as in guide or keep) him in righteous ways. Interestingly, David said he was asking for the sake of those who were hostile to him. He asked God to use him to make a clear demonstration of right and wrong before David's enemies. After a quick discussion of what behaviors David saw in them that needed correcting (And they certainly seem to need correcting.), David asked for God to bring them to a point of decision-making. He asked God to make them trip over their own plans, so they would have to choose which of the paths they would take. David even asked for the paths to be made clear, so they could choose. He asked for God to cast away those who remained bitter toward God's purposes. He asked God to cast away this people group because they did not deal rightly with people. But he asked God to look on those who take refuge in Him with favor.

The closing line is beautiful and foreshadowing. But simply, David referred back to how God is the kind of god who would do this thing. This got me thinking about praying in accordance with God's character. Do we know the things His character desires? Do we pray in accordance with His purposes?

*But I, by the abundance of Your loyal love,
will come to Your dwelling.*

*I will bow at the temple of Your holiness
in awe of You.*

LORD guide me in Your righteousness.

*For the purpose of those hostile to me,
straighten the face of Your way.*

For there is not uprightness from their mouth.

There inward most parts desire bad.

A burying place, opened wide, is their throat.

With their tongues they make smooth.

Make them bear their guilt, God.

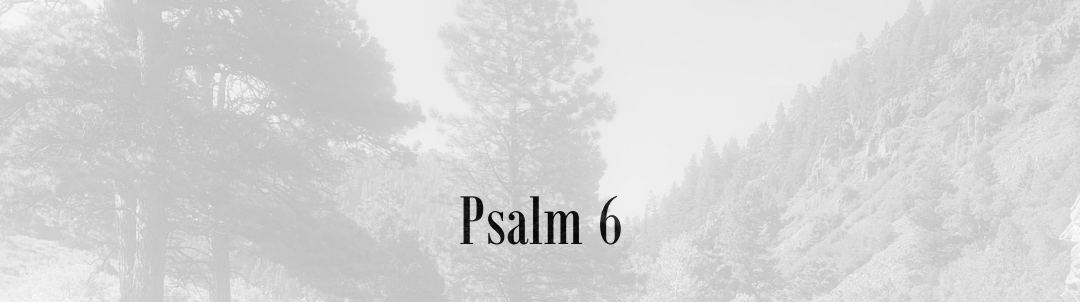
Let them fall by their own counsels.

*By the abundance of their trust-breakings
push them out,*

for they are bitter against You.

And brighten all who take refuge in You.

~ Psalm 5:7-11



Psalm 6

David's prayer, here, mixed several really important themes from the Scriptures. At the start of the prayer, David seemed to acknowledge that he was guilty. He asked God to be merciful to him as God justly delivered punishment for wrongdoing. David accepted that God would correct him. Perhaps he even wanted to be corrected. But David did ask for the severity of the correction to be mild. He was asking God to go easy on him.

The prayer shifted at the end of verse 3 and into verse 4. David asked God, "How long?" This question hits kind of awkwardly as we read it. But we see David's request for leniency shift into a cry for rescue at this point.

David accepted that he was sinful and needed correcting, but his train of thought here suggests that his real hope in the matter was for God to do a work. He asked how long God was going to leave him in this sinful state, battling against sin in his own strength. He seemed to think he was close to death and offered that lament to God in the prayer. He poured out his sorrow and brokenness. All of it hinged around his sinfulness being too much for him to overcome in his own strength and waiting in the hope that God would heal him of his sinful heart.

Right in the middle is where we see why—God's

loyal love. David had received promises from God. David's people had received promises from God. Humanity had received promises from God. David knew God loved humanity and was obsessed with rescuing them from sin because God has a love that transcends our ability to cancel it out.

David was waiting for those promises to come true. He was tired of waiting. He was weary of the struggle. He felt that his life was slipping away. He wanted to be reconciled with his God.

Do we hate our sin that much? Do we struggle with it to the point that David expressed here? Are we exhausted from the fight against our sin's attempts to drag us into the grave? Are we feeling our life and vitality slipping away from the all-consuming mouth of sin? Are we begging God to rescue us? In Jesus, we have the seal of that rescue, but the rescue is not fully accomplished. Until it has been, this prayer should continue to be our prayer.

*Turn around, LORD, pull my soul out!
Free me for the sake of Your loyal love.
For reconciliation with You does not exist in death.
Who will lift their hands to You in She'ol?
I am exhausted from my groaning.
Every night I make my bed swim
and I dissolve my couch with my tears.*

~ Psalm 6:4–6

Psalm 7

This prayer is similar to many others in that it makes a specific claim. In the previous psalm, David appealed to God's loyal love and justice. But here, David claimed innocence. David actually called doom upon himself if he was guilty. He instructed God to let those who chase him catch him if he was guilty and to make his name not only be dragged through the dirt but to make it live in the dirt. But he was confident he was innocent and appealed to that in his prayer for rescue.

As I read about God being a *shield* to David in verse 10, I was reminded of God speaking to Abraham about being a shield to him in Genesis 15 when God made His covenant with Abraham. This was right before Abraham believed God and was counted as righteous. Like Abraham, David also had a covenant with God. David also saw God as his Shield. So, David also came to God in right standing because he trusted in Him.

The psalm, here, works all of this together into a beautiful prayer. David was in distress. Even though we know it is on account of someone named Cush, we do not know the context beyond that. But David knew he was innocent before God, just as Abraham was. He was not holding onto injustice, wantonly taking from others, or showing little love to those who loved him. So, in light of his credited right standing and his covenants with God, David asked the Shield of his faith for rescue.

What kind of trust is necessary to be counted as righteous, as David or Abraham were? It can be humbling to look at Abraham or David as our points of reference, but they shouldn't be the focal point. Abraham and David were not counted righteous because their faith was so strong, but because the One in whom their faith was placed is so strong. When we come to God in faith, He is strong enough and loving enough to make us righteous. So, let us come to Him in prayer, knowing He offers that kind of righteousness to those who have faith even the size of a mustard seed².

*LORD, my God, in You I flee for protection.
Free me from all who chase after my soul
and snatch me away,
lest I be pulled to pieces as by a lion,
my soul be crushed,
and nothing remains to snatch me away.
LORD, my God, if I have done this,
if there stands out injustice in my palms,
if I have treated a person I am at peace with badly
or pulled off in emptiness one who cages me,
let those who hate me run after my soul
and reach it.
And let my life be tread to the ground,
and my significance in the dust dwell.*

~ Psalm 7:1–5



Psalm 8

This is such a grandiose prayer of praise and thanksgiving. I have heard wonderful sermons on this psalm. I have heard beautiful songs written about this psalm. I even have this psalm posted on the bulletin board in the kitchen. It is one of my favorites.

What strikes me about this psalm, amid all the lofty and vivid language, is the way God's purposes are woven into the theme. There is all kinds of language toward the end of the psalm about the myriad glories of God's creation, but it focuses heavily on the authority of mankind to rule over creation. There is language about the splendor of the heavens and the celestial bodies, but the focus is that mankind lacks very little to them in comparison. But the whole thing comes back to the very first idea within the bookend exclamations of the psalm—God is working to rescue humanity for His purposes.

Verse 2 reminds me of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1. Paul wrote that the world convinces us to be too "wise" to buy into God's purposes, so God brought the message of His purposes to humans in foolishness. Here in the psalm, the language implies simplicity, not stupidity as the word "foolishness" implies. God wants humans on board with His purposes so badly that He has made it so simple that even those still nursing from their mothers can understand it. That is something worth praising.

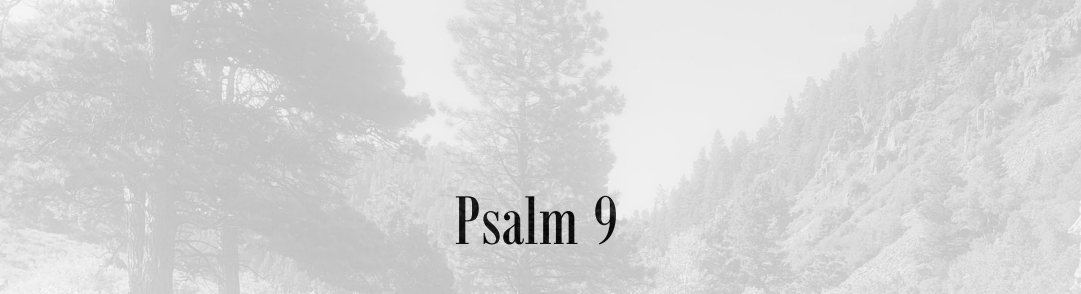
LORD, our Lord, how vast is Your name in all the land!
Who gives Your grandeur over the heavens!
From the mouth of sucklings and nursing ones
You have set foundations of strength
for the purpose of those who box You in,
to make an end to those who hate
and those who hold grudges.

For I see Your heavens,
the creation of Your graspers,
the moon and the blazing ones
which You have stood up,
what are humans that You mark them for remembrance?
And the son of man that You visit him?

But You made him lack little
from the spiritual beings,
and significance and magnificence
You encircle him.
You make him rule
over the creation of Your hand,
all things You have placed
beneath his foot.

*Flock and cows, all of them.
And also mute beasts of the field.
Little bird of the heavens and fish of the waters,
things that cross the roads of the waters.*

LORD, our Lord, how vast is Your name in all the land!
~ Psalm 8



Psalm 9

What jumps out of the page at me in this psalm is the focus on justice. The psalm has twenty verses, and in those verses, there are four separate Hebrew words that mean something along the lines of justice or rendering judgment. These words are used a total of ten times. That is a lot of times. And that doesn't count the times that related words, like righteousness or ruling were used, nor does it take into account a number of words that sound a lot like the words for justice or judging. This concept jumps out of the page as you examine the word choice. David was focused on justice. But how did David conceive of the idea?

Looking at this passage, we do see a lot of what passes for our idea of judgment here in the modern West. Especially toward the beginning of the prayer, you see a lot of focus on God punishing the types of people you would expect—those who hate David and those who seek after bad things, etc.

But toward the middle, the focus shifts from those people who need punishment in our idea of justice and focuses on a different type of person. David described these people as “the crushed,” people in “times of trouble,” “those seeking refuge,” or even simply the “afflicted.” In the middle verses, these people are all given shelter and protection from God. There is no discussion of merit for this favor. It isn't the “righteous” or “godly”

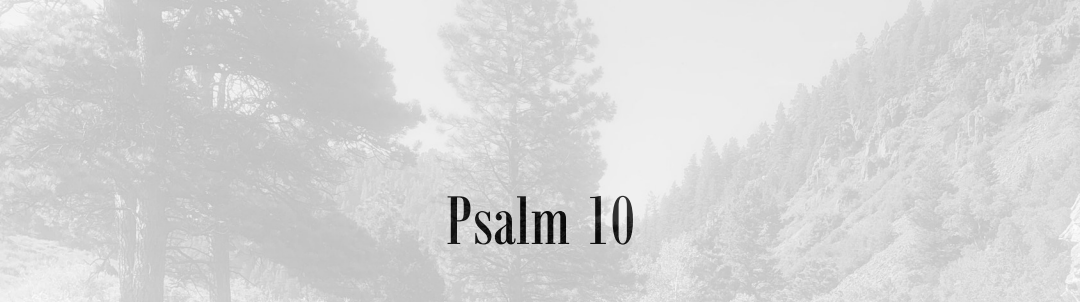
who receive his care and provision in David's idea of justice, but it is the ones in need of it. This is different from our ideas of justice.

The prayer draws toward a close with a discussion of the punishment that David calls upon the people in the first part of the prayer. At first, David prayed for God to punish them, but here, David took a different focus. In this part of the prayer, he was asking for each person's deeds to come back upon them. This reminded me of Jesus's teaching to treat others as you want to be treated³. In David's imagining, justice looks like receiving the treatment that you show to others. Those who sow righteousness will reap blessing, but those who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind⁴.

All of this leads to praise. In verses 1 and 14, there is a Hebrew phrase used that roughly translates to, "so that I may mark the tally of all your works." And in verse 11, David calls people to "stand boldly in front of the people groups." All this paints a really cool picture of standing before those people chasing after other ways of life and just listing off marvel after wonder about God's glory.

How do you interact with God's justice? Do you agree with this definition? Or do you prefer your own? Do you long for justice and pray for it? Do you rejoice and proclaim it when you see it?

*And GOD forever sits as Judge,
He stands up His throne for justice.
And He will judge the inhabited world in righteousness.
He will rule the gathered people in evenness.
The LORD will be a high refuge for the crushed,
a high place in tight times.
And those who know Your name will seek refuge in You,
for You have not cut loose those who pursue You, LORD.*
~ Psalm 9:7–10



Psalm 10

Verse 15 seems to be the centerpiece of what is happening in this prayer. David asked God, in this verse, to bring justice upon his enemies. This is a pretty common theme, but depending upon which translation you read, you might completely miss what he asked in this verse.

The Hebrew literally translates to “Burst the arm of the one who does bad and badness itself.” This seems weird, but it seems like David saw two problems with wickedness: People do bad things and badness exists. He asked God to destroy the power of both. That same verse goes on to say, “Tread after his badness until it fails to come forth.” This is as much of a plea for his enemies to be released from their captivity to sin as it is a plea for God to punish sinful people.

Once that verse becomes the focus, the rest of the language lights up. The first fourteen verses are packed with language from Genesis. The people David was praying against are described as hiding to strike with deadly intent like in the story of Cain. This person was hiding in a “walled field,” which combines the murder site of Abel with the city Cain went on to build. He also crouches and pounces like a lion with huge paws to knock down David, which follows a similar image to Sin crouching at the door waiting to devour Cain. There is language about this enemy oppressing the afflicted with

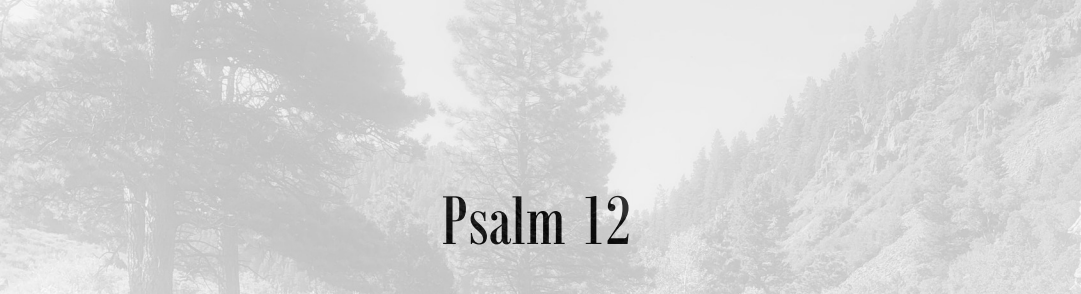
flaming language, reminiscent of the fire that destroyed Sodom because of the oppression of the afflicted. All of this comes back to imagery of Sin corrupting humans in order to produce violence and death across creation.

But the prayer ends with a different focus from Genesis. David hoped in the promise of God returning as King of creation, casting out those who hate Him, and rescuing those who cry out for His mercy. This is the type of prayer that comes from meditating day and night on God's Word as Psalm 1 instructs us to do. When David saw the wickedness of his enemies, he saw the enslaving power of sin to produce violence. So, when he prayed about it, that was where his prayer focused. When David considered what God would do about these enemies, he remembered God's justice to exile those who reject Him in the early chapters of Genesis and God's promises of restoration. So, when he prayed about it, that was where his prayer focused.

Where does our prayer focus? How is the narrative of Scripture shaping your view of the world around you? How is it shaping your understanding of the problems around you? How is it shaping your hope for the future? Where are you out of alignment with the Scriptures in your prayers?

*By arrogant majesty those who do bad flame against the afflicted!
Let them be seized in the plan which they have woven.
For the one who does bad boasts of the desire of the soul
and the one who breaks off curses and scorns GOD.
The one who does bad in the height of his face
fails to tread after Him.*

~ Psalm 10:2—4



Psalm 12

This psalm begins with a plea from David to God asking for God to save David. In English, the word used is likely “save” or something similar, but the Hebrew implies something about setting David in an open place or out of a cramped in area. David then expressed his feelings that he was all alone in following God. Certainly, Elijah’s words on Mount Sinai many years later should be connecting to this psalm in our minds.

What is interesting is that after David poured out his complaint to God, he recorded God's response to him. I looked at verse 5, where God began to speak, in both the NASB and the ESV, and they both make God’s response sound strange. God said He would now act because people were calling to Him, as if He was not at work before this. But what the Hebrew revealed was that a lot of language is reminiscent of the Flood narrative, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the oppression of Egypt. The afflicted were being oppressed and the destitute were crying out. All of this is odious to God, so when He hears the cry of innocent blood being shed, He cannot withhold His justice any longer. It is as if the cry of the oppressed was the causal factor in producing God’s action. Not that He *couldn’t*, or even *wouldn’t*, have acted without it, but once the cries were made, He could no longer hold back.

The next thing that God said was that He would place “him” in the liberty he longed for, but the identity

of the “him” is vague. But, when we look at the rest of the psalm, we see that this liberty actually looks like being hedged into a sheltered place (as opposed to the open place David prayed for) for those who seek refuge in God. But, those who speak ruin and deception will be cut off, and those who pursue chaos and death will be left outside God’s shelter, walking around it in circles with no way in.

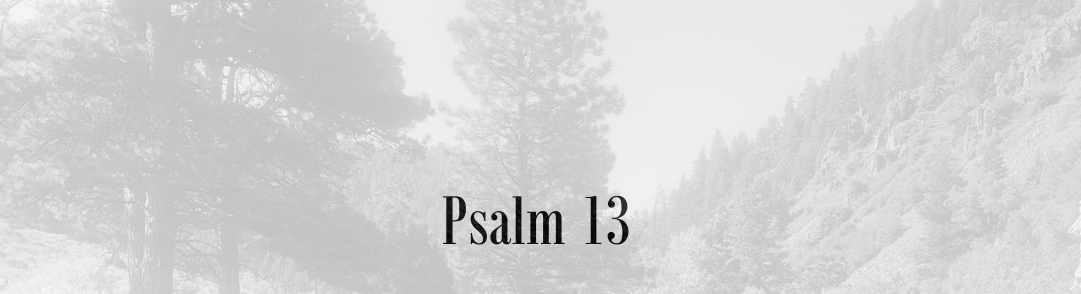
There is so much in this prayer. I noticed that what David asked for was exactly the opposite of what God promised him. I am grateful that when we pray, God knows the deep parts of what we long for and knows how to give us what we desire in far better ways than what we think to ask for. I also am motivated by God’s opening words. How often do we pray asking for God to set the universe right? How often is the cry of our heart heard before God?

*“Because of the devastation of the afflicted,
because of the shrieking of the destitute,
now I will rise,” says GOD.*

*“I will place him in the liberty he pants after.”
The speakings of GOD are pure speakings,
like silver refined in a crucible on the land,
sifted seven times.*

*You, LORD, will hedge them about with thorns,
You will guard him from this generation until the vanishing point.
In a circle the ones who do bad walk about,
for held high is the tempest among the sons of men.*

~ Psalm 12:5–8



Psalm 13

The repeated question in this psalm is “How long?” What a question. One could read this as a doubt that God actually will fulfill His promises. I have certainly felt that urge before, as have many in the Bible. Even the Baptizer began to question whether Jesus was the One he hoped for⁵. But I think the psalm does not allow that conclusion to be made. It would seem that this is simply the groaning of a soul tired of waiting.

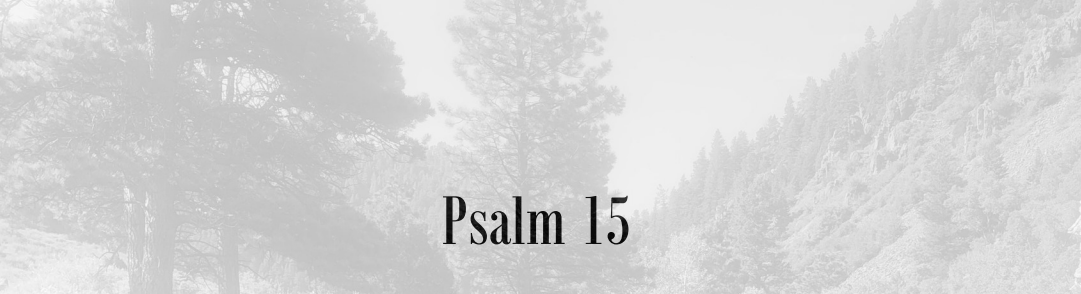
This is the groaning of exhaustion. This is the groaning of the heart that has fought to be faithful and lost more than it has won. This is the groaning of a heart that is having sin eat its lunch. Plain and simple, David was exhausted from the toil of life outside Eden and couldn’t help pleading for God to complete His work of delivering His creation from the grasp of the Serpent.

I do love the ending too. David said that the wicked were waiting and would celebrate (dance) if he fell. But David knew God’s faithfulness. He knew the kind of faithful love God has and hung his faith upon that. Because of God’s faithful love, David waited expectantly for the day when it would be his own heart doing the dancing because it had seen God’s salvation. That is something worth singing about.

How often do we groan this groan? Are we sick of the brokenness this world has to offer? Are we tired of being immersed in our own sins and the sins of those

around us? Are we crying out asking God the same question, “How long?”

*Scan Your eyes across me, LORD, my God!
Light my eyes lest I become limp with death,
Lest the one who hates me will say, “I am able!”
Distress will spin with joy when I fall.
But I, in Your loyal love, have sought refuge in You.
My heart will spin with joy in your liberation;
I will sing to GOD because His recompense is with me!*
~ Psalm 13:3–6



Psalm 15

“Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord?” Aside from being a great name for a book by Michael Morales on the book of Leviticus, it is also a tremendously important question. I have written elsewhere about the background of this question. Without retelling at least a chapter’s worth of context, suffice it to say that the Mountain of the LORD is the place from which a human king, in alignment with God and His purposes, rules over the material creation in order for life to thrive and the cosmos to function properly. The need for a human to take the seat on this Mountain is the entire narrative of the Old Testament.

This psalm is David’s reflection on this question, a question that remained unanswered during his lifetime. It essentially is the question of what human is righteous enough for God to use to set right all that is wrong in the world. We might think to ourselves that the answer to this question is “Jesus,” but certainly David did not know that name. We might also think the answer would be “Whomever He pleases,” which is true in a way, but also not true. The job this human would need to perform would require so much that not just any human would do. Certainly, God could empower anyone as He wishes, but a special someone was going to be needed.

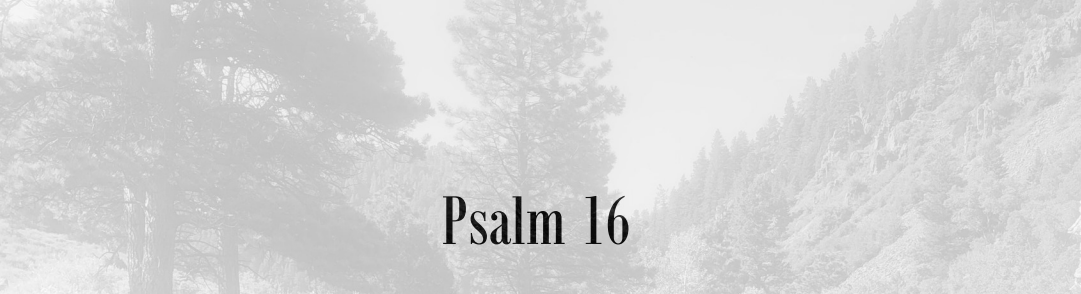
David clearly reflected on this question a lot. It was a huge burden on his mind. He had meditated on

God's Word and reflected upon God's character, likely mixed with prayer and maybe fasting, all about this one question. Once David had wrapped his mind around the concept, he wrote a prayer in the form of a poem about it.

This got me to wondering, how much do we do this? How often are we asking ourselves the important questions? How much time do we spend reflecting on God's purposes and how we might fit into them? How much of our day is spent meditating on what we should be striving after in order to be pursuing God's Kingdom? For me, I know the answer to all of these questions is, "Not enough." How about for you?

*LORD, who may dwell in Your tent?
Who may lodge on the mountain of Your holiness?
He who walks with integrity
and works righteousness
and speaks truth from his heart.
Not him who walks about
telling tales with his tongue.
Not him who makes
bad and disgrace for his neighbor.
Not him who has lifted up
against God's creation near him.*

~ Psalm 15:1–3



Psalm 16

There is some really interesting wordplay going on in this psalm. It is almost as if there are two different psalms being told in the same words depending on which of the double meanings you interpret from the language. On the one hand, many of the words depict idolatry language. You could read some of the words to mean other gods, idols, molten images, and things of that nature. The other way they could be interpreted is sorrow, another human, and offerings. It is really fascinating stuff.

But, if I place these two ways to read this psalm side by side, we get a picture of humans who are idolaters and the idols they worship receiving the same judgment. It is as if the language is intentionally blurred in order to build on the idea found elsewhere in Scripture about the way humans and their gods tend to meld into a single being. Humans who do not follow God chase after other gods. (The word used could mean “other” or “another god.”) The sorrow of the humans is shared by the idols they follow after. (The word used could mean “sorrow” or “idol.”) Both are “easily flowable” (referencing the fickleness of the human and the molten metal used to make idols). God was not going to accept the offerings of these people or the idols they made. (The word used could mean “offering” or “molten image.”)

This language of the idolater who is filled with ideas of fickleness, sorrow, and instability is contrasted

with David's idea of himself. He found God to be his refuge, his joy, and his stability. Both in the kind advising and the loving chastisement, David trusted God was giving him something better than what idols could offer. He ended by saying that the righteous ones would not see the pit of death, but that God would make known to them (The word for "make known" implies the knowledge comes from seeing, in contrast with not seeing the grave.) the road that leads to life.

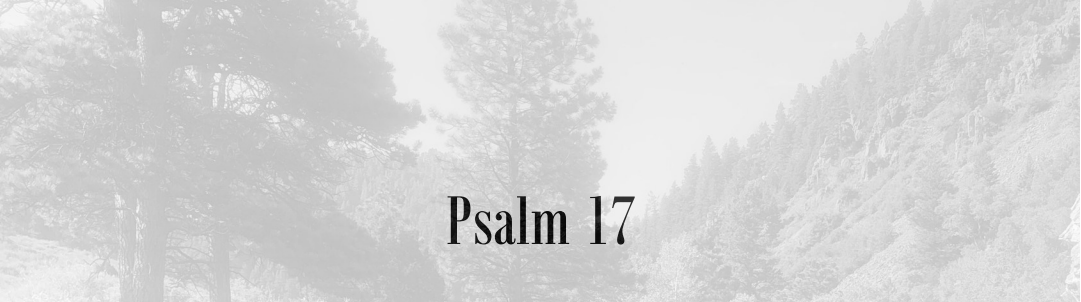
In a world filled with idols, we have a very different God. There are many different faiths throughout the world, as well as many different secular philosophies for living the best life possible. But the God we are called to follow offers what those faiths and ideas cannot. This is a point to meditate on. Clearly, David knew very well the difference this made in his life, and it even drove him to write a prayer of praise to God for the goodness God offers. Are we reflecting on how much better God is than anything else the world has to offer and responding in prayerful praise appropriately?

*Sorrow/ idols will increase
for those who are easily flowable
to another/ other gods.
I shall not pour out
their drink offerings/ molten images from blood.
I will not lift up
their names upon my lips.*

*God is the weighed-out portion
of my land inheritance,
and the thing that holds me together.
You sustain my lot.
The measuring lines
fall pleasantly to me;
also, inherited things
glisten to me.*

*I will bless GOD,
who has advised me;
also, in the night
chastises my inmost being.*

~ Psalm 16:4–7



Psalm 17

Two pictures stand out to me in this prayer. The first picture is what David claimed was true. He cried out to God to hear and see him. His request and confidence seem to have been rooted in his confidence in his own blamelessness. But then, he described the details of that blamelessness. He claimed to have “planned not to cross over with [his] mouth.” In light of the other ideas with it, I get the picture of marking off boundaries. The ways of violence he described as “well-trodden” (clearly defined), and he said that he fenced those roads apart from him with thornbushes. This would prevent him from even seeing them. He claimed to have been following in the “tracks” or “ruts” of God. All of this gave me an image in my mind of someone who is incredibly diligent to make sure he does not leave what is good and does not trust himself to make those determinations in the moment.

I wonder, are we that deliberate? Do we plan our lives with forethought as to how we can avoid that which will lead us to ruin and walk faithfully in the paths of life? Do we think things through ahead of time to be proactive about avoiding sin?

The other picture is of fat. David said that the wicked had shut up their “fat hearts” from God and then went on to describe them like a beast that devours anything it can. David’s hope was in God’s passion for rescue. He looked forward, in this prayer, to the day when

the fat ones (who eat all that they take and constantly destroy) would be cut off, the day when those who trust in the Lord would grow fat from the abundance He gives them. The language David used is that we will be so well provided for that our fat will overhang down onto our small children. That is a picture of abundance!

I wonder, do our prayers hope for this? Maybe not enormous bellies that rest upon our young children, but on receiving the abundant generosity of God? That is His purpose. Are we hoping in it?

*Rise up, LORD!
Go before their faces!
Bend their knee!
Cause my soul to escape by Your sword
from the one who does bad.*

~ Psalm 17:13



Psalm 18

This is a really long prayer from David. There are a lot of things worth noticing in the prayer, but I want to look at the big picture of this prayer. David goes from praying to God, to talking about God, to talking about himself, to praying again, and all over the place. But ultimately, the whole thing comes together with a powerful message.

We note from the first verse (Or, depending, on your translation, this part might precede verse 1 as some translations do not put the headings of the psalms as part of verse 1.) that David wrote this when God rescued him from Saul and his other enemies. But we see a psalm nearly identical to this one in 2 Samuel 22, near the end of David's life, and long after Saul had died. This came after Absalom took the throne and David reclaimed it, and after the other revolts that followed. This prayer identifies itself as the response to David's long, bloody, war-ravaged history.

David concluded this prayer with his overall point for the prayer. In verse 49, David said that because of all the things he prayed in the prayer, he would throw his hands up in praise and make music to God's name. Then, verse 50 summarizes all the rest of the prayer—God is a mighty Rescuer and extends a loyal love that transcends beyond the circumstances or even the sins of the recipient of that love.

It is amazing to read both ends of this prayer and see how it started in crying out from a place of distress and ended in a praise built upon trust. We often talk about “walking by faith” as if it is some sort of blind hope, but that does not seem to have been David’s experience. The fact that David referenced all the way back to Saul’s persecution in this prayer suggests that David’s hope was not blind. It was built on a long track record with God.

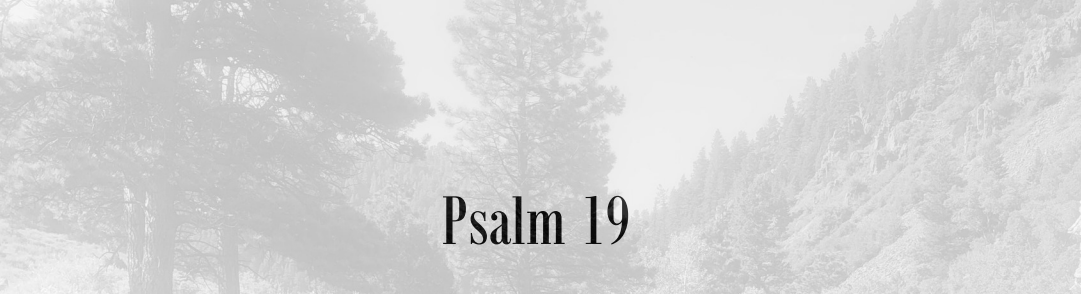
David remembered God delivering him from Saul repeatedly and providing abundant life along the way. He remembered his victory over the giant and how God picked him out of the shepherd fields to be His king. He remembered how easily his skill with weapons and physical feats came to him and recognized they were gifts he had been given. After a lifetime of seeing God take care of him, David wasn’t trusting in a blind hope. He knew his God intimately and had experienced God’s dependability.

David also remembered how the priests at Nob died because of him. He remembered the destruction he wrought with Bathsheba. He remembered the carnage Absalom brought upon the kingdom because David had neglected justice. He remembered Death coming upon Jerusalem because of his disobedience. And through all that, he still was the recipient of God’s love. He didn’t *hope* God would keep loving him; he had *experienced* the extremes of how far God’s love will go.

This makes for a great example for our prayer lives. Are we praying in blind hope? Certainly, God loves and rewards those who trust Him without seeing⁶, but it does make for a harder journey for us. Are we praying based on our own experiences? Are we praying based on the experiences of those we know? Are we praying based on the experiences of those who walked with God before us? Are we approaching the throne of grace boldly based upon the great cloud of witnesses with which we are surrounded?⁷

*So, therefore, I will extend hands
among the people groups, GOD,
and to Your name
I will touch the strings!
He gives great rescue to His king
and makes loyal love to His anointed,
to David and to his seed
to the end of forever!*

~ Psalm 18:49–50



Psalm 19

David prayed this prayer from a heart of cherishing devotion. He saw that God was putting His glory on display for all to see. He recognized how wonderful God's glory is. He rejoiced in the experience of it. This is the picture of someone who loves God coming to his Beloved and truly cherishing Him.

What is great about this prayer is that, because of the sky and sun imagery, it has the feel of a prayer made after having a beautiful early morning of quiet with God. You can imagine David sitting on a hill with his sheep or sitting on a high tower in his kingdom. You can picture him gazing upon the stars in the early morning and watching as the black glow on the horizon turned reds, purples, oranges, and yellows. You can picture the backlit silhouettes of the hills and mountains as the sun began to peak out. You can imagine the smell of the dewy grass, and the trees opening their pores to receive the day, releasing their aroma. And in this moment, David was overcome with joy in his Creator.

The part we might struggle to imagine is that the joy he felt like celebrating in that moment was the joy he found in God's *Torah*. The beautiful morning reminded him of the books we refer to as the Pentateuch—Genesis through Deuteronomy. Certainly, Genesis and the first half of Exodus fit the bill, but our modern conception of

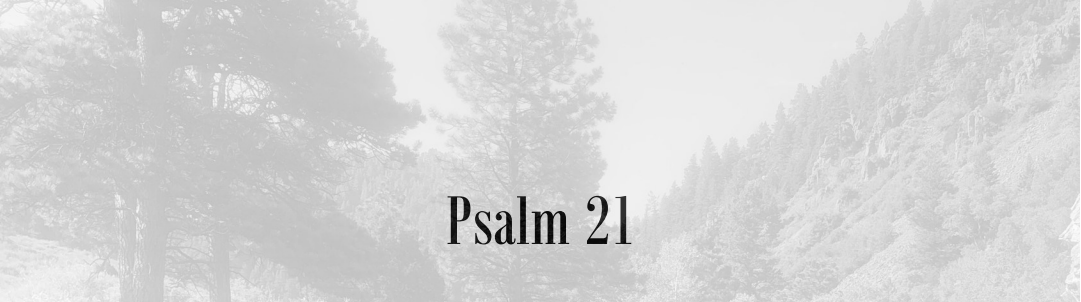
the latter half of Exodus all the way through Deuteronomy is usually not celebratory.

But David felt the warmth of the sun on his skin, saw the beauty of the gradually changing sunrise, and smelled the morning as it woke up for the day and was reminded of Torah by all of it. He knew the words of the Torah were given to him to turn lives around. He knew they were given to make fools wise. He knew they were given to make glad the heart. He knew they were given to open the eyes of the blind. He knew they were given as a lasting source of stability and truth. Because of this, he asked forgiveness for the sins he did not mean to commit and protection from the sins he easily fell victim to. And he closed by asking that God would look with favor upon his words and upon his heart's meditation. Beautiful.

How can we not respond to this psalm with a craving for the Torah? Perhaps it is hard to love those books because they are difficult, but they are more valuable than much fine gold and sweeter than fresh honey. Let us approach the Torah, in response to this psalm, prayerfully. Let us read it and give thanks where we find delight. And where we find difficulty, let that lead us to prayer and meditation. How else can we respond to this psalm? I don't think we can in any other way.

*The heavens are marking the tally of the significance of God,
and the work of His hands is conspicuous in the skies.
Day to day gush out speech,
and night to night breathe knowledge.
Speech does not exist and words do not exist,
there is not heard in them their sound.
With all the land goes out their measuring line,
and from the extremities of the habitable world their speeches,
to the sun He has placed a tent in them.
He, like a bridegroom, comes out from his nuptial bed.
It is bright as a mighty one to run its well-trodden road.
From the extremity of the heavens is its going out and its coming
round.*

~ Psalm 19:1–6



Psalm 21

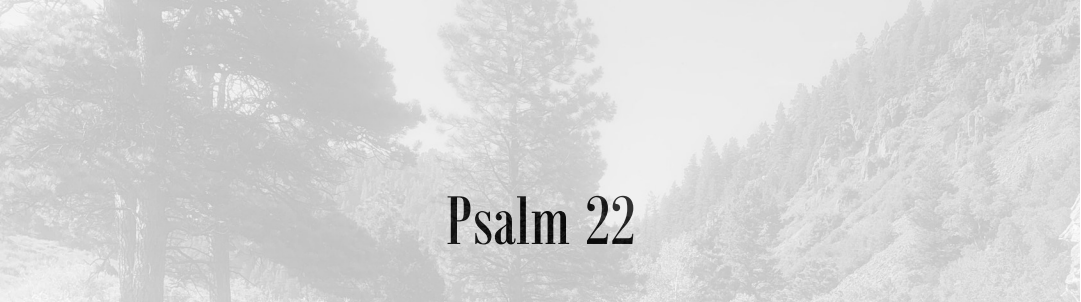
In this psalm, we see a couple of different pictures of God's strength outlined by David. In the beginning of the psalm, David described how the king (presumably himself, although it could be the Messiah) finds joy in the strength of the Lord. We are also told this great joy was in the power of God to rescue. But then, all the rest of the language is about the blessings the king was experiencing, not about deliverance from any enemy. The amount of language from the Eden narrative in the prayer explains that David considered God's strength and rescue to be a partial return to Edenlike status.

The other picture David described was of those who hate God. Again, there is Eden-language, but reversed. Instead of "length of days," those who hate God would see their "fruit destroyed from the land" and their "seed destroyed from among humanity." They used cunning to devise plans for evil purposes, like the serpent. Clearly, Eden was on the mind.

David's prayer was to rejoice in God's strength and rescuing power. He recognized that rebellion puts people in the place of destruction and misery as depicted by the story of the exile from the Garden of Eden. But David also recognized that God's power was stronger than just exiling from Eden, it is strong enough to *rescue* from exile.

David's delight was in recognizing that God has the power to exile but has even more power to be able to reconcile the outcast. It made him sing and dance with the brightness of his joy. It made him write this prayer. How do you respond to this strength that God has? What does that explain about the hope you have in Him? Spend some time in prayer with Him today on this and see what He has to reveal to you on the matter.

*LORD, from Your strength the king will be brightened,
and in your rescue how much he will spin with emotion!
The longing of his heart You have given to him
and the wants of his lips not withheld.
For You make blessing of good come before him.
You set on his head a crown of refined gold.
Life he asked from You.
You gave him length of days forever and ever.
His significance is great from Your rescue.
Majestic appearance and magnificence You level upon him.*
~ Psalm 21:1-5



Psalm 22

Many have noted that Jesus quoted from this prayer of David when He was on the cross. Typically, we try to make this psalm all about Jesus and make it a weird prophecy of David in the form of a psalm. I would propose that instead of David looking into the future and writing a strange poem about Jesus on the cross, what we actually have here is a poem David wrote about his own feelings and problems, a poem that Jesus used to contextualize His own experience on the cross.

There is so much crucifixion imagery in this poem, it is hard to not feel like David had some glimpse into the future. But this could just as easily have been an excerpt from Isaiah or Daniel. There are a lot of really cool passages to Isaiah's prophecies of new creation and Daniel's vision in Daniel 7 that would make wonderful studies.

But to remain focused on prayer, I cannot think of anything this prayer could teach us which is more important than the way in which Jesus used this prayer. David was in a time of trouble. He was miserable and was put to shame by everyone around him. But when David reflected on God, he remembered that God is in control and is just.

He remembered that his God is the One who uses the wickedness of the wicked to be the vehicle of their own overturning. He remembered God is the One who

uses the suffering of the righteous to bring blessing to all creation. David recognized this in God's character. Jesus, seemingly, comforted Himself on the cross with this idea. And when Jesus wanted to confront those mocking Him on the cross or doubting His identity, He gave them this prayer to reflect upon in order to understand what He was doing on that cross.

I think this is a prayer to keep handy. Maybe we keep a copy in a wallet or purse. Maybe we put it on a note card and put it somewhere prominent. Better yet, this is a prayer to memorize. Jesus thought this prayer was the best comfort available in His times of struggle. Why would we look for any better prayer of comfort than the one He chose for Himself? I would encourage you to cherish this prayer and make it your own in your times of trouble.

*Like water, I am poured out,
and all my bones are broken apart.
My heart is like wax,
it is melted in the middle of me.
Dried up, like a potsherd, is my vigor,
and my tongue cleaves to my jaws,
and belonging to the dust of death You set me.
For barkers have gone around me.
An assembled company of those who do bad
have nailed me.
They have bored through my hands and feet.*

~ Psalm 22:14–16

Psalm 23

This has to be the most well-known psalm. I have read it a million times and have had it memorized for years. But slowing down and writing it out opened up a whole new layer of meaning.

The first thing I thought was important is noting that this seems to be a prayer from an uncomfortable spot. This isn't "God things are so great! Thanks!" This is a prayer from an uncomfortable place in which David convinced himself that His God still was trustworthy, even in this situation. From there, I wanted to simply expand the language of the psalm to try to capture the feeling and nuance of the prayer. I am embellishing the language, but I think I am remaining true to the meaning of the words. When you read an ellipsis (. . .) take a moment to pause, breathe, and rest in that moment.

The LORD is my Shepherd: The One who protects me. The One who looks after me. The One who provides for all of my needs. The One who intimately watches over me day and night. The One who leaves the ninety-nine other sheep to come after me when I am lost⁸. The One who will fight the bear to guard me and will snatch me out of the wolf's mouth⁹ . . .

I will not lack for anything: neither food nor shelter, safety nor security, love nor comfort, wisdom nor guidance . . .

He makes me stretch out in pastures of fresh, tender sprouts of lush grass . . .

He leads me to the shores of the waters of peace and rest . . .

He turns the very essence of my life around as the deceit of my heart tries to carry me away . . . For, like a sheep, I am prone to wander and leave the God I love, yet my Shepherd's love, like a fetter, keeps my heart bound to Him¹⁰ . . .

He holds my hands, like a toddler learning to walk, to teach me *to walk in the ways of doing what is right*: What is right toward Him, what is right toward those around me, and what is right toward myself . . .

And He doesn't do these things out of obligation, but *because that is who He is*: He delights in this type of nurturing . . .

As I read this, pausing and feeling each idea at a time, I could just feel peace flowing down my body. I could feel tensions I didn't know I was carrying melt away. It was like the anointing oil flowing down the priest's head and down his beard¹¹. Did you feel it?

The rest of the psalm pours out of that peace derived from reflecting on God's character. David wasn't going to allow the great distress of his situation to cause him to fear, because God's wooden-thing-used-to-protect-His-people (We translate it as "rod" and "staff.") gave him a nurturing, protective love.

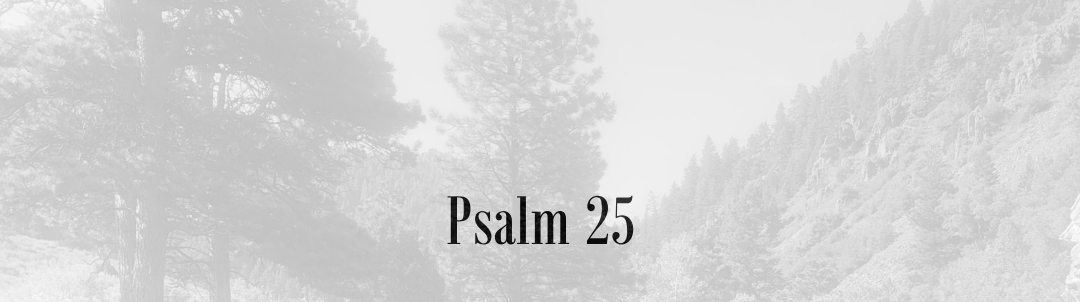
I also thought the object that David said he would

not fear was interesting the: “bad.” This is the Hebrew word *ra*, which is the opposite of *tov*, or “good,” from the creation narratives in Genesis. If *tov* stands for abundant life, beauty, and prosperity, David was not going to fear that he would be in a place where the enemy of abundant life, beauty, and prosperity would thrive. Then, he ended by describing the prosperity and life that God had planned for him.

If this isn’t what a prayer of distress should look like, I don’t know what is. Spend some time reading this psalm. Read it out loud. Whisper it to yourself. Live in it. Put yourself inside the vivid pictures and allow yourself to experience David’s situation. And let that shape how we pray in times of need or concern.

*The LORD is my shepherd. I will not lack.
In pastures of sprouts He makes me stretch out.
Against waters of peace He leads me for sustenance.
The essence of my life He turns around.
He guides me in the tracks of doing right
to the purpose of His name.*

*Also, though I walk through the valley of the shadow-of-death,
I will not fear bad, for You are with me.
Your branch and Your supporter, they nurture me.
You set in order to my face a table
in the sight of those who cramp me in.
You have fattened with oil my head,
my cup to abundance.
Certainly, good and loyal love
will run after me all the days of my life,
and I will sit down in the house of the LORD to length of days.
~ Psalm 23*



Psalm 25

This psalm, like 23, does have the feeling of distress in the language, though that is not the focus of the prayer. The focus is all about the *paths* of God.

What I thought was really interesting about this psalm in particular is that it does not present a picture of joy in the paths of God. David's words focus on the need for God. And even then, the reasons David explained for why He needed God were very practical. If this psalm had not come from David, I wonder if we would esteem it at all. The overall message seems to be something along the lines of, "Things are not going great, God, so show me how to walk right so I can get out of this pinch I am in."

But the beauty in the prayer is the desperation and the faith. While David did not express a passion for God's ways in this psalm (though he does in others), he did recognize the efficacy of God's ways to produce the desired outcome. David trusted that following God's ways would lead to life and was willing to make radical changes to his life to achieve that end.

What jumped out at me as I read this prayer this time was the repetition of the idea of God teaching David to walk in His ways. There is certainly language of holding his hand and walking him like a child, but most of the time the word used for "teach" implies goading and chastising. It is boot-camp teaching, not preschool teaching. David needed to be whipped into shape, so if

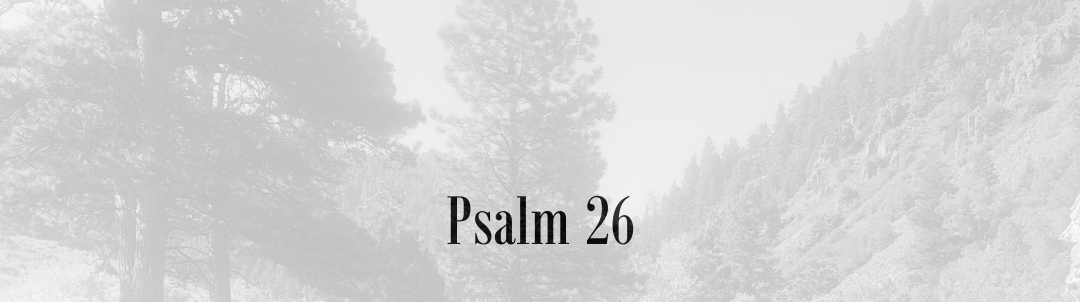
that meant having God push him hard, he was up for it. If that meant God getting tough, he was up for it. He was asking God to train him and to get it done, no matter the cost.

Remember, though, that these were David's words to God. God was not saying, "I am going to beat you into submission." David was saying, "God, I need this. Even if it takes beating me, please get it done." That is not a reflection on who God is, but on the degree of need David saw for God's ways. I wonder, are we this desperate? Even in Jesus's prayer He taught the disciples, He instructed us to pray that we would not be put into the furnace to change our hearts¹². And while I think wanting to avoid the painful ways of growing in godliness is ok, the desperation that is willing to undergo the pain in order to achieve it is where our hearts should be.

So, how do we pray? Do we pray for God to only work until it gets uncomfortable? Or do we pray that God would make us like Him, regardless of the cost?

*Your ways, LORD make me know.
Your well-trodden road goads me.
Walk me in Your truth and goad me,
for You are the God of my rescue.
With You I bind myself together all the day.
Mark for remembrance Your nurturing love,
LORD, and Your loyal love.
For, from the vanishing point they have been.*

~ Psalm 25:4–6



Psalm 26

It is a little difficult to find the heart of this psalm, or at least I found it difficult. As I read through the words, I was reminded of the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector¹³, and David didn't sound like the tax collector. It came across as braggy and condescending. Truly, it felt challenging to accept. But then, a couple of things caught my eye that changed my perspective.

First, there is clearly a passion for piety in this prayer. David wanted to be pious, and he had clearly done a good job if this is all true. Second, as I reread the beginning a few times, I started to imagine a child coming home from school with a report card. Certainly, the element of bragging didn't disappear with this perspective, but I began to see a different heart.

David came running home from school to God excited about his work. His first words pointed out how good he had done and that he hadn't missed a single question on the test. He had done so well that he even invited God to quiz him on the homework. He used two words for testing too. The first implies examination, truly seeing the status of something, but the second implies refining, correcting flaws. Verse 3 really stood out to me in this idea. David said that God's loyal love was "conspicuous before [his] eyes." He could just see the right answers and knew it. He was excited that God had taught him and that he was learning. There is no claim of

perfection in his words, simply a joyous excitement to see God's instruction bearing fruit.

The other thing that stood out was verse 6. David talked about washing away the impurity in his hands and hanging around God's altar. Both of these suggest that he sought to make amends for the ways he failed. After bringing his excitement and inviting God to test him, he decided he would remain in a place that allowed him to correct any errors the testing would reveal.

This was encouraging for me. We are taught to ask God to change our lives. We are taught to pray, expecting to see God work, and to pray in faith. We are taught to rejoice in God's good work. But then, if we see something God has accomplished in our own lives . . . we better not say anything, otherwise we are arrogant and shameful. How dare we say that we are righteous (or even progressing toward righteousness) after we pray expectantly for God to make us righteous? But this is the very nature of witness. And didn't John the Visionary (the author of Revelation) say that overcoming this world comes from Jesus's blood and *the word of our witness*¹⁴? We tell people about what God has done in our lives in order to reveal God's righteousness and power.

When was the last time we looked at our own progress? Do we reflect on how far God has taken us? Do we rejoice in Him about this progress? Do we praise Him openly about it?

*Judge me, LORD, for I have walked in my integrity
and in GOD I have run for rescue;
I have not slipped or tottered.
Examine me, LORD, and lift me up.
Refine me according to my inmost parts and my heart.
For Your loyal love is conspicuous in my eyes,
and I have walked in Your truth.
I do not sit down with men of ruin
and with concealers I do not go.
I hate the gathering of those who do bad,
and with those who do bad I will not sit down.*

*I shall wash my palms in purity
and I will revolve around Your altar, LORD,
that I may make myself heard
in the sound of the extending of the hands
and mark the tally of all Your distinctions.*

~ Psalm 26:1-7

Psalm 27

In my context, this is another really well-known psalm. Several parts of this stood out to me as familiar, though I did not remember them all going together in a single psalm. It was more like a bunch of moments of, “Oh . . . that’s where that comes from.”

The poem begins with a lot of talk *about* God before moving to a prayer *to* God, as many of the psalms do. I wanted to look at the prayer (verses 7–12) with the remaining verses as the context, not the focus.

David’s prayer, here, was for God to keep him close. In fact, verse 9 seems to be the crux of the request because David asked God not to do three things: hide His face from him, beat him out like dust in a rug, and cut him loose.

I do think the last two verses, which do not seem to be directed at God, illustrate this idea. Verse 13 is an incomplete sentence, only half of a conditional statement, but it points to David having “built up,” “supported,” or “made stable” his hope of God’s purpose to make all things new. Verse 14 uses a common Hebrew idiom. He tells the reader to wait for God, but the word “wait” is a figure of speech and is actually a word that means to “bind together” or “twist together.” David concludes his poem with the idea that he had constructed a tether to God or strapped himself to God in order to seek prosperity. The focus of the prayer is that God would not

remove the tether/strap.

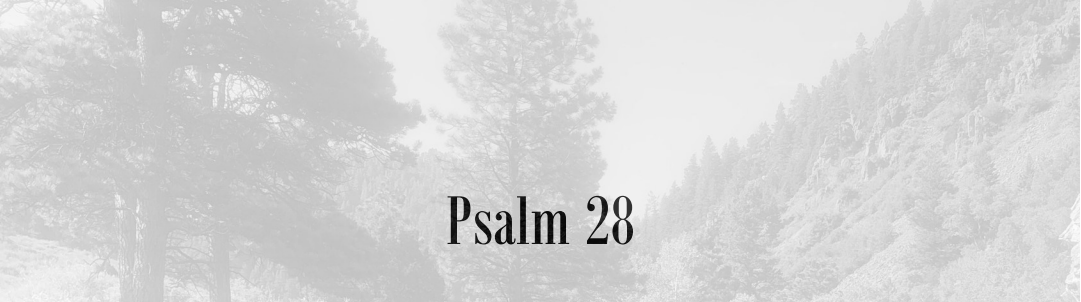
Again, David seems to have been reminding himself of the hope that comes from the Lord while he was in a dark place. It reminded me of the words of the old hymn:

*Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain;
Free to all, a healing stream,
Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.
In the cross, in the cross
Be my glory ever,
Till my ransomed soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.¹⁵*

So, let us pray along with David. Let us pray along with Fanny Crosby's words. The beginning of the psalm expounds on David making his tether/strap, so let's pray that we would do likewise with fervor and passion. David ends with his desperation to remain connected to God, so let's pray for that kind of desperation. The Gospel reminds us that Jesus is our tether/strap to God. So, let us rejoice in thanksgiving that our Tether will never leave us nor forsake us.

*Hear, LORD, my sound
and favor me, and heed me.
To You my heart said, "Search out my face!"
Your face, LORD, I seek.
Do not cover Your face from me,
do not stretch out in anger to Your servant.
My essential aid You have been,
Do not beat me out like dust from a rug,
and do not cut me loose, God of my salvation!*

~ Psalm 27:7-9



Psalm 28

I use a pretty simple literary technique quite a bit when looking at the Scriptures. It is so simple that I don't think we ever even are taught it, we just know how to do it. But I mention it because I don't think we employ it with the Scriptures as much as we ought to. This technique is to look to see if there is a symmetry between the beginning and the end. If there is, that focus is often the point of the passage.

What I notice with this prayer is that there is a connection between these two parts of David's words. The opening line is really beautiful. David asked God not to be deaf. The Hebrew figure of speech implies that the deaf person is so unresponsive to hearing that you would have to carve your words into stone in order to get your point across. (And God is described as a rock immediately before this figure of speech.) David reasoned that if God were deaf to him, then God would also be mute to him. Without God's words, David felt he would die. I like the progression. Then, the prayer ends with David proclaiming that God is a shepherd for His people. You can see a kind of symmetry between David feeling like he would die if God wouldn't hear him and the point where David felt like God was his protective shepherd.

What struck me about this prayer was that first line. Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt a palpable silence from God? Have you ever prayed and

prayed but not felt like God was speaking to you? It is frustrating. It can be terrifying. It is a time to cry out to ask God to hear and to speak.

I was reminded of the story of Jesus asleep in the boat in the storm¹⁶. Certainly, David probably felt similar to the apostles. Maybe David was wondering if God was asleep. Maybe he wondered if God even cared that he was perishing. The conclusion David came to in the psalm is the same answer that Jesus showed His disciples—God’s very nature and character demonstrate that He cares and that He does listen.

When we feel like this, we can cry out like David at the beginning of this prayer or like the apostles in the boat. But perhaps the silence is meant to be an invitation for us to lay down with Jesus and peacefully rest through the storm rather than panic. Bring it to Jesus, but be open to wherever and whatever He directs you to.

*The LORD is my Light and my Salvation,
whom shall I fear?*

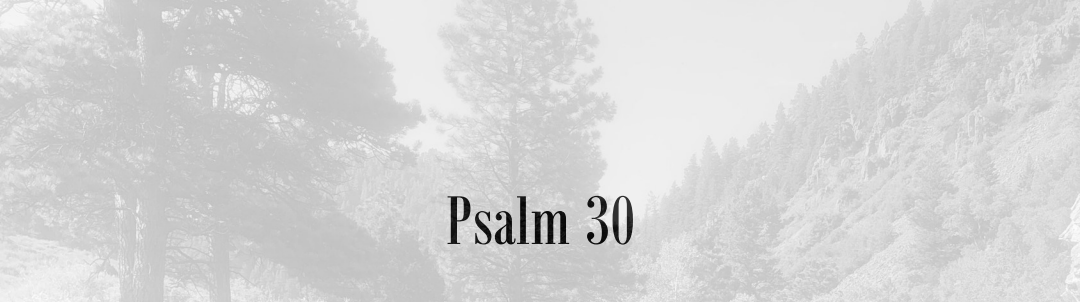
*The LORD is the strong place for my life,
what shall make me tremble?*

*From those who approach upon me
and those who do bad to eat the flesh of my distress?*

And those who hate to me?

They staggered on weak legs and fell.

~ Psalm 28:1–2



Psalm 30

I think the first line of this prayer really sums up the whole prayer. The psalmist wrote, “I will hold up the LORD for He has held me up!” The whole prayer flows out of that single concept; and what a beautiful concept it is.

The psalmist listed out a few ways he would lift up God. He encouraged God’s people to make music to God. Even dancing was to replace mourning. His people were also encouraged to extend their hands to Him in praise for the purpose of remembering His holiness. Extending the hands in worship and making music for dancing in joy are each mentioned three times in the psalm. He also demonstrated that he had made commitments to himself (not sworn oaths) to hold firm to God.

This psalmist also listed out ways God had held him up. God had not let those who hated the psalmist be joyful over his demise. When he called to God, God stitched him back together. He had experienced God bring his life out of the grave (Metaphorically, though *we* have also seen His power to bring lives back from the grave literally¹⁷.) and protected his life from entering the grave.

The entire prayer is a reflection on a lifetime of God’s provision. The whole psalm rejoices in a rich

history between a man and his beloved God. Do we pray like that?

*I will hold up the LORD for He held me up
and did not let those who hate me brighten over me.*

*LORD, my God, I cried for help to You
and You stitch me together.*

*LORD, You have brought my soul up from She'ol.
You maintain my life from descending in the pit.*

*Touch the strings to the LORD, those He loyally loves,
and extend your hands to mark for remembrance His holiness.
For His anger is but a wink of an eye, but His delight is life.
For the evening weeping may last, but at dawn a shrill cry.*

~ Psalm 30:1-5



Psalm 31

This psalm holds special meaning for me. My family has adopted a practice of praying specific scripted prayers throughout the day. There is a prayer upon waking to give thanks for rest and one we pray at breakfast to give thanks for the dawn of a new day. At midday, we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. There is a prayer at the evening meal to give thanks for the day's provision. We have a prayer for sunset to acknowledge that He reigns, even over the darkness. And finally, we pray a few prayers before bed. They all come from Hebrew prayers of the first century. Adopting this schedule has been a beautiful blessing in our lives.

I mention this because the last line of the bedtime prayers comes from a Hebrew prayer called the *Beyad'ka Af'keed Rukbi*, which in turn uses the language of verse 5 of this psalm: "In Your hand my spirit lodges. You have loosed me, LORD, the God we can trust."

The psalm itself is a prayer about seeking safety and rest in God. David wrote about fleeing for protection in God and about being freed from danger by God. He described God as a strong and unassailable fortress and a place of rest and peace. He used language describing wasting away from sorrow and anxiety and asked that God would turn the languishing into blessing. David felt shame and reproach, fear and anxiety. But yet, he turned to God for forgiveness, liberty from captivity, and

protection from all manner of bad things. To David, God was his ultimate hope for the complete reversal of fortunes.

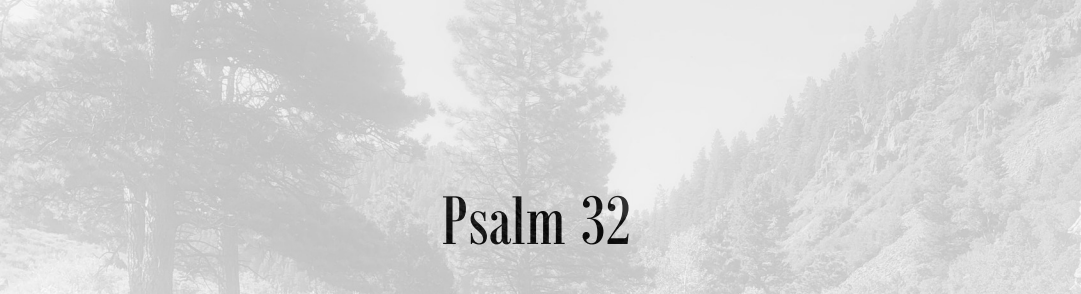
So, when my family and I pray these words at night, we are drawing on this entire psalm. We give our spirits to God to shepherd through the night. He is both the unassailable fortress of safety and the quiet place of peace and rest. We remember that He has loosed us from the distress of our lives. Whether it is the tight places He snatches us from, the net He opens for us, or our own crookedness causing us to wither, we remember the freedom we have in Him. And we close by ascribing the title of *trustworthy* to our God. He has set apart a special measure of loyal love for each of us, even in the most dire circumstances.

I don't know that David integrated specific prayers into the fabric of his day like this, but around the time of Jesus, this was common practice for God's people. In what ways are you integrating prayer into your schedule and your day?

*Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of all creation,
who arranges in order daytime and nighttime.
He rolls away the daylight from the face of darkness,
and darkness from the face of the dawn.
Blessed are you, LORD, who blends the lights of evening.*

*Hear, Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD only.
Blessed be the Name of glory.
His Kingdom is to the vanishing point and even to the end.
Love the LORD your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your strength.*

*Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of all creation,
who causes the bands of sleep to fall upon my eyes
and deep slumber upon my eyelids.
May it be the delight of Your face,
LORD my God, and the God of my fathers,
to let me lie down for the night in peace and safety
and to let me arise in peace and safety.
In Your hand You watch over my spirit.
You have loosed the cords that bound me,
LORD, the God we can trust.
~ The Traditional Progression of Blessings
for Before Going to Sleep¹⁸*



Psalm 32

How much of a burden is your sin? How much do you feel it weighing you down and wasting you into nothingness? How relieved do you feel when you finally confess and experience the euphoria of forgiveness? How peaceful do you feel when you sense the palpable embrace of a loving God rejoicing in His wayward child's return?

This was David's prayer in this psalm. You can feel the calm as he reflected on the good life he was able to enjoy in God's forgiveness. The sensation of crushing, burdensome weight is tangible as you read about when David kept his sins secret from God. The feeling of calming release as the sins were confessed washes peace over the body. It is so interesting that the act of confessing requires exhalation and produces the same effect as releasing a bated breath.

There are so many invitations in this prayer. Perhaps you are under the burden of unconfessed sin. David's words clearly invite you to confess and receive peace. Maybe you have confessed but have not accepted the forgiveness God freely offers. This psalm invites you to reach out and take the forgiveness that is offered to you in confession and find joy in the good life of the forgiven. Or you could be someone already resting in the forgiveness of confessed sin and experiencing the good life. In that case, the appropriate response, in David's mind, is to sing, shout, and dance for joy in your

Confessor. Respond appropriately today. The good life is waiting for you.

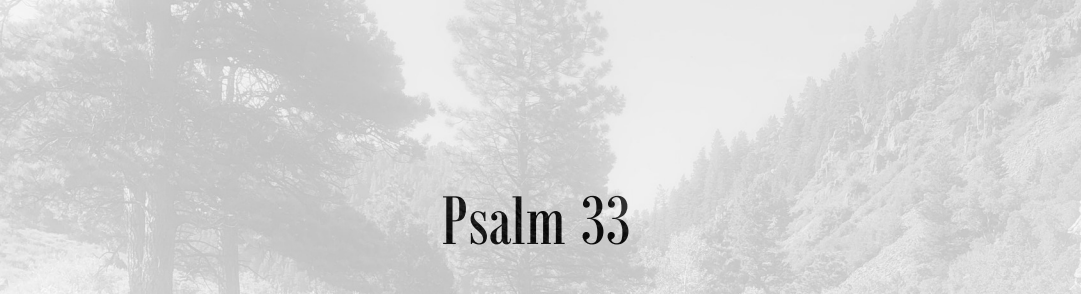
*I kept silent, my bones wore out
and failed in my moaning all the day.*

*For daytime and night,
Your hand was heavy upon me.*

*My vigor turned over
in the drought heat of summer. Selah.*

*My failure I made known to You
and my crookedness I did not cover.
I said, "I will make known over them
my transgressions to the LORD,"
and You lifted up the crookedness of my failure. Selah*

~ Psalm 32:3–5



Psalm 33

The prayer in this psalm is only the last line. The psalmist prayed that God would honor His promises in love. That's a nice prayer, right? Everyone gets blessings because God is so loving. But the prayer didn't end there, he concluded with "according to what we have hoped in You." This changes the message. Now, instead of everyone getting blessings, the psalmist was asking for God to honor his promises to demonstrate His love by giving us what we hope for. That is kind of scary.

The psalm illustrates the difference well. God's Word is what one might call *objectively good*. It isn't what tickles fancies, but what actually produces good. God's Word and His breath created Eden and brought order from chaos. His word rescued His people out of the vile kingdom of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey. His word released the abyss upon the world of violence to wash the corruption of Noah's day away from the rest of His good creation.

People make their own plans, and God opposes many of them; but no one is able to hinder God's purposes. The world looks to armies, horses, and valiant warriors as their means of producing a better world and the good life. But God offers to be a building tool for us to make a better world. And God offers to be a shield for us to guard against that which seeks our harm. God snatches us away from death, while the world uses

violence and threats to subdue enemies. God protects us from hungering, while the world oppresses the lowly to feed the powerful.

So, what are you hoping for in the Lord? If we are hoping to conquer our enemies and bury them beneath our boots, that is not the hope offered by God. If we are hoping for peace, generosity, and love, God promises to give those things. He will come to give to each the desires of their hearts because He loves us enough to give us what we want. To those that seek violence, they will receive violence. For those who oppress, they will be oppressed. For those who seek a quiet life of building others up and loving their neighbors, He will welcome them into His Kingdom, one that is run by those very values.

What are you hoping in and what are you praying for?

*How good is life for the people group
that has the LORD as their God;
the people tried to inherit by Him.
From the heavens looks out the LORD;
He sees all the sons of man.
From the place He sits.
He glances sharply upon all who sit on the land.
The One who forms together hearts,
the One who discerns on all their creations.*

~ Psalm 33:12–15

Psalm 35

The nuances of meaning in this psalm are what really convicted me. At first glance, the first six verses seem very violent. It looks like David was asking God to come as a mighty warrior. It sounds like Goliath taking shield and spear upon the field¹⁹. Or like the promise of the Babylonians sweeping down to drive away the Assyrians in the Prophets²⁰. Once you think about it, this kind of language fits God's enemies better than His own character. Ironically, the dichotomy between God's enemies and His own character is what stood out to me in this prayer.

Looking at the nuances of the psalm, David asked God to wrestle and pin down those who wanted to attack him. He asked God to take up defensive implements while pouring out and shutting up (as in a box) the offensive weapons. The remainder of those first verses focus on separating those who wished harm away from him, so they could not harm him. Interestingly, that prevented *those people* from sinning *and* protected *David* from harm.

Going on, the way he described the way these other people treated him in comparison to the way he treated them follows the same pattern. Clearly, these people were enemies with David. They treated David like an enemy. They rejoiced over his distress. They looked to cause him harm whenever and wherever they could. They

hated David. They overcame good shown to them with their bad²¹.

David, on the other hand, treated his enemies like family. He prayed for them. He mourned for them. He grieved with them. He showed them love. He treated them how he would want to be treated²². He was heaping purifying coals onto their heads and overcoming their bad with his good²¹.

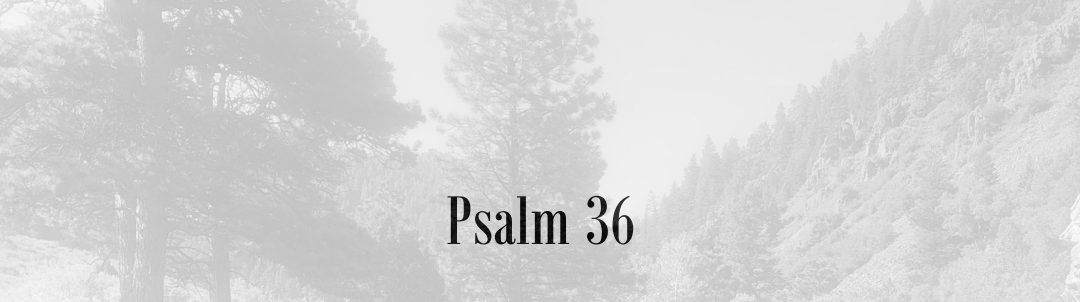
Where do we fall on this spectrum, spanning from David to his enemies? How do we interact with those who might be considered our enemies? Do we love our enemies? Do we pray for those who persecute us²³?

Ask those questions about hot debates of our time. How about those on the other side of the political party line? Are they first and foremost brothers and sisters to be loved and held in fellowship? Or how about across the Pro-Life/Pro-Choice debate? Are they humans who deserve to be treated with kindness and love? Or the gender and sexuality debates. Are those of different opinions held in as high of regard as those you agree with? Republican versus Democrat? Old earth versus young earth? Baptism or Eucharist debates? Let us pray that our hearts, and our prayers might look more like David's and less like those of his enemies in this psalm.

*You have seen, LORD.
Do not be deaf, my Lord.
Do not be distant from me.
Wake Yourself up
and be aroused to my justice, my God,
and my Lord, to my strife.*

*Judge me according to
Your righteousness, LORD my God,
and do not let them be bright to me.
Do not let them say in their hearts,
“Oh, look! Our soul!”
Do not let them say,
“We have swallowed him up!”*

~ Psalm 35:22–25



Psalm 36

Perhaps you can relate to David's experience in this prayer. I know I can. Even these opening words resonate: "Crookedness prophesies to the unrighteous man in the midst of my heart." This idea of the two natures within the body is probably most well-known from Paul's exploration into the idea in Romans chapter 7. David felt that there remained a spirit of unrighteousness within his hard heart that continually contended with his spirit of obedience to God. There was a constant tension between the spirits. The beginning of this prayer is a lament of that. Have you felt this struggle? Have you wrestled with it? That thorn in the side or the sin you cannot shake? Have you grieved over it and cried out to God on its account? I do.

The middle of the prayer could be taken a few ways. When I reflect on my own grieving of my own sins, one way to look at this stands out. These verses appear to be lauding God's glory, but I think it is an accusation. David began with the sorrow of his condition and moved on to his frustration. God's character of love and dependability stretches to the farthest and most remote parts of creation, so why didn't David feel it? Both man and beast found rescue and shelter from God, so how come David was wrestling with this grief? God is the One who created Eden and extends its blessings to all of His creation. He is the One who transcends all of our reality.

He is the One through whom our entire existence can be experienced. So, why did sin have such a grip on David's heart? Have you wrestled with this? I have.

David ended with a few short lines of request. He asked God to strengthen (literally to irrigate with the waters of life) the obedient spirit within his heart. He asked that the unrighteous spirit in his heart would not be able to cause him to walk in arrogance. He asked that it would not cause him to work in unrighteousness. Those things carry a man to the place of destruction from which there is no hope.

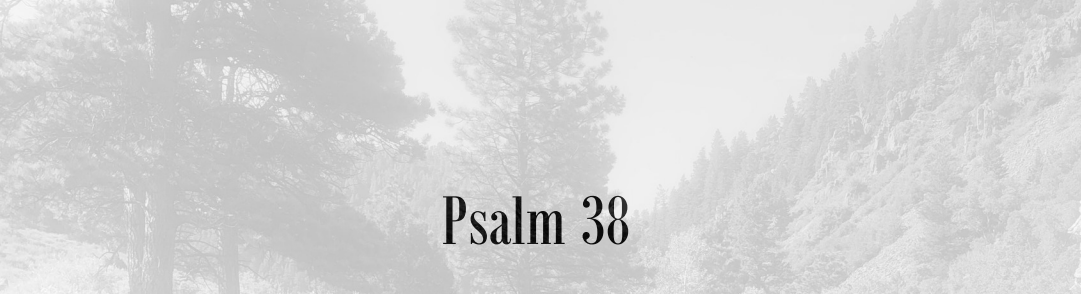
Do you know this grief? The sorrow of knowing sin's grip on your heart, the fear of God turning you over to destruction? Have you been to this point where all you can do is plead for God's mercy because you know the wretchedness of your heart doesn't merit it? I have. And David has. Peter has, and Paul. And we have seen that when we come begging Jesus, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean," we can hope in His response of "I am willing; be cleansed."²⁴

*LORD, Your loyal love is to the heavens,
Your trustworthiness to the end of the clouds.
Your righteousness is as the mountains of God,
Your justice the abundant abyss.
You give man and beast its space, LORD.*

*Now, Your loyal love is significant, God,
and the sons of Adam seek refuge in the shadow of your wing.
They are saturated with the drink of the fatness of Your house,
and the river of Your Eden irrigates them.
For with You is the well of life.*

*By Your light, we see light.
Draw Your loyal love for those who know You,
and Your righteousness for the straight of heart.*

~ Psalm 36:5-10



Psalm 38

Ezekiel chapter 36 talks about the day in which God would make His people new. He described fixing our hearts, cleaning our impurity, giving us a new spirit, and making a whole new type of humanity. The part of that prophecy that really stood out to me was that, once we are made new, Ezekiel told we would loathe ourselves because of our former sins. When I reflect on this psalm, that is what I think of.

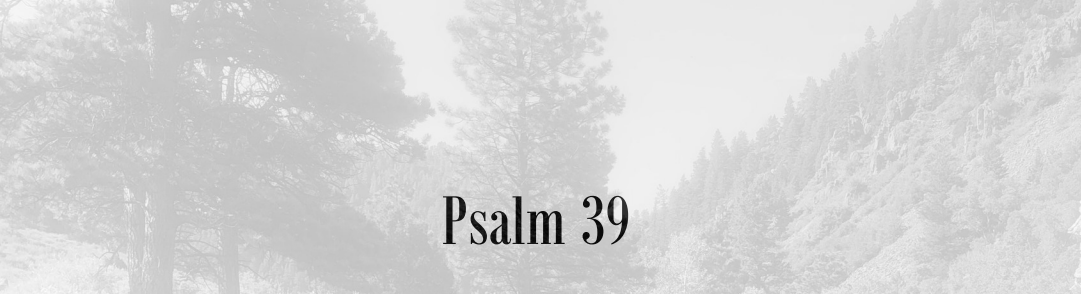
The other place my mind goes is to Genesis chapter 3. God had told Adam that eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowing Good and Bad would lead to *mut*. This is the Hebrew word for “die,” but it is very close to a Hebrew word for “wither” or “shrivel.” When I read David’s words in this psalm, I think of that same withering and death that Adam was warned about and that the two first humans brought upon themselves in Genesis 3.

David approached God begging for mercy. He had no excuse, only the offering of his pitiful existence. His sin was causing him to waste away and decay. He was shriveling into the dry bones from Ezekiel’s vision²⁵. David had come to see that his sin was destroying him. Based only on that, he approached God and was bold enough to ask. He knew why he was suffering. He knew he deserved the suffering. But he also knew God is a god of pity, mercy, and love.

Have you come to this hatred of your sin? Have you been broken to this extent? That is the picture of salvation and the picture of sanctification that we are given in the Bible. It isn't a matter of effort or results but a weighing of passions. It is weighing how much we desire God and His salvation and how much we hate the oppression of sin in our lives. Do you pray with this hatred of sin?

*Integrity does not exist in my flesh
from the face of Your frothing.
Peaceful wholeness does not exist in my bones
from the face of my failure.
For my crookedness passes over my head.
As a weighty burden, they are what encumbers me.
My bruises stink and fester
from the face of my folly.
I am bent and bowed to the very end.
All the day I walk darkened.
For my fatness is filled with parchedness,
and integrity does not exist in my flesh.
I have become numb and crushed to the very end.
I roar (cry) from the roaring (snarling) of my heart.
It is not hidden from You.*

~ Psalm 38:3-9



Psalm 39

This prayer really resonated with me, but it was complex and took a few layers of digging to see it as a whole.

The first layer that came to me was the bulk of the middle. It seemed to be a long, solemn poem about the fleeting nature of life. This is common enough of a genre of poetry and not out of line with the psalms. David seemed to be clinging to God because he recognized that fragility of life. That is a good prayer: “God, help me to cling to You because I am too fragile to survive on my own, and my life is too short to waste time on futility.” I could stand to pray that message more.

But by the last several verses, the tone really changed. Instead of focusing on clinging to God in the fleetingness of life, David’s words sounded like they accused God of bringing his hardship upon him, or at least making his life miserable in light of his own mistakes. It sounds like David viewed God like a nag or a legalist—purely correctional and not warm or encouraging. By the end, his words, “Look away from me so I can smile before I walk and no longer exist.” feel incredibly extreme. It is like David had completely rejected God and wanted space from Him. I don’t know that we want to admit it, but I think this is a very honest prayer in the life of a Christian at times. Sometimes, it just becomes too much, and we simply want to rest and seek

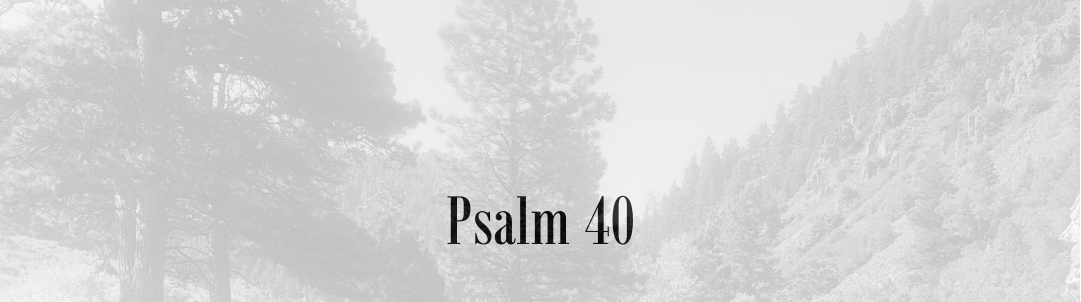
our own desires. I don't think God begrudges that kind of honesty in prayer.

The final layer, the one that ties it together, was when I started back over and found this was meant to be a praise. This seemed to blow the whole, "give me some space so I can rest, God," argument out of the water. The beauty of this prayer is in its whole. The prayer holds a tension, as Hebrew poetry so often does. David recognized that life is fleeting. He knew he needed to cling to God. He wanted to be with God. His hope, as he said in verse 7, was in God. But, man, his sin was heavy. He knew he needed God to purify him from his sin, but there was so much that needed to be purified, and he was tired.

I can relate to that. Have you been in the place where the war within you between God's Spirit and your own sin reaches the point of exhaustion? The point where you are tired of wrestling and just want to rest? It isn't a rejection of God or an acceptance of your sin, just an honest weariness. I don't think this is a place many of us are comfortable admitting when we are in it, but it is a real place. It is ok to be weary of the fight. And it is beautiful to bring this kind of prayer to God.

*I said, "I will hedge my ways from failing in my tongue.
I will hedge to my mouth a muzzle.
In the end, the unrighteous one will be conspicuous to me."
I was bound silent.
I was still from good and my pain was stirred up.
My heart was hot in my midst.
In my meditating, I spoke consumed fire in my tongue.
Make me know, LORD, my end and the measure of my day.
What am I? Let me know how impermanent I am.
Look! As a handbreadth You give my days,
my duration as if it did not exist in front of You—
certainly, all breath, all humanity in his place.*

~ Psalm 39:1–5



Psalm 40

This prayer begins with “patiently I was patient.” It is an awkward phrase in English, but I think the meaning translates well enough. Similar to how I might say, “Super-duper.” It is merely repeating the sound, but anyone who has ever been eight years old knows that nothing is more extreme than super-duper.

But this phrase got me thinking about Jesus’s words in Matthew 24:4–14. Jesus explained how all sorts of terrible things were to be expected. In those things, one might expect that faith would falter and many would turn away (as Jesus predicted will happen). But He ended His listing of calamities by saying, “But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.” (v.13)

Here in this psalm, David claimed he hadn’t just been patient, but patiently patient. Similar to the list we heard from Jesus, apparently David had been patient in quite a bit of distress. When he finally saw God rescuing him, he described his situation as being in the “pit of the uproar of devastation” and the “sticky mud of the bubbling swamp.” Apparently, David had endured hardship into what felt like the very grave while waiting for God. But, afterward, he proclaimed, “How good is life for the valiant man who puts the LORD before him as his refuge and does not turn to face the proud ones or those who turn away into falsehood.” Even having figuratively sunken into the grave, David still proclaimed that

remaining true to God is the path to the life of blessing.

So how do we measure up in our patience? After all, the first word Paul used to describe love in 1 Corinthians 13 is *patient*. Do we pray and wait for God to work? Will we continue to pray and wait, even as the grave opens its mouth and swallows us up? That is what enduring to the end looks like—trusting God even into death. And if we are waiting, would you describe your waiting as *patiently patient*?

*Patiently I am patient for the LORD,
and He stretched to me and heard my cry for help,
and He brought me up from the pit of the uproar of devastation,
from the sticky mud of the bubbling mire,
and He raised my feet upon a lofty crag,
making firm my goings,
and He gave my mouth a fresh song of praise to our God.
The multitudes will see and fear
and run for refuge in the LORD.*

*How good is life for the mighty one
who sets the LORD as his refuge
and has not turned to face the proud ones
or those who turn away into falsehood.
You have created abundance, LORD my God.
Your distinctions and Your contrived plans
toward us cannot be lined up in a row to You.
I would make them conspicuous and speak.
They would be too numerous to mark the tally.*

~ Psalm 40:1–5



Psalm 41

The prayers in this psalm are fairly simple. In the first prayer, David asked God to show him favor in stitching him back together from the brokenness his sin had caused. In the second, David asked God to raise him up. Then, in that second prayer, David expressed his confidence in God before worshipping Him.

These are simple enough prayers, and maybe you have prayed similar ones. But looking at the focus of the psalm, the entirety of it focuses on one thing: justice. David never used the word for justice, but the psalm is littered with what justice is. David described how the good life belongs to those who take care of the helpless and those in need. The people David described as hating him were going around spreading gossip about him when he was in a low state (causing hurt to the lowly). Even those who had received goodness and blessing from him had turned to treat him poorly when he was low.

So, in the second prayer of this psalm, it becomes clear that David wasn't asking simply for blessing. His prayer was that God would right wrongs. David saw the righteous being brought low and the unrighteous raising themselves to high places. He prayed for God to restore him, so that he might be a worker of righteousness in a world that was turning dark.

This is what it looks like to delight ourselves in God (praying His purposes) and to receive the desires of

our hearts (being blessed in the process of achieving God's purposes).

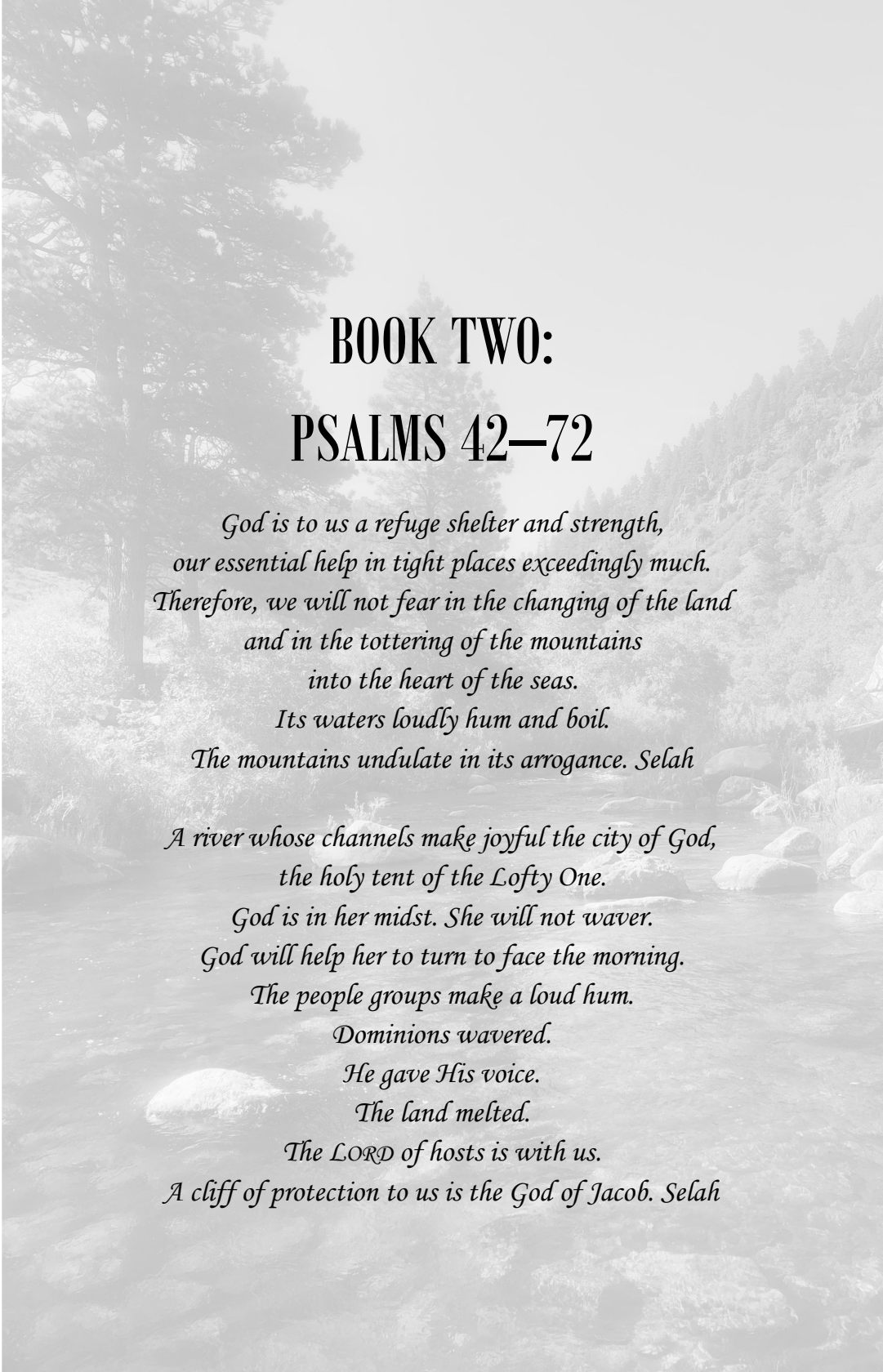
*How good is life for he who is circumspect
toward those dangling in the day of bad.*

The LORD will smooth him.

*The LORD will hedge him and keep him alive,
and he shall be straight in the land
and not given in soul to the one who hates him.*

*The LORD will support him upon his bed of languishing.
Those lying down You turn over in his malady.*

~ Psalm 41:1–3



BOOK TWO:

PSALMS 42—72

*God is to us a refuge shelter and strength,
our essential help in tight places exceedingly much.
Therefore, we will not fear in the changing of the land
and in the tottering of the mountains
into the heart of the seas.*

*Its waters loudly hum and boil.
The mountains undulate in its arrogance. Selah*

*A river whose channels make joyful the city of God,
the holy tent of the Lofty One.*

*God is in her midst. She will not waver.
God will help her to turn to face the morning.
The people groups make a loud hum.*

Dominions wavered.

He gave His voice.

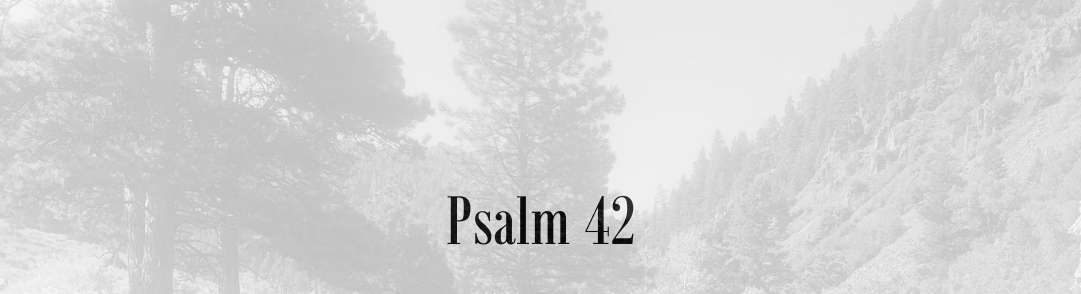
The land melted.

The LORD of hosts is with us.

A cliff of protection to us is the God of Jacob. Selah

*Come gaze upon the works of the LORD,
who has put ruined places in the land,
who stops battles to the furthest end of the land.
The bow He bursts and cuts in half the spear.
The chariot He burns in fire.
“Relax and know that I am God.
I will be held above in the people groups.
I will be held above in all the land!”
The LORD of hosts is with us.
A cliff of protection to us is the God of Jacob. Selah*

~ Psalm 46



Psalm 42

I love the raw emotion of the Psalms. Especially in these earlier psalms, you can feel the deep anguish of the psalmist. Here, the sons of Korah relate an experience of such sadness within their souls that they needed to express it twice. Trouble, of some sort, had befallen them. They were broken.

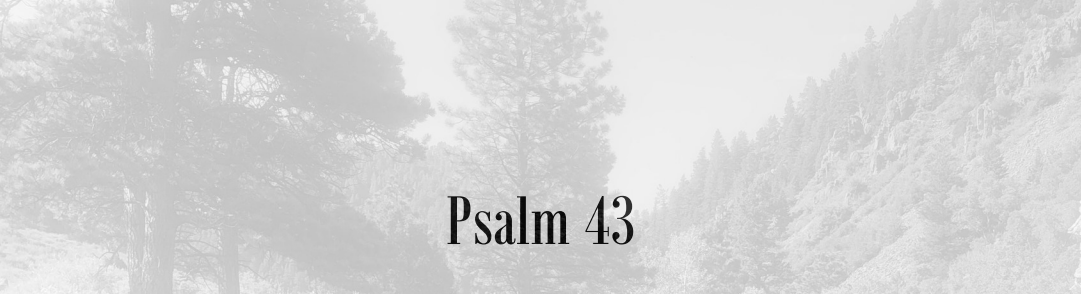
In their brokenness, they looked back upon their former joys. Their hearts went to the times they publicly were able to worship God with their friends and family. These were the good times. This was their longing. You can hear the groaning of their spirits in the starving desire for God's presence. You can feel the emptiness within them as they wept over their separation from the God whom they loved.

So, when they lifted up their prayer, asking God why He had set them aside like something despised, you know where their heart was. Do you pray with this passion? Is your prayer life as desperate as theirs? How do you measure up?

*Thirsts my soul to God, to the God of life.
When shall I come and see the face of God?
My weepings have been to me my food day and night
while they say to me all the day, "Where is your God?"*

*This I will mark for remembrance
and will pour out on me my soul:
for I crossed over in the mob
I walked slowly to the end of the house of God
in sounds of shouts for joy
and extending of the hands,
a great sound moving in circling dance.*

~ Psalm 42:2–4



Psalm 43

This psalm gives us a simple prayer. Something was troubling the psalmist. In his distress, he asked God to fight his battle. He confessed that God was the source of his strength and safety, and he laid the struggle before God's feet with the request to fight on his behalf. Do you do that? I know I could stand to grow in this way.

The prayer continued with a request for God to lead him through the struggle, so that he would only be focused on remaining faithful instead of on striving. This guidance would lead to joy, dancing, and worship of God, all in the midst of the battle that God was fighting for him. The psalmist had given things over to God and now was ready to be undistracted in walking in His ways. How well do you stay focused on our true mission and rest in God's protection? Are you praying for it?

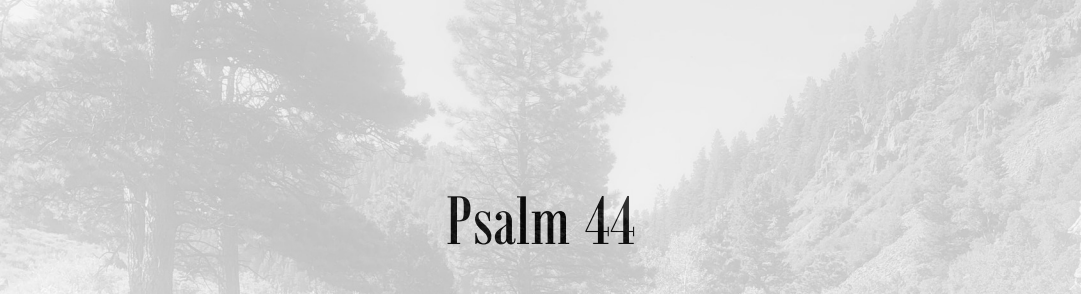
And the end of the poem isn't even a prayer at all. It is the mind telling the soul to stay calm and trust God. He knew he had given the struggle to God. He knew God would deliver him. But his emotions still raged within him. So, he ended his reflection, after asking God, with a reassurance from his mind to his soul to relax and trust God. This reminded me of Paul's words to take every thought captive to obey Jesus¹. The psalmist wasn't feeling what he mentally knew was true, so he spoke to his body a command to rest and trust that God would do the things he knew were in keeping with God's character.

Is this part of your prayer life? Do you ask God to take your battles? Do you ask God to keep you focused on His mission specifically for you, faithfully trusting He is taking care of the rest? And do you survey yourself and your surroundings to orient yourself in faith in God's work?

*Judge to me, God, and grapple my dispute
from a people group not loyally loved,
from the man of deceit and depravity slip me out!
For You are the God of my safe place,
why have You pushed me aside?
Why do I walk dark in the oppression
of the one who hates me?
Send Your light and Your trustworthiness,
let them guide me.*

*Let them bring me to the mountain of Your holiness
and to Your dwelling place.
Then, I will go to the altar of God, to God Himself.
I will spin with joy
and will extend to You in the harp, God, my God.
Why are you bowed down, my soul?
And why do you make great noise within me?
Wait for God, for again I shall extend my hands to Him,
the salvation of my face and my God.*

~ Psalm 43



Psalm 44

This strikes me as the way we should pray when we are in distress or making requests. Maybe we don't need to pray the exact words the sons of Korah did here, but this should at least be the orientation of our hearts.

I love how the prayer starts by reflecting on God's character all the way back to the beginning. These writers began with the stories they grew up on about God's glory. I think most Christians are at a loss in this area because we have so little understanding of the Old Testament.

But these men would have had rich upbringings in these stories. These would have been their bedtime stories. These would have been the teachings in synagogue and Shabat class. They followed weekly Shabat cycles and some even followed the seven-year Shabat cycle. Throughout the year they would celebrate festivals and gatherings. All of this ingrained these stories into the fabric of their lives.

They would have been reflecting on stories about Abraham and Joseph. They would remember the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings. Joshua and the judges of Israel would come to mind. These stories were their identity. And when they came to pray, they reflected on what these stories taught them about God.

After reflecting on what they had heard, they moved on to their own experiences. They remembered God liberating them from difficult situations and rescuing

them out of trouble. They remembered the times they had boasted in the God who blessed them so greatly.

So, by the time they brought their sorrow to God, there could be no anger with Him. They could not doubt His power or His goodness. The misery they brought to Him was out of character for Him. (Or so they felt.) They laid out their grief before Him and weighed the evidence against what they had heard and what they had experienced. The only conclusion was that God would act, but had not yet acted, for their rescue. God was their rescuer and rescuing is what He does. So, why wasn't He doing the very thing He is best known for?

When the ask finally came, it still held the desperation of their pain, but it was not a knee-jerk reaction. They knew God was capable. They knew God was willing. They knew that *Rescuer* is who God is. He just needed to do it. So, their request was for God to do the very thing that He does. They asked God to get up and start to work. There was no discussion of merit; no mention of repayment or debt. They simply said, "God, we know who You are. Go be You because that is who You are."

How do you need to change the way you pray in light of this? Is your prayer in alignment with your knowledge of who God is? Is the favor you ask for based on anything more than His own character?

*In You we will batter our tightness with our horns.
In Your name we will trample those who rise against us.
For not in my bow do I seek refuge, and my sword will not save me.
For You have liberated us from our tightness,
and those who hate us You have paled.*

~ Psalm 44:5–7



Psalm 48

Do things ever remind you of God? Obviously, this was something that happened to the sons of Korah. In their case, they looked upon the city of Jerusalem and felt a sense of safety and refuge in this city. They began to praise the city for many things. This would not strike the reader as odd considering the last few psalms by the sons of Korah were praising different aspects of Jewish life.

They began by describing Jerusalem (often using the pronoun *she*) as a beautiful city. She inspired joy in all who looked upon her. Not only that, but she was the home of the great king lauded in Psalm 45. There were beautiful houses for the royalty and even for their God. The kings of the nations were terrified just to look upon her. The psalm even ends with an invitation to inspect the city, inside and out. Doing so, they claimed, would leave you talking about the strength of the city for the rest of your life.

But in the middle of the poem, the sons of Korah turned their praise of the city into a prayer. As they reflected on how powerful and secure their city was, they were reminded that they had a God who is powerful and a secure place of refuge in a similar way. Just like seeing Jerusalem would inspire a lifetime of tongue wagging, an encounter with God warranted praise to the ends of creation. He is more beautiful than the beautiful city was.

He is more exalted than Jerusalem's high mountain was.
He is a safer refuge than the fortress was. He is a greater
King than the great king within her walls ever was.

So, I will ask again—do things ever remind you of
God? Maybe it is something that tastes *heavenly*. Or
perhaps it is a *soothing aroma* that you smell. You might
hear music that is *divine* or witness a sunrise that is *glorious*.
God has placed throughout all of His creation a myriad of
things that serve as pointers to Him. All of which should
cause us to reflect on His loyal love for us and the
bountiful plans He has in store for those who love Him.
Let all creation serve as a reminder to worship the God
who created those things.

*Mighty is the LORD,
and the city of our God
is to be made to shine muchly,
the mountain of His holiness.
Beautiful height,
the thing that causes joy in all the land,
Mount Zion,
the Far North,
the City of the Great King.
God, in her palaces,
has made Himself known
as a high safe place.*

~ Psalm 48:1–3

Psalm 51

If I were to isolate this poem from any context, it would be a powerful meditation of the heart of someone extremely troubled in spirit. Knowing that it is a psalm of David after he was confronted by the prophet *Natan* about murder, rape, and the impending death of his soon-to-be-born child, it is all the more powerful. You can feel the anguish and sorrow of the poem. I was struck by the complete absence of anger or resentment—David didn't attribute any part of his punishment to God being unjust. David reflected on his own predicament. And the outpouring of his meditation was a mournful, sorrowful repentance.

One thing that might not stand out if I read this poem apart from the preceding few psalms is the idea of sacrifices. There is some discussion of sacrifice here, but the previous few psalms have all carried a similar theme about sacrifice. This theme is that God does not need the sacrifices people offer Him. He didn't demand sacrifices because He was hungry (as most pagan beliefs have always assumed). In fact, His original creation did not have any sort of sacrificial system. The sacrifices were enacted to help *us* deal with the problem of *our* sins.

In this block of psalms, God made clear that He preferred His original method, where sacrifices were not a part of the relationship. The real way in which He wants to be related to is through love and gratitude. As Psalm

50:14–15 tells us, God would much prefer a “sacrifice” of hands raised in worship. He would be more pleased with a life of righteousness. He would be more delighted if His name was the one we turned to for rescue. Here in Psalm 51:10, we are told that the best way to fix a damaged relationship is not through slaughtered animals or burnt offerings. It is through a true and real sorrow that leads to repentance.

When David needed to come to God, he approached God in this way. How about us? Do we come to God with acts of generosity or sacrifice? Perhaps that is good. But do we come with a heart and spirit that are crushed over our sin? Do we lament that we have dishonored the name of our Beloved and damaged our relationship with Him? Do we come before Him with hands outstretched in worship and praise? Or is it easy to do some act of penance or offer a trifle as repayment of God’s generosity? Let us pray for God to reveal the truth of our hearts and for God to shape us into the original design of God’s creation.

*Look! You incline to truth in the inner parts,
and in the closed parts You will make me know wisdom.
Wash my failure in hyssop and I will be bright.
Wash me, and I will be white more than snow.
Make me hear mirth and joy.
Let the bones You have crushed spin with emotion.
Cover Your face from my failure,
and wipe away all of my crookedness.
Put in order a bright heart in me, God,
and an upright spirit make new again in the midst of me.*
~ Psalm 51:6–10

Psalm 52

Let's look at the context of this poem. It references the events of 1 Samuel 20–22 as the meditation that led to it. King Saul, in his madness, wanted to kill David. David fled to the tabernacle and asked the high priest for bread, knowing that Saul would likely kill the high priest for helping him. He even lied to the priest in order to get the bread. Do'eg saw that the high priest helped David and reported this to Saul. In his rage, Saul killed the high priest. This is the story that David reflected on when creating this poem.

What is interesting, given the context, is how David seemed to place all the blame on the “mighty man” and none of the blame on himself. So then, I read this poem as a condemnation of Saul for trying to kill David and for succeeding in killing the high priest. I also read it as a boast that David is not like Saul. Instead of being a wicked murderer, he claimed he was squeaky clean in his dealings with people. He then closed by praising God for making him good. Looking at it this way, there is a lot that we could pray on. But this makes David sound an awful lot like the Pharisee praying in the temple in Jesus's parable².

This is where we notice that David referred to this poem as a “contemplative” (*maskil* in Hebrew). Notice, too, that names are not used in the poem. Is it possible that David's pride and rebellion are the “mighty man”? Is

it possible that the person David refers to in the first-person is the righteous spirit God had placed within him? If that is true, the poem becomes a wrestling of his own natural spirit against the work of God's Spirit within him.

It is a plea from the righteousness within him for his unrighteousness to repent. David wasn't demonstrating how he was better than Saul. (He was complicit in the death of the high priest.) Instead, he was using his own situation to convince himself that his sin led to destruction and that his righteousness led to life. In this way of reading, the prayer at the end is a result of the conclusion he reached. He mentally recognized that righteousness was the way to the good life and thanked God for guiding him in the paths of righteousness.

So, how about you? Have you sorted this out in yourself? Do you make a habit of prayerfully reflecting on your own actions? Do you make a habit of prayerfully convincing yourself that God is the source of all blessing? Let this model help shape your prayers in regard to the sins you continue to wrestle with.

*Why do you boast in bad, mighty one?
The loyal love of God is all the day.
Your tongue weaves ruin
like a sharp razor, worker of treachery.
You love bad more than good,
lies more than word of righteousness. Selah*

*You love all the words
that swallow up, tongue of deceit.
But, God will tear you down to the goal.
He will lay hold of you
and tear you away from the tent
and uproot you from the land of the living. Selah*

~ Psalm 52:1–5



Psalm 54

As I have been translating the psalms to English myself, I have noticed a standard set of words for a variety of concepts (which is to be expected in a compilation of works largely from one author). Multiple words are used to convey the idea of *trust*, whether it is trusting God or trusting in other things. The commonality between most of these words is *refuge*. If the psalmist was trusting God, he would say he was seeking refuge or protection in God. If someone is described as trusting in something else, that thing is what this person thought would bring him or her safety.

The other idea that seems common to the psalms is that places of safety are described as rocky places. These places are rocky crags on a mountain or stoney cliffs. I believe the idea is that they are unassailable. Even the word cave is often linked to Eden language throughout the Scriptures.

So, when David was in physical trouble, he fled to the rocky cave (trusted in the Eden-like place of safety). The Ziphites, instead, ran from the cave and ran to Saul to tell him about David. (They trusted in Saul, whose name is almost identical to the Hebrew word for the “grave.”) In response, David continued to demonstrate his trust in God by praying for deliverance. Ironically, Saul had lost God’s favor by not seeking God’s protection when facing his enemies.

All of this paints a complex picture of where we put our trust. Where do you put yours? Does your prayer life reflect that?

*God, in Your name deliver me
and in Your mightiness judge me.*

God, hear my prayer.

Give ear to the speech of my mouth.

*For those who turn aside have risen against me,
and those who inspire terror search out my soul.*

They have not set God before them. Selah

Look! God is critical help to me.

The Lord is the supporter of my soul.

*He will turn around the bad
to those who are hostile to me.*

In Your dependability, bring about their end.

In willingness I will slaughter sacrifices to You.

I will extend my hands to Your name,

LORD, for it is good.

*For from all tightness He has snatched me away,
and in those who hate me has seen my eye.*

~ Psalm 54



Psalm 55

I can relate to David's sorrow in this poem. He asked for God to listen to his request for favor, but most of the poem is only a lament. Sometimes what we really need is simply to vent our sorrows. I might cry out, asking for God to do something, when really what I need is for Him to do nothing and simply listen. It is encouraging to think back to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 32. God was angry with the people and told Moses to leave Him alone in His anger. Moses, then, did the exact opposite by staying there with God to intercede. In the same way, we can come to God asking Him to move, but He might recognize our need for Him to stay instead.

What I could really relate to was verses 6–8. David was weary of the struggle. He was weary of the heartbreak of the human condition. He was weary of his own sin and the sin that surrounded him. He wanted to escape. Who hasn't felt this? Who hasn't been tired of wrestling with sin? Who hasn't been tired of people letting them down? Even Jesus, in places like Matthew 17:17, vented this frustration with the way the world is now.

David's desire was to sprout wings and fly away to the wilderness. As a Wyoming resident, I always feel the desire to go out into the wilderness, but in the Bible, the wilderness was the place of fear and death. It is the place that is not yet under the dominion of God's order and structure. It was not a good place to be. But yet, David

said he would rather go to the wilderness and be chased about by storms and powerful winds than remain in his situation.

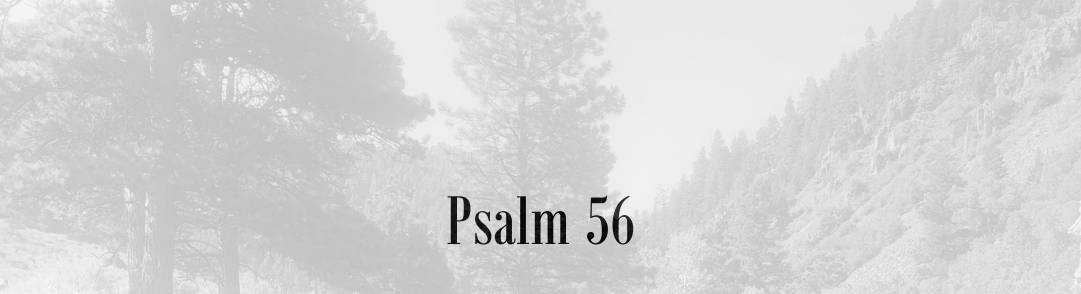
Jesus, though, didn't take the same approach to dealing with this same problem. Both Jesus and David were weary of the sorrow of this world. But, while David wanted to sprout wings and fly away, Jesus chose to walk into the middle of it. He, who could have flown away, chose to draw near. He walked into the storm to bring rescue. He entered the wilderness to assert His authority. He chose not to flee from His sorrow, but to enter it and vanquish it.

So, let us pray for that heart. Let us pray that God would attune us to our sorrow. That, when we become overwhelmed with sorrow, we would step into the chaos in God's Spirit to bring love and peace to the storm.

*My heart writhes in my midst,
and the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
Fear and trembling come into me,
and horror has filled me in.
And I said, "Who will give to me wing feathers as a dove?"
I would fly and settle down.
Look! Far away I would rove.
I would pass the night in the wilderness. Selah*

*I would hurry the escape to me
from the wind of rushing tempest.
Swallow up, Lord. Split their tongues.
For I have seen violence and strife in the city.
Days and night they surround her upon her walls,
and crookedness and toil are in her midst.*

~ Psalm 55:4–10



Psalm 56

The imagery in this psalm, using the original Hebrew, is incredibly deep. It assumes a narrative that is lost to most modern Christians. The major motif of this narrative is the opposing kingdoms of God and of the Serpent.

This poem begins with the Serpent's kingdom. Even the setting of the poem reflects this. It was written when the people of Gath took hold of David. Gath is where the giant, Goliath, came from. He was the mighty warrior descended from the spiritual creatures themselves, who dressed in scaly armor made of bronze (which, in Hebrew, sounds like the Hebrew word for "serpent"). These people were looking to squeeze David and feed upon him.

They had elevated themselves in their pride. They twisted David's words in order to deceive. They hid in covered places (like holes in the ground or deep grass), watching David's heels in order to strike and squeeze the life out of him. David even asked God to turn them over to their own *aven*, which means "not straight", much like a serpent slithers (typically translated "crookedness").

In contrast, God presents a refuge. Even in the pit of vipers, David reminded himself he did not need to fear because God held his future in security. Then, David laid out the intimate care God had for him. God knew the details of his wandering. He didn't just write down

David's sorrows, but God actually treasured away David's tears. God would also strike at David. But instead of striking at David's heels to squeeze the life out of him, God would strike to snatch David away from death.

The actual prayer in the poem is interesting. It began with David asking God to be generous with him. But in the asking, David also asked for generosity to his enemies as well. He demonstrated that they loved violence and death. They loved the Serpent's ways. So, in verse 7, David requested for them to slither down into the pit, where snakes love to go. But David also demonstrated his own passion for God and asked for God to give him what he loved as well.

Where do your passions lead you in your prayers?

*Show me favor, God, for I pant.
Mortal man, all the day, feeds on squeezing me.
Those hostile to me gasp all the day,
for abundantly they feed on me loftily.
Day I fear; I will seek refuge in You.
In God I make clear His words.
In God I have sought refuge,
I will not fear. What can flesh work to me?*

*All the day they reshape my words against me.
All their contrivances are toward bad.
They turn aside from the road.
They cover themselves.
They guard my heels as who twist together with my soul.
Deliver them to crookedness;
make the people descend, God.*

*You have marked the tally of my wanderings.
You have put my tears in Your bottle, not in Your book.
Then, those who hate me will turn around back.
In the day I called, this I know: that God is mine.
In God I clarify word.
In the LORD I clarify word.
In God I seek refuge, I will not fear.
What will humanity work to me?*

~ Psalm 56: 1–11



Psalm 57

This psalm has two parts to it. The first part is the actual prayer. The second part is David's response to his own prayer.

The first part is wonderful. As I was translating the psalm, I knew from verse 1 what I wanted to talk about. I love how David asked God for help. He requested that God show favor to him and allow him to seek protection from God. In the same sentence, he stated that he was going to take refuge in God. It was almost like David was asking for God to be okay with David coming to Him for help because he was going to do it whether God wanted him to or not. "God I hope You don't mind, because I am coming!" I could certainly view this as disrespectful or presumptuous, but I view it in light of Peter's words to Jesus. David, like Peter, recognized that the only place he could go was to God³. In light of that passage, I think this was where he was going.

The other thing I liked about this prayer is the language about God being in control of David's life. We are given in the context of the poem that this was when David was fleeing from Saul. In Hebrew, Saul is rendered *Sha'ul*. "The grave" is the Hebrew word *She'ol*. They look nearly identical. David also talked about Saul's persecution as Saul trying to "swallow up" David, language often used to describe the grave swallowing people in death. But

David's hope was in the God who is in control of David's end. David was fleeing from death/Saul and was appealing to the One who truly has the power to control who lives and who dies.

The latter half of the poem is simply praising God. David praised God for being the kind of God who protects those He loves. He praised God for being the kind of God who is faithful, dependable, and loyal. And he talked an awful lot about singing about God being awesome.

Do we have this attitude in our prayers? Do we have this mentality that asks, "I'm clinging to God whether I am welcome or not"? Do we orient our prayers with that kind of focus? And when we pray, does it inspire the kind of faith that causes us to worship?

*Awake my significance! Awake harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn!
I will extend my hands in praise among the people.
Lord, I will touch the strings among the gatherings.
For great to the ends of the heavens is Your loyal love.
And to the ends of the clouds Your trustworthiness.
Be held high above the heavens, God,
above all the land Your significance!*

~ Psalm 57:8-11



Psalm 58

The prayer in the middle of this psalm captures a perspective that is really important for our lives and seems to have been lost to our culture.

In the psalm, here, David didn't ask for God to destroy his enemies. Instead, he asked for God to take away his enemies' tools to commit wickedness. Often we quote passages like,

*Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."*⁴

We use these as justification for desiring our enemies' destruction. We quote this as if God's point is that He can punish them much worse than what we could do ourselves; as if we are hoping for God to cataclysmically destroy them when we could only wound them. But is that in keeping with God's passion for rescuing the wicked? Or in keeping with Jesus's teaching about hating and murder? Is that even the best way to understand that passage in itself?

In the psalm, David simply asked God to disarm his enemies. He wanted their injustice to stop and asked

God to eliminate the *method* of wickedness, not to eliminate the *doers* of wickedness.

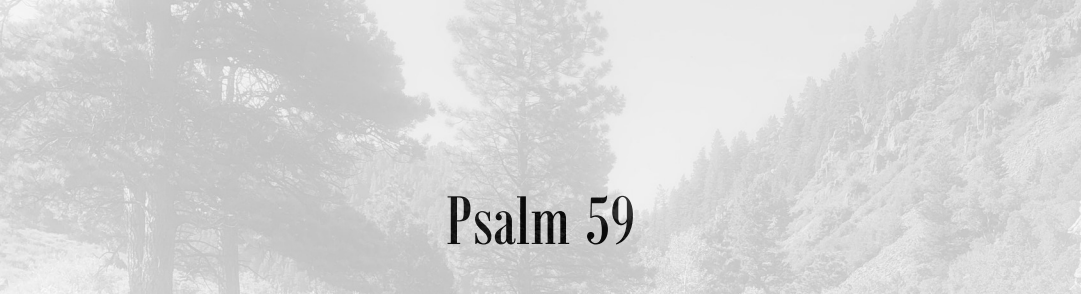
Even the word “wicked” is not a great translation of the original language of the psalm. When I label someone as *wicked*, I can put them in a category of throwaways. They become less than. They become an obstacle to overcome. Instead, the Psalms uses a variety of words to describe these people, but they all link back to behavior. They might be called “those who hate me,” “those who do bad things,” “those who do not do what is right toward others,” or things like that. The people are not the obstacle to be overcome. The behavior is the obstacle, and the people are the goal for rescuing.

So, do we oppose the people who are God’s enemies or the behaviors they choose that oppose God? Let us pray that God would reveal any prejudice in our hearts. Let us pray that He would help us to love first and seek reconciliation. Let us pray that our hearts would view people the way God does, so that we can love them the way that God does.

*Estranged are the unrighteous from the womb.
Those who speak falsehood stray, even from the hollow place.
Poison they have in resemblance to the poison of a serpent,
like a deaf twisting thing that stops up its ears,
so that it hears not the sound from whisperers,
joiners of spells from skill.*

*God, tear down their teeth in their mouths,
their young lion's biters tear down, LORD.
Reject them like water walks from them.
He draws his piercers, let them be cut off.*

~ Psalm 58:3–7



Psalm 59

Saul had sent men to watch David's house so they could sneak in and kill him in the night. There is no mention of this happening in Samuel or Chronicles, but it certainly is in line with the way that Saul treated David.

David asked for rescue four times in the first verses. Twice he asked to be “snatched away,” once to be “lifted up,” and once to be “set loose/free.” I am still confronted in each and every psalm like this that the language centers largely on putting distance between the psalmist and their enemies, rather than primarily focusing on defeating the enemies.

David went on to contrast his righteousness against those who hunted him. He claimed he had not broken Saul's trust. He claimed he had not sinned against Saul. He claimed he had not walked in any distorted version of love toward Saul. He was righteous. In contrast, Saul and his allies were “turning aside” to come after him and “lying in wait” to attack him. Those are terms from the Law of Moses that describe a higher level of guilt. There was guilt associated with accidentally harming someone or with harming someone in battle or a mutual dispute. But this was intentionally seeking to destroy someone when there is not already open hostility. This was as wicked as it gets.

Eventually, David got to the point of asking God to deal with the enemies, but we need to look at his

request toward them in light of the whole context. It is easy to look at David's words and see a request for a righteous heavenly smiting, but how does that fit? David asked God not to simply kill them in any normal way or the people would not remember it. If David went out and fought them, everyone would think it was David's skill with weapons that rescued him.

Instead, He asked for God to bring about an end to these people, so they would not exist. The reason he asked for this was so that the people would know that God reigns over all creation until it ceases to exist. David was clearly thinking back to the rebellion of Korah⁵ and asking, like Moses, for God to destroy them in a way that could only be attributed to God. In Moses's day, this cleared up any confusion for the people about who God had appointed as His leader. David, seemingly, was hoping for the same thing.

In the end, David was going to sit back in the safety of his home. He was going to wait for God to move, singing (loudly) God's praises.

David's prayer was based on the hope that, when people see that God is ruler of all creation, they will surrender to His will. It was based on the hope that this surrender is the solution to all the problems of this world. Are you praying for this same solution to your problems?

*The God of my loyal love will go before me.
God will make me see those hostile to me.
Do not strike to kill them, lest they will mislay my people.
Make them waver by Your power
and bring them down, our Buckler and our Lord.
The failure of their mouths, the words of their lips
and let them be caught in their exhalation,
and from their oath curse
and from their emaciation they mark the tally.*

*Finish them in anger.
Finish and make them not exist,
and they will know that God reigns in Jacob
to the ceasing of the land. Selah*

~ Psalm 59:10–13



Psalm 60

This psalm seems to link up with 2 Samuel 8 and 1 Chronicles 18. In the narrative, we are simply told about a series of David's victories. But apparently, the Israelites suffered some losses, or at least difficulties, along the way to these victories. David's prayer in response reminds me of some of Jeremiah's prayers. You can feel the anger in it. You can feel David's frustration with God Himself. In his eyes, David saw the defeats or struggles as failures on God's part. He had trusted in God and not received what he expected. He believed in God's power but was not seeing it. He felt abandoned, broken, and adrift.

The remarkable thing in this prayer is what David asked for in it. David lamented that God was not working as he expected. He felt like God had not demonstrated His mighty power as David wanted Him to. And in all this, David asked for God to be with them. David seems to have questioned God's loyalty to the Israelites in this prayer, but still, he asked for God's presence. He wanted God in their midst. He wanted God to lead them. He wanted God to be their source of strength.

It is interesting that David never seemed to question why God didn't do what David expected. The narrative, especially in 2 Samuel, uses a few words that suggest David was not conquering his enemies in righteousness or according to God's commands. Perhaps

David needed to repent. Perhaps it was the sin of the people. Perhaps it was something else. But David never came to God in humility or repentance.

How often do your plans not go well? How often are you doing something that you expect to see blessing in, only to find it does not go as planned? David's prayer here seems to demonstrate for us a model of trusting God through the broken seasons. In some ways David trusted. In some ways he didn't. The conspicuous absence of seeking repentance should also model in the negative the need to humble ourselves before God in these moments. Do you trust God in these trials? Do you doubt His goodness? Do you question your own goodness?

Who will flow to the city which is hemmed in?

Who will guide me to the end of Edom?

Have You not rejected us, God?

And will You not go forth, God, in our hosts?

*Give to us delivering aid from our tight places
and make ruin the deliverance of humanity.*

*In God we will create power,
and He will trample our tightnesses.*

~ Psalm 60:9–12



Psalm 61

This is such a beautiful little prayer. We don't know anything about the context, other than that David was its writer. The progression of the prayer is where the beauty comes from.

David began his prayer by asking God to rescue him from his trouble. As is common, the language is very military based. David asked God to lead him to a high rocky place (synonymous with a strong fortress in Hebrew) and then compared God to a strong tower. David's military background influenced his language to pray with military concepts. This language apparently was extremely impactful on Erastus Johnson, who wrote a hymn specifically on the concept of God being this high rock of refuge⁶ described in this poem.

But the language quickly shifted from God snatching David away to a high place of refuge. David changed his language to focus on God's presence. Apparently, the high refuge and strong tower, in David's mind, were more like being in God's house or sheltering under God's wings. Now, the safety was not based on the location, but on the presence of God with him. David didn't need a fortress; he simply needed a powerful God by his side.

Finally, the language shifted again. David stopped focusing on being near God and moved toward trusting in God's character. He was asking for God's loyal love

and God's dependable trustworthiness as his source of security. David didn't need a safe retreat to protect him. He didn't need to run and hide beneath God. He could trust that God's love for him was enough to protect him wherever he went.

Have we reached this level of trust in God? This is a faith that allows us to step out boldly. It is a confident faith that carries us in the times we cannot feel God near us. It is a better faith than seeing God simply as a person to whom we can flee. Let us pray for this kind of faith. Let us pray for the faith that convinces us we can depend on a faithful God who loves us with extreme loyalty.

*Hear, God, my cry!
Prick up Your ears to my prayer.
From the end of the land, I call out to You.
In shrouded heart, guide me
to the cliff higher than I.
For You have been a shelter to me,
a tower of strength in the face of those who hate me.
Make me dwell in Your tent to the vanishing points.
Let me seek refuge in the hiding place of Your wings. Selah*

*For You, God, have heard my vow.
You have given possession of those who fear Your name.
Days upon the days of the king You increase.
His years are like generation and generation.
He will sit to the vanishing point to the face of God.
Your loyal love and trustworthiness,
weighed out, will guard him.
Therefore, I will touch the strings to Your name
to the end that I may make complete my vows day by day.*

~ Psalm 61:1–8

Psalm 62

This is a fairly short psalm with an even shorter prayer. Eleven of the twelve verses are not addressed to God. It is only in the last verse that we see David address God directly at all. The rest of the poem compares the dependability of God to anything else people might try to anchor their trust in.

Six times, David used the Hebrew word *akē*. It doesn't map onto any specific English word perfectly, but it is a word of affirmation. I translate it into English as "certainly." I love the abundance of that idea in this discussion. The entire psalm focuses on this idea of God's dependability as compared to whatever the world might have to offer. The emphasis this word puts into the prayer gives the feeling of that dependability. God isn't just a wish that we hope for. He is dependable and *certain*.

From the very first line, David made the claim that he planned to wait for God to be his deliverer. All of the discussion suggests that other people were not waiting for God. Some chased after this. Others chased after that. Undoubtedly, people brought suggestions to David on what to hope for. But David wouldn't have it. He would be patient. He would be loyal. He would wait for God. He would wait because God is loyal in love and mercifully just.

Where do you fall in this comparison? Do you set your hope on things of this world? Do you set your hope

on things that are unstable? Are you chasing after this or that to find security, stability, and hope? Or are you patiently waiting for God to be your hope?

Certainly, my soul waits silently for God.

My deliverance is from Him.

*Certainly, He is my rock of refuge
and my deliverance, my stronghold.*

*I will not be made to totter abundantly,
to the end when You will break in on a man
that You may dash him to pieces.*

*All of you are like a wall bending down,
a wall pushing down.*

*Certainly, from His swelling
they have advised to push off.*

*They are pleased with falsehood in their mouth.
They bless, and in their middles they make light. Selah*

~ Psalm 62:1–4

Psalm 63

David began this prayer with deliberate intention. After affirming that God was his god, the very next Hebrew word he prayed was a commitment to diligently seek God. But it wasn't just a thorough search. The word carries a notion of arising early in the morning to conduct a thorough search. David was going to get up and get after his pursuit of God. He was eager to start. He was dedicated to being diligent. By the time night rolled around, David found himself staying up late, unable to sleep, because he could not stop marveling over God. This is the outpouring of God's command to meditate on His word "day and night"⁷.

You can hear the desperation in David's pursuit. His desire for God is like a tongue sticking in a dry mouth or the pain of an empty stomach. He felt like he would wither and die without more and more of God.

All of this led David to peer into the holy place to look upon God. Just as Moses asked God to show him His glory⁸, David had tasted and seen that the Lord is good⁹, and he had an insatiable appetite to experience God more and more. The exact meaning of David gazing upon God in the holy place is unclear. It would have been forbidden for David (or anyone other than the high priest on Yom Kippur) to enter the room in the tabernacle where God's glory dwelt. Had David gone in, we would expect lightning to consume him like Nadav and Avi'hu¹⁰.

Perhaps David was referring to having looked upon the ark while it was being transported? We don't know for certain, but, regardless, David was willing to take the risk of approaching God's presence just to gaze upon Him.

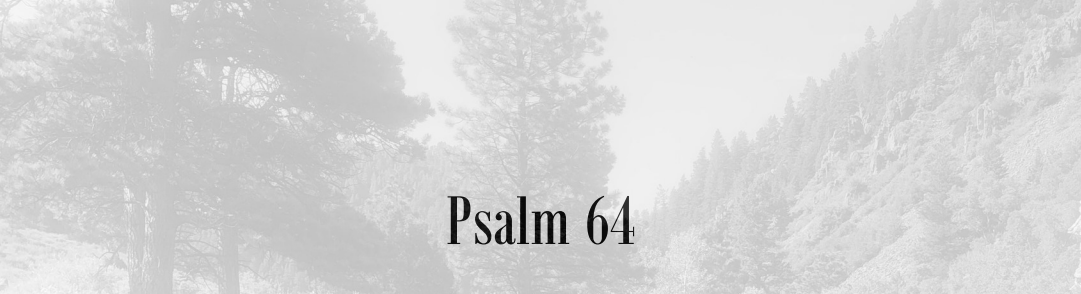
And what was David hoping to see? God's power and glory. The next verse equates God's power and glory to His loyal love. In David's imagination, God's power is His love. His glory is His love. Love is what made God the type of god whom David was desperate to see and willing to risk his life to look upon.

And perhaps the most surprising part of this prayer is that David prayed this while on the run from Saul in the wilderness. While he was driven from home and friends, and while he was hunted like a beast, all David could think about was how much he craved seeing God's majesty and awesomeness. He would cling to God no matter what. How about you?

*God, You are my god. Early I will seek you.
My soul thirsts for You. My flesh longs for You
in a land of dryness and languishing, failing for water.*

*Therefore, in the Holy Place, I have gazed upon You
to see Your strength, Your significance.
For Your loyal love is more good than life.
My lips will loudly praise You.
Therefore, I will bless You in my life.
In Your name, I will lift up my hands.*

~ Psalm 63:1-4



Psalm 64

David prayed another prayer against his enemies in this poem. Aside from the beauty of the poetry and the cunning used to develop the wordplay, the complaint is largely resemblant to other similar passages. What I was really struck by in this prayer was verses 7–9.

The complaint in the earlier verses was that those who hated David shot “arrows” of bitter words at him, and their tongues spoke like sharp “swords.” In verse 7, God began to shoot “arrows” back at these people. Once struck, they were completely upended. In the end, those whom verse 4 described as “not fearing God,” began to make God’s work evident for all to see. Whether that is as a cautionary tale or through repentance is not specified in the poem. Other similar passages, like the book of Jonah, suggest that either repentance or cautionary tales are on the table. It is up to the sinner to decide whether they will be upended to righteousness or to destruction.

The other connection that is important is that even though the poem talks about people shooting arrows at others, the language makes it clear that the arrows are metaphors for their words. Once God began shooting arrows, David described the outpouring of God’s words as “flowing like water.” God poured forth a “river of speech.” And when God speaks, we see two possible responses. The first is that chaos turns into abundance and beauty, just as we see in the creation narrative of

Genesis 1. The other option is that abundance and beauty are removed from the rebellious, and they are brought to ruin, like we see in the plagues of Egypt.

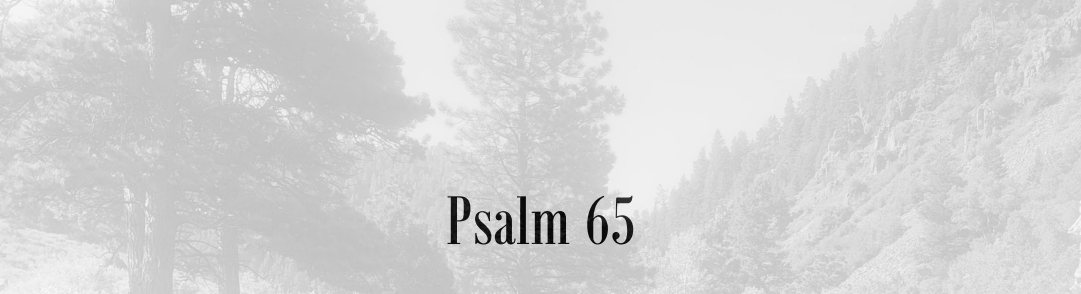
The entire narrative of the Bible is about the creation of Eden, the loss of Eden, and the hope of return to Eden. David's prayer, here, is fully immersed in that story. Are our prayers? Are we praying for God to speak creation into rebellion? Are we praying for the reconciliation of all creation toward His purposes and His glory? Are we praying for our enemies, that they might be given the free opportunity to repent and be reconciled with God? Are we hoping they accept that offer?

*They seek injustices.
They cause an end of seeking
from seeking out the midst of man.
The heart is unsearchably deep.
And God will flow His arrows at them like water.*

*In a wink, they will be struck,
and they will make him stagger against them.
The tongues of all who see them will flutter.
And all humanity will fear.
And they will make the work of God evident for all to see.
And they will consider in prudence what He has done.*

*The righteous will be glad in the LORD.
And all the upright of heart will seek refuge in Him
and will make Him shine.*

~ Psalm 64:6–10



Psalm 65

One of the very best things about living in Wyoming (And there are a goodly many.) is the smells. There is the smell of the dry air of summer through mountain canyons. There is the smell of rain before a storm as it opens the pores of the plants to release their fragrance. There is the smell of dew on fresh wildflowers at dawn in springtime. But one of the best smells has to be the smell of a pasture after rain. Whether it is a field of prairie grass for livestock, alfalfa for hay stock, or grain for food, they all smell amazing in the morning after a rain.

You can imagine something similar in David's prayer here. We don't know when he wrote this song. Perhaps it was while he was a young man shepherding his father's sheep around Bethlehem. If that is true, you can imagine him sheltered in a small cave or tent during a torrential storm. A thunderstorm in the mountains under a small shelter is a memorable experience. Or perhaps he spent the night in his royal palace hearing the storm through the walls and ceiling.

Either way, you can imagine him going out into the field in the morning. Whether simply exiting his shelter with the flock or going out to the fields from the palace, you can imagine him going out and smelling the smells. You can imagine him surveying the washout from the heavy rain. There might even have been trees that were toppled. The lightning perhaps was echoing in his

mind from the night before.

And through it all, his only response was worship. He experienced God's awful and terrible power. He was seeing its destruction and also experiencing its beautiful aftermath. And in all of it, he looked forward to see how it all was working to water the field so that the world might sprout into abundance. What else could he do but praise God?

I cannot tell you how many times I have experienced something similar. It is hard to go through a day where I live without having at least one of my senses overcome by the glory of God. Whether it is the sight of a mist creeping through the canyon draws of the mountains, the sounds of aspen leaves rustling in the breeze, the feel of crisp air on a cool evening, or the smell of a field after a rain, I cannot help but stop and give thanks. Are you on the lookout for the beauty God is surrounding you with? Are you looking through the turbulent and traumatic to see the abundance God is creating? Are you responding in prayer and praise?

Stillness belongs to You. Praise, God, in Zion.

To You will be completed an oath.

You who hear prayer, all flesh will come to Your end.

The words of crookedness prevail against me.

Our betrayals You cover over.

*How good is life for the one
whom You try and choose
and bring near to settle down in Your yard.
We will be sated in the goodness
of Your house of holiness, Your temple.
Fearsome in righteousness, You will heed us,
God of our freedom, from fleeing for refuge
for all the ends of the land and the remotest sea.*

*Who soothes the uproar of the seas,
the uproar of their waves,
and the tumult of the gathered community.
And the sitters fear the ends from Your signs.
The going out of dawn and evening
You make creak with joy.*

*You visit the land and cause it to overflow abundantly.
You make rich the canal of God, full of water.
Therefore, You establish their increase.
Its furrows You make drink their fill.
You sink its cuttings with abundant showers.
You soften it. Its sprouting You bless.*

*You have crowned the year with Your good,
and Your ruts trickle fatness.
The pasture meadows of the wilderness trickle and dance.
The hills gird themselves.
The meadows of fat are wrapped with flocks
and the valley vales are enveloped with grain.
They mar the silence. Yes, they sing!*

~ Psalm 65



Psalm 66

Again, we come to a psalm without a listed author or context, but you can intuit from the psalm some of the context. It would seem that this person had just gone through something amazing. There was a trying time and then a wonderful revelation of God. Whatever the trial was, the psalmist felt it was commensurate to the oppression in Egypt or the wilderness wanderings. Whatever the deliverance was, the psalmist felt it was like the mighty acts of God's rescue of old. But I think we can relate.

I doubt that anyone reading this has been through a generational oppression like was seen in Egypt or a lifetime of exile after the fashion of the rebels with Moses. But, perhaps, we have felt that way. After all, the oppression in Egypt is the primary image the Bible uses to depict our slavery to sin. And the wilderness wanderings are a depiction of our exile from the Garden of Eden. Can we not, then, import our struggles into this grand epic of oppression, exile, liberation, and restoration? The way the Bible is written seems to encourage us to see our lives through the lens of this story. So, if we import our lives into this narrative, the prayer in this psalm gives us two responses.

The first response would be for those who have experienced the trials and brokenness and have come out the other side. This seems to be the exact situation this

prayer is conveying. You can see in this prayer that the psalmist's response was to gush. He was over the moon excited about what God had accomplished in his life. While the poem is actually pretty neatly structured, a quick reading makes it seem like the psalmist is a labrador chasing multiple ideas. There is praising God. Then there is telling others about God's awesomeness. Then it goes back to praising God. After that, the psalmist talks about inviting others to come worship. And back and forth and back and forth.

This is a perfect response to God's work. If we have seen it, we should be excited to praise God, tell others about it, and invite them to experience the joy with us. Just as James wrote, "Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises"¹¹. Is this how you respond?

The other situation is if you are currently in the trial. We have all experienced a situation where we are distraught, and someone is energetic and bubbly. It is very off-putting and annoying. But the message this psalmist has, buried in the bubblyness, is incredibly relevant to the time of grieving and wrestling.

This person had gone through it. He had been put in the fire. He had been thrown into the chaotic sea. He had been snared in the net. And in each of those situations, the psalmist had seen God's mighty work of deliverance bring him out of despair and place him into abundance. And the word *abundance* actually describes being filled until there is not room for more—not just a

lot of filling, but the most possible filling. While this does not temper the heat of the refining fire, it adds hope. This isn't a call to stop grieving, but a sip of the waters of relief in the process. In the same passage from James mentioned above, "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray."¹¹

So, how do you compare? Do you have this perspective in suffering? If not, pray that God would give the far-sight to look for the future glory that results from the present oppression.

*Walk and see the works of God,
fearful of gleaning upon the sons of humanity.
He turned over the sea into dry land.
In the river they will cross over on foot.*

*There let us rejoice in Him.
He reigns in His might to the vanishing point.
His eyes lean forward in the people groups.
He will not let those who turn away
lift themselves up. Selah*

*Bless our God, peoples,
and make the sound of His praise heard.
Who keeps our very lives in life
and does not give our feet to tottering.*

*For You have tried us, God.
You have refined us like smelted silver.
You have brought us into the net.
You have placed a pressure on our narrow spots.
You made mortals ride to our head.
We went in the fire and in the water.
And You brought us out to saturated abundance.*
~ Psalm 66:5–12



Psalm 67

This prayer gives a wonderful example of James's words about prayer and the motivation behind it¹². In this prayer, the psalmist asked for many things: favor, blessing, the light of God's face, the produce of the land, and two more requests for God's blessing. These are excellent things to pray for, but there is more to these requests.

Look at the connections. First, the psalmist prayed for God to show them (We are not told who "them" is, but we can assume it is Israel.) favor, to bless them, and to shine the light of His face upon them. But the next line explains the motivation—that all peoples throughout the land would worship God. Again, at the end of the prayer, the psalmist prayed for the produce of the land and twice for God's blessing. But, again, the motivation is for all people to fear Him.

Sandwiched in the middle are the connections between the requests and the motivations. The psalmist understood that the blessings the people received would draw the investigation of people across the globe. They would come and see God's ways. They would come and see that He sets captives free. They would come and see that He is an upright and just judge. And just as Solomon's wisdom caused the Queen of Sheba to glorify God¹³, the marvels these investigators would behold would cause them to fear God, worship Him, and shout

for joy in Him. That is what James means by praying with the right motives.

This made me think of our context. Do we want those around us to worship God? Do we want them to repent and live righteously? Too often we want God to simply destroy the people around us who are muddling things up, forgetting that we were once the wayward ones. If we want this world to become God's new creation, it begins with us showing the world that there is a mighty God who frees from the slavery of sin and judges in uprightness and justice. Then, they will want to come and see and be changed. Let that motivate your prayers.

*God, show us generosity and bless us.
Cause Your face to light to us. Selah*

*That Your way would be seen in the land,
Your liberation in all the people groups.
Let the peoples extend their hands to You, God.
Let all the peoples extend their hands to You.
Let the gathered people be joyous and creak for joy,
for You will judge the peoples from uprightness.
And You lead the gathering in the land. Selah*

*Let the peoples extend their hands to You, God.
Let all the peoples extend their hands to You.
The land gives its produce. Bless us God, our god.
Bless us, God, and all the ceasings of the land will fear Him.*

~ Psalm 67



Psalm 68

There is a lot going on in this psalm, and I mean a *lot*. David crafted this song to pray His praise to God. In doing so, he mixed in a variety of elements. His song speaks of his understanding of God's work. It draws upon his view of the hope God offers. It mixed beautiful imagery into the words. It used metaphors and other poetic devices. It all pointed to God's glory.

This made me think of our own prayer habits. I was raised in a Catholic tradition. Speaking only from my experience, we were taught a variety of prayers and encouraged to recite these scripts frequently. I think of a Catholic friend who told me a story about how her grandfather prayed the rosary every day for years, and she wanted to follow his example. When I became a protestant, the opposite was preached. Scripted prayers were not *the way* to pray, and all prayer needed to be spontaneous speaking from the heart. These ideas are polar opposites, and I suspect the beauty lies in the middle, as it does in so many dichotomies.

Two influences came into my life at about the same time. First, I began listening to N.T. Wright, an Anglican priest, talk about the liturgy of his faith tradition. This illuminated the beauty of having structured and scripted methods of worship. I was unconvinced that scripting is the only way (nor do I think he would argue that it is), but it put scripted prayers back in the toolbox

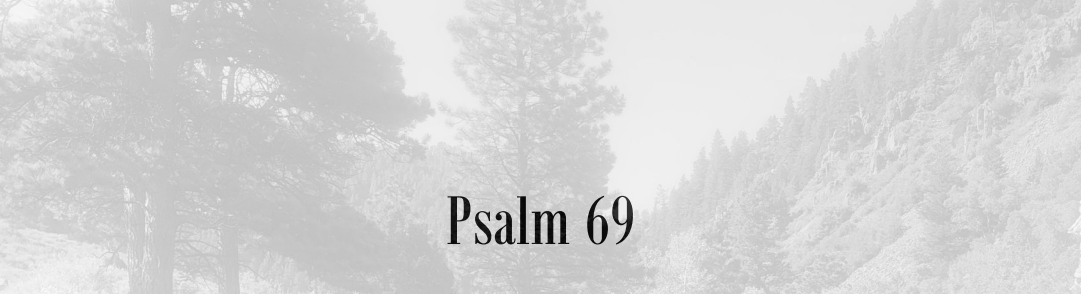
for my spiritual formation and life. Second, I began watching the series, *The Chosen*, and heard the beauty of the prayers they prayed throughout the day. I fell in love with this practice so much that I researched these prayers, translated many into English from Hebrew, and published *Prayers from the Time of Jesus* as a visual prayer book of ancient Hebrew prayers. There is something wonderful about having beautiful prayers that you pray regularly.

Bringing all of that back to this psalm, David didn't *just* pray spontaneous prayers, though spontaneous prayers are wonderful, and he clearly did pray them often. He didn't *just* pray the scripted prayers from his people. David prayed in all manner of ways. He prayed quick and hurried prayers. He wrote poems about his prayers. He took the time to make beautiful prayers and complex prayers. He prayed shallow prayers and deep prayers. He set some of his prayers to music.

I cannot help but feel convicted by this. What have I done with my prayers that makes them beautiful? I believe that God sees every one of our prayers as beautiful if we offer them in faith, but am I putting any effort into them? Am I taking time and thought to make something God would want to hang on His refrigerator? I am not saying every prayer needs to be this way, but are you making any of your prayers look like this?

*God, in the dwelling of His holiness
is Father to the lonely orphans
and Justice-Bringer of the widows.
God sits down the solitary house.
He leads out the bound in prosperity.
Certainly, those who turn away
live in a dry, scorched land.
God, in Your coming forth
to the face of Your people,
in Your stepping into the desolation. Selah*

*The land undulates.
Also, the heavens themselves
oozed from the face of God,
Sinai from the face of God,
the God of Israel.
Rain showers spontaneously.
You move to and fro, God, Your possession.
And when it was exhausted, You stopped it up.
~ Psalm 68:5–9*



Psalm 69

David's prayer in this psalm is all about his shame. There are four different Hebrew words used in the poem that could be directly translated as shame. These range from ideas of being exposed for all to see to being insulted publicly. In addition to these words, there are a handful of situations described in the poem that carry a connotation of shame.

Perhaps you can relate. Maybe you have been humiliated and are ashamed to be seen because of what has been revealed. Maybe you have hidden shame that you fear might be exposed. David described it as being swallowed in a muddy quicksand. He felt himself sinking into the swamp. He was trying to get out and it sucked him in more. Down he went, and the weight crushed him more and more. What was worse for David was that he was God's anointed king. This wasn't just his own shame, but he was shaming God as well.

The poem also talks about David's faithfulness. This is where the poem becomes even more relevant. David was passionate to follow and obey God. He served God and loved God. The implication is that this is what made people view him as shameful. This is one of the biggest barriers to Christian ministry—we are afraid to be shamed by others for following Jesus. Jesus did mention the fate of those who deny Him publicly¹⁴, but the fear is real either way. David never got out of the swamp in this poem. He stayed in the swamp. And he waited. And he

kept praying. And he continued to hope in God.

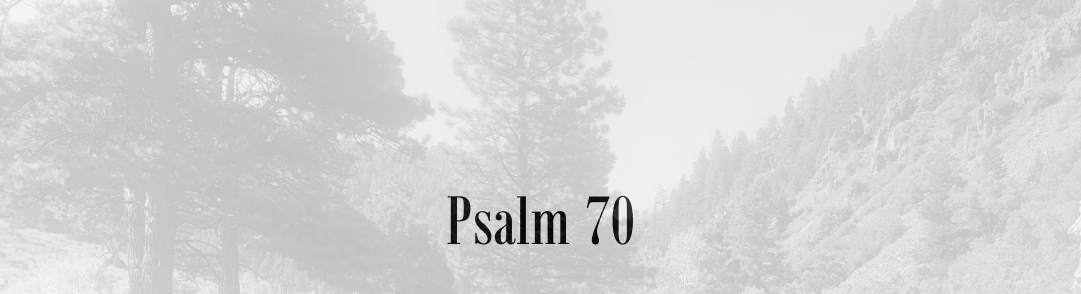
Are you here? This is a perfectly fine place to be. David was there, so you would be in good company. Keep praying. David did not die in that swamp.

What does occur to me is that the Apostles took a different approach. All throughout the New Testament, you find examples of the Apostles turning the shame of serving God into their glory. Paul, more than anyone, loved to put forward his shortcomings and shame. He felt that these dishonorable things were what demonstrated Jesus's power most clearly¹⁵.

Are you in the swamp? You can stay there and hope to be snatched away like David. God wants us to wait for Him and hope in His rescue. But you can also grab hold of the shame and let it drive you. Let it be a bridge to others who are oppressed by their shame. Let it be a demonstration of the work of the Christ in you. What else could God mean by not bearing His name in vain¹⁶? This, too, comes from prayer.

*You know my exposed shame
and my public humiliation and my insults.
All those who cramp me in are before You.
Exposed shame has burst my heart, and I am sick.
And I waited for sympathy, but it did not exist,
and for those who sigh, but I did not find them.
And they gave in my food snake venom,
and for my thirst they made me drink vinegar.*

~ Psalm 69:19–21



Psalm 70

You can sense the urgency in this prayer. Perhaps it is the shortness of the prayer (only five psalms have fewer verses). But the word “hurry” is used twice and a request not to “tarry” was also included, all in five verses. That seems to have been a major idea on David’s mind when he wrote this. The symmetry in the poem really is pretty well done.

Despite a neatly organized poem, we do not have much context as to why David focused on immediacy. Did he feel doom impending and help couldn’t wait? Was he becoming impatient in a long season of waiting and wanted it to be resolved?

The impression that I get when reading this poem—the focus on hurry, the symmetrical shape, the lack of context—makes me think David wrote this to be a *pocket prayer*. That is my term for a prayer that you memorize and keep in your proverbial pocket in case you need it. I think of the *Serenity Prayer*, especially how it became popular in the Alcoholics Anonymous groups. Or how Catholics keep the *Hail Mary* close at hand. Even the *Lord’s Prayer* is one of these. A pocket prayer is simply a prayer that we have written or learned, so that we have a prayer to pray when words fail us. My impression is that David spent a lot of time in hurried situations or in impatient ones and wrote this as something to pray in those times. It might not have been the prayer that

summarized his lifetime but was at least the prayer for a common theme throughout his life.

I have never tried this. Certainly, I have memorized prayers before. I have written down prayers and had them readily accessible for use in times of need. I have even put together a book of scripted prayers in order to appreciate their beauty. But I have never prayerfully reflected upon my own life and written my own theme prayer for it. Have you? I think it would be a wise practice for each of us. We all have sin we continue to wrestle with. Why not develop a prayer for those times? A prayer that captures the struggle. A prayer that carries the hatred of the sin and the shame it causes. But also, a prayer that turns our eyes back to God and His beauty.

Spend some time in prayer and reflection today. Do you need a theme-prayer?

*God, snatch me away!
LORD, be my delivering aid! Hurry!
Make them pale with shame,
and expose them who search out my very life.
Make them back up back,
and insult those pleased with my bad.
Turn them around on the heel of their shame
who say, "Oh, look! Oh, look!"*

*Brighten all who search You out,
and make them glad in You.
And those who love Your liberation
will continually say, "Magnify God!"
And I am afflicted and destitute, God. Hurry to me!
Be delivering aid to me!
You are the One who slips me out, LORD. Do not tarry!*
~ Psalm 70

Psalm 71

There is a portion of this prayer that stood out to me. The entire prayer is a combination of seeking God's deliverance and protection, followed by the hope to be able to rejoice in God's work and celebrate His rescue. I don't want to dismiss the main plot of the prayer, but a few verses in the middle stood out to me more than the rest of the prayer.

Starting in verse 5, you see a few lines that fit together as a sub-theme in the prayer. The psalmist said God was his *tik'va*. This word comes from a root word that describes cords, bands, or ties. The psalmist was claiming that God had been his tether, anchor, or guy wire. Verse 6 says the psalmist had been *samakb'*ed upon God since birth. This means something in the neighborhood of propped up or supported. Some translations use sustained as well. And I think this language all culminates in verse 9. The psalmist pleaded that God would not cast him away in his old age or cut him loose when his strength was spent.

I just wrote about having a theme prayer in the last psalm, and here I think I have found mine. Do you have sins you wrestle with? Ones that are a daily battle? Ones you lose the fight to as often as you win? The sins you really hate because they are the ones that know best how to get under your skin, push your buttons, and eat your lunch? Sins that make you think that God will see through

you and reject you because you cannot remain faithful to Him despite your constant trying? The ones which you are most ashamed of and most broken over? This is what I think of in this prayer.

In these sins, we see whether God is our tether. Are we tied to Him so that, wherever the tide would try to wash us, we are latched on? Are we propped up by Him? Are we fighting in our own strength or allowing Him to lift us up and hold us up like a parent teaching a child to walk? Do we bring these sins to our Lord, lay them at His feet in full and unhidden view, and beg Him not to turn away?

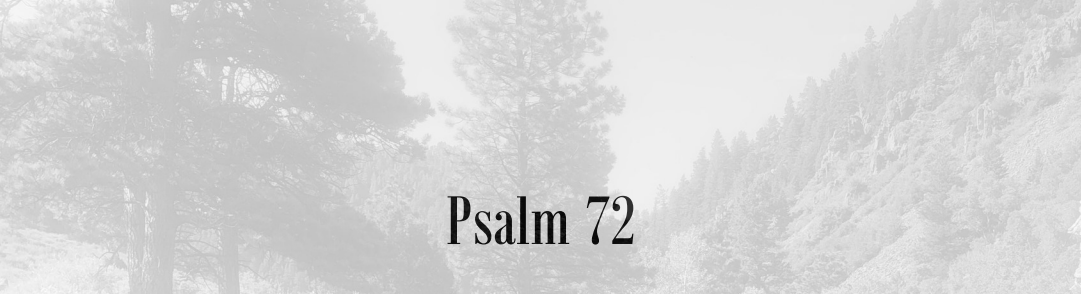
This is what coming to Him when our strength is spent looks like. When we have wrestled, when we have fought, and when we have failed to rule over sin, if He truly is our *tik'va* and our *samakb*, then we can have confidence that He will not cut us loose or cast us away. The cry of our affliction reaches His ears and stirs His mercy and His jealousy.

*My God, slip me out from the hand of the unrighteous,
from the palm of those who deal wrongly and the sour ones.*

*For You are my tether, Lord GOD,
to whom I have run for refuge from my youth.
Upon You I have been propped from the belly.
From the innards of my mother You cut me off.
My praise is in You continually.*

*As a shining omen, I have become abundant,
and You are my shelter of strength.
My mouth is filled full with Your praise,
all the day with Your beauty.
Do not cast me away in the time of old age.
As my vigor is spent, do not turn me loose.*

~ Psalm 71:4–9



Psalm 72

I try not to get into weighty theology too much in these studies. My goal is to focus on what prayer looks like and how it is done so that we can apply these things to our own lives. I try not to make these controversial or complicated. I simply want to learn about prayer and grow in it. But this psalm, I am convinced, requires a change in theological mindset.

To oversimplify things, the Bible does not, as Western churches tend to teach, tell the story about how: “Our sin has created an impending wrath that God will one day bring upon us. But oh, thank goodness Jesus came. God punished Him instead of us so that we can leave the horrid world behind and go to heaven.” Instead, the story is about God creating a good universe that is designed to be ruled by a human king in submission to God.

This king’s dominion was to be a small pocket of beauty and abundance within a dark and chaotic world. And the king was to extend that kingdom to the ends of the earth. All of creation outside the kingdom would see the glory of the kingdom. Seeing it, they would want to come be a part of the kingdom, even if only as a servant. The Bible tells the story of how this king and queen abdicated their throne and went into exile. It tells how none had been found worthy and able to reclaim the throne to continue the mission of expanding the kingdom

to the ends of the earth. Now, read this psalm with that narrative in mind.

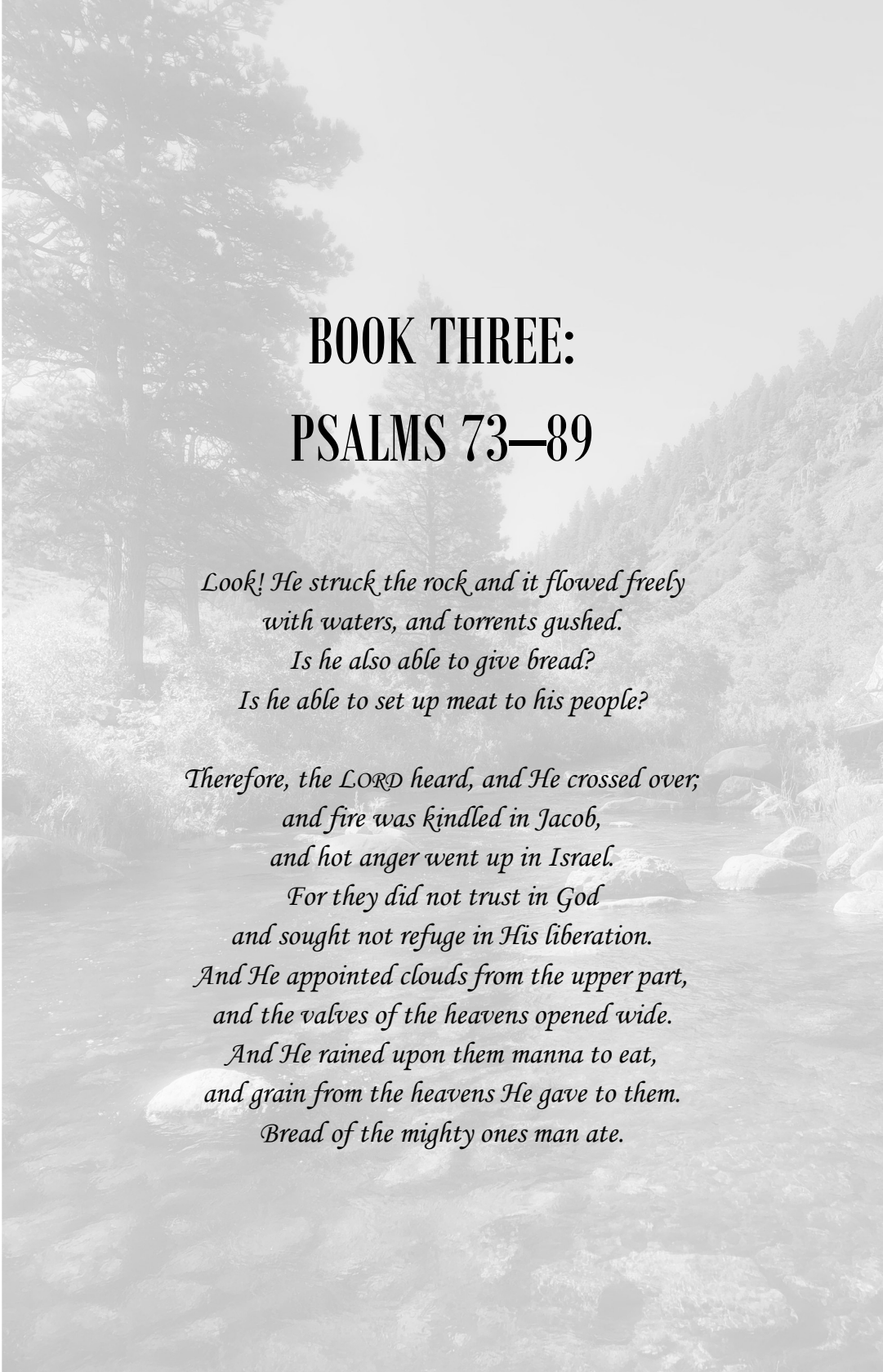
With that focus, this prayer is all about restoration. Solomon was praying for that king. He wanted to see that king on the throne. We don't know when exactly he wrote this, but it seems likely he was hoping God would make him that king. If we know the Solomon story, we know it is filled with imagery and language that makes it seem like he created Eden in Israel, but it is also riddled with references to the Torah demonstrating that Solomon was building his Eden upon unrighteousness.

Solomon's prayer in this psalm was simply that God would either make him the Eden King or send the Eden King. He wanted restoration. He wanted God's glory to be the way in which the world operated. He wanted God's mission, to expand Eden to the ends of the cosmos, to be accomplished. All of the language in this poem is about getting a righteous king back into Eden and the blessings that would follow.

Solomon wanted restoration of God's plan and complete reconciliation between God and His people. What are you praying for? Is it this?

*God, give Your justice to the king
and Your righteousness to the son of the king.
May he rule Your people in righteousness
and Your afflicted ones in justice.
The mountains lift up peace to the people,
and the hills in righteousness
will judge the afflicted of the people,
will set free the sons of the destitute,
and break in pieces the oppressor.
They will fear You with the sun
and, in the face of the moon, generations of generations.
He will come down as rain upon sheerings,
as deluges drench the land.
The righteous sprout and bloom in his days
and abundance of peace to the end when the moon is no more.
And he will tread from the sea to the end of the sea
and from the river to the end of the ceasings of the land.*

~ Psalm 72:1–8



BOOK THREE:

PSALMS 73—89

*Look! He struck the rock and it flowed freely
with waters, and torrents gushed.*

Is he also able to give bread?

Is he able to set up meat to his people?

*Therefore, the LORD heard, and He crossed over;
and fire was kindled in Jacob,
and hot anger went up in Israel.*

*For they did not trust in God
and sought not refuge in His liberation.*

*And He appointed clouds from the upper part,
and the valves of the heavens opened wide.*

*And He rained upon them manna to eat,
and grain from the heavens He gave to them.*

Bread of the mighty ones man ate.

He sent out food to them to their satisfaction.

He pulled up the east in the heavens,

and He drove the south in His strength.

*And He rained meat upon them like dust,
and birds of wings as the sand of the seas.*

*And they fell in the midst of their camp,
surrounding their dwellings,*

*and they ate and were sated muchly,
and their longing came to them.*

They did not turn aside from their longing again.

Their food was in their mouth.

And the hot anger of God rose in them.

*It struck their fattest ones to kill,
and the choice ones of Israel bent the knee.*

*In all these things they failed again,
and they did not trust in His distinctions.*

*And He finished their days in fleetingness
and their years in terror.*

*When He struck them and they treaded after Him,
and they turned around and got up early to seek God.*

~ Psalm 78:20–34

Psalm 73

Asaph wrote a prayer here that captures something you hear all the time—why do bad things happen to good people? More accurately, I think the prayer looks at why God allows the unrighteous to prosper and the righteous to suffer. I like his response, though I imagine many will find it unsatisfactory.

Asaph began by venting his lament. He didn't even ask questions. He simply told God what he observed and how he felt things worked. His accusations remain true to our situation even today. Those who are violent and unrighteous seem to have all sorts of goodness in their lives. Those who remain faithful to God seem to get brushed aside and tread upon. By verse 13, Asaph went so far as to say that he lamented having tried to live a righteous life; he felt it was a waste and a fool's hope.

One of the best sections of this prayer is in verses 15–16. Asaph was ashamed of feeling like this and he tried to hide it. He felt like he could not give voice to his emotions or his experience. He felt like he couldn't think through the dissonance he was experiencing. He felt like doing so would be entirely shameful. I think that is something we face in our context. Our culture has made doubting and questioning a shameful thing and a reproach. Heaven forbid anyone should find out that we are experiencing a season of testing or trying so that we can be encouraged and supported. (Or so our culture

seems to tell us.)

The beauty of the prayer and answer to the question begins right after the shame Asaph felt in even having these thoughts and speaking these things. In verse 17, Asaph took the shame and confusion to God. Coming to God's presence set things at peace within Asaph. The next few verses depict the long-term implications of the lifestyles Asaph discussed at the beginning of the prayer. The unrighteous will be sent into exile, and the righteous will be welcomed into the loving arms of a Father. But the beauty is how it ends. The intimacy with God that we can look forward to when the unrighteous are sent into exile is not a future hope, but a present one. Verse 26 depicts the invitation to come to God when broken and weary. And reflecting back through the prayer, you actually see that this is what Asaph had done.

This prayer answers the question of why the righteous suffer hardship and the unrighteous prosper: they don't. While the righteous might suffer toil and hard things while living in the Serpent's kingdom, they also get God. They have a God they can come to. They have a God who hears. They have a God who loves with an exceedingly great love no matter what. They are safely held in His hand. What do the unrighteous really have in comparison?

Asaph came to God in distress. He had bottled it up for fear of shame and rejection. Once he finally opened up to God, God didn't explain the dissonance nor

remove it. But Asaph experienced God's love in a fresh way and recognized that his perspective was centered on the wrong thing. We get to pray to God and be loved by Him. He will not turn His back when we wrestle with doubt or shame. He wants us to bring them to Him so that He can love us through it. Are you doing that?

*If I had said, "I will mark the tally thus,"
look! I would have acted treacherously
toward the generation of Your sons.
And when I weave thoughts to know this toil,
it was in my eye to the end.
I came into the holy place of God.
I discerned their latter part.
Certainly, in slippery places You set them,
You make them fall to ruin.
How they are laid waste!
As a wink they are snatched away
completely from sudden calamity.
As a dream when one suddenly awakes, Lord,
in awaking, You will despise their image.*

~ Psalm 73:15–20



Psalm 74

My wife always teases me when we read Scripture together. I am firmly convinced that the first three chapters of Genesis outline the entire story of the Bible and that everything else in the Scriptures references back to those chapters. Because of that belief, I see Genesis 1–3 imagery everywhere and always end up linking things back to those chapters. I frequently stop while reading to link things back, and apparently it can be distracting.

In the case of this prayer, I can confidently say that I am not imagining the Genesis references. They are everywhere. But to remain focused, I want to highlight a couple of key passages to understand the prayer.

First, notice verses 3–9. In these verses, Asaph asked God to go examine the ruins to see what the hateful one had done. This enemy roared like a deadly beast and wanted to cage others in traps. He (the enemy) used the appointed meetings to lie in wait and set up false signs. Day 4 of the Genesis 1 narrative tells us that the lights in the heavens were set up to govern signs and appointed meetings. This enemy was using them deceptively to trap others. After that, this enemy chopped down the Eden forest and burned the holy place to the ground. The enemy sought to destroy and cause harm and tried even to destroy the heavens.

The second place I wanted to look at was the strange language of verses 13–17. These verses also link

back to Genesis 1–3, though they explain the situation in foreign terms. I say *foreign* because Asaph borrowed a story from his neighboring cultures. Verse 13 talks about God breaking the “sea,” but the Hebrew word for sea is *Yam*, which was also a name of an evil sea dragon goddess of a neighboring culture. Verse 14 also talked about cracking open the heads of Leviathan, the name for the Yam dragon in another neighboring culture. Yam and Leviathan were the neighboring cultures’ depictions of what we might call the Devil in our culture. Though in the ancient Near East, they were the sea dragons of verse 13. In the neighboring cultures, their chief god (Marduk, Ba’al, or otherwise) killed the dragon to defeat chaos. They used her body to establish order in the cosmos. Literally, the created order was believed to be fashioned out of her corpse in their stories. This block of verses uses those well-known stories to speak of God being the one who defeats the terrifying enemies of destruction and establishes structured places for abundant life to thrive.

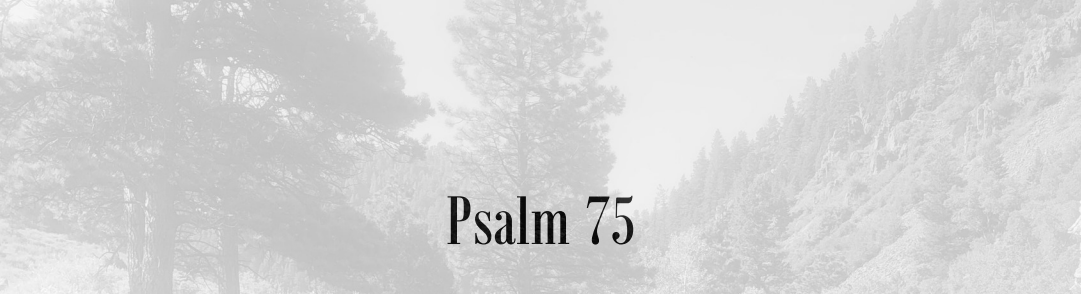
Noticing those references, the prayer becomes simple. Asaph felt as though unrighteous enemies were undoing God’s work to create beauty and life. He asked that God would again do the kind of thing He did in creating the cosmos to begin with. He wanted the forces opposed to God to be completely defeated and the abundance of Eden to cover the land.

There is a lot of imagination in this prayer, and Asaph grabbed a story he knew to use for expressing his

emotions, his situation, and his needs. I think that we can do the same. We can relate to Bible stories in our prayers, but we can also express our situations based on books, movies, personal narratives, songs, artwork, or whatever else conveys the groanings of our souls. God has given us these things to speak into our souls so that our souls can, in turn, speak out of them. Use them in your prayers.

*You broke in pieces in Your strength the Sea (Yam).
You burst the heads of the sea dragons in the waters.
You cracked open the heads of Leviathan.
You gave him as food to the people, to the desert-dwellers.
You cleaved springs and torrents.
You dried up ever-flowing rivers.
To You belongs the day.
Also, to You belongs the night.
You set upright the lights and the sun.
You stationed all the boundaries of the land harvest,
and the gathering You mold into shape.*

~ Psalm 74:13–17



Psalm 75

The prayer in Psalm 75 is simply rejoicing in God's justice. Asaph started by praising God but quickly switched to relaying God's words back to Him. It is unclear if God spoke these words to him, if Asaph was paraphrasing Scripture, or how else he might have come by these words. But God was the One who introduced the concept of His justice. After hearing God speak, Asaph responded by rejoicing in God's justice.

This made me think of Paul's Epistles. Often, he would be writing and then break out into prayer as he reflected on God's character. Paul would start talking about God's glory and be so moved that he would need to stop his train of thought just to worship for a bit.

Do we do this? Are we ever moved to prayer by Scripture? Does our time reading the Bible cause us to pause to worship? Or if we are listening to preaching, reading a book, sharing with others, or reflecting on God's character in similar ways, does our heart ever need to stop to give God the glory He is due?

*We extend our hands to You, God. We extend our hands,
and near Your name they mark the tally of Your distinctions.*

*"For I take appointed times. I judge in uprightness.
The land melts and all who sit in it. I make even its pillars." Selah*

*I said to the boasters, "Do not boast!"
and to the unrighteous, "Do not lift up the horn!
Do not lift up to the heights your horns!
You speak with a forward neck!"*

*For not from the going out and from the evening
and not from the wilderness is the lifting up, for God judges.
This one He lowers, and this one He lifts up.
For a cup is in the hand of the LORD,
and the wine boils full mixture, and it flows from this.*

*Certainly, its dregs will drain.
All the unrighteous of the land will drink.
And I will make conspicuous to the vanishing point.
I will touch the strings to the God of Jacob.
And all the horns of the unrighteous I will fell like a tree.
The horns of the righteous will be lifted up!*

~ Psalm 75

Psalm 76

In Psalm 75, Asaph stopped to praise God's justice, which is a wonderful characteristic of our God's Spirit, though at times a difficult one. Here, in Psalm 76, Asaph praised another difficult characteristic—His fearsomeness.

We are told that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”¹ But beyond quoting that passage, we don't talk much about the fear of the Lord. Asaph used the entire first half of his poem to introduce the idea. God had a reputation. Everyone knew God is not the type of god to be trifled with. I like how verse 2 basically gave God's address, as if to say, “If you want to go toe-to-toe, here is where you can find Him. He is ready!” or how verse 10 basically says, “If you want to come at Him angry, that's fine. He can get angry too!” Whoa. That is a stone-cold threat and not a challenge I want to take up.

While the language sounds like some really good intimidation and trash talk, I do think that the reason why He is to be feared is important. This isn't a fire-and-brimstone passage like it kind of feels. Notice that in verse 3, Asaph listed the things that God burst: fiery arrows, shields, swords . . . and war. And in verses 8–9, His movement gives the land rest and sets the afflicted free. God is the type of god to be feared. As Asaph prayed in verse 7, who can stand against His purposes? He is on a mission to rescue all of His creation from bondage to the

Enemy. Paul also wrote that all creation is held captive by the Enemy and forced to do his will².

God is to be feared because He will put an end to it. The Hebrew word used to describe what God will do is to “burst” the weapons and tools of the Enemy. Literally, He is going to blow it up. God will completely eradicate everything that stands opposed to His will, and nothing can stand against His face. That is why He is to be feared. But it isn’t going to be a violent destruction, but a destruction of violence. And Asaph’s hope for the time when God accomplishes this is why Asaph praised Him for His fearsomeness.

Are we praying for God to do this work? Are we praising Him for being the type of god who both can and will accomplish it? If not, is His purpose really what we hope for? Are we on the wrong side of that fear, fearing that God will oppose our will on that day?

*God is known in Judah,
His mighty name in Israel.
And His shelter is in peace,
and His habitation is in Zion.
There He burst the fiery arrows,
the buckler and the cutter, and war. Selah*

*You are vastly illuminated
from the mountains of prey.
The ones mighty of heart were stripped.
They slumber in their sleep,
and the hands of all men of power come not forth.
From Your rebuke, God of Jacob,
chariot and horse were stunned.
You are to be feared.
And who will stand against Your face
from the time of Your anger?
From the heavens You make heard the reign.
The land feared and rested.
In arising to justice, God,
to liberate all the afflicted of the land. Selah*

*For, the passion of humanity will extend hands to You.
A remnant of passion You will gird.
Vow and complete your vows to the LORD, your God.
All around Him will flow gifts to him who fears.
He will prune the spirit of feared leaders to the kings of the land.*

~ Psalm 76



Psalm 77

There are a couple of things I wanted to note with this psalm. First, this psalm appears in *The Chosen*, the TV series created by Dallas Jenkins. It appears in Season 3, Episode 8 in two separate contexts in the show. That episode depicts the psalm being performed by Asaph for King David. That makes this psalm, but also the entire book of Psalms, come into color in a way that I found really beautiful and helpful. The other context is that you get to see how the psalm would have been used by ancient Jews because a few of the characters interact with the psalm throughout the episode. I imagine you would need to watch the whole series up to that point to really understand the context, but I cannot imagine anyone would regret doing so. I was very impacted by experiencing this psalm through that context.

The other focus of this psalm is on the references to the Exodus story. When Asaph was in distress and feeling like he couldn't even bring his sorrow to God, he reflected on the history of his people and of God. The story of the Sea of Reeds came to his mind. Likely, this part of the Exodus narrative brought reminders of the rest of the story leading up to it. But Asaph thought about the parting of the sea specifically. The people felt hopeless. They were distraught. They assumed they would die because they were encompassed by forces of destruction.

But, in their moment of despair, God proved that He had not forgotten. He proved that He is both powerful and faithful. He performed the greatest act of liberation in the early story of the Jews. It was so powerful that it became the defining story of the entire people group to this very day. The Jews made that the beginning of their calendar and celebrate this story as the start of their year.

This is significant because Asaph was shaped by the story of God as a faithful liberator. This story had become his story. When he was in trouble, the story he had internalized became his heart song and his hope. And I believe this is the purpose of the Scriptures—God has given us these words in order to surround us with a story. It is the story of the Christian people. And it is there to become our heart song and our hope.

Is the Gospel story your story? Have you internalized it? Have you made it your hope in ways that actually are reflected in your life? Does it shape how you pray? Does it shape the hope that you have? That is what it means to have faith—to see yourself inside the narrative of Scripture and allow the story of God's work to be your story in ways that show in your life.

*Will the Lord push aside to the vanishing point?
And will He not be pleased again?
Has His loyal love ceased until the goal?
Has His speech ended to generation and generation?
Has God mislaid graciousness?
Or drawn up in His anger His compassion? Selah*
~ Psalm 77:7–9

Psalm 79

I couldn't help applying this prayer to the context of regeneration by the Spirit. In truth, we don't know what the actual context for the prayer was. There is no story in the Scriptures that matches the situation described in this psalm during the time of Asaph. It is possible that this psalm is prophetically depicting the future; it is far more likely that Asaph was speaking figuratively and symbolically applying these pictures to his own struggle. I felt the impulse to do the same thing.

It was verse 8 that gave me this idea. Asaph asked for the crookedness of *rishonim* to not be held against him. This word is usually translated as "forefathers," or something similar, but at its basest level means "formers." I couldn't help but see myself in this situation.

Asaph described a bloody and devastating destruction, where God's kingdom was ravaged and the dead were strewn around and rotting. It was the sins of the formers that caused it. The formers had driven the nations away from seeing who God is. The formers had brought shame upon His kingdom. The formers had caused God to abandon the kingdom to its fate.

But Asaph prayed as someone who wasn't a former. He was something else; something unlike the formers. He was one who hoped in God's nurturing love. He was one who hoped in God's liberating mission. He was one who was passionate to see God's name glorified.

I think we often wrestle with the consequences of our failures. When we fail to bear God's image appropriately, we bring about shame and destruction. When we turn to God, we expect God to take away the consequences. Sometimes He does, but other times He has a better plan. But the cry of God's people, from Cain until new creation, is for God to fix what we have broken and to cover over where we have failed. This is that prayer.

*Do not mark for remembrance to us
the crookedness of our formers.
Hurry, come to meet us in You nurturing love
for we are languishing muchly.
Help us, God of our liberation,
to speak the significance of Your name,
and snatch us away and cover over
upon our failure to the purpose of Your name.
Why do the people groups say, "Where is their God?"
Make known in the people groups before our eyes
vengeance for the blood of Your servants,
which has been poured out.*

~ Psalm 79:8–10

Psalm 80

This psalm is a beautiful poem. The amount of imagery and symbolism in this poem, along with how well the language captures the overall plot arc and tension of the Bible, could fill an entire book. As I wrote this, I needed to pause for a moment just to marvel at this work.

The overall prayer is simple, though. Asaph was grieving over the condition of their people and over the state of the world. There is so much hope. Asaph expressed confidence that God would liberate Israel and the world from the dominion of the Enemy four times in nineteen verses. The psalm is full of so much confidence in God's power. Asaph referred to God as *Elohim tzeva'ot* (God of hosts) four times in this short psalm, among other references to God's power. But most of all, I feel a negative emotion in this poem. I cannot pinpoint whether it is exactly confusion, disappointment, or something else. Perhaps it is all of them. But you can tell there is a sorrow overshadowing the entire thing.

Asaph knew the world wasn't right. He described first the sorrow of his own people and asked God for restoration, or more specifically for a turnaround. He was asking God to turn back the clock to before sin broke everything. He was asking God to turn them around on the path to head back toward Eden, rather than She'ol. He pleaded for things to turn around because he

recognized things were going from good toward bad.

After grieving over his own people, he took it to a cosmic level. All the language from verses 8-16 tells us about how God had planted Israel to be a new tree of Life in a new Eden, so that the world could be set right and all the land could be watered from the river of Eden. But it focuses on how that mission was not on track. Again, Asaph prayed for God to turn things around. The universe was not getting better, but worse. This rescue mission, called Israel, was not gaining ground, but retreating in a route. Asaph begged God to turn it around.

Interestingly, the word *shuv* is also used four times in this prayer. In the Old Testament, we usually translate this as “turn,” but in the New Testament, the Greek analogue to this word gets translated as “repent.” The message of the Bible is not for individuals to repent so that we can be saved from hell. It is the lament of the universe, asking God to turn things around. All parts of creation are crying out for God to turn things around. And we are invited to turn around and walk in accordance with the turning around that God is accomplishing in us.

So how about you? Are you turning around? Are you hoping in a complete turnaround? Are you lamenting that which is not yet turned? This is what it means to have faith in Jesus. Not just that He is God, but that He is turning things around and that we are passionate about being a part of the turned-around cosmos. Do your prayers reflect that?

*God of hosts, turn things around we plead.
Look from the heavens and see and visit this vine,
and the plant which Your right hand has planted
and on the son You have made stout to You.*

*Burned in fire, cut down from the rebuke of Your face,
they wander away and perish.
Let Your hand be upon man,
Your right hand upon the son of humanity.
You make stout to Yourself.
And we will not move back from You.*

*Revive us, and in Your name we will call.
LORD God of hosts, turn around,
and make Your face shine, and we will be set free.*

~ Psalm 80:14–19

Psalm 83

I want to mention, before discussing Psalm 83, why I skipped over Psalm 82. As I read through that psalm, the language was very unclear as to who was speaking and whom they were speaking to. I came to the conclusion that God was speaking to the other spiritual beings a rebuke for their mismanagement of their spheres of authority. I could be wrong, but that is where I landed and why I did not include that psalm in this book on prayer.

Entering into Psalm 83, it was verse 3 that specifically stood out to me. Asaph was asking God to move against their enemies because the enemies were plotting against God's *tzafan*, or "hidden treasure." It reminded me of a synonym of *tzafan* which is *segula*. Together, these words paint an intimate picture. The first instance of *tzafan* being used in the Scriptures is when Moses's mother looked upon him. Moses was a treasure to her. Later, when God gave Moses the commandments, He said that if the people would obey His voice they would be His "treasured possession," or *segula*. I think Malachi 3:17 paints the best picture of the idea. God was proclaiming His judgment coming to consume the world for its defilement, but yet there would be a remnant of faithful people who would be treasured by God. They were the ones He would enter the fire to bring safely out. It is the thing a heart prizes above all else.

In our psalm, Asaph tugged on this string. I cannot say that I have ever appealed to this idea. I have never played the *if you love me then you better . . .* card with God. But I have been on the *that is my beloved so you better not . . .* side of things. Asaph pulled on that heartstring. Like Delilah asking Samson how he could say he loved her while treating her the way he did³, Asaph was asking God how He could claim His people were His treasure if He did not move against their enemies.

Do you see yourself as God's treasured possession? If you seek after Him and strive to obey, then you are His treasured possession. It can be hard to humble ourselves to play the Delilah in our relationship with God, but that is the relationship we have. He loves us and prizes us above all else. Let us pray in light of that love and the love we should have in response.

*My God, place them as the whirlwind,
as chaff to the face of the wind,
like fire kindles a forest
and like a flame blazed the mountains.
Therefore, run after them in Your tempest,
and in Your storm wind make them tremble.
Fill full their faces with disgrace
and they will search out Your name, LORD.
Make them pale, and they will tremble
to the end of the end,
and they will blush, and they will be destroyed.
And they will know that You, Your name, LORD,
alone, Most High, are over all the land.*

~ Psalm 83:13–18



Psalm 84

This type of prayer is one of the types I need to work on most myself, and I imagine you might too. If you are in the same boat as me in regard to this type of prayer, I think it is to our shame. I think lacking in this type of prayer demonstrates a childishness and a self-centeredness that is unfitting for a mature walk with God.

Think of it in terms of family dynamics. Babies communicate with their families only through screamed demands. It isn't their fault, they can't do otherwise, but it is hard to say this is a mature relationship or communication method. As children learn words, they begin to tell us what they want and then to ask for what they want. Then, we start working on "please" and "thank you." By the teenage years, a human should be able to notice things that are done for them and go out of their way to express that gratitude. (Notice I said they *should* be able to do it, not that they practice it.)

And as we get older and the family relationship turns to marriage and parenting, the communication still grows. Now, there is intuiting the other's needs. There is spontaneity in showing gratitude for the whole of what a spouse does, not only specific things. But the best is the unprovoked expression of delight in the other. This isn't a thanksgiving. It isn't in response to anything. It is simply a pouring out of love. It is when a husband sees flowers while out and desires to bring them home to his wife just

because he loves her. Or when a wife comes behind a husband to hug him while he is working and tell him she loves him. It is those times when the feelings of love that a person brings you overflows and something must be done.

The sons of Korah, in this prayer, did just that. They came to God in prayer simply out of love for Him. Nothing here in this prayer suggests they needed anything. Nothing in the language suggests they were responding in thanksgiving for anything specific. They simply loved God and wanted to express that love to Him.

That is what a mature, loving relationship looks like. How does your expression of your love for God compare? Join me in pursuing God in this kind of prayer and love.

*How lovely are Your dwelling place, LORD of hosts.
My very life has longed for,
and even become spent for, the yards of the LORD.
My heart and my flesh shout for joy to the God of life.
Also the little bird has brought forth a house
and the swallow a nest to herself
where she may put the burstings of her eggs,
Your altars, LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.*

*The good life belongs to the ones who sit in Your house,
whoever make You shine. Selah*

~ Psalm 84:1—4

Psalm 85

This is another psalm where the word choice really stands out. The word *shuv* is used five times in the first eight verses. This word often gets translated as “repent” but literally means to “turn around.” Interestingly, the person acting in relation to these turnings is God. The sons of Korah recounted some of the times God had turned the people away from danger or sin to return to walking in His ways. They also asked God to turn them around again because they were, once again, wandering down the way that leads to death. Finally, they expressed confidence that God would rescue them and guard them against returning.

In addition to the repeated use of the word *shuv*, there were also three other action words that stand out in those first verses. When God turned His people around, He *lifted up* their crookedness and *gathered up* His outpoured punishment. They were now asking God to *break up* His vexation with them. They first asked for a turn around and then asked for removal of the consequences of their waywardness.

Finally, notice the last five verses. The word *near* stands out to me. After all the turning and removing language, there follows language of proximity. Their prayer was not asking, “Anywhere but here.” They had something more specific in mind. They wanted rescue from the path that leads to death, forgiveness for their

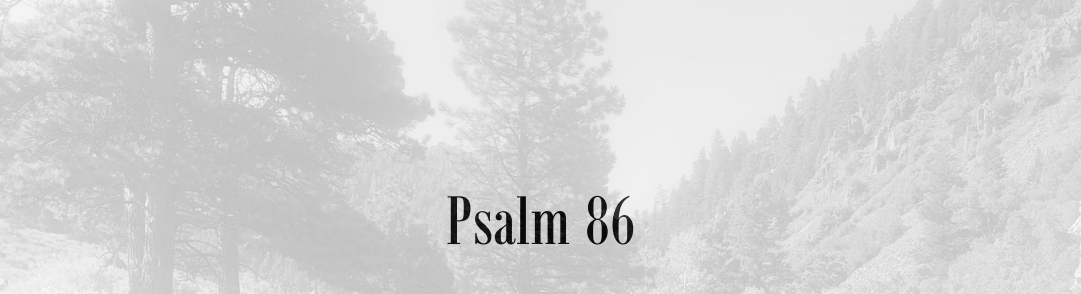
unrighteousness toward God, and reconnection with God in intimacy. These last verses show the true desire of the sons of Korah. They wanted to be near God. They wanted to live in closeness to Him. They wanted to experience His loyal love, trustworthiness, righteousness, and peace.

I think we are more comfortable with the first parts than the last part. But even in the first part, do we ask Him to turn us around? Do we ask Him to cause us to repent? I do not think this psalm is teaching us not to repent in our own selves, but that repentance comes from God as much as ourselves. But mostly, I wonder how much we want the things in the last part. Do our prayers demonstrate a passion for those things? Or do they simply show a desire to be taken out of the hot water before we boil?

*Make us see, LORD Your loyal love,
and give to us Your liberation.
I will listen to what the LORD God will say,
for peace He will speak to His people
and to His loyally loved ones
and not let them turn around to foolish hope.*

*Certainly, He is near to those who fear Him.
He liberates them to lodge His significance in our land.
Loyal love and trustworthiness meet together.
Righteousness and peace have fastened on each other.
Trustworthiness sprouts from the land,
and righteousness leans out from the heavens to look.*

~ Psalm 85:7–11



Psalm 86

Have you ever done a *names of God* study? There are many out there, and they all seem to have focused in on a handful of phrases. It is an interesting study, but I have never personally loved any of them I have seen. Perhaps I just haven't found one I like. Regardless, that seems to be what David was praying in this prayer.

While I never loved the *names of God* studies, I always liked the stories that go along with the names. When Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah and God saw Abraham's faithfulness and stayed his hand, Abraham called the place *Yahweh Yireh* because God saw him and provided. That name has been applied to God Himself, as well as the place. When Hagar was visited by God's messenger, she gave God a similar name. After the battle in the wilderness with Moses lifting his hands to the heavens on the hillside, God became known as the people's Banner. The names given to God in the Scriptures usually are after an event where the namegiver experienced an attribute of God and celebrated God for being that attribute (the One who sees, the One who heals, the One who is a banner, etc.).

David's prayer is filled with celebrations of who God had been in his life. David said God loved him with a loyal love. He called God a refuge. He called God good. He called Him forgiving. God was the One who answered him when he called out. God's nature and works were

unparalleled in David's eyes. These things were how David saw God, and he littered his prayer with who He knew God to be.

After laying all of this out, David talked about God's name three times in verses 9–12 before finally proclaiming God's name, His true name, in verse 15. When Moses first met God on Mount Sinai at the beginning of Exodus, God gave Moses His moniker, something for the people to call Him by. But it was not until Moses had stepped into his role and the people had bound themselves to God in covenant that God finally declared His true name to Moses⁴. Verse 15 of this prayer is nearly verbatim of what God's messenger proclaimed to be God's true name.

Interwoven with all of the name language is David's request. The prayer hints at troubles and distresses, but when it comes down to it, David's prayer was for deliverance from his own crookedness. He wanted to be shown how to walk in God's way so he would not end up in the lowest depths of the grave. David appealed to God with this request based upon who he knew God to be. And he had confidence that God would act in accordance with His own name. This follows the same method we have seen in countless other prayers, where the person praying is encouraged to have confidence because of God's character and to hold God to account for His own behavior based on who He claims to be.

What names do you have for God? Who have you seen Him to be? How are you implementing that into your own prayers?

Favor me, Lord, for to You I call out all the day.

*Rejoice the soul of Your servant,
for to You, Lord, I lifted up my soul.*

*For You, Lord, are good and forgiving
and abundant in loyal love to all You call.*

*Give ear, LORD, to my prayers,
and prick up the ears in the sound
of my request for favor.*

*In the day of my tightness,
I call to You, for You heed me.*

*None exists like You among the gods, Lord,
and none exist like Your works.*

~ Psalm 86:3–8



Psalm 88

Jesus taught, in several places, about being persistent in prayer. Whether the persistent widow⁵ or the often-misunderstood story of the man going to his neighbor late at night to borrow bread for a friend⁶, persistence was a big issue on Jesus's mind. I think this prayer is a powerful demonstration of the kind of persistence Jesus called for.

I think this is one of the most macabre of all the psalms. The entire first half is truly, very sad. It breaks your heart to read the lament of the sons of Korah. The second half starts with a few verses that are not sad, but it ends in sorrow again. But those few verses are the hope of this prayer. The sons of Korah did not seem to have any hope of avoiding their fate. They felt doomed and did not expect deliverance, even though they asked for it.

But even in the time when they resigned themselves to their fate, they continued to pray. The sons of Korah felt that God works wonders, even for the dead in the grave. There was hope to worship God even among the shades of She'ol. God's love would be whispered among the halls of Death, and even as the "land of forgetting" robbed the dead of their memories, still they would remember God's character.

That is persistence. They spoke of prayer beyond hope. They spoke of prayer beyond death. They spoke of prayer without ever having confidence that they would receive what they wanted. They would faithfully enter into

death, and they would faithfully continue in prayer from the belly of the grave.

How persistent are you in prayer? Do you have prayers that you will carry into the grave? Do you even have prayers that will matter after you die? I confess that most of my prayers are small. I pray for rest at night and blessing in the morning. I pray for work and safety, even success on a hunting or fishing trip. Most of those prayers are unimportant after a few hours. God wants us to bring them to Him, but what about big prayers? Prayers for God's purposes in the world? Prayers for the hearts of people to be turned toward God? Prayers for all creation to be made new? Are you praying prayers that will matter when you die? Do you have the faith to carry your prayers into death and continue to persevere in faithful prayer even in the grave?

You have made those I know distant from me.

You have made me an abomination to them.

I am shut up, and I cannot go out.

My eye pines from my affliction.

I have called out to You, LORD, in all the day.

I have spread my palms to You.

You will work wonders to the dead.

The shades will arise and extend the hands to You.

~ Psalm 88:8-10



Psalm 89

This prayer is identified by *Eetan*, the author, as a contemplative poem, or *mas'kil*. It isn't hard to see why. The poem begins with how amazing God is and then moves into a discussion of the blessings the people receive from God. There is a long speech from God about the best blessing that He gave to His people: David. God gave David as His anointed one to rule over the people, to contend with the other "mighty ones," and to be a conduit of God's blessing to the people. But then God's speech talks about how God would be faithful when His anointed turned his back on God. Once God's speech finished, Eetan questioned God's loyal love because he didn't see God living up to His promises. The lament almost seems to cut off in verse 51 because it never comes to any resolution or conclusion. It simply turns on its heel and gives a powerful one-line praise of God. The lack of transitions is jarring.

But if we look at the beginning of the poem, we find Eetan gave a couple of clues as to why there is such joy in the poem when much of the poem sounds like a lament. In verse 3, Eetan tells us that God made a covenant. God had promised His chosen one that He would give perpetual blessing to him. The poem is packed full of language about God's loyalty and trustworthiness. It would seem Eetan wanted to point out that he had a lot of confidence in God's intention to keep His covenant.

God also outlined His purpose for the covenant. In verses 6–12, you get hints of the rebelliousness of creation. The gods seem to struggle to follow God, and some even try to rebel. They work together with creation to work against God's purposes, and God has to constantly keep them in line. God said, in verse 19, that He was raising up His anointed one to stand among the rebellious powers as the one who would execute God's reign over creation. This anointed one was to be the method God used to accomplish His purposes.

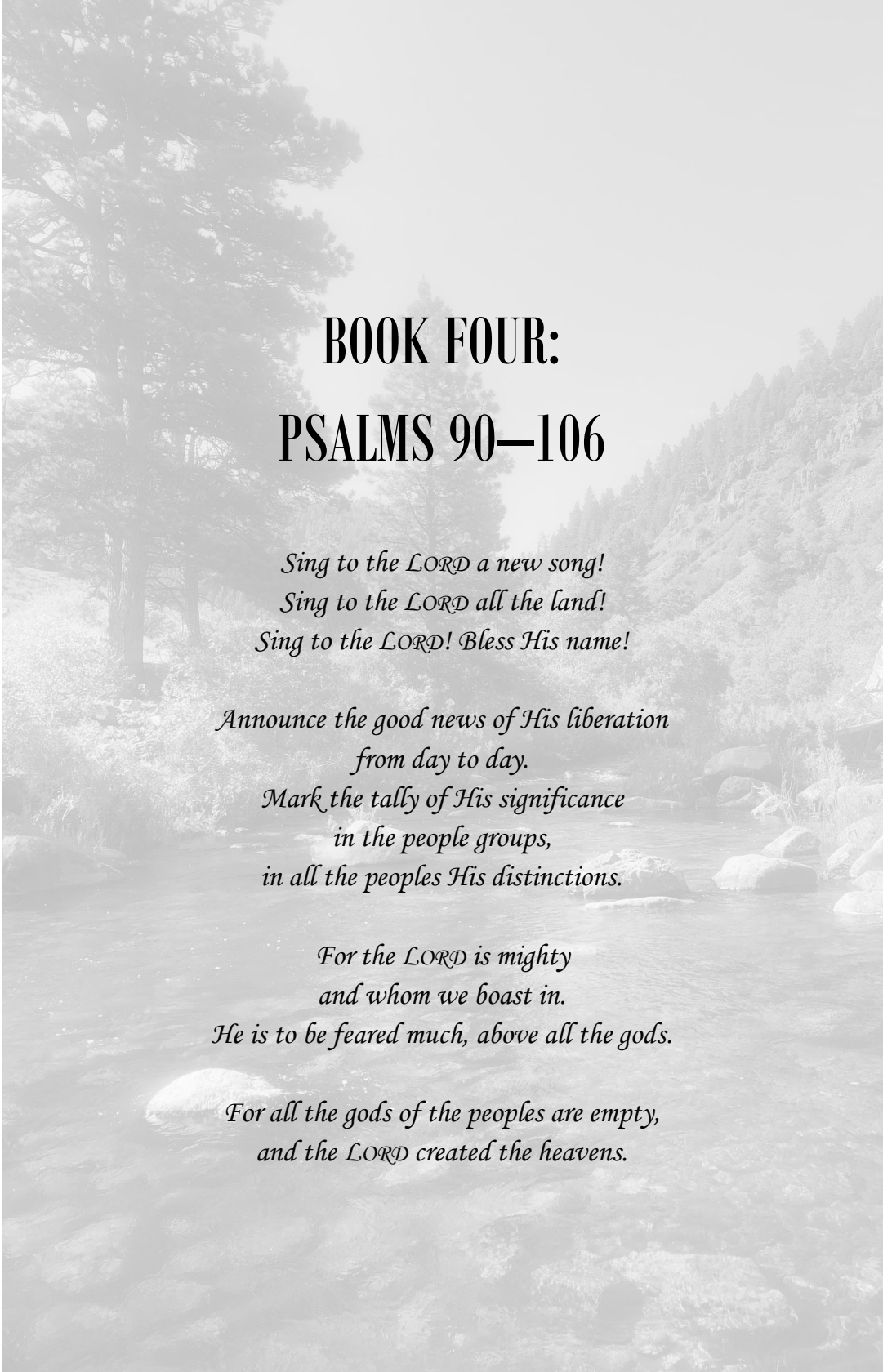
Bringing all of this together, you end up with a poem that takes some contemplating. You end up with a poem about how Eetan did not think God was living up to His word or keeping His promises, but yet is a poem rejoicing in God. It all seems to boil down to Eetan having a tremendous amount of trust in God. He did not think God was doing what He had promised. He even called God out on those things, seemingly telling God to refocus on what He had promised. But all the while, Eetan rejoiced because he believed God. He believed God would do what He had promised and believed God is trustworthy. This is not a poem where Eetan calls God a liar, but rather where Eetan trusted that his own situation would change because he trusted God is *not* a liar. The difference is subtle, but you can see his heart. This is what it looks like to doubt in faith and to question in faith.

So, how about you? How do you pray these prayers questioning God? How do you come before God

when what you see and experience doesn't match what God has said? Is your faith like Eetan's?

*He will call to Me "My Father!
You are my God and the Rock of my liberating."
Also, I will give My firstborn,
the Most High, to the kings of the land.
To the vanishing point I will hedge to him My loyal love,
and My covenant will be sustained to him.
And I will set upright to the end his seed,
and his throne as the days of the heavens.
If his sons cut ties with My teaching
and they not walk in My justice,
if My statutes they pierce
and My commands they do not hedge,
I will visit in the branch their betrayals
and in blows their crookedness.*

~ Psalm 89:26–32



BOOK FOUR:

PSALMS 90—106

*Sing to the LORD a new song!
Sing to the LORD all the land!
Sing to the LORD! Bless His name!*

*Announce the good news of His liberation
from day to day.*

*Mark the tally of His significance
in the people groups,
in all the peoples His distinctions.*

*For the LORD is mighty
and whom we boast in.
He is to be feared much, above all the gods.*

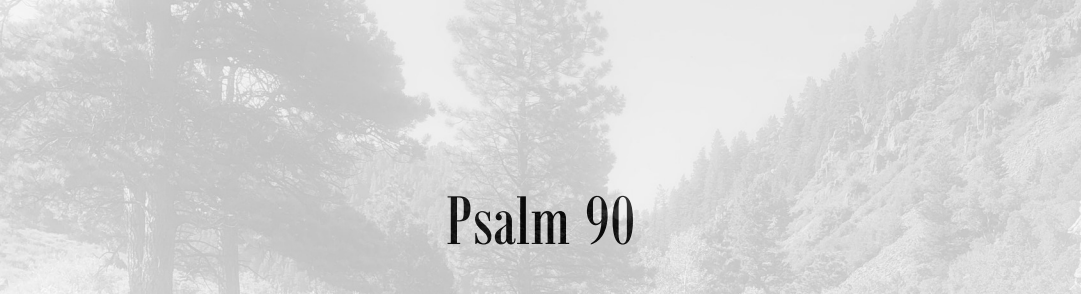
*For all the gods of the peoples are empty,
and the LORD created the heavens.*

*Grandeur and majesty belong to His face,
strength and glory in His holy place.*

*Give to the LORD, clans of the peoples.
Give to the LORD significance and strength.
Give to the LORD significance.*

*Lift up an offering and come to His courts.
Bow down to the LORD in holy adornment.
Writhe from His face all the land.*

~ Psalm 96:1–9



Psalm 90

It is hard to read this psalm and miss the abundance of language about time. There is talk about days and years all over the place, juxtaposed with language of eternity. We don't know when Moses wrote this, but I imagine it coming from the latter part of his life, somewhere around the time of the book of Deuteronomy. As I reflected on the prayer, it reminded me of conversations you have with your grandpa when he starts getting up there in years. You hear grandparents say things like, "It goes by in a flash!" and, "Enjoy it while you can because it will be over before you know it!" We tend to brush those comments off, but Moses seems to be praying from that same mindset. I think he was reflecting on the ups and downs of his life and seeing how God was interwoven with all of it.

I think the crux of the poem comes in verse 12. Moses asked God to teach God's people to weigh out their lives, as Moses seemingly had done here. Moses had weighed out the insignificance of his own lifespan in comparison with God's. He recognized he was a fool and could not see the forest for the trees in comparison with God's perspective. He perceived that his own acquired wisdom led only to sorrow, but leaning on God's wisdom led to blessing and life. This is a prayer after reflection. It is a prayer for perspective, humility, and wisdom. It is a prayer that recognizes that we act like three-year-old children telling their parents they know better. It is also a

prayer Moses prayed for the people and for their children.

I think this comes as a challenge to us. Moses seems to have believed this reflection is a source of wisdom. This prayer reminds me of James's instruction to pray for wisdom if we lack it¹. I think that Moses modeled that for us here in this psalm. Will we pray likewise? Will we contemplate these things in prayer?

*Who knows the strength of Your anger
and as Your fear, Your outpouring of emotion.
Therefore, teach us to weigh out our days,
and we will come with a heart of wisdom.*

*Now, turn around, LORD, to the end.
And have compassion upon Your servant.
Sate us in the morning with Your loyal love,
and we will shout for joy and rejoice in all our days.*

*Make us joyful according to the days You have afflicted us,
the years we have seen bad.
Make Your work seen to Your servants,
and Your magnificence upon their sons.*

*And let the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us
and the creation of our hands set upright to us
and the creation of our hands set upright.*

~ Psalm 90:11–17

Psalm 91

I think the dialogue of the prayer and God's response set the tone for this poem. In verse 2, the psalmist called God his shelter and stronghold and said he would flee to God for protection. In verses 14–16, God welcomed the psalmist into His protection because the psalmist “has clung to” God. Maybe it is because I have young kids, but when I think of clinging, I think of a firm latching on. Whether it is a kid playfully wrapping around my lower leg so I cannot move nor shake them off, or whether it is a sad or scared child wrapped around my neck with no intention of letting go because I am the only safe place in their world, the clinging is similar. It is firm and tight. It is relentless. And the more desperate the need or the threat of removing the child becomes, the tighter the squeeze and the deeper their face burrows into me. That is what God rewards the psalmist for. That is what it looks like to flee to God for protection.

The remainder of the poem is a big discussion of what the safety of God looks like. God is called “the Most High” twice, and once, the psalmist tells the listener that God will place those seeking His protection in a “high safe place.” His messengers lift up; the dangers are trampled down. He releases from traps and covers over. Those who trust Him flee to Him and are covered by Him, while bad things are repulsed by Him and will not draw near. And at the end of the poem, those finding

refuge in God not only receive safety, but they are also sated and glorified.

The most significant thing about this psalm is that it seems to clearly be where Jesus was drawing from in His lament over and rebuke of Jerusalem². He wanted His people to come to Him in this way, but they refused. He wanted to show them nurturing love, but they hated Him. He sent His messengers to lift them up, but they cast the messengers down into the grave. Jesus invited the leaders of Jerusalem (And I think all people.) to reflect on the childlike safety God offers in this poem and to realize that we tend to identify with the trappers, pestilence, and unrighteous ones in the poem more than we do with the psalmist.

I think this merits prayer on a few things. I think we need to ask God to show us how we fall short of the psalmist here. I think we need to ask for God to fix our eyes upon Him as our refuge in this way. I think we need to ask for persistence to remain focused on Him in this way. And we need to ask for hearts that cling to Him like a young child emotionally waking up from a nap. That is our path to peace and satisfaction.

For You, LORD, are my shelter.

Set your dwelling most high.

Bad will not meet to you,

and plague will not come near your tent.

For His messengers He will appoint to you

to hedge you in all your way.

Upon their palms they will lift you up,

lest you dash your foot in a stone.

Upon a roarer and a twisting venomous serpent you will walk.

You will tread down a young lion and the chaos dragon.

~ Psalm 91:9–13



Psalm 92

This poem has a sort of circular nature. It begins by declaring that the worship of God and the making of music to God's name are *tov*. We translate this word as "good," but it is a specific type of good. We see in the early chapters of Genesis several examples of *tov* and a couple of examples of *lo tov* (not good). The repetition of these words is meant to build into our brains that when God says something is good—He means good for creating or sustaining abundant life for all creation. So, bringing that back to the psalm, the psalmist asserts that we draw life from worshipping God and making music to His name.

The interesting thing about the prayer is that the psalmist explains why we worship—because God does *tov*. He does amazing things that fill our lives with joy and abundance. He stands as a barrier against all things that seek to oppose abundant life. God does *tov*, and that inspires us to rejoice in God. Our rejoicing in God is also *tov* to us. Presumably, upon recognizing the *tov* we receive from the worship and making of music, we would then worship more and make more music, which would lead to more *tov*. This is why I called the prayer circular.

So, the prayer points out the obvious questions. Have you received joy and abundance from God? If you do not believe that you have, pray for it and for open eyes to recognize it. If you have received it, have you

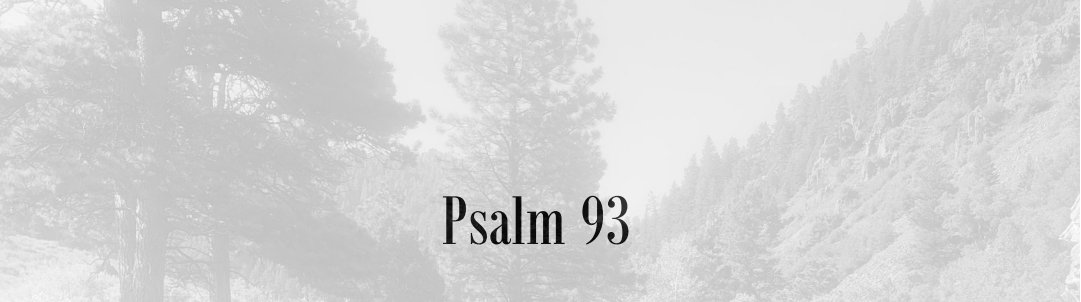
worshiped in response? Just as Paul wrote about making his joy complete by receiving God's love and allowing it to inspire more love³, you are encouraged to make your joy complete in receiving more abundant life by worshiping over the abundant life you have.

*It is good to extend hands to the LORD
and to touch the strings to Your name, Most High,
to make conspicuous in the morning Your loyal love
and Your trustworthiness in the nights.
With the lute and with the harp,
with meditative sound in the lyre.*

*For You give me joy, LORD, in Your works.
In the works of Your hand, I will shout for joy.
How mighty are Your works, LORD.
Your contrivances are very deep.
A man of brutishness does not see,
and a dullard does not distinguish this.
The unrighteous, in their bud breakings, are like herbage,
and all the doers of crookedness blossom
to be exterminated to the end of the end.*

*And You, who is raised up to the vanishing point,
LORD, look! Those who hate You.
For look, LORD, those who hate You will be destroyed.
All doers of crookedness will be divided up.
And You have raised up, like an ox, my horn.
I overflow in fresh oil.*

~ Psalm 92:1–10



Psalm 93

This is a short little poem and easy to overlook. One of the shortest psalms, it has no introduction nor apparent contextual setting. But in sitting with the poem, you can feel the unspoken context. It is a prayer of confidence in the midst of turmoil.

Have you ever felt like you were on unstable ground? Not literally, but simply shaken by something in a way that nothing seems stable? Perhaps a loved one died, and you are coping with the loss of someone who has been a stabilizing force in your life. Perhaps issues with infidelity or divorce have robbed you of your trust. Perhaps something happened that stripped away your ability to accomplish a dream or passion. We all have anchors in our lives and to have them moved or even removed is troubling, to say the least.

The psalmist, here, seems to have been working through the healing of that shaking event. Whatever the event, the psalmist felt unstable and adrift. He felt the waters of death roaring and dashing, mounting and breaking. He was lost, scared, and overwhelmed. But in that distress, the psalmist sandwiched the distress with his confidence in God. He latched onto God's power and dependability. He latched onto God as the King who reigns among His people as the one Anchor that could not be shaken, even though all other anchors would be shaken.

And notice how he clung to that hope. He didn't just write himself a poem about God's dependability. He prayed the poem. He didn't just trust that God was there somewhere, watching after him. He came before God to talk with God as a method of experiencing God in his own distress. It is the same as a hurt child. A child doesn't want to *know* his mom loves him when he is hurt; he wants to *experience* that love, so he runs to her for a hug and comfort. That is what the psalmist did here.

I have often heard that we are supposed to remind ourselves of God's character, but why not rather come to Him and allow Him to demonstrate His character to us? Instead of preaching to ourselves, why not experience God and let that shape us? Why not come to God to experience Him more and more?

*The LORD reigns with up-mountings.
He is wrapped. The LORD is wrapped.
He has girded Himself with strength.
Also, He set upright the habitable world;
it will not be shaken.*

*Set Your throne upright from the time.
You are from the vanishing point.
You have lifted up the rivers, LORD,
You have lifted up in the rivers their dashing.
From the sounds of abundant waters,
the large bursters of the sea, large in height, LORD.
Your testimonies are supported very much.
Holiness is appropriate in Your house, LORD, to length of days.*
~ Psalm 93



Psalm 94

I wonder if you have ever prayed this kind of prayer. In fact, I am not sure that I can say I have. This is a Job 1 and 2 kind of prayer. There is anguish in the poem. The psalmist was clearly in a bad spot. He even lamented the deplorable condition of the entire people. They were all suffering and being afflicted.

But the reason this poem hits so hard is the confidence in the face of sorrow. If you look at the repeated phrases at the beginning and end of the prayer, you notice a request for God to work miraculous wonders to rescue His people, a question of how long God would wait before He acted, and a confident assertion that God's work is going to happen. Notice the back-and-forth in verses 7–10. It almost sounds mocking, as if the psalmist were saying, “You guys are saying what now? You’ve gotta be kidding me! How foolish can you be?” You have the confident opposition the psalmist commits to in verse 16. All of it comes together to paint a picture of real confidence.

Now, I can honestly say that I have prayed with that kind of confidence and commitment. I can even say I have prayed with that kind of confidence and commitment in some pretty bad situations. But not like the psalmist here. Not like Job. Do I have that intensity of faith? Is my love for God that strong? Is yours? This

inspires me to pray for a deeper love for God and a deeper faith. I would invite you to join me in that prayer.

*The One who plants the ear, does He not hear?
Does not He who sculpted the eye gaze?
He who disciplines the people groups, does He not correct?
Does the One who goads man have knowledge?
The LORD knows the contrivances of humanity,
for they are fleeting.*

*The good life belongs to the mighty one
whom You discipline, LORD,
and from Your wisdom teaching
You goad them.*

~ Psalm 94:9–12



Psalm 97

One thing that is important for understanding this psalm, and several others in near proximity to it, is that the Hebrews had a different idea of monotheism than we do. When we hear the word, we tend to think of the belief that only one god *exists*. In the Hebrew mindset, there is only one god to be *worshiped*. They did not doubt the existence of a myriad of other gods; those gods simply all paled in comparison to their God, whom they believed created the other gods. The cherubim at the garden, the seraphim in Isaiah 6, and the angels throughout the whole story of the Bible (among others) are all described using the word “gods.”

Bringing that idea into this psalm, the small prayer toward the end seems to be a comparison the psalmist made. The psalmist seems to have been looking at everyone else who chased after the myriad gods with pity. His prayer is a prayer of gratitude. He saw that chasing other gods was folly and did not lead to blessing or benefit in the way following God does. Our God is the One who made the cosmos and sustains every detail of it. Our God is the True God whom all creation must obey. What good is worshipping anything else?

Today, we still have people who chase after other gods. Whether it is the polytheistic or animistic cultures throughout the world, the faiths that put forth warped distortions of the God of Abraham, or atheists who chase

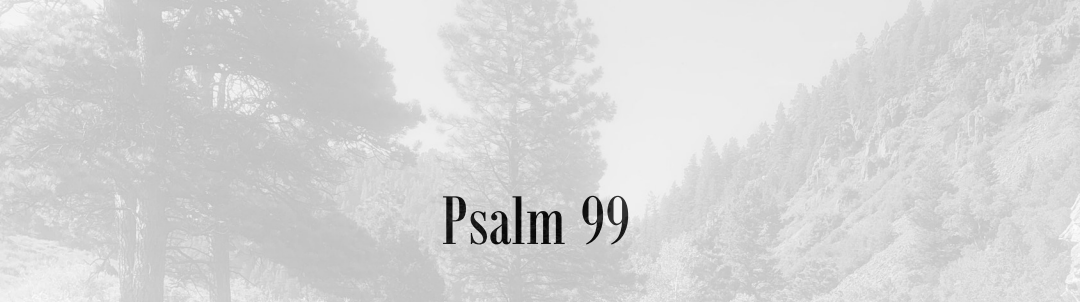
after gods masquerading as secular motives, everyone is following a god of one sort or another.

This prayer resonated in my own heart because I see the same emptiness in the pursuit of the other gods. I have experienced that emptiness. I feel the same pity for those thinking they have found the path to the “good life,” not seeing it is Death in disguise. I feel the same gratitude for God rescuing me from my own deception and calling me to walk in His ways. Does it resonate with you as well?

*His lightning lit up the habitable world.
The land saw and writhed.
The mountains melted like wax
from the face of the LORD,
from the face of the Lord, all the land.*

*The heavens make conspicuous His righteousness,
and all the peoples have seen His significance.
All those who serve carved images will be made pale,
those who boast themselves in empty things.
All the gods bow down to Him.*

~ Psalm 97:4–7



Psalm 99

This poem celebrates God's paradoxical nature. There are so many ways in which God is one thing, and at the same time something completely opposite. I think of Zechariah's words that the Messiah would hold the offices of King and Priest in perfect harmony⁴. This gives us a similar situation.

The prayer begins with worshiping God for His significance. The psalmist praised God's goodness and majesty, His power and loftiness. He is the King of all creation, whom even the inanimate objects tremble before.

The poem shifts in the middle to focus on something else. Instead of God's lofty majesty and fearsome power, the psalmist poured out gratitude for God's *nearness*. God had been near to Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, so the psalmist also had confidence in God's nearness to himself.

But neither of these characteristics are exceedingly great on their own. A high and lofty king of all creation is not wonderful news if he is inaccessible and doesn't care about you. Having God near is not helpful if He is not powerful, loving, and just. It is in the harmony of these characteristics that blessing occurs. And that is what the psalmist praised.

What about God are you enraptured with to the point that praise pours forth? What about Him are you

discovering is more complex than you imagined? How does that complexity add to your love for Him?

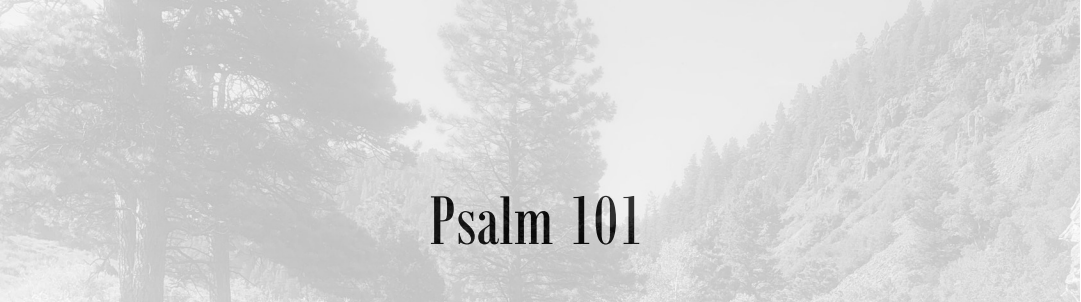
*The LORD reigns. The peoples tremble.
He places the spiritual guardians.
The land quakes. The LORD is in Zion.
He is mighty and held high above all the peoples.
They will extend the hand
to Your mighty and fearful name.*

*He is holy and He strengthens the king.
You love justice.
You created evenness in justice
and righteousness in Jacob.*

*Raise up the LORD our God
and bow down to the footstool of His feet.
He is holy.*

*Moses and Aaron are among His priests,
and Samuel is among those called of His name.
They called to the LORD, and He heeded them.*

~ Psalm 99:1–6



Psalm 101

Three Hebrew words in verse 2 seem to outline the entire prayer here—*Matay tavo elay?* David asked, “When will You come to me?” David longed for God’s presence. He desperately wanted to be in God’s presence. But he didn’t just desire that presence, he pursued it.

Look at the rest of the language in the prayer. It is all about pursuing God. David was singing and making music about how great his God is. He was contemplative about how to honor God. He was diligent to walk in God’s ways. He rejected the things God hates and delighted in the things God loves. He built his life around God’s ways.

On the one hand, I could view this in light of Jesus’s words about the master coming unexpectedly and judging the actions of his servant⁵. In this understanding, I could view David as being sacrificial in his life to act in ways that are pleasing to God. I think this is an important part of our lives. We are called to live sacrificially, so that we would reject our own desires and walk in ways pleasing to God. If this is true of this passage, David’s prayer is a commitment to God to be sacrificial. Do you pray like that?

The other way I could view this, the way I think is more true, is that David was reflecting on his own heart. While we are called to sacrifice our own desires to walk in God’s ways, that is not meant to be the long-term

position of our hearts. We are not supposed to live begrudging lives until we finally die and receive relief. Instead, we are called to faithfully walk in sacrificial ways in order to discover that those ways are the path of true joy. I think David was in that phase of his walk here. He was not committing these things to God. He was not shoving these sacrifices in God's face as a way of demanding favor. He was confessing his heart. He was expounding on why he wanted God's presence. He loved the things God loves and hated the things God hates, so he wanted to be closer to God so that they might delight in these things together.

So, let us pray those words from verse 2—"When will You come to me?" Let us pray to God our commitment to walk in His ways and ask God to strengthen our spirits to live up to those commitments. But let us also pray that our hearts would delight in God's delights, so that our spirits would be in harmony with God's spirit.

*I will sing of loyal love and justice.
I will touch the strings to You, LORD.
I will be circumspect in the way of integrity.
When will You come to me?
I will walk in integrity of my heart
in the midst of my house.*

*I will not set before my eyes
words without profit.
The creation of those who turn aside I hate.
They will not adhere in me.
A heart distorted will turn aside from me.
Bad I will not know.*

~ Psalm 101:1–3

Psalm 102

This psalm even comes with instructions on when to use it. It begins by introducing itself as a prayer belonging to anyone who is afflicted. If you slowly work through the language, you can feel the anguish. You can feel the writhing of emotions. It breaks the heart just to imagine yourself into this prayer. It is desperate and sorrowful. It is tragic.

The prayer itself crosses back and forth between sorrow and hope. It begins with the sorrow. The psalmist gave voice to his sorrow and set words to describe our own tribulations. This continues for the first 11 verses.

Then, as if taking a great effort of the will, the psalmist forces the conversation to turn toward the hope in God. He began to try to remind himself who God is for these next 11 verses. But even in those verses, you can taste the bitterness of the psalmist. He tried to preach the Gospel to himself, but you can feel a resentment that God had not rescued him. Instead of a reminder that God is the type of god who delights in rescue, the psalmist could only feel that God rescued everyone but him.

Most of the remaining verses return to the sorrow. There is a proclamation of faith at the end, but, in light of the rest of the poem, it does not seem joyful or hopeful.

But the wonderful thing about this prayer is that it is given to us for a purpose. It is a prayer of sorrow and disappointment in God, yet God gave it to His people. He

gave us this prayer in order for us to pray. The psalmist came in sorrow and never left that sorrow behind. He tried to have faith but never found much of it. We are invited to come and bring our sorrows in the same way. He never hated God or blew up at God, but you can tell he wished God had done something different. We can take that to God too.

We can bring all of this emotion to God. The invitation of this psalm is that God will sit in our grief with us. He will be with us, grieving as well. He will sit *shiva* (the Jewish practice of grieving in silence over a significant loss) with us and feel our sorrow with us. And He will stay there with us as long as we need. But the most important part of that invitation is that we bring it to God. If we bring things to God, He will be with us. And I can think of no greater hope than that.

*He afflicted my vigor in the way.
He cut short my days.
I say, "My God,
do not take me up in half of my days,
Your years in the generations of generations."
You set the land to the face
and the work of Your hands, the heavens.
They will be destroyed and You stand,
and all of them, like treachery, will wear out.
Like clothing, You will pass through them,
and they will be passed away.
And You are He, and Your years do not complete.
The sons of Your servant will settle down,
and their seed, to Your face, will be set upright.*

~ Psalm 102:23–28



Psalm 104

Do you notice a pattern in this psalm as you read it? There is a distinct progression in the first twenty-six verses of the psalm. Go back. Reread the poem and see if you catch it.

Now that you have reread, did you notice the progression? It follows the six days of creation. The psalmist worshiped his way through all of the creation narrative from the opening lines of the Bible. The last part of the poem, verse 27 through the end, is less noticeable, but they worship through day seven. In six days, God created the heavens and the land, and on day seven He ceased His creative work and began His sustaining work. These last verses continue the worship through what God had made and into what He sustains. It is some really cool imagery to work through the passage as well.

We tend to overlook the importance of these early chapters of the Bible. We look at them as disjointed historical accounts to entrench upon or regard as merely legendary. But these chapters set the whole story of the Scriptures. God created Eden. Humans lost Eden. God made a way back into Eden. Humans are welcomed back into Eden.

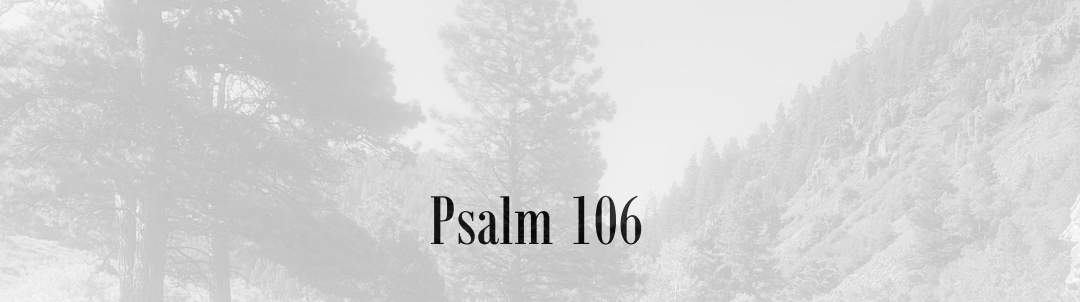
So, this poem is not simply a fun poem about a chapter of the Scriptures, but a poem rejoicing in God's purpose for all creation. God has Eden planned for us. We have the hope of fully returning to Eden one day and

are invited to live the blessings of Eden, even now in this life. This prayer, then, is the words of a psalmist rejoicing in eager anticipation for what God has planned for him.

Do we pray with this kind of hope? Do we pray with this kind of excitement? Do we pray with this attention to detail about the good things God has in store for us? Do we pray that we would experience this life now and live as though this experience is true in our lives today?

*He set the land upon its foundations.
It will not totter
to the vanishing point and to the end.
The abyss, like a garment, He filled up.
The waters were standing above the mountains.
From Your rebuke they flee.
From the sound of Your thunder, they jump up.
The mountains rose.
The valleys sank down to the place which He set to them.
You set a boundary that they may not cross over.
They will not turn around to fill the land.
He sends forth springs in the flood-draws.
Between the mountains they walk.
They give drink to all His living things of the field.
The wild donkeys burst from their thirst.*

~ Psalm 104:5–11



Psalm 106

This is an incredibly long psalm given the brevity of the summary. The psalmist was crying out to God to rescue him (likely him and his people) from the disaster their own sin had led them into. That is the basic premise of the entire psalm, which is one of the longest of the psalms (only four psalms are longer). The length of the psalm can dull the senses and make you miss out on the purpose, but the length actually serves to drive the point home.

Throughout the prayer, there is a repeated theme—the sinfulness of mankind lands them in hot water, messes of their own making. But, repeatedly, God rescued His people by means of a deliverer. But these deliverers were consistently overcome by their own sin. The deliverer would die, and the people would return to sin. Much of the poem highlighted Moses's role as the deliverer. In the middle, that role was attributed to Phinehas. But after him, that role disappeared and was not seen again. After Phinehas, there was no deliverer, and the sin escalated.

Where sin looked like doubting God's goodness in the wilderness, it became slaughtering their own children to idols after Phinehas died. The prayer then came to a close with a final repetition for rescue and an entreaty for the people to celebrate God.

I would hope that the focus of the prayer is abundantly clear at this point. First, the prayer is a petition

for God to deliver a people who were in rebellion. Their own sin rendered them unable to repent, so mercy was requested. This prayer was offered in the faith based upon God's previous works from of old.

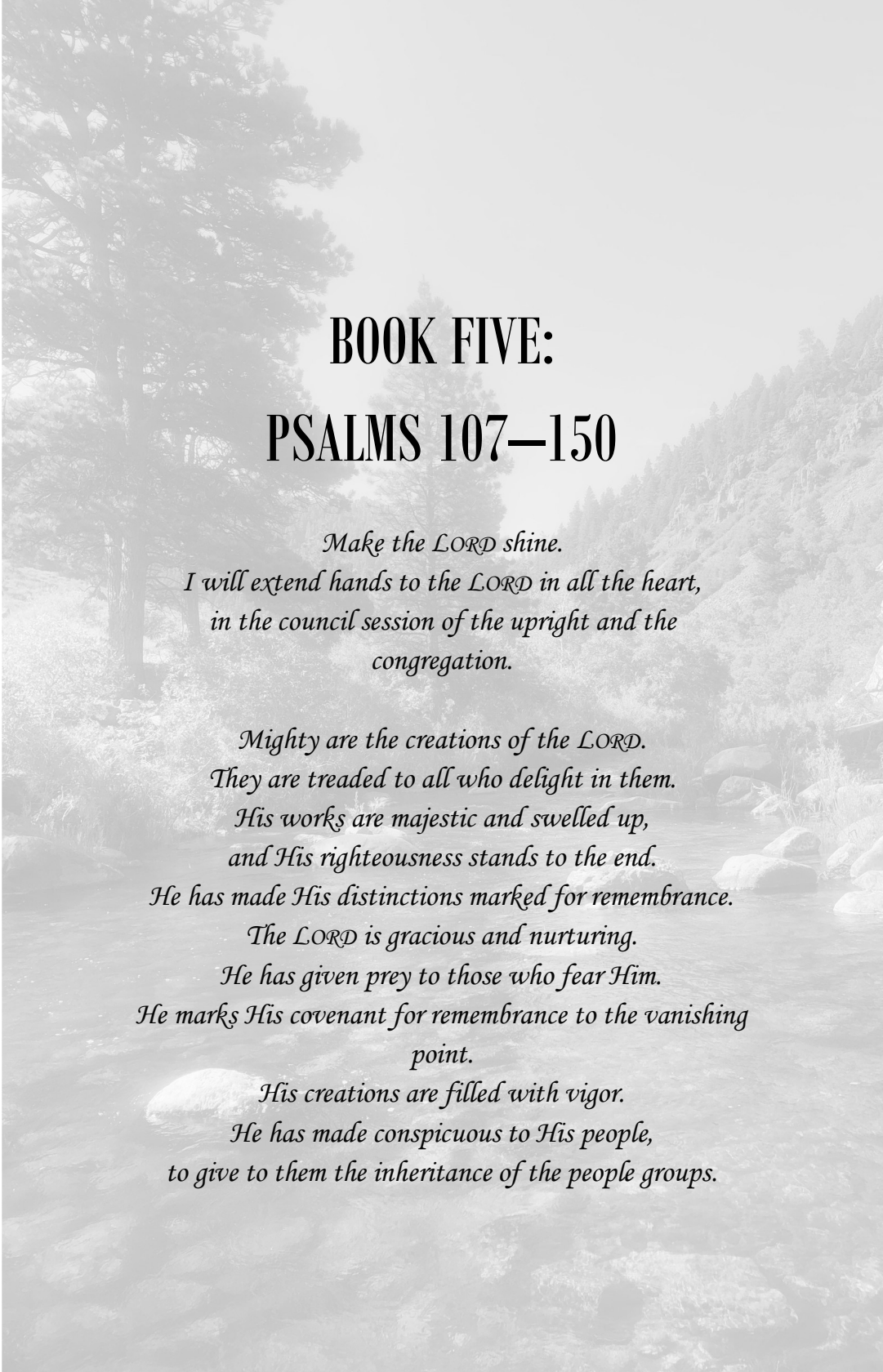
Second, the prayer is a petition for God to send a deliverer. The people needed a new Moses or Phinehas. But even they had ultimately failed to deliver the people when their sins were smaller. Now the sins were greater, so who could deliver them in this state? And who could deliver in a more lasting way than Moses and Phinehas?

Our world is not so different. People are bitter toward God. People refuse to obey Him. His people make golden calves to worship (figuratively) and bow down to idols. We quite literally slaughter our own children in the pursuit of "the good life." We are the wicked generation of the poem. And, like the psalmist, we await the coming of God's Deliverer. Only this time, we have seen Him and know He is returning. So, we too can pray this prayer. But instead of focusing on the only partial success of Moses and Phinehas, ours should be based on the uncontested victory of our Christ.

*Set us free, LORD our God,
and grasp us from the people groups
to extend the hand to the name of Your holiness,
to shout peace in Your praises.*

*Blessed is the LORD, the God of Israel,
from the vanishing point to the end of the vanishing point.
And all the people speak "trustworthy."
Make the LORD shine.*

~ Psalm 106:47-48



BOOK FIVE:

PSALMS 107—150

*Make the LORD shine.
I will extend hands to the LORD in all the heart,
in the council session of the upright and the
congregation.*

*Mighty are the creations of the LORD.
They are treaded to all who delight in them.
His works are majestic and swelled up,
and His righteousness stands to the end.
He has made His distinctions marked for remembrance.*

*The LORD is gracious and nurturing.
He has given prey to those who fear Him.
He marks His covenant for remembrance to the vanishing
point.*

*His creations are filled with vigor.
He has made conspicuous to His people,
to give to them the inheritance of the people groups.*

*The creations of His hands are trustworthiness and
justice.*

All His appointments are dependable.

They are supported to the end.

*To the vanishing point they are created
in trustworthiness and uprightness.*

He has sent loosening to His people.

*He has given His covenant charge
to the vanishing point.*

His name is holy and to be feared.

*The beginning of wisdom is the circumspect fear of the
LORD.*

There is goodness to all those who create His praise.

They stand to the end.

~ Psalm 111

Psalm 108

This psalm has a surprising ending, and I believe that the surprise packs the punch of this psalm. As I began the psalm, I was struck by the reciprocal nature of the poem. It began with David enraptured with God. God's goodness. God's power. God's love. All of it was the delight of David's heart. Then the poem transitioned into God's response.

God promised David possession of the land and dominion over David's enemies. God portrayed it as demonstrating His own power and authority. But the implication is that God is the rightful ruler of all of those places. *Therefore*, He was giving them to David as their rightful owner. This is exactly what we see in the story of David. David pursued God's heart and loved God with all of his own heart. In response, God acted in loyal love by showing favor to David.

The twist is what comes next in the prayer. Out of nowhere, we find that things were not good between David and God. David felt like God had abandoned him and his people. He did not feel like God was watching over their armies in battle, which is implied in God's promise in the middle of the poem. He cried out for help and asserted confidence that God would help.

Imagine yourself in David's shoes. Imagine you have lost the sense of God's presence. Imagine you felt like you were losing everything, and God was not

rescuing. Imagine that you felt hopeless and desperate. Would you pray this kind of prayer? Would you pray about singing God's praises and making music for Him? Would you sing about the magnificence of His loyal love and trustworthiness? That is what it looks like to have faith in God and love for God—to worship through the trials, not with clenched teeth and begrudging heart, but in actual trust and confidence.

*Who will conduct me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to the end of Edom?
God hasn't rejected us, has He?
And will You not go forth, God, in our hosts?
Give rescuing deliverance to us from tightness
and decimating liberation of humanity.
In God we will create power,
and He will trample our tightnesses.*

~ Psalm 108:10–13

Psalm 109

I would invite you to read this entire psalm after you finish this paragraph. As you read it, pay attention to how you feel reading it. Stop every few verses to reflect on how you feel about what is said. Stop and reflect on how this psalm fits with the messaging of the Bible. Go read it now and see what you think.

I would hope that as you read it, the first part made you uncomfortable. I would hope that seeing David wish destruction on his enemies made you wonder how this was consistent with the Gospel and with the words Jesus taught. It should make you feel that way.

On one level, you can see this psalm is a venting session for David. He came out of the gates full of emotion, and he let it pour out like hot lava. He was cursing his enemies up one side and down the other in the first part of the psalm. But as his steam wore out, he started moving into justifying his hatred of his enemy rather than asking God to do terrible things to them. By the end, the prayer started shifting back toward focusing on God's goodness rather than the badness of David's enemies.

Prayer has that power. When we bring our frustrations to God and pour them out to Him, He has a way of shaping us through that. It is hard to condemn anyone as a terrible person before God. When you do, you will soon realize that you fit more into the "terrible

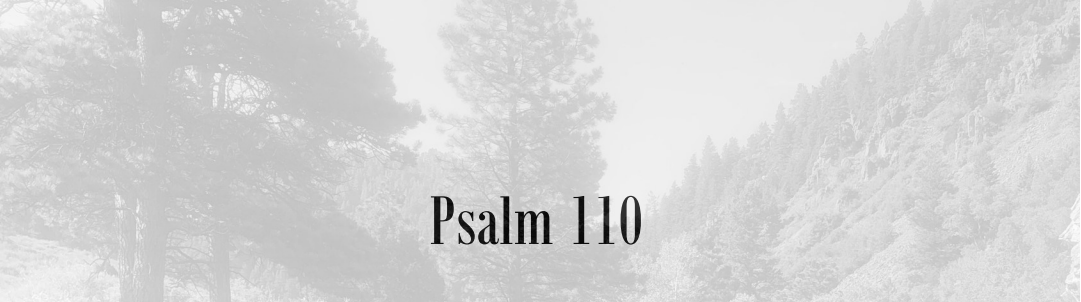
person” category than you do in the “righteous oppressed” category. His presence alone will start to turn our eyes from the focus of our anger into our own hearts. And from our own hearts back to His goodness. It makes me wonder what another ten to fifteen verses would have done to David’s heart.

I would encourage you to bring your feelings to God. Bring your joy to Him; He wants to rejoice with you. Bring your sorrow to Him; He wants to grieve with you. Bring your disappointment; He wants to lament with you. Bring your frustrations to Him; He wants to work in you. Bring your anger to Him; He wants to make new life in you. Bring your “you” to Him; He wants to make you like Him.

*For I am afflicted and destitute,
and my heart is pierced in my midst.
I am walking like a shadow as it stretches out.
I am shaken off like a locust.
My knees totter from fasting,
and my flesh is untrustworthy, without fatness.
And I have become a shame to them.
They see me. They waiver their heads.*

*Give me delivering aid, LORD my God.
Set me free according to Your loyal love.
And they will know that this is Your hand.
You, LORD, have created it.
They diminish and You bless.
They arise and are paled,
and Your servant rejoices.*

~ Psalm 109:22–28



Psalm 110

This is a bizarre and confusing little prayer. But it is also one of the most quoted passages in the Bible and the passage of the Old Testament which the New Testament quotes the most. It is clearly incredibly important, and this passage explains so much of the Gospel.

What strikes me about this poem in regard to prayer is how the conversation works in it. If we believe the accounts of the Gospel we are given, then we believe that Jesus set aside much, if not all, of His power in order to become human¹ (entrusting His power to His father for safekeeping until He might take it up again in His resurrection). He would have needed to learn who He was and about His mission from reading His own Scriptures².

This means that God spoke these words to David so that, when David prayed them back in this psalm, they would be recorded for Jesus to then learn about Himself and His mission when He grew as a boy into manhood. It is like a time capsule that God left for Himself in His own Scriptures, and David was invited to be a part of it. I would say it is similar to someone asking a trusted loved one to remind them of something later in case they forget.

Regardless of exactly how this all plays out, it is obvious that God used David in a pretty powerful way in this prayer. This prayer literally shaped the way Jesus lived His life and carried out His mission. God used David's

prayerful life to impact something that big. Are you opening yourself up to God in order to be used in ways this big?

*The LORD whispered to my Lord,
“Sit to My right hand
to the end that I place those who hate you
as a stool to your feet.”
The LORD will send out a branch
of Your strength from Zion.*

*Tread down in the midst of those who hate You.
You freed Your people
in the day of Your power.
In the swellings of holiness,
from the womb of the daybreak,
to You, dew of Your childhood.*

*The LORD has sworn and will not console You.
A priest to the vanishing point
according to the manner of Mal’ki-tzedek.
Lord, upon Your right hand
He will dash kings asunder in the day of His anger.
He will judge in the people groups.
He will fill full bodies
whose heads are dashed asunder
over the land of Raba.
He will drink from the brook in the path.
Therefore, He will hold up head.*

~ Psalm 110

Psalm 115

I think this is one of the more familiar psalms, at least the opening verse is familiar in my context. I can even think of a song based (seemingly) entirely upon verse 1 of this psalm. The psalm also seems very repetitive (because it is repetitive). “Familiarity breeds contempt,” as they say, and the redundancy makes the psalm appear like one to skip, but there is a hugely, and I mean enormously, important prayer hidden within these few verses.

Look at verse 16. The cosmos in the ancient Hebrew world looked like a flat disc of land with a hard blue dome over the top of it held aloft by the mountains. The dome contained the sun, moon, and stars. This was called the *rakia*, or “the heavens” or “skies.” But then, above the dome was the spiritual realm where all the spiritual beings dwelt. This was also called “the heavens” when we translated it into English, but in Hebrew, it was called *shamayim*. In a few places, there is a place called *ba’shamayim shamayim*: “the heavens of the heavens.”

The exact meaning of that phrase is not critical to this understanding, but it helps understand verse 16—God has His throne in *ba’shamayim shamayim*, but He gave the land to humans. God is King in the spiritual realm, but He gifted humans with dominion over the flat disc under the sky dome. This idea is all over the Scriptures, but comes out clearly in the words, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and *subdue* it; and *rule* over the

fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”³

Now take this cultural context (which would have been understood by Jews at the time this was written) back into the well-known verse 1. The psalmist asked that glory be upon God’s name, not on humans. The word we translate as “glory” is the Hebrew word *kavode*, which means “significance” or “importance.” It is the thing that distinguishes its object from anything else, that which makes the object unique.

Bringing it all together, the psalmist’s prayer is for God to remove the authority to rule the land from men. The psalmist lamented the foolish nature of men because they consult idols and bring ruin in their wake. Instead, the psalmist wanted to remove that significance from humans and return it to God, who delights in blessing and shows generosity. It is a prayer asking for God to take over as King of the land because humans seem incapable.

The Gospel is a direct response to this prayer. God came as a human to take upon Himself the role of King of all creation. The psalmist surrendered that role to God on behalf of humanity, and God received the gift from the psalmist in the human person of Jesus.

This is another example of how God uses our prayers in meaningful and colossal ways. This wasn’t a prayer for God to do something small, but rather for God to rearrange the order of the cosmos. And this prayer led to the very Gospel which we cling to with hope and desperation.

*Not to us, LORD. Not to us.
For, to Your name give significance
upon Your loyal love,
upon Your trustworthiness.
To what will the people groups say,
“Where now is their God?”
And our God is in the heavens.
All which pleases Him, He does.*

*Their idols are of silver and gold,
the work of the hands of humans.
Mouths belong to them,
yet they do not speak.
Eyes belong to them,
yet they do not see.*

~ Psalm 115:1–5

Psalm 116

The first 11 verses of this psalm depict a familiar circumstance. The psalmist was in distress and cried out to God for rescue. The psalm records a bold confidence that God would rescue the psalmist. Verse 10 demonstrates that confidence well—God rescues those who are afflicted. Verse 5 digs a little deeper into that hope—God is generous, righteous, and nurturing. I am always impressed by how much confidence the Old Testament writers had because of their understanding of God’s character.

But the thing that really stood out to me in this psalm was verses 12–14. In verse 12, the psalmist was searching for the appropriate response to this kind of generosity and faithfulness from God. It is such a natural inclination for humans to feel the need to do something in return to someone who is generous to you. In the context in which I came to know the Lord, this instinct was always treated as borderline sinful. We were taught that God gives the gift for free, so any attempt to repay is sinful because it negates God’s generosity. While I agree we do not need to *earn* God’s generosity, I do think this perspective takes that idea too far.

Here, the psalmist felt the impulse to repay God for His generosity. It is more of an honorarium than a repayment, but the psalmist felt the need to offer whatever meager return he could. The conclusion he

came to in this psalm was a list of three things.

First, (And I would argue most importantly.) the psalmist committed to “lift up the cup of liberation.” He was going to accept the gift of being set free from slavery to sin and use it. He wasn’t going to hold onto the gift as a get-out-of-jail-free card for some future use. He was going to take the cup offered to him, drink down every drop of freedom contained within, and pursue the life consistent with that freedom. That is the most appropriate response to this gift.

Second, the psalmist committed to continuing to call upon God. The surprising twist about God’s generosity that we find all throughout the Scriptures is that, when God performs extremely generous acts, the kind of acts that would make you feel as though you could never ask for anything else ever again, He invites us to ask for even more. The extravagant gifts are not the culmination of His generosity, but the very beginning of it.

Lastly, the psalmist committed to fulfill his vows to God. Ironically, the first two commitments are types of vows. (A vow to take full advantage of the liberty God offers to escape from sin, and a vow to boldly ask God for generosity over and over.) So, the third commitment is a commitment to keep the first two commitments (among any other vows).

This is how we respond to God’s generous and nurturing love. If you have received that love, are you

responding in this way? Where are you falling short? Let that inspire your prayers.

What shall I turn around to the LORD?

All He bestows on me!

*The cup of liberation I will lift up,
and in the name of the LORD I call.*

*My vows to the LORD I make complete
conspicuously, please, to all His people.*

~ Psalm 116:12–14

Psalm 118

It was a little difficult to parse out which parts of this psalm actually constitute prayer. Some of the psalm seems to be the psalmist speaking to himself. Other parts are addressing God's people. Only a little of it seems to be directed toward God Himself. Obviously, the psalm is more or less a single coherent train of thought, but the prayer is only fragments here and there. To boil out everything except the prayer, you are left with only a few words—verse 21, “I will extend my hands in praise to You for You heeded me, and You have become to me liberation,” and pleas of “liberate!” and “push forward!” in verse 25.

Clearly, the psalmist had received from God liberation from his oppression and was excited about it. The tone of the entire psalm is rejoicing in God as a faithful liberator. But the prayer does more than thank. The psalmist had known the joy of experiencing God's liberation. So, he asked for more joy. He expressed ideas of God liberating him from enemies and struggles. He wanted God to do more liberating.

He knew God could, and would, liberate those who called to Him on the basis of His loyal love, so he asked. He thanked God for the past liberations and asked God to continue to liberate, to push further into his brokenness, and to liberate even more. There was clearly so much more sorrow and affliction in this psalmist's life.

He literally begged God to continue on His campaign of liberation in the psalmist's story.

Do we pray like that?

*I will extend hands to You
for You heeded me,
and You have become to me liberation.
The stone spurned by the builders
has become the head angle.
This is from the LORD.
It has become distinct in our eyes.
This is the day made by the LORD.
Let us spin with emotion and rejoice in it.*

*I beg, LORD, liberate, we beg.
LORD, push forward, we beg.
Blessed is the one who comes
in the name of the LORD.
We have blessed You from the house of the LORD.
~ Psalm 118:21–26*



Psalm 119

I think I have found this psalm to be the most interesting thus far. Certainly, I have read it before, but never as slowly as I did this time. It is a really peculiar poem, and I think it requires some critical analysis as we examine it. It is the longest psalm, so I want to take the time to really look at it.

I debated on whether to break this psalm up into twenty-two separate case studies for the twenty-two sections of the poem or to treat it as a whole. Ultimately, I decided to do one long case study instead of twenty-two short ones. I felt that breaking them out would make for thin reflections and would do a disservice in understanding the message of the whole. This will, however, be a longer study than I have done with any other prayer so far, and I will address the twenty-two sections as whole units in areas.

The first thing you might notice about this psalm is that it does not have an author attributed to it in the actual text. Your Bible might have a note on authorship, but that is not part of the original text. Despite the fact that any notes of authorship that you might have at the start of this psalm *are not* part of the Scripture, if you have a note at the beginning of the psalm, it probably suggests Ezra as a likely author. We have not reached any discussion of Ezra yet in the *Praying with the Bible Series*, but we have examined his context. In the Latter Prophets,

there were a few of the prophets in the Book of the Twelve who were contemporaries of Ezra. They never called out Ezra as being unrighteous, but they did call the leaders during Ezra's time unrighteous. The book of Ezra is also covered with language referencing back to the Torah that suggests he was not walking in God's ways. This is important as we approach this prayer.

The prayer begins with an assertion that living the way God wants us to will lead to a life filled with blessing. The psalmist expressed a longing to walk according to God's ways. He confessed that he worked hard to follow God's ways, but that he was continually struggling to stick to it. He begged God to prevent him from going astray. He expressed a love for God's Scriptures and a desperation for more. But, despite loving God's instruction, he admitted he was not capable of obeying well, and asked God to give him the ability to understand the Scriptures more clearly. These are great things. Do we have these longings for God to guard us against wandering and for God to help us understand Him more perfectly? Do our prayers reflect that desperation?

The *Dalet* section is clever. The psalmist expressed a feeling that he was barely *clinging* to life in verse 25, so in verse 31 he decided to *cling* to God's teaching. The whole section is about carefully considering God's Word and deciding to be obedient to it. The psalmist asserted that this process of considering and then choosing is the path to being wise.

The *He* section continues this train of thought. Here, the psalmist advocated for *guarding* God's ways as the method to develop the *desire* for His ways. He advocated that changing the object of our fears, from worldly things to God, is the path to life. Do you guard God's ways? Do you know them enough to defend them? Do you orient your life so that you would not stray from His wisdom and so His word would not be corrupted in the eyes of unbelievers?

Moving into the *Vav* or *Waw* (depending on your translation) section, you should start to feel a dark cloud over this prayer. There is a fine line between having a healthy and appropriate love for God's wisdom and idolizing the wisdom itself. In the best-case scenario, the psalmist is flirting with that line in these verses. How ironic that he was praying to God celebrating his own potential idolatry of the word.

Continuing on, he prayed about his waiting and hoping for God to begin the process of new creation. He didn't like what he saw in the world around him and prayed his trust in God's plan. He was so trusting that he made plans with himself to obey God. He rushed to obey. He woke up in the night ready to worship. He was excited about God's work and wanted to be about it.

He then relayed to God his reflection upon his own life. He had been miserable before committing himself to God but rejoiced in the life he had at this point, which was founded upon God's Word. He was

happy to have suffered in earlier times so that he could learn God's ways. He asked for God to continue to teach him and discipline him, so that he might grow even more in the rich life God has planned for those who obey Him. But, even in these verses, we see another dark cloud. He began comparing himself to the unrighteous and how much better off he was than them. This really hit home for me. Are we praying that our gratitude and our reflection upon God's work do not turn into arrogance and feelings of superiority?

Right in the center of the poem you see the driving force of this prayer. The psalmist was tired (something specifically mentioned in Malachi, who was Ezra's contemporary). He was so desperate for God to liberate His people from spiritual bondage, but he was running out of patience. He sank into despair. But even in that dark place, the psalmist promised himself and God that he would cling to God's teachings because they give life.

And just like that, the psalmist put back on the manic persona again. He told God all about how passionate he was for God and how much he loved Him. He expressed an extreme delight in God's ways. Given the previous verses, it is almost like his prayer made him vulnerable and here he snapped himself out of the vulnerability and forced himself to try to hide his sorrow from God. Do we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and honest with God? Or do we put on a mask of the way we

think God wants us and hope He won't notice?

From here, you see the psalmist started talking like an isolationist, someone who shuns the world because he hates it so much. The language became harsher and more arrogant all through the end of the *Ayin* section. The dark clouds seem to have been thickening over this prayer.

The next few sections seem to work back the gathering clouds. You finally see the psalmist began to talk about God's name and seeking His face rather than pursuing His word or wisdom. He expressed delight in many different ways of following God. But then, we see in the *Koph* or *Qoph* section that the psalmist was primarily passionate about following God because of the life and blessing God gave him. When we pray, what motivates us? What is the driving force in our hearts?

Resh and *Sin* and *Shin* crank the dial on the arrogance way up. The psalmist seems to have used these verses to show God why he felt he deserved God's blessing because he was so righteous. These sections come across as some pretty terrible boasting.

Strangely, the prayer ends well. The whole section of *Taw* focuses on requests from God, but the requests are for the right things finally. Finally, we see the psalmist simply asking for God to work in his heart, so that he would delight in responding to God in appropriate ways. Have you ever prayed that? Have you ever thanked God for all that He does and then asked Him to give you the correct response warranted so that you could honor Him

in the way you respond?

Overall, we see the psalmist had a high confidence in God's Word. He believed it was good and dependable. He believed God would be true to His Word. He knew God's Word and had in his mind a clear picture of what to expect from God based on the Scriptures. I couldn't help but notice that for most of the prayer, the psalmist seems to have been idolizing God's wisdom. Over and over throughout the psalm, you see the psalmist rejoicing and desiring God's testimonies, wisdom principles, justices, commandments, and instructions. Those are the things this psalmist desired. Compare that to Moses, who was equally desperate, but desperate for God's presence rather than His wisdom.

I also couldn't help but think of Jesus's words about not using many words and much repetition in prayer. This is by far the longest psalm, and it is incredibly redundant in much of the language. It seems like the psalmist was trying to impress with the prayer. The arrogance of the psalmist also reminded me of the Pharisee in Jesus's parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector⁴. I found this interesting since Ezra's leadership served to create the basis for the Pharisee sect.

As you come to this psalm in prayer, pray about how the language hits you. The range of the psalm, from section to section, creates a reflective glass and a litmus test for us to examine ourselves against. And the best self-examinations are always done in prayer with the One who

sees us fully and most truly. Where do you need to repent? Where do you need to ask God to grow you? Where do you need to ask God to help you see more clearly?

Let my ringing cry come near to Your face, LORD.

According to Your word give me distinguishing.

Let my plea for favor come to Your face.

According to Your speech snatch me away.

*Let my lips gush forth praise,
for You teach me Your wisdom principles.*

*Let my tongue heed Your speech,
for all Your commandments are righteous.*

*Let Your hand be my rescuing help,
for Your appointments I have chosen.*

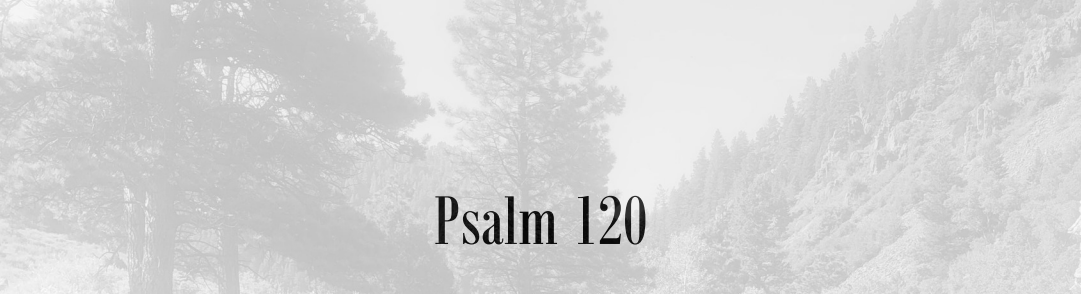
*My longing belongs to Your liberation, LORD,
and Your instruction is my enjoyment.*

*Let my soul live, and it will make You shine,
and Your justice will be my rescuing help.*

I have gone astray like a sheep, destroyed.

*Search out Your servant,
for Your commandments I have not mislaid.*

~ Psalm 119:169–176



Psalm 120

I can actually really relate to this psalm. Do you ever feel like the odd one out? Do you see the way to prosperity, but everyone around you seems to be clamoring after the wrong things? We often talk, at least in my context, of being around like-minded people and the peace that comes from it. This seems to be the opposite of that.

The psalmist felt like he was lost in the wilderness and living among foreign cultures. He wanted peace and spoke for it, but everyone around him acted more like the violent raider nations which neighbored Israel. He wanted to pursue what led to life, but everyone seemed to be clamoring for unrighteousness and death.

This psalm puts words to this same sorrow we feel today. There are a million ways in which our culture is chasing after bad roads. There are countless issues that have captivated the minds of our neighbors and stirred them up in bad directions. This psalm captures the loneliness of that situation and the sorrow in that isolation. It captures the longing for the joy of being among those who want to see God's Kingdom come according to His methods. This psalm is able to put words to a grief that many of us feel.

*To the LORD I called in my tightness,
and He heeded me.*

*LORD, snatch away my soul
from the lips of untruth,
from the tongue of deceit.
What can be given to you,
and what can be added to you,
tongue of deceit?
Arrows of the mighty
pointed with glowing coals of juniper.*

*Woe to me, for I turn off the road of Mesbek.
I dwell with the tents of Kedar.
Too long has my soul dwelled
with those who hate peace and prosperity.
I am of peace and prosperity, and I speak for it.
They belong to war.*

~ Psalm 120

Psalm 123

This psalm opens with words about lifting eyes. While Psalms 121 and 122 do not contain actual prayers, they follow the same pattern. In Psalm 121, the psalmist was looking for the coming of his hope. He longed for comforting from the sorrow and toil of the world. His eyes continually looked up, hoping for the deliverance to come. In Psalm 122, David looked to Jerusalem with this same hope. Jerusalem was built to be a new Eden-like city. But all David could do was hope that he would *find* the comfort and deliverance in the city. He did not *see* it.

Which brings us back to Psalm 123. This is the conclusion of the triad. The psalmist had scanned the horizons, seeking the consolation for their toil. Then the psalmist looked in Jerusalem for the same hope. Next the psalmist looked in one more place. It was not the high places. It was not the fortified city of the king.

It was only in God that this psalmist actually saw what he hoped for. He had looked for someone to bring relief from the brokenness of the world. Only in God did he find it. Having seen what he longed for, the prayer in this psalm was a petition for that hope to become a reality. He had seen the object of his hope. Now he wanted to experience it. That was his prayer.

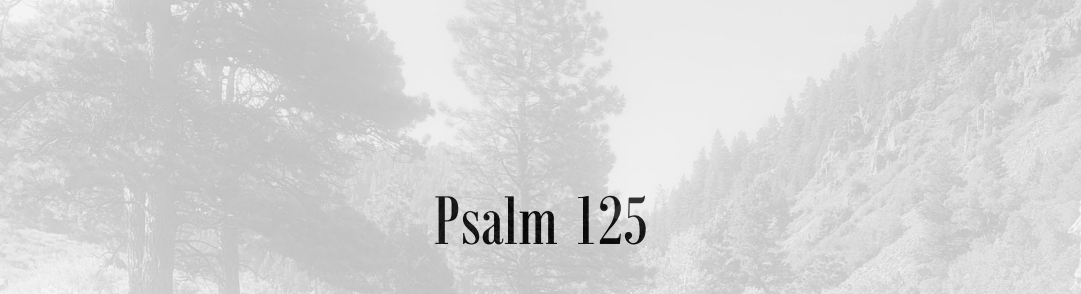
We have seen the hope of relief from the kingdom of the Enemy. We have seen Him in whom we hope. We have even experienced a taste of relief. But until that taste

becomes a total experience, this prayer is our hope—that God will be the One who one day brings us into rest, comfort, and security in a complete way.

*To You I lift up my eyes,
the One who sits in the heavens.
Look! As the eyes of the servants
are to the hand of their lord,
as the eyes of the female servant
are to the hand of her mistress,
therefore, our eyes are to the LORD our God
to the end that He will favor us.*

*Incline to us, LORD.
Incline to us, for abundantly we are filled full of contempt.
Abundantly our soul is filled full of the mocking of the secure ones,
the contempt of the ones who are mounted up.*

~ Psalm 123



Psalm 125

People often wrestle with questions about how God can punish people just because they don't believe in Him. This line of questioning is some of the most controversial debate about God and His character. But look at the way the psalmist talked about it here. He wasn't asking God to destroy the unrighteous. He wasn't asking God to cast them into a fiery pit of eternal burning.

He simply asked God to recompense people according to their desires. He asked God to give good to those who desire it. Those who pursue unrighteousness could expect to be separated out from those who want righteousness. The two are incompatible. This is what God's justice looks like—providing to people what they desire most.

Prayer is an integral part of this. What do you pray for? What is it you desire? If your prayers are any indication of your desires, what can you expect to receive from God when He comes in justice?

*The ones who flee for refuge in the LORD
are like Mount Zion: they will not be moved.
They dwell to the vanishing point.*

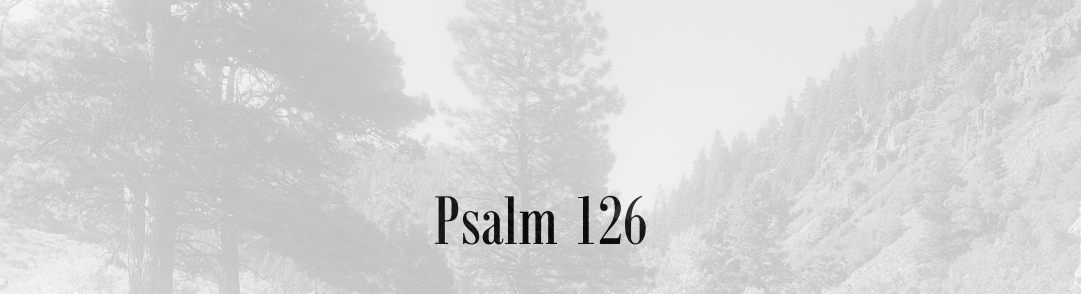
*Jerusalem, the mountains surround to it,
and the LORD surrounds to the people
from now and to the end of the vanishing point.*

*For the branch of the unrighteous will not rest
upon the roughness of the righteous ones
to the purpose the righteous ones
will not send their hands in injustice.*

*Do good, LORD, to the good ones
and to the ones upright in their hearts.
And the ones who turn away their winding,
the LORD will walk the workers of crookedness.*

Peace upon Israel.

~ Psalm 125



Psalm 126

The imagery of this psalm impressed me as I was translating it. The psalmist describes coming out of captivity. You can imagine what this would look like. I imagine the scenes of Holocaust survivors as their liberators set them free from the camps. It is a somber moment. The people were broken. They were starved and malnourished. It is heartbreaking to even reflect upon in my imagination. Regardless of the exact captivity the psalmist is describing release from, you have to imagine it is some degree of what you see in the Holocaust survivor.

But yet, the psalmist said that when God released them from captivity, they were like fat, healthy, strong people. They were filled with laughter, singing, and songs of joy. Certainly, they were not actually in good health, but they rejoiced as though they were. God's liberation was a weight from their shoulders. It was food in their bellies and water for their parched throats. It was strength in their limbs and joy in their hearts. This liberation made them different. Even if they didn't look different, they were different.

I couldn't help but apply that to my own life. I have been liberated from my oppressor. He is an oppressor that wants to break us and destroy us. He saps the life right out of us. But God set me free. I may still look like a captive. I have the scars and brokenness to prove it, but I am made different because of that

liberation.

The request in this poem is to remake these broken people in drastic ways. He compared it to when the floodwaters come to the dry and parched land. It reminded me of the nature documentaries that show scenes of floods in the desert. The land is always so parched that it is cracked and broken, but then the rains come and turn it into pools of fresh water. Then animals come from miles and miles around to the life that flourishes in the formerly dry desert of death. This is what the prayer was here.

Have you experienced this liberation? If not, it is waiting for you. Jesus is waiting for you. He is extending His hand to set you free if only you will accept it. Ask for His liberation, and He is faithful to grant it.

If you have experienced it, our life is different. We may not look different, but we have life that is meant to be shared. We are meant to be singing and crying out for joy. Let us pray along with the psalmist. Let's pray that we become fountains of life like the pools of floodwaters in the desert. Let's pray that we become a fountain of life that draws anyone from far and wide looking for life. Let's pray that we can point them to the Source.

*In turning around, LORD,
the returned ones of Zion were like strong ones.
Then our mouth was filled full of laughter
and our tongue ringing cries.*

*Then they will say in the people groups,
“The LORD increased to His creations with them.”
The LORD increased to His creations with us.
We are glad.*

*Turn around, LORD, our returned,
like the flood channels in the parched land.
The ones who sow in tears
will be cut short in ringing cries.*

*He who walks along and weeping lifts up,
drawing the seed will keep going
in the ringing cries lifting up his bound sheaves.*

~ Psalm 126



Psalm 130

This psalm is all about waiting. In eight verses, there are two separate Hebrew words used to describe waiting, and each is used a few times.

Let's start with the second word first. In most English translations, the word is rendered as "hope." I think that is a really great translation, but it doesn't capture all of the meaning. Our English word hope *does* mean the same thing, but in our culture, I think we have lost most of its meaning. When we say we hope for something what we really mean is "Wouldn't it be nice if . . ." but the original meaning of both the English word hope and the Hebrew word *yakhal* means "to wait with expectation." The psalmist was looking forward with eager expectation. Hope is what a child feels about Christmas morning. It is emotional and produces a response.

The first word is more impactful in my opinion. That is why I wanted to address it last. This word for wait is *kava* in Hebrew. *Kava* means "to bind something to something else" or "tie them together." In this context (which is commonly used in Hebrew language), the idea is that the psalmist was committing himself to have his own fate bound to God. He was binding himself to the hope he had in God. He was binding his fate to what he expected God would do.

Does this translate into our contexts? Do we have eager expectation filled with emotional and physiological response to God? Do we bind ourselves to our hope in God? I think we often approach God with a “Wouldn’t it be nice if . . .” attitude and then try something else if our prayer isn’t immediately answered in the way we want. That is not a prayer made in faith. A faithful prayer binds the fate of the person praying to God’s actions and looks forward in eager anticipation to see God at work. Is that how you pray?

*From the deep places
I have called to You, LORD.
My Lord, hear my sound.
Let Your ears be pricked up
to the sound of my request for favor.*

*If You hedge up crookednesses, LORD,
my Lord, who will stand?
For with You is forgiveness
to the purpose that You may be feared.
I bind myself to the LORD.*

*My very life is bound
and to His word I wait with expectation.
My very life belongs to my Lord
from those who hedge on the dawn,
hedgers of the dawn.*

*Wait expectantly, Israel, to the LORD.
For the ones He loyally loves are with the LORD,
and His setting loose is abundant.
And He will set loose Israel
from all his crookedness.*

~ Psalm 130



Psalm 131

This psalm is all about posture. David *came* to the Lord in this psalm confessing that he had *prepared* himself to hear from God. He had *checked his pride* at the door, so that he would not be too proud to hear from God. He had *quieted* his soul so that all the noise would not drown out God's voice. He had *prepared*, and afterward, he *waited expectantly* to hear from God.

Do we come to God prepared? Do we do the work beforehand in order to be in a posture that is ready to hear from Him?

The other thing that is interesting is that this is not the only picture the Bible presents of prayer. We have all kinds of prayers that show prayer with a proud heart and an unquiet soul. Sometimes that is appropriate too. But what makes those prayers interesting in light of this one is how those prayers changed the condition of the person praying.

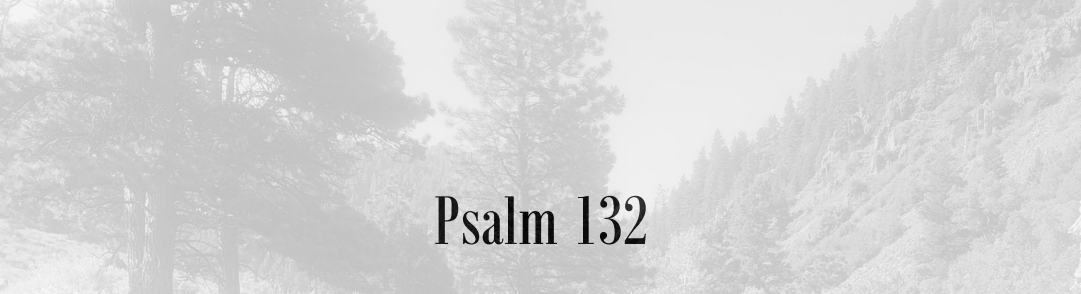
The prayers of the proud often were shown to humble him. The prayers of the unquieted seem to calm their storms. We want to come to God with humble hearts and quiet souls, but we can come to Him exactly the opposite and know that He will do the prep work for us—quieting our distress and removing our pride.

So then, this becomes a short checklist for us. If we want to hear from God, do we come in humility and in the stillness that only comes from faith?

*LORD, my heart does not soar,
and my eyes are not held high.
And I do not walk in the mighty ones
and in distinctions from me.
If I have not made level
and made silent my very life,
like someone taken care of by his mother,
more than like someone treated like my very life has been . . .*

*Wait expectantly, Israel, to the LORD,
from now and to the end of the vanishing point!*

~ Psalm 131



Psalm 132

This prayer actually features a prayer of David within the prayer of the psalmist. David had prayed a vow to not rest until he found a place for God's temple. The psalmist continued in this same passion by embarking on a pilgrimage to this place of God's residence and inviting others to come along.

The prayer started by calling to God's mind how David was passionate to find a place to meet with God. The psalmist demonstrated that he was pursuing this place so that he might meet with God. He expressed his hope that God would be in that place. David didn't want this place for God's sake. The psalmist wasn't going to this place for God's sake. The passion was to be able to come to this place in order for humans to meet with God. The psalmist wanted to be able to come into His presence and enjoy the blessings that pour out of that relationship.

The psalmist himself invited anyone reading his poem to come to God's dwelling place. This means that as we read this psalm, we are invited to come to God's presence. David was passionate to pursue God in this way. The psalmist was passionate to pursue God in this way. Are we similarly passionate about it? Do we seek Him with this level of excitement and passion?

*Mark for remembrance, LORD,
to David all his afflictions
which he swore to the LORD
a vow, to the soaring One of Jacob,
“If I go in the tent of my house,
if I ascend upon my bed sheets,
if I give sleep to my eyes
and to my eyelids slumber,
it will be for the purpose
of finding a place belonging to the LORD,
dwelling places to the soaring One of Jacob.”*

*Look! We have heard it in the place of fruitfulness!
We found it in the fields of forest!
Let us go to His dwelling places.
Let us bow down to the stool of His feet.*

~ Psalm 132:1–7

Psalm 135

It isn't hard to figure out the main point of this psalm. In the first three verses, you see three times a call to make God shine for the world to see. In case you forget while reading, the psalm ends with the same call. Right before the end, there are four calls to bless God. This psalm is all about making God's glory known and heard.

But in the midst of this psalm, there is a single line that stands out. Out of twenty-one verses, verse 13, jumps out because the psalmist changes the object of his speech. Instead of rallying people to make God's glory known, this verse shifts to a praise of God. It is a really quick change before getting back to what the psalmist was talking about before, but there is a little prayer right in the middle.

This got me thinking about my own life. How often do we go about God's work without God? How often do we serve Him without including Him in the process? How often do we teach or preach or write about Him and not include Him in the process? If our service and actions are not laced with even small bits and pieces of prayer, are we sure we are doing those things for Him? What is the point of serving a God we want nothing to do with?

*LORD, Your name
is to the vanishing point.
LORD, Your remembrance
is from generation to generation.*

~ Psalm 135:13

Psalm 138

I wonder how many of us would pray a prayer like this. David's prayer, here, is all about God's integrity and trustworthiness. I think most of us would agree that God has integrity and is trustworthy. We might quote passages like,

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.*⁵

Or,

*God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;
Has He said, and will He not do it?*⁶

But do we really believe those passages?

David praised God for being dependable. He praised God for being consistent to Himself. He praised God that His word was consistent with His character. It was based on this trust in God's integrity and dependability that David trusted God would rescue Him. You will notice that David never asked God to help him; he only expressed his confidence that God would help him. That is faith.

God's integrity is a delicate subject for many Christians. We will confess He has integrity, but we get uncomfortable talking about God's wrath and certain

parts of the Old Testament. We do all kinds of theological gymnastics in order to explain away things we see as inconsistent in His character, so that we can avoid dealing with a God who can be complicated but yet retain His integrity.

I would argue that most Christians, if they were honest with themselves, would not be able to praise God for having such marvelous integrity. This is where our prayers come in. James tells us that if any of us lacks wisdom we only need to ask⁷. Jesus Himself told us that, if we ask, God will send His Spirit to us⁸. So, if we do not understand God's integrity, we need only ask for God to send His Spirit upon us and to give us wisdom, so that we might better understand.

I would invite you to spend time in prayer on this. Ask God to reveal your struggles with His integrity. Ask Him to open your heart so that you might see what you truly believe. Then, ask Him to speak into the areas you discover are inconsistent with His character or His word.

*I will extend hands to You in all my heart.
In full sight of the gods
I will touch the strings to You.
I will bow down to the temple of Your holiness,
and I will extend hands to Your name,
upon Your loyal love
and upon Your trustworthiness,
for You have magnified Your speech
according to all Your name.*

*In the day, I called and You heeded me.
You have made strength
boisterous in my soul.
All the kings of the land
will extend hands to You, LORD,
for they hear the speech of Your mouth,
and they will sing in the ways of the LORD,
for mighty is the significance of the LORD.*

~ Psalm 138:1–5

Psalm 139

I think this psalm cuts to the very core of why Jesus is so compelling. It was really emotional for me working through the Hebrew of this psalm and processing it all together in preparation for writing this.

David prayed an invitation to God. He invited God to investigate every detail of him. His body, his thoughts, his actions—everything was on the table. Of course, David expressed later that God already knew everything, but still, David offered everything to God's scrutiny.

The poem then shifted into God's pursuing faithfulness. This, in itself, is a powerful passage, but after the invitation, it becomes even more powerful. God had examined David fully, yet there was no situation or location where God would not pursue David.

I think the climax of this progression is in verse 17, when David expressed his love for God. God knew him and still pursued him. God had seen everything unlovable in David and yet continued to be faithful to him. There was no situation in which God's pursuing love was off the table. And how else could David respond other than to love God?

This is what made me think of Jesus. He didn't just pursue us in Spirit; He came to live among us. There was no human shame He would not endure. There was no disgusting place too repulsive for Him. Nothing would

separate us from Him. He knew our sins. He knew our shame. He saw through all of our coverings and masks and knew us intimately. But He never turned away. He never despised or rejected. He pursued in love. And what can we do in response other than to love Him?

*I will extend hands to You
because I am fearsomely distinguished.
Your creations are distinguished,
and my soul knows it muchly.
My bones were not hidden from You
when I was created in covering.
I was variegated in the deep places of the land.
Your eyes saw my wrappings,
and upon Your book were graven all of the days,
and not one of them were molded.
And how prized are Your thoughts to me, God.
How numerous in Your head.*

~ Psalm 139:14–17

Psalm 140

Right in the middle of this prayer, David quoted another prayer he had previously offered. The basic premise of that previous prayer was asking God to “give ear” (verse 6). This ties into a bigger theme I notice as I read through the Psalms—often the psalmists do not ask God for anything other than to pay attention to them. The psalmists often ask for God to give ear or prick up His ears. They often ask God to look upon them. Often, they praise God for heeding them or ask God to heed them. Usually *heed* gets translated as “answer” in our English translations, but truly it means to “take notice.”

I think there is an overwhelming sense of confidence in God by praying this way. These psalmists knew God’s character. They didn’t just know *about* God’s character, but they had experienced it firsthand. They knew that God is loyal and nurturing. They knew that God is motivated by the cries of the afflicted and the spilling of innocent blood. They had confidence that if God would only take notice of their situation, then they didn’t need to ask for anything else, because they trusted He would act in their favor.

There is also a sense of trust in these requests. They are incredibly open-ended. Essentially, the psalmists asked God to take notice and to respond however God saw fit.

There are times when I do not know what I want

or need but know that I want or need something. This kind of prayer is perfect for that situation. There are times when I need to surrender my plans because I am too focused on specifics. This kind of prayer is perfect for that situation as well. It is a far cry from the prayer of Abraham's servant looking for a wife for Isaac⁹. Both types are good, and both types have their place.

*I said to the LORD, "You are my God.
Give ear, LORD, to the voice of my request for favor."
The LORD, my Lord is the strength of my liberation.
You have fenced to my head in the day of weapons.
The LORD does not give the desires of the unrighteous.
He does not bring his plan, for they will be raised up.*

~ Psalm 140:6–8

Psalm 141

Do you notice the head and face language in this psalm? It is all over. David asked for God to give *ear* to the sound of him calling out. He asked for his prayers to be like incense to God's face (implying *nose*). But the language really focuses on the *mouth*.

Cries for help left David's mouth. His enemies were trying to entice him to "eat their delicacies" as a metaphor for buying into their way of life (in addition to an obvious Eden reference). We use the same idea in our idiom "drink the Kool-Aid." David asked God to guard his mouth so that he would not consume their ways. Interestingly, this is where the mouth changes.

Instead of his own mouth, David moved the mouth language to describe the grave. To paraphrase the train of thought: cries for help left David's mouth as he asked God to guard his mouth. He wanted to avoid eating the ways of the unrighteous. Feeding upon their ways would lead David into the mouth of the grave to feed She'ol. It is kind of a cool way of linking the ideas together through common language.

Nevertheless, the focus of the prayer is something God's people have always wrestled with. The world has always sought to influence us away from God's ways instead of allowing us to influence the world. Eating is a perfect example of this because that is how Genesis depicted the first corruption of the image of God. The

world is constantly trying to convince us to do things our own ways or someone else's way. We are constantly told that God's way isn't the way that leads to life. We need to pray, like David, that God would protect us in what we consume so that tares do not get planted with our wheat¹⁰.

*I call out to You. Hurry to me!
Give ear to my sound in my calling to You.
Set upright my prayer as fumes to Your face
which my palms lift up as the offering
for the evening blending of the lights.*

*Set, LORD, a guard to my mouth;
guard upon the swinging of my lips.
Do not stretch my heart to the word of bad
to glean wantonness in unrighteousness
with men who are workers of crookedness.
And that I would not eat in their delicacies.
Let righteous loyal love strike me down and correct me.*

~ Psalm 141:1–5

Psalm 142

There are a lot of places in the Psalms where I feel uncomfortable. There are so many places where the psalmist expressed their own righteousness, and it always makes me uncomfortable. How can anyone claim to be blameless? How can anyone claim to be righteous? Blamelessness has always occurred to me to be a target we aim for, not a destination we achieve (at least in this life).

David had this confidence in this poem. The very last words of the prayer are David claiming that he would be surrounded by the righteous when God came to recompense humanity for their behavior. This, to me, implies that David felt he was righteous enough to merit this status among the righteous. How could anyone claim that?

I think the first two verses answer the question. Specifically, verse 2 illustrates David's actions. It isn't pious deeds or sacrificial behavior. It is an outpouring. David came to God and poured himself out at God's feet. Then, as verse 1 ends, he asked for God to show him favor. This is the basis for the claim.

To be *righteous* means that you act rightly in your dealings with someone. David demonstrates, here, that the "right" way to treat God is to pour yourself out before Him and ask for favor. It is to bring the broken pieces of your humpty-dumpty of a life, dump them at God's feet, and ask Him to fix what only He can fix. It requires

humility. It requires a submission and a resignation.

But, as David expressed in verse 3, God knows it all anyway. There is nothing we dump out that God will be surprised by. There is nothing there He didn't plan to fix anyway. There isn't any part of you that He wouldn't delight in fixing. It is simply the action of dumping out the pieces and asking for favor. That is what made David righteous. That is what makes us righteous.

I would encourage you to pray this type of prayer today. Even if you have prayed it a million times, pray it again. Bring the pieces. Dump them out. Ask for favor.

*My sound to the LORD;
I shreek my sound to the LORD.
I ask for favor.
I pour out to His face my contemplation;
my tightness to His face I make conspicuous.*

~ Psalm 142:1–2

Psalm 143

I love verse 10 of this psalm. Throughout the prayer, David juggles a couple of different ideas—a desire for God’s mercy and a request for God’s rescue from people who wanted to do him harm. Looking at these two concepts side by side, it would seem David felt like his own sin was bringing the disaster of his enemies upon him. This probably isn’t an inappropriate thought.

But in the midst of this, David begged God to teach him how to create God’s delight. On the surface, this is a nice enough prayer. Essentially, he asked God to show him how he could please God. Maybe he felt that doing these things would warrant the favor he desired. But on a deeper level, consider what he was asking. He was God’s chosen king in the land of promise.

He was asking how he could create God’s *ratzon*. While this is not the word used from the Eden narrative, it is a synonym for Eden. Now, we see a prayer from God’s chosen king who rules over the land of promise asking for wisdom to create Eden. That is a powerful prayer. You can see how the rest of the problems go away if David were able to create Eden.

As followers of the Christ, we have the same hope. We have the hope of Eden’s return to Earth. The seed was planted on Passover 2,000ish years ago. The Tree of Life sprouted three days later. Now we are called to eat from the Tree and cultivate the garden. Let us join

in with David to pray, “Lord, teach us how to create Your Eden.”

*Teach me to create Your delight, for You are my God.
Let Your Spirit of goodness guide me in land that is level.
Revive me, LORD, to the purpose of Your name.
In Your righteousness, bring my soul forth from tightness.
And in Your loyal love, cut short those who hate me,
and destroy all those who make tight my soul,
for I am Your servant.*

~ Psalm 143:10–13

Psalm 144

There is a repeated phrase in this psalm that clues us into what David may have been thinking about. He was asking for God to rend open his captivity and to snatch him away. In verse 11, it is from the hand of foreigners, but in verse 7, it is from the abundant waters and the hand of foreigners. These foreigners had deceit in their mouths, and their power was the power of deception.

One common way the Bible uses the word *foreign* is to describe other gods. Countless passages talk about the people turning to foreign gods or asking for deliverance from foreign gods. This reminded me of the Serpent in Genesis chapter 3. This Serpent was depicted as a spiritual being, and we were told it came into the garden from the field. It was not in its home. It was a foreigner. He spoke lies and had the power of deceit.

Linking it back a couple of chapters earlier, the *many waters* is the wild wasteland of Genesis chapter 1. David was praying for deliverance from the chaos before the garden and from the Serpent who sought to lure him out of Eden.

Notice, too, the end of the prayer. The outcome David expected after God rescued him was that they would have abundance. Their children would grow tall and strong. Their fields and livestock would produce bounty. It is the blessing of Eden.

All of this comes together to convince me that David's desire was to be rescued from the spiritual beings who stand opposed to God. He was grateful for the training to be a fighter that God provided him, but he knew that he was nothing compared to the spiritual beings he stood opposed to. His prayer was for God to be the one who fought his spiritual battles because he couldn't do it himself. He recognized that the spiritual beings were trying to cage him and bind him, so he prayed, asking for God to set him free from them. It is a desperate plea for God to be David's champion in the same way that David had been the champion for Israel against Goliath.

How is your spiritual battle going? Do you recognize that you are in this kind of battle? Do you take an active role in it? Or do you passively sit by while the universe around you pushes you to and fro? We are in need of this rescue day by day. We are in need of someone to come as the stronger man who binds the strong man in our hearts¹¹. Is this part of your regular prayer life?

*Send out Your hands from the heights.
Rend me open and snatch me away from the abundant waters,
from the hand of the sons of foreigners,
whose mouth speaks emptiness,
and their right hand is the right hand of untruth.*

*God, I will sing to You a fresh song in the harp of ten strings.
I will touch the strings to You,
the One who gives liberation to kings,
the One who rends open David,
His servant, from the sword of bad.*

*Rend me open and snatch me away
from the hand of the sons of foreigners
whose mouth speaks emptiness,
and their right hand is the right hand of untruth.*

~ Psalm 144:7–11



Psalm 145

This is the last prayer offered to God in the Psalms. How fitting that it should be a long prayer praising God interwoven with a call to those who follow God to praise Him. Following the idea of the essay format of the Psalms, this serves as the kind of topic sentence of the conclusion paragraph. The psalm is a prayer of praise but also serves to kick off the final points about praising God. The remaining psalms all bring the idea of praising God together. They form the final encouragement to drive that point home.

You will notice that there is little discussion of why we praise God in this prayer. By this point in the Psalms, that point is already made. This prayer mostly is David's proclamation to God that he is excited to praise God. You can feel his delight in praising God as you read through it. David's prayer involves:

- Holding God's glory up for others to see
- Telling God about His greatness
- Boasting about God's character
- Exploring God in prayer and in the Scriptures
- Shepherding God's creations
- Talking about the wonderful things He does
- Crying out with joy to God
- Lifting hands to God
- Looking to God with eager expectation that He will provide

- Asking Him to help in times of trouble
- Being persistent in all of these things.

That is the introduction to the conclusion of the Psalms—we are given the opportunity to do these things, and we would be foolish not to do them.

The other thing I notice is that the psalm starts with David praising God. By verse 4, all generations praise God. In verse 7, it is all the righteous ones. Verse 10 describes all whom God has loyal love for blessing Him. By the end, it is all flesh that worships God. Mixed into David's prayer is a progression that shows God's worship spreading across the world and across time. David's praise led to future generations following his practice, and that practice spread throughout the world. Praise of God always leads to more praise of God.

So then, the final message we are given from the Psalms is a last paragraph encouraging us to praise God. We will remember that the entire book, in Hebrew, is called the "Book of Praises." It all comes back to praise.

Read through this psalm. Read through the remaining five psalms after this one. Take your time. Pray through them. And really take their message to heart. Do what these psalms instruct you to do. Join into the worship of God that spans throughout the cosmos and throughout time. That is what this journey through the Psalms has been about, so let us leave this journey together and enter into the world it has been leading us

to. I will see you there.

*You open up Your hand
and sate to all living things its desire.
The LORD is righteous in all His ways
and loyally loving in all His creations.
The LORD is near to all His callers out,
to all that call out to Him in trust.
The desire of His fearers He will create,
and their cry for help He will hear,
and He will set them free.
The LORD guards all those who love Him,
and all the unrighteous He will obliterate.
My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,
and all flesh will bless the name of His holiness
to the vanishing point and to the end.*

~ Psalm 145:16–21

CLOSING

What a journey this has been through the Psalms. There is so much encouragement. There is so much caution. There is so much contextualization and understanding of prayer. We have seen beautiful prayers. We have seen less beautiful ones. We have seen thought out ones and rushed ones. We have seen prayers for wonderful things and prayers for terrible and dreadful things. The Psalms carry so much range of prayer.

But as we come to the end, the Psalms provide their own closing. Having wrestled through it all, the Psalms end in praise. By the end, the book just assumes that you will want to praise God. They do not offer argument or persuasion, merely an invitation to join in. That is what God offers us in the Psalms—a place in the prayer community of the entire people of God throughout history.

These prayers have been prayed for thousands of years. David prayed some of them. Moses prayed some of them. Jesus prayed them. The Apostles prayed them. The Church has prayed them for 2,000 years. And we are invited to join in the praise of God through these prayers. When we pray these prayers we are praying alongside God's people echoing through time.

And these Psalms also teach us so much about prayer. There are so many prayers in this text and so many

types of prayers. Meditate on the Psalms. Implement them into your prayer life. Allow them to shape you.

Make the LORD shine!
My soul will make the LORD shine!
I will make the LORD shine in my living.
I will touch the strings to my God in my continuance.
Do not flee for refuge in leaders, in a son of man,
in whom is not the ability to set free.

~ Psalm 146:1–3

ENDNOTES

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Prayer is one of those things. We know we should do it, and maybe we even want to. We see others do it, and maybe we do it ourselves. For some, it is a discipline or a habit, but for others, it is a struggle. But would any of us say we are great at it?

Praying with the Book of Praises continues the journey begun in the *Praying with the Bible Series*. This volume turns to the Psalms—the songs and prayers of God’s people across generations. In these pages, we explore the heart-cries of lament, the soaring hymns of praise, and the steady petitions for God’s deliverance. We will look closely at how the psalmists brought every emotion before the Lord and discover how their words can shape our own prayer lives today.

This book was written with the same purpose in mind as the rest of the series. I invite you into a whole new level of God’s word. I hope our passions to pursue the Living God are sparked to greater intensity. I trust we will continue to develop and reinforce habits. I expect we will continue to be inspired and gain a richer perspective.

Praying with the Book of Praises is the fourth installment of the *Praying with the Bible Series*. This series presents prayer in a way unlike anything else. Rather than leading readers in reiterating scripted prayers, this book explores how the Bible presents prayer, in both positive and negative perspectives. If you’re searching for a comprehensive look at the way the Bible presents how to pray—and if you want to learn from the earliest followers of God how the practice of prayer is intended to be used—then you’ll cherish *Praying with the Book of Praises* as an indispensable resource.

R.A. Sweeney writes, not as an expert teacher, but as a tour guide of the Scriptures. After getting to know Jesus in his mid-twenties, he became a Hebrew scholar and has taught Scripture and led Bible studies for many years. He strives to write in a way that helps others understand what the Bible is saying, rather than speaking for the Bible.

He has lived in Wyoming nearly his entire life and enjoys exploring the glory of God’s masterpiece in the Wyoming outdoors.



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