

Commentary



Explore the Bible.®

Summer 2017 > *Robert Smith, Jr., General Editor*



...
...maketh me to lie down
...green pastures; ²he leadeth
...side the ³still waters.
...
...He restoreth my soul; ⁴he
...eth me in the paths of rightness
...for his name's sake.
...
...Yet, though I walk through
...of the
...of the

Psalms

LifeWay | Adults

LIFE BY DESIGN

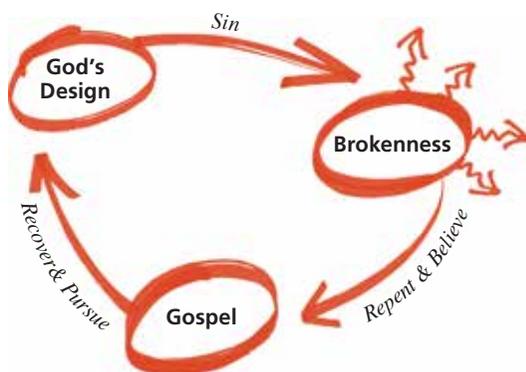
We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

Excerpted from [Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel](#).

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» MEET THE WRITERS

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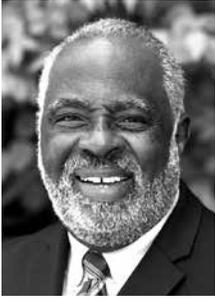
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A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR

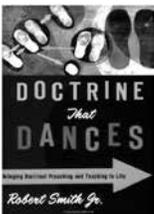


Sometimes, when reading the Bible, it seems as if our lives are worlds apart from those included in the pages of Scripture. It is easy to ponder, sometimes with guilt and secrecy in our hearts, whether the Bible is relevant to feelings we have today, thoughts we have today, struggles we have today, or situations we face today.

This study in the Book of Psalms holds good news for you. A psalmist has likely written about whatever feelings you might experience in any situation in which you find yourself. These lessons speak to those who are soaring on the heights of spiritual growth and to those who are in the depths of spiritual weakness. It legitimizes the feelings of those seeking God's recompense for persecutors and those seeking forgiveness for doing wrong to others. It teaches lessons for dealing with the perils or the successes of life with great grace, patience, and faith while extolling the loving kindness of our God, who is always worthy of praise.

This journey through the Book of Psalms is for you. If you earnestly apply its lessons, it will benefit you and those around you as you seek to walk the narrow path surrounded by distractions, faith challenges, and contemporary thought.

Robert Smith, Jr.



Dr. Robert Smith, Jr. serves as the Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity and professor of Christian preaching at Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of Doctrine That Dances: Bring Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life.

INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS

A stately, antique pump organ stands in the family room of my home. The instrument is more than 100 years old, yet it can still bellow out the familiar strains of old hymns as it did when my grandmother first played it at the small, rural church of which she was a member. One day the congregation voted to upgrade to an electric organ, so they gave my grandmother the pump organ in recognition of her 50 years of faithful service as accompanist.

Before she died, Grandma gave the pump organ to my wife and me. Now when our grandchildren visit us, they usually make their way to the family room. They take turns trying to play the old songs from that same songbook my grandmother used.

The Bible also contains a songbook. The Book of Psalms has been called ancient Israel's songbook. Jewish and Christian congregations sing many of these Old Testament psalms (or at least portions of them) to this day, particularly the psalms of praise. Yet the Book of Psalms is also part of Holy Scripture; thus, it conveys the life-changing message of faith in various poetic forms. Elements of prayer permeate these ancient songs.

As we explore selected psalms in these sessions, we will encounter vital theological truths and rich personal drama. We will discover sublime terms and phrases that we can use to express our hearts to God in prayer, praise, supplication, and intercession. We can do more than study these psalms; we can let them tune our hearts to sing God's praise.

»» AUTHORSHIP

As with all of Holy Scripture, God is the ultimate Author of the Book of Psalms. He inspired those who took stylus in hand to write down the messages He revealed to them (2 Pet. 1:20-21). The Old Testament individual most commonly associated with the Book of Psalms is David, king of Israel. In 2 Samuel 23:1 (KJV), David was heralded as "the sweet psalmist of Israel." While he composed about half the psalms in the book, several other composers made contributions as well.

The sons of Korah contributed nearly a dozen psalms (Pss. 42; 44-49; 84-85; 87-88). This family from the tribe of Levi helped with tabernacle worship. Korah began well but later became part of a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. He and many of his family members perished, along with other members of the revolt (Num. 16:1-35). Some of Korah's sons remained faithful, however; their descendants were allowed to serve the Lord.

Another psalmist, Asaph, was a relative and assistant to Heman, a singer appointed by David to serve in front of the tabernacle (1 Chron. 6:31-33,39). Asaph and his family were responsible for 12 psalms (Pss. 50; 73-83).

David's son, Solomon, was reputed to have written more than 1,000 songs (1 Kings 4:32). However, only two psalms in the Book of Psalms are attributed directly to Solomon (Pss. 72; 127). Still other contributors to the Book of Psalms include Moses (Ps. 90), Heman (Ps. 88), and Ethan the Ezrahite (Ps. 89). Forty-eight psalms in the book are anonymous.

»» PURPOSE

The various composers of the Book of Psalms had purposes in mind for their songs. In nearly every case the writer wanted God's people to revere and praise the Lord. Some psalms, however, had secondary purposes too. For example, a few psalms take the form of laments—complaints to the Lord about oppressing situations under which His people were suffering. Other psalms incorporate historical reminders, especially stories of the Israelites' exodus and wilderness travels. The psalmists sought to magnify God as Creator and Lord of all.

In a number of psalms, the various composers made notations for the benefit of singers, music directors, or musicians. Because of these notations, we can understand that many psalms were used regularly in Israelite worship. The practice of singing psalms in congregational worship continued into the New Testament era (see Eph. 5:19). After the Passover, Jesus and the disciples sang psalms before going to the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:26). Paul encouraged the Colossian believers to use psalms and other spiritual songs to show gratitude to God and to magnify Jesus as the Messiah (Col. 3:16).

»» ORGANIZATION

The Book of Psalms can be organized into five smaller books, or sections. Section one is comprised of Psalms 1–41. Section two includes Psalms 42–72. The third section contains Psalms 73–89. Section four includes Psalms 90–106, and Psalms 107–150 comprise the fifth and final section. Bible scholars have suggested several possible rationales for these five groupings, including Jewish tradition, changes in authors, historical allusions, differences in subject matter, and similarities of composition.

Readers must keep in mind the poetic nature of Psalms. Because we are not studying these songs in the original language, we can miss some of the Hebrew literary devices that enhance the texts. For example, Psalm 119 is a long acrostic poem. It has 22 sections designed around the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section contains eight verses, and each verse in a section begins with a word having the same beginning Hebrew letter for that section. This literary device was used in predominantly oral cultures to aid in memorization.

Other literary features of the psalms include parallelism, repetition, metaphors, and figurative language. Notations generally considered to be musical instructions are located at the beginning and within various psalms. No one knows for certain today what some of these terms meant in ancient times, such as the terms “Selah” (Pss. 3; 32; 49), “Shiggaion” (Ps. 7), and “Mikdam” (Pss. 16; 56; 57). Some psalms have notations that designate instruments to be used in accompaniment. For example, Psalms 4 and 6 were written for stringed instruments, while Psalm 5 called for flutes.

» THEMES

Although written by multiple writers over a long period of time, a number of common themes flow through the various songs in the Book of Psalms.

Praise—Nearly every psalm contains the theme of praise to God in some fashion. Many psalms contain the writer’s expressions of praise, while others instruct readers or hearers to praise the Lord.

Prayer—David prayed for deliverance from enemies who sought his life. The theme of some prayers invokes God’s judgment against evildoers. Other psalms that feature prayer focus on personal introspection or requests for God’s healing.

Petition—These prayers take the form of a petitioner approaching a king. Generally the psalmist requests God the King to protect him and grant certain favors. When the Lord answers such petitions, the petitioner’s proper response is to praise God (Ps. 32).

Proclamation—While psalms are not strictly sermons, they sometimes proclaim themes built around theological truths. Psalm 1 proclaims the path of wisdom verses wickedness. Another important theological theme involves the messianic psalms, such as Psalms 2 and 22. Messianic psalms contain prophecies fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

» CHRIST IN THE PSALMS

Jesus quoted from Psalm 110 in asserting His claim as Messiah (Luke 20:42-43). The Lord taught that He fulfilled prophecies contained in the Psalms (Luke 24:44). Paul referred to a messianic psalm about Jesus’ deity as he preached in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:33; compare Ps. 2:7).

Some psalms—often called royal psalms—have a dual application to the king of Israel and to the Messiah as King. Some psalms prophesy specific historical events that were fulfilled in Jesus. John 15:25 reports Jesus’ quotation from Psalm 69:4. Matthew 27:34 fulfilled Psalm 69:21. In Luke 20:17, Jesus used Psalm 118:22-23 to teach that He was the chief cornerstone. Peter also used this text in Acts 4:11 to explain that Jesus is the Messiah.

TYPES OF PSALMS

LAMENT—emotional cries to God for deliverance from distressful situations

Pss. 3–5; 7; 12–13; 17; 22; 25–27; 35; 39–44; 54–60; 62; 64; 69–71; 74; 77; 79–80; 83; 85–86; 88; 90; 94; 120; 123; 126; 134; 137; 140–142; 144

THANKSGIVING—expressions of gratitude to God for His abundant blessings

Pss. 9–11; 16; 23; 30–31; 34; 48; 62; 66–68; 75; 91–92; 106–109; 115–116; 118; 121; 124–125; 129; 131; 138–139

HYMN—declarations of the greatness of God

Pss. 8; 15; 19; 24; 29; 33; 46; 52; 65; 81–82; 87; 100; 103–105; 111; 113–114; 117; 122; 135–136; 145–150

ROYAL—prayers for God’s blessings on Israel’s king, some with messianic implications/fulfillments

Pss. 2; 18; 20–21; 45; 50; 61; 63; 72; 84; 89; 101; 110; 132

ENTHRONEMENT—celebrations of God’s rule over all His creation

Pss. 47; 93–99

PENITENTIAL—expressions of contrition and repentance

Pss. 6; 28; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143

WISDOM/DIDACTIC—practical guidelines for godly living

Pss. 1; 14; 36–37; 49; 53; 73; 76; 78; 112; 119; 127–128; 133

THE PATH

Believers should embrace godly wisdom because obedience to God's Word is the path of true life.

The North Yungas Road in Bolivia once topped the list as the world's deadliest highway. Before portions of the road were modernized, as many as 300 travelers a year were killed along its route. As a result, the highway picked up the ominous nickname "Road of Death." Numerous crosses still mark spots where fatal accidents occurred.

The original road runs northeast approximately 43 miles between the capital city of La Paz and a town called Coroico in the rain forest region of Bolivia. Along the way the road ascends to over 15,000 feet above sea level before descending to about 4,000 feet at its final stop. Cut into the steep sides of a mountain range, it is only slightly wider in places than a one-lane road. The old route remains unpaved in many stretches. Thus, on one side of the road is the stony mountain face with its ever-present threat of falling rocks. On the opposite side are deep ravines, some of which plunge nearly 2,000 feet before reaching a valley floor. The road advances in serpentine fashion with hairpin curves and low visibility. Guardrails are lacking around many curves; meeting or passing other vehicles becomes a hazardous game of "chicken." If those factors were not enough, the rain forest climate often renders the road impassable. Torrential rains cause mudslides and create waterfalls that cut deep ruts into the roadway. After the rains, dense fog settles like a shroud over the heights, cutting visibility to nearly nothing. In recent years, a portion of the route was modernized with asphalt, guardrails, and double lanes. Further, a bypass was built that allows motorists to avoid the road's most dangerous sections. Nevertheless, a few thrill seekers each year still choose to follow the path of the old road of death.

Similarly, the Bible speaks in a spiritual sense of two paths that form a life-and-death decision for every person. In Deuteronomy 30:15, Moses set these two paths before the Israelites: the way of rebellion leading to death and the way of obedience leading to life. The writer of Psalm 1 also spoke of two ways: the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. Jesus would later identify the two ways as the broad gate (and road) that leads to destruction

and the narrow gate (and road) that leads to life (Matt. 7:13-14). This session thus emphasizes that we all still face the decision about which road we will travel in our lives.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 1

Psalm 1 plays a double role in the Book of Psalms. On one hand, it serves as an introduction to the entire collection. In this regard, Psalm 1 and Psalm 150, the final psalm, stand as complementary bookends. In Psalm 1, God is said to bless the righteous by watching over them; in Psalm 150, the righteous are said to bless God by praising Him continuously.

On the other hand, Psalm 1 also functions as an introduction to the first section of the Book of Psalms (1–41). Psalm 1 lacks a superscription that identifies its writer, reports its historical context, or gives a musical notation. Instead, the psalm opens abruptly with a blessing formula commonly found in Old Testament wisdom materials to exhort God's people to right living.

The blessing formula thus signals that Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm. As such, it is designed to teach and exhort God's people toward moral and spiritual obedience. The opening blessing suggests that two-way theology—a key theme of wisdom writings—is a major concern of the psalm. Two ways, or paths, of life are compared; only one way, however, ends in blessing. The worshiper is to ponder why one is blessed and not the other. In essence, then, the wisdom psalm teaches a fundamental truth: God's redemptive favor rests upon the individual who truly seeks to follow the righteous path of life.

Poetic contrast is a central feature of Psalm 1. The lone righteous individual is set against the many who are wicked (1:1). The one who is right with God is described as a flourishing tree (1:3). In contrast, the wicked are like dried chaff blown away by the wind (1:4). The ineffective advice of sinners is juxtaposed against the Lord's revealed wisdom (1:1-2).

A focus on the Lord's instruction (Hebrew, *torah*) also distinguishes Psalm 1 as one of three explicit torah psalms (see also Pss. 19; 119). The righteous person delights in knowing and practicing God's instruction. Indeed, the way of *torah* is synonymous with the way of the righteous, because obedience to God's Word is the path of the one who has true life.

The Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in Psalm 1, but we know from the New Testament that the Holy Spirit is always active in undergirding God's Word. He empowers the righteous to avoid the influence of the wicked by embracing the power of the Word to live (see Eph. 1:17).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PATH OF LIFE (Ps. 1:1-3)

VERSE 1

How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers!

Verse 1 begins with a blessing formula that announces the spiritual state of a righteous individual. First, the text declares that the righteous person is **happy** (“blessed,” KJV, ESV, NIV). The Hebrew word rendered *happy* occurs more than 40 times in the Old Testament, at least half of which are in the Book of Psalms. This term is best understood as the joyful spiritual condition of those who faithfully walk in a right relationship with God. It is more than a superficial feeling of happiness based on material possessions or suitable outward circumstances. It refers to the deeper fellowship with God that produces joy and satisfaction despite external conditions.

The blessed individual is intentionally not identified by name. He is simply called **the one** (“the man,” KJV, ESV). If the psalmist had intended to use a particular hero of the faith as an example—Abraham, Moses, Job, or the like—he probably would have named the individual. Neither is the term *the one* likely to refer to an ideal, or perfect, person. Instead, biblical standards indicate that the righteous person is one who is in a right relationship with God through God’s grace alone, not by human efforts (Eph. 2:8-9).

If the psalmist did have the ideal, or perfect, person in mind, then Jesus Christ alone would meet this criterion. In that case, Psalm 1 would be best understood as a messianic psalm that foreshadows the sinless life Jesus lived. On the other hand, the term rendered *the one* is singular and is used elsewhere in the Old Testament as an impersonal pronoun to mean “somebody.” The psalmist likely had that usage in mind here as well. Thus, the word refers in the general sense to any person who longs to walk in a right relationship with God. The contrast is between the many wicked versus the solitary individual who walks the path of life in delightful obedience to God’s Word.

Three parallel relative clauses follow the blessing formula and further describe the righteous individual. In particular, the clauses present a trilogy of unholy actions the obedient individual shuns. Their sequence is not so much a methodology for avoiding wickedness as they are an emphatic call for doing so. Using the techniques of repetition and parallelism, the psalmist underscored what actions are unacceptable for the righteous.

Each clause contains three significant parts: (1) a verb in the negative—that is, an action to avoid doing; (2) a noun signifying a kind of relationship to avoid; and (3) a second noun identifying the ungodly nature of a group that is to be shunned. Furthermore, the psalmist appears to have constructed the clauses so that they build on one another. That is, both the actions and the relationships described in each clause intensify in intimacy, while the groups appear to sink lower in terms of their moral and ethical behavior.

The first clause declares that the righteous individual **does not walk in the advice of the wicked**. The verb translated *walk* is to be understood figuratively in this context; it refers to how one behaves in life, a person's typical, everyday practices. As mentioned, the verb is negated (*does not walk*) so as to emphasize that the wise person avoids this particular pattern of behavior.

What was the behavior? The psalmist did not specify one particular activity but rather described a general pattern of behavior informed and motivated by *advice* (“counsel,” KJV, ESV; “in step with,” NIV) from an ungodly source. The Hebrew term translated *advice* is a general word for counsel, or plan. It points to the intellectual and spiritual foundation, or source, that a person draws from in making moral and ethical decisions in life.

Believers must resist the temptation to view *the wicked* (“the ungodly,” KJV) as a source of moral counsel. This plural noun describes people who are unbelievers and thus who do not have a relationship with God. They have no reverence for God and no desire to follow His Word. Turning to ungodly people for advice on living a truly happy, or blessed, life would be sheer folly. Proverbs 4:23 warns God's people to guard their hearts “above all else,” because the heart “is the source of life.” Similarly, the apostle Paul urged believers to pray diligently and not to worry, because God's peace would “guard [their] hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7).

The second clause—[does not] **stand in the pathway with sinners**—further intensifies the declaration. Like the first clause, the second one also has three parts. The Hebrew verb translated *stand* implies that the righteous person consciously refuses to put himself or herself in a particular position or situation. That position is here described as *the pathway*. A path, or trail, indicates a well-worn route of travel. Thus, in Scripture it often serves as a metaphor for a way of life, or lifestyle, of a person or group.

Here in the second clause, the psalmist labeled the ungodly group as *sinners*. This term refers to individuals who miss a mark, or target, either unintentionally or intentionally. Either way, they consistently miss God's standards that are revealed in His Word. On the other hand, truly happy, or blessed, believers carefully avoid putting themselves into situations or on a trajectory of action that they know leads to sin. They do not seek advice on life-shaping decisions from *the wicked*. But even more, they refuse to dabble

in the sinful ways that many people embrace as a lifestyle. This is a call for believers to reject unholy lifestyles. They must not even step onto such a path; it leads to destruction (see Matt. 7:13)!

The third and final clause in verse 1 intensifies the psalmist's declaration still further. The blessed individual does not **sit in the company of mockers**. The Hebrew verb rendered *sit* is a common term that means "to sit down or dwell." The ungodly identified in the third clause are *mockers* ("the scornful," KJV; "scoffers," ESV). These are individuals who ridicule the righteous. They jeer at the idea that anyone would want to follow a godly way of life. Their approach is to discredit the life of faith in God, to disdain it as laughable and ignorant. Ironically, mockers of God by their actions often make themselves detestable to others (Prov. 24:9).

For the psalmist, it was unthinkable that any righteous person would join in with those who viciously mock the believer's godly way of life. The intensity of the last clause is found also in the word *company* ("seat," KJV, ESV). This term literally means "a dwelling place." Thus, the one who is right with God does not dwell with those who seek to mock God, His people, or His ways. Over time, God's people can face increasing pressure to conform to the environment around them. The temptation to do what everyone does is real. But the one who seeks to be right with God resists these temptations (see Ps. 26:4-5; Prov. 4:14-15).

VERSE 2

Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night.

The psalmist began his declaration in verse 1 with the positive words "how happy." Then he stated three negatives—that is, three things that the happy, or blessed, individual does not do. In verse 2, therefore, the psalmist returned to a positive statement of what the righteous person does do. He signaled this return, or contrast, with the word **instead**. In linguistic terms this is called a particle of exception. The psalmist pivoted to focus on what marks out the path of life. These are actions that characterize the righteous individual's lifestyle.

In their poetic form, the two lines of verse 2 emphasize parallel ideas. It was typical in ancient Hebrew poetry to express emphasis by the way the words of a line were structured. Words that appear early in a line stress their importance to the overall idea. Thus, a literal rendering of the first line of verse 2 states that "in the instruction (Hebrew, *torah*) of the LORD (Hebrew, *Yahweh*) is his [the blessed one's] delight." The early emphasis on *torah* in the line helps identify Psalm 1 as a wisdom psalm, or *torah* psalm.

The term rendered **instruction** can also be translated “law” (KJV, ESV, NIV). As such, the term could refer specifically to the Ten Commandments or to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. Further, the term was used in some contexts to refer in a general way to the revelation of God’s will for His people. This is likely the meaning in Psalm 1:2. The psalmist declared that God’s instruction is the source of **delight**, or joy, for the righteous. In another psalm, God’s instruction is declared to be perfect and life-renewing (Ps. 19:7).

The second line of verse 2 parallels the first line in emphasis. That is, because blessed believers delight in God’s instruction, they think deeply about it **day and night**. The Hebrew term rendered **meditates** does not reflect the popular form of meditation practiced in various mystical religions. That type of meditation features the repetition of a magical word or mantra to empty the mind of all other thoughts. In contrast, the Hebrew verb refers to speaking in a low tone when reading or reflecting on an important truth (see Pss. 63:6-7; 143:5).

The righteous person so loves God’s Word that he or she continuously reflects on its truths (*day and night*). As a figure of speech, this phrase conveys the idea of letting God’s Word inform and guide the believer all the time. Consequently, the vocation of the righteous is the lifelong study of the life-giving Word of God (Josh. 1:8).

The spiritual discipline of meditation begins with reading and memorizing the Word of God. Hiding His Word in our hearts enables the Holy Spirit to help us recall and embrace it at a moment’s notice (Ps. 119:11). Mulling over God’s instruction with a humble, obedient attitude leads us to further understanding and prayer. Yielding to the Word through repentance and praise makes it the true light on the path of life (Ps. 119:105).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Law, Ten Commandments, Torah” on pages 1015-1019 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What delights you most about reading and studying the Scriptures? What are some ways a believer can meditate on God’s Word during the day and the night?

VERSE 3

He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Psalm 1:1 emphasizes what the believer avoids, or does not do. Verse 2 then describes what believers do in their delight over God's instruction—they think deeply and constantly about how to obey it. Verse 3 follows up on the contrast with a focus on the results of avoiding wickedness and delighting in God's Word. In other words, verse 3 further defines what it means to be "happy," or blessed, as an individual who is in right relationship with God.

First, the righteous person enjoys the blessings of stability and fruitfulness. To communicate this truth, the psalmist employed the imagery of **a tree planted beside flowing streams**. The righteous person is thus not like a wild tree that comes up by chance but rather is one that a planter intentionally places in a conducive location. The Hebrew term translated *planted* can also be rendered "transplanted." The idea, therefore, is that a master gardener transplanted a seedling or a cut from an established tree to a place where the new tree would flourish and grow (see Ezek. 17:22). Most importantly, the gardener anticipated that the tree would soon produce fruit. Similarly, God plants His people so they can draw from the life-giving resources of His Word. They find stability and purpose in life, and they bear the fruit of being in right relationship with God (see John 15:1-4).

The term rendered *flowing streams* ("rivers of water," KJV; "streams of water," ESV, NIV) can refer either to natural waterways or to artificially dug irrigation canals. If the latter idea is meant, the picture is of a master gardener who digs a canal from a plentiful water source and then plants fruit trees alongside the canal. Just as the trees flourish by sending their roots deep into the watered soil, likewise the righteous person finds constant nourishment in God's life-giving Word.

The proximity of plentiful water to a fruit tree would accomplish two things. First, the tree would fulfill its purpose for being planted—to bear **its fruit in its season**. At harvest time, the master gardener would pick fruit from the tree, thereby enhancing the family's well-being. Likewise, when God's people sink their roots deeply into God's Word, they produce abundant spiritual fruit. In doing so, they fulfill their purpose of honoring God and enhancing the collective life of His redeemed family (Prov. 12:12; Col. 1:10).

Second, by growing in the proximity of an ever-flowing stream, the tree could endure—even thrive—in difficult conditions. Even in extreme heat and arid winds, the tree's foliage and fruit would not **wither**. As long as it stayed connected to the source of its strength, the tree would remain healthy, strong, and fruitful for many years. The implication of this imagery is that the believer who stays connected to God through His Word will find nourishment and strength to thrive in withering circumstances. Indeed, God will work through such circumstances to make us "mature and complete, lacking nothing" (Jas. 1:4).

In the final line of verse 3, the psalmist seemed to leave the tree analogy for the purpose of summing up the results of a believer's delight in God's Word. In short, the righteous individual finds that **whatever he does prospers**. The Hebrew verb translated *prosper* has the sense of "to be successful" or "to make something a success" (see Gen. 24:40). When believers delight in and meditate on God's Word, they strive to conform to it. In doing so, they succeed in the most important matters of life (see Matt. 6:33).

The psalmist was not offering unlimited worldly success. Believers do not receive a guarantee of fame, fortune, or material prosperity. Instead, the blessing is the result of embracing godly wisdom. True fulfillment in life is found through faithful obedience to God and His Word (see Josh. 1:8).

THE PATH OF DEATH (Ps. 1:4-5)

Until this point the focus of the psalm has been on the path of the righteous. In verses 4-5, the focus turns to the path and fate of the wicked.

VERSE 4

The wicked are not like this; instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Having described the blessed condition of the righteous—those who know the Lord, delight in His instruction, and strive to avoid the way of wickedness—the psalmist began verse 4 with a strong contrast: **the wicked are not like this** ("not so the wicked," NIV). While the happy person in verse 1 is depicted as an individual ("the one") (though perhaps as a representative of all the righteous), the term rendered *the wicked* is plural. The psalmist's intent is clear: the wicked as a group do not walk in the same life path as the godly individual. They are not right with God, and they do not desire to be right with Him. Their destiny is diametrically opposed to the blessed and fruitful life of the righteous. The wicked are on a path that ends in destruction.

In verse 3, the righteous person was likened to a flourishing tree, green-leaved and fruitful even in difficult times. By contrast, the wicked are compared to **chaff that the wind blows away**. The psalmist had in mind the winnowing process that was a familiar part of the grain harvest. Workers would transport bundled sheaves of cut barley or wheat to the threshing floor—an area of bare ground, usually circular, and often located on a hillside where constant breezes blew. Grain stalks were spread out on the threshing floor like a mat, and teams of yoked oxen walked round and round the floor, trampling the stalks until the heads of grain fell off. Next, workers cleared away the trampled stalks, leaving behind the residue of mixed grain, husks,

and stalk scraps. These were swept into mounds and removed. Then the winnowing began. Workers used long, wooden pitchforks to toss the mixed materials in the air again and again. Eventually the wind blew all the lighter chaff (husks and scraps) to the side; only the heavier heads of grain fell back onto the threshing floor.

VERSE 5

Therefore the wicked will not stand up in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

The word **therefore** signals a conclusion regarding the meaning of Psalm 1:4. The psalmist explained that being “like chaff” means the wicked will not **stand up in the judgment**. Two key implications of this statement deserve note. First, God undoubtedly will hold wicked people accountable for their evil actions. Ultimately, such people will face their Maker in the judgment.

Second, wicked people *will not stand up* (“will not stand,” ESV, NIV) in their time of judgment. This is not in conflict with the first implication—that somehow the wicked will not stand in judgment. Rather, the verb rendered *will not stand up* refers to an inability to succeed. It conveys the idea of being unable to rise in defense of oneself. In other words, the wicked will have no basis of argument, no ground to stand on, to defend their wicked actions. They will be put to silence before the righteous Judge of all the earth. Since the word *judgment* is preceded by a definite article, this reference likely points to the end-time judgment that Jesus described in Matthew 25:31-46.

The second line of Psalm 1:5 is a good example of synonymous parallelism in Hebrew poetry. That is, the second line repeats the theme of the first line by using synonymous, or similar, ideas and terms. Thus, **the wicked** in the first part of the verse are called **sinners** in the second part. The root word rendered *sinners* means “to miss the mark.” Romans 3:23 plainly states that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The emphasis of Psalm 1:5 points to sinners who not only are unrepentant but also are steeped in wickedness.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Judgment Day” on pages 966-967 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In light of the coming day of judgment, what will be the most important concern that matters for time and eternity? How can believers share this truth in love with those who are in rebellion against God?

The phrase **in the assembly** (“congregation,” KJV, ESV) **of the righteous** may imply that wicked people also will face more immediate, temporal forms of judgment. Sin carries terrible consequences in the here and now, but its wages in the life to come are eternal—death and hell (Matt. 23:33-36; Rom. 6:23). The word rendered *assembly* is one of two Hebrew terms in the Old Testament that describe the Israelite people as a covenant congregation bound together by their faith in the Lord. The faithful believer chooses not to put himself or herself in partnership with the wicked (Ps. 1:1). Conversely, God will not allow the unrepentant wicked to remain with His people (1:5).

THE CONCLUSION (Ps. 1:6)

VERSE 6

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.

Psalm 1:6 summarizes not only the theme of this psalm but also the theme of the entire Book of Psalms. The emphasis is on two contrasting ways, the **way of the righteous** and the **way of the wicked**. The *way*, or path, refers to the chosen lifestyles that individuals follow, including their motives and the ultimate results of their lives. The *righteous* conform to God’s Word, delight in it, and study it (1:2). As a result, they flourish and bring forth fruit (1:3).

Further, the Lord **watches over** (literally, “knows”) the path that the righteous travel. This verb’s form emphasizes a continuous watching or knowing. Thus, the phrase refers to an intimate kind of knowledge gained by experience and relationship.

Conversely, the path of the wicked **leads to ruin**. The basic meaning of the Hebrew term rendered *ruin* (“shall perish,” KJV; “destruction,” NIV) means “to perish” or “to die.” Since God neither knows nor watches over the wicked, they will die and be eternally separated from Him (Pss. 37:20; 73:27; 92:9; Luke 13:27). Believers, on the other hand, can live with confidence, knowing that God gives His protection to the obedient because He knows them (John 10:14).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Righteousness” on pages 1399-1401 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Psalm 1 indicates that the righteous find fulfillment in life through faithful obedience to God and His Word. What are ways the believer can choose to show faithfulness to the Lord?

THE PAST

We can learn from the past as we observe God's faithfulness in contrast to humanity's unfaithfulness.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹ This oft-quoted saying reminds us of the importance of knowing our history. However, it is not enough simply to recall accurately a set of historical facts or a timeline of events. We must learn the truth that the past can teach us. We must embrace the lessons of distinguishing between right and wrong, wise and unwise, just and unjust, success and failure.

In 1897, at the zenith of the worldwide British Empire, England was poised to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee—the 60th anniversary of her reign. Members of the royal staff implored the renowned poet Rudyard Kipling to write a special poem for the occasion. Kipling's initial composition for the jubilee lauded the perceived benefits of British colonization. The poem bristled with imperial pomp and smug national self-glorification. After further reflection, however, Kipling laid aside the first composition and wrote a second poem, "Recessional," which reflected not a celebratory mood but instead a mood of humble contrition. The title referred to a common church practice of singing a dedication hymn at the end of a worship service as the ministers departed the sanctuary.

Kipling's new poem called on British citizens to avoid imperialistic pride and never to forget that God holds dominion over all peoples and kingdoms. Five of the poem's six stanzas end with a memorable refrain drawn from Deuteronomy 6:12: "Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (KJV).

Nearly 3,000 years before Kipling reminded the British people not to forget the Lord God, the Israelite psalmist Asaph made the same plea to the people of Israel. In Psalm 78, Asaph solemnly challenged the Israelites to teach their children God's commands and to warn them about the consequences of forgetting the Lord's mighty works in the past. The poet reminded his nation of their past cycles of failure and of God's unwavering compassion and grace. By not forgetting the lessons of history, the people of Israel could be confident about the present and be hopeful for the future.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 78

Bible scholars generally agree on the nature and purpose of Psalm 78, even if they disagree on how to categorize it. Some regard it as a historical psalm, a hymn of praise reciting the marvelous works of God on Israel's behalf. They do so because the psalm's subject matter is similar to other historical psalms (Pss. 105; 106; and 136). However, Psalm 78 appears to go beyond a mere recitation of events in Israel's past. Thus, other scholars put this psalm into the wisdom category. They point out several typical wisdom themes that are found especially in the first 11 verses, including a focus on God's law.

On the other hand, the psalm is quite long (72 verses), and the majority of verses do not contain wisdom language. This has led still other Bible scholars to classify Psalm 78 as a didactic, or teaching, psalm. That is, it was composed to teach God's people a vital spiritual truth: disobedience carries terrible consequences.

To emphasize the point, the psalmist Asaph first set the context of Israel's covenant with the Lord, including God's law. Then he drew from Israel's checkered history of rebellion against God and reminded worshipers about the consequences of disobedience suffered by previous generations. Thus, the psalmist appealed to the past in order to instruct a new generation to take the path of faithful obedience to the Lord.

A superscription labels Psalm 78 as "a maskil of Asaph." The precise meaning of the Hebrew term *maskil* [MAHS keel] is uncertain. Twelve other psalms in the Book of Psalms carry the same label (Pss. 32; 42; 44–45; 52–55; 74; 88–89; 142). The word may suggest that this is a psalm of understanding or instruction, or a skillful or artistic composition. Another suggestion is that the term calls for serious reflection on the psalm's content. This suggestion, while certainly appropriate for Psalm 78, should not be taken to mean that psalms without this label deserve any less serious reflection.

Twelve psalms in the Book of Psalms are credited to Asaph (Pss. 50; 73–83). Who was this psalmist? The writer of 1 Chronicles identified Asaph as one of the descendants of Levi, whom King David put in charge of music for Israel's worship at the tabernacle in Jerusalem (1 Chron. 6:39; see also 16:7).

Assigning a date of composition for the psalm is difficult. Because of its content, however, some scholars suggest a date near or at the end of David's life. The history featured in the psalm begins with Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage (78:12–14) and concludes with David's divine selection as Israel's shepherd-king (78:70–71). The final verse summarizes David's entire reign as being carried out "with a pure heart and ... skillful hands" (78:72).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

TEACH FOR THE FUTURE (Ps. 78:5-8)

Verses 5-8 play an important role in setting the context of Psalm 78 as a didactic, or teaching, psalm. These verses reveal that from the time God first established His covenant with Israel, He commanded the people to teach their children His works and ways. They were to do this so that future generations would not have to learn the folly of rebellion through experiencing judgment.

VERSE 5

He established a testimony in Jacob and set up a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children

Verse 5 follows closely on the thought of verses 2-4, in which the psalmist committed himself and his generation to tell future generations of the “praiseworthy acts of the LORD, his might, and the wondrous works he has performed” (78:4). In doing this, Asaph and his generation would be continuing to pass down the vital truths their ancestors had taught them.

In verse 5, Asaph added to the weight of his example of commitment. Teaching the next generation about the Lord’s works and ways wasn’t just a wise thing for parents and grandparents to do. More significantly, it was a matter of obeying what the Lord had commanded His people to do. The Lord had **established a testimony ... and set up a law** for this very reason.

The word rendered *testimony* (“statutes,” NIV) comes from a root that means “to bear witness.” The term was also used at times to refer to the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written (Ex. 25:16). The term rendered *law* (Hebrew, *torah*) can also be translated “instruction.” In this context, however, the word likely refers to the covenant itself (Ex. 19:3-8) as well as to the entire body of instruction—the Commandments, statutes, ordinances, and directives included in the Mosaic law. The law specified both how Israel was to approach God and how the people were to live in community within a covenant framework (Deut. 4:6). Thus, one generation’s passing down these truths to the next was a moral duty, not just a nice idea. That the Lord placed this duty squarely on the shoulders of believing families can be seen in Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

The language of Psalm 78:5 makes clear that spiritual education is more than teaching youngsters a set of religious traditions. God **commanded ... fathers** to guide their children by example to embrace the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel. Parents were to **teach** (“make ... known,” KJV) **to their children**. The verb rendered *teach* calls for a knowledge gained by

personal experience. Fathers were to help their children learn to obey God's commands, not just commit words to memory. Likewise, Christian parents today are called to teach their children God's works and ways, especially the mighty work of salvation God accomplished through Jesus Christ.

VERSE 6

so that a future generation—children yet to be born—might know. They were to rise and tell their children

After unfolding God's strategy for training future generations in His ways, Asaph turned in verses 6-8 to describe the intended goal, or result, of cross-generational training. Asaph's aim was to underscore the reason that teaching new generations was crucial.

Asaph kept in mind several generations. In various verses of this psalm, he mentioned fathers (78:3,5), their children (78:4,5), the current generation ("us," 78:3), and future generations (78:4). Clearly the psalmist's interest was in the past, present, and future. Thus, Asaph declared at the beginning of verse 6 that the current people of God must be committed to teaching God's works and ways to **a future generation—children yet to be born.**

The phrase **so that** reflects a strong Hebrew term that can also be rendered "to the end that." It points to the expected outcome of a particular action. Thus, if each adult generation does what God commands in terms of teaching the next generation about Him, then each new generation is likely to respond to the Lord in faith and obedience. The new generation will **know** personally how God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt and made a covenant with His people at Mount Sinai. In time, that new generation also would **rise and tell their children** of the Lord and His wonderful works. In this way the covenant of faith would continue and expand.

VERSE 7

so that they might put their confidence in God and not forget God's works, but keep his commands.

Verse 7 illustrates the blessings of teaching future generations about God's mighty works. First, doing so helps a new generation of believers **put their confidence in God.** This *confidence* ("hope," KJV, ESV; "trust," NIV) relates to the trust (or lack thereof) that an individual has in God. This idea actually constitutes the psalm's overall theme. The arrogant are those who place their trust elsewhere and, as a result, are disobedient (Ps. 49:13).

Second, consistently training new generations in God's ways helps ensure those ways will not be forgotten. To **forget God's works** ("deeds," NIV) is to disregard not only the events but also what those events reveal about

God's nature and will. The Lord is a God who acts. He acts both in deeds of judgment and in works of mercy. Remembering this truth gives His people a basis for confidence in God's compassion and care.

Third, teaching about God and His ways helps the young better **keep his commands** ("commandments," KJV, ESV) even as they grow into adulthood. The opposite of forgetting is remembering, and remembering fosters obedience. Thus, Psalm 78:7 portrays a three-part chain of faith: personal confidence, remembrance, and obedience.

VERSE 8

Then they would not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not loyal and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

In contrast to the positive results identified in verse 7, Asaph recalled the sad history of the Israelites' rebellious relationship with God. Asaph had in mind the Israelites who stubbornly rebelled against God in the wilderness (see Deut. 9:7). However, the psalmist also had a preventive purpose in mind. The telling and retelling of God's mighty acts helps young generations avoid taking the same disobedient roads that their ancestors took.

If new generations of God's people faithfully obeyed God's commands, **they would not be like their fathers.** Those ancestors had proven to be a **stubborn and rebellious generation.** Asaph may have used these terms deliberately. The phrase *stubborn and rebellious* appears twice in Deuteronomy 21:18-21, where the Lord instructed parents on how to deal with a constantly and willfully disobedient son. In Asaph's thinking, the wilderness generation of Israelites had behaved in just such a defiant way toward God.

Asaph ended the verse by describing two ways in which the previous generations had displayed their disobedience. First, their **heart was not loyal** ("aright," KJV; "steadfast," ESV). Second, their **spirit was not faithful** to the Lord God. The term translated *loyal* literally means "to be firm." The term rendered *faithful* can also mean "to be reliable." The wilderness generation had constantly shifted with the circumstances. Their faith in God was fickle, not firm. They were rebellious, not reliable.

Asaph used the remainder of this psalm to document the Israelites' sad history of unfaithfulness. The people neither remembered God's works nor lived in obedience to God's ways (78:10). Consequently, the retelling of the faith in Psalm 78 was (and is) meant to be an encouragement to faithful obedience and a warning against stubborn rebellion. Likewise, we as followers of Christ in our day are responsible for teaching future generations God's compassionate work in the gospel as an encouragement and as a warning.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Faith, Faithfulness” on pages 547-551 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some ways that previous generations taught you about the Lord’s mighty works and ways? How do you need to strengthen your commitment to tell future generations about the Lord?

REMEMBER THE PAST (Ps. 78:32-37)

Asaph reminded the people of his day about the Israelites’ past cycles of spiritual failure. Those failures brought about God’s disciplinary judgment, which was then followed by the people’s repentance and return to God. Too often, however, the people’s repentance was not sincere.

VERSE 32

Despite all this, they kept sinning and did not believe his wondrous works.

Asaph began verse 32 with a call to remember the Israelites’ relationship with God in the wilderness period (see 78:12-31). The phrase **despite all this** points to the cycle of sin, punishment, cry for help, and forgiveness that occurred repeatedly during this time (and also later during the time of the judges; see Judg. 2:11-19). God had miraculously rescued the people of Israel from the Egyptian army (78:13). Then He provided water in the wilderness when there was none available. Still, the people continued to sin against God (78:17). They demanded food yet still spoke against God (78:18-19).

God was furious with His people, because they doubted His ability to provide for them and save them (78:21-22). Still, God gave His people an abundance of food (78:25,29). In all of this, the Israelites failed to learn either from God’s chastisements or His great deeds of provision. Like spoiled children, the wilderness generation refused to learn from the past.

Asaph identified the wilderness generation’s specific sin in the last part of Psalm 78:32. The people **did not believe** the Lord’s **wondrous works** (“wonders,” ESV, NIV). The term rendered *wondrous works* refers to the mighty acts that God carried out on behalf of His people. Such acts could be either cosmic wonders or historical achievements, but they were never chance events. Instead, they were divine actions that showed God’s intentional care in times of need or discipline against persistent rebellion.

The verb rendered *believe* appears four times in Psalm 78, twice translated as “believe” (78:22,32), once as “faithful” (78:8), and once in the negative form “unfaithful” (78:37). The basic meaning of this verb is “firmness” or “certainty.” To believe, therefore, is to be certain of something. Biblical faith is an assurance, a certainty (see Heb. 11:1). This is in contrast to the modern idea of faith as something that might be wished for but is not certain.

VERSE 33

He made their days end in futility, their years in sudden disaster.

Asaph pointed out that God did not ignore His people’s sinfulness. He had warned His people many times that disobedience invited divine discipline. The nature and extent of God’s disciplinary judgment might seem severe to believers today. However, as the Books of Exodus and Numbers reveal, the Israelites stubbornly refused to come to their senses. They continued to be unfaithful. They would not trust the Lord to provide food and water in the desert. Instead the people kept rebelling against God. Consequently, they were consigned to wander in the wilderness until the disobedient generation died off (Num. 14:22-23).

The generation that refused to trust in the Lord experienced many wasted days as they waited for death. God caused their days to **end in futility** (“vanity,” KJV). The word that is translated *futility* literally means “a breath” or “vapor.” The rebellious generation came to the end of their lives with nothing. In effect, the disobedient Israelites spent nearly 40 years journeying through the wilderness, always wondering when their demise would come in **sudden disaster** (“trouble,” KJV; “terror,” ESV, NIV).

VERSE 34

When he killed some of them, the rest began to seek him; they repented and searched for God.

God’s disciplinary judgment was not without some results. When the Lord struck down (**killed**) some of the rebellious people, others had a spiritual awakening—albeit a short-lived one. When the throes of judgment passed, most of the people returned to their unfaithful ways.

Asaph described this superficial repentance as part of a tragic cycle. In other words, the psalmist was describing a pattern of behavior, not merely one specific incident. Verses 34-37 depict the people of Israel as moving from punishment to repentance to deception and back to unfaithfulness.

Asaph presented the case that Israel was guilty of an action that in the law merited capital punishment. Surely such a case would cause the people of Israel to wake up and sincerely return to God! But no, the Israelites remained

obstinate and sinned against God. They responded in a cycle of superficial repentance. Asaph described the cycle as containing eight steps, or actions. The first three actions are described in verse 34.

When the heat of God's judgment became severe, the people first **began to seek** God. The term rendered *seek* often means "to consult" or "to inquire of" the Lord about a matter. In other words, the people were asking "Why us, Lord?" Second, the people **repented** ("returned," KJV). This verb implies that the people turned back from going in the wrong direction. Third, the Israelites **searched for God**. This verb carries the idea of being on the lookout for someone (Ps. 63:1).

VERSE 35

They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God, their Redeemer.

The fourth step in the cycle involved remembering two foundational truths about the Lord's character. First, they recalled that **God was their rock**. Many Scripture passages refer to God as a rock, a source of protection, safety, and refuge (Deut. 32:4; Pss. 18:2; 19:14). Second, they remembered that **the Most High God** was **their Redeemer**. The combination of the terms *Most High* and *God* occurs also in Genesis 14:18-20,22—a passage about Abraham's rescue of his kidnapped nephew Lot.

The term *Redeemer* comes from Israel's tribal culture and points to the vivid imagery of a kinsman who delivers his relatives from difficulty or danger. The unique feature of this term is its focus on the privilege and duty of a close relative to bring about the redemption of his kin. It highlights the special relationship God had with the people of Israel (Ex. 19:4-6).

What is troubling in verse 35 is that the Israelites remembered these foundational truths only after God brought terrible punishment on them. In Scripture, the verb **remembered** often means "to think about or pay attention to something." Asaph reminded the people of his day that a past generation of Israelites had failed to pay attention to their relationship with God. Asaph's generation needed to avoid committing the same dangerous error.

VERSE 36

But they deceived him with their mouths, they lied to him with their tongues,

Israel's repentance took a turn for the worse in the four negative steps of the last half of the cycle. In fact, it proved to be insincere repentance. The people **deceived** ("flattered," ESV) God and **lied to him**. The verb translated *deceived* also conveys the idea of persuasion by insincere flattery. The Israelites offered

only lip service. Of course, no one can successfully deceive the all-knowing God. The Israelites were deceiving themselves. Their lies would serve as evidence that God's judgment against them was right.

VERSE 37

their hearts were insincere toward him, and they were unfaithful to his covenant.

The next stage in the people's insincere repentance was a disloyal attitude toward God. The term rendered **insincere** ("not right," KJV; "not steadfast," ESV; "not loyal," NIV) suggests that the Israelites were prone to worship false gods (idols) alongside their worship of the Lord. Consequently, their disloyal **hearts** led to disobedient actions. The people became **unfaithful to** the Lord's **covenant**. True repentance leads to a growing relationship with God that is made evident through consistent, willing obedience.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Covenant" on pages 355-359 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways can the old Mosaic covenant be said to be fulfilled by the new covenant in Jesus Christ?

COMPASSION IN THE PRESENT (Ps. 78:38-39)

In these verses, Asaph contrasted Israel's repeated unfaithfulness to God's unwavering compassion. He emphasized humanity's mortality as God's motivation for extending grace.

VERSE 38

Yet he was compassionate; he atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them. He often turned his anger aside and did not unleash all his wrath.

Asaph described God's merciful responses to the people of Israel in six brief statements. Five of the six appear in verse 38. The word **yet** ("but," KJV) alerts the reader that God's responses stood in stark contrast to the Israelites' persistent rebellion and insincere repentance.

(1) God's first response provided the basis for all the other responses. It is God's nature to be **compassionate** toward His people. He does not have to work up a sense of compassion; He is always and forever full of compassion

(see Ex. 34:6; Deut. 4:31). His character is unchanging. (2) Out of His gracious character, therefore, God **atoned for** the people's **iniquity**. The important Hebrew term rendered *atoned for* can also mean "cover over," "pacify," or "propitiate." The word rendered *iniquity* describes the crooked, perverse spirit associated with sin. The Lord provided a way of atonement in the law when He established the Day of Atonement sacrifice (Lev. 16). That ritual, however, only foreshadowed the perfect atonement sacrifice God would make for all people in His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:1-18).

(3) The Lord **did not destroy** His covenant people, although their destruction would have been just punishment for their sin. (4) Instead, time after time He **turned his anger aside**. (5) God restrained His fury, choosing not to unleash the full measure of His righteous **wrath**. The term rendered *wrath* refers to God's intense reaction against sin. Although the people of Israel deserved to receive the full brunt of God's wrath, the Lord showed compassion on them.

VERSE 39

He remembered that they were only flesh, a wind that passes and does not return.

The final statement describing God's pattern of compassion and forgiveness offers a powerful motive for God's characteristic mercy. (6) God **remembered** the people's weak nature: **they were only flesh**. This does not mean God excused, ignored, or overlooked human sin. Rather, He knew that people could never truly defeat the sin that held them in bondage. They were weak, feeble, and short-lived. Only God could defeat the curse of sin on behalf of sinners. And He ultimately provided atonement for our sin and rebellion by offering forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Atonement" on pages 139-144 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what way was God's wrath turned aside and His compassion shown in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ? List some of the ways we can be thankful both now and in the future that Jesus offered Himself on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin.

1. George Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense*, vol. 1 of *The Life of Reason* (chap. 12, p. 284), Project Gutenberg [online], [cited 8 November 2016]. Available from the Internet: www.gutenberg.org.

THE SHEPHERD

God can be trusted since He is always good.

One version of a legendary story about Psalm 23 tells of two men who were invited to quote the well-known text from memory before a large audience. One of the speakers was a young man who had been trained in the best speech and drama techniques. He had the resonant voice of a trained orator and walked onto the platform with a confident gait. The second speaker was an elderly Christian gentleman whose voice was fragile, feeble, and shaking from the effects of age. He walked slowly onto the stage with the help of a cane, yet he too exhibited an air of serene confidence.

After the host introduced the two men, the young professional speaker came to the microphone first. With amazing eloquence, he filled the room with the psalm's poetic lines, pronouncing every syllable, word, and phrase perfectly; pacing each line with precision; and building to a final crescendo. When he concluded the recitation, the audience erupted in applause and loud cheering. Some called out for an encore.

The speaker nodded in appreciation but returned to his seat on the platform as the elderly gentleman stood and began to shuffle toward the microphone. Leaning on his cane, the old man began to quote the psalm in a measured tone, his voice cracking from time to time as he spoke. The audience listened in rapt attention as the speaker recited each line of the psalm, just as the young orator had done. Yet when the old gentleman concluded the recitation and turned to go to his seat, no cheering or applause came from the listeners. Instead, the only sounds were those of tender weeping and whispered words of praise to God.

Without hesitation, the young orator came back to the microphone. Instead of giving an encore, however, he addressed the audience in a subdued tone. He explained that the greatest difference between the two men's presentations was not eloquence or training. Rather, the greatest difference was that one speaker knew the psalm about a shepherd, while the other man obviously knew the Shepherd of the psalm.

As we approach the study of this great and familiar psalm, we will do well to take seriously the young speaker's closing words. The most important

outcome of this session will not be how well we are able to read or recite the words of Psalm 23. Rather, it will be how well we know and trust the Good Shepherd both now and throughout the days of our lives.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 23

Psalm 23 is arguably the most beloved, most memorized, and most studied text in all of the Book of Psalms. It is sung or read frequently in congregational worship, personal devotions, and funeral orations. Many people who otherwise do not read the Bible nevertheless recognize this psalm's familiar words and sentiments.

The superscription identifies Psalm 23 as “a psalm of David.” The Hebrew term rendered “psalm” literally means “melody.” The root verb form means “to make music.” Thus, a psalm can rightly be understood as a song—that is, a poem intended to be sung to musical accompaniment.

Seventy-three psalms in the Book of Psalms are attributed to David, Israel's most beloved king. From the time of his youth in Bethlehem, David was familiar with the shepherd's life (see 1 Sam. 16:11; 17:15,33-35; 2 Sam. 7:8). He clearly drew from that experience in composing Psalm 23. Psalm 28:9 (another Davidic psalm) also refers to the Lord using shepherd imagery.

Psalm 23 does not fit neatly into any of the major psalm categories. Some Bible students think of it as a thanksgiving psalm, while others suggest that the song has more features in common with individual psalms of trust or confidence. To be sure, the psalmist uttered personal declarations of trust in the Lord in verses 1 (“I have what I need”), 4 (“I fear no danger”), and 6 (“I will dwell in the house of the LORD”). However, the psalm was written in such general terms that its occasion and date of writing cannot be determined precisely. Indeed, its general nature contributes greatly to the psalm's being relevant and beloved by so many across vastly different times and cultures.

Although it is commonly called the Shepherd's Psalm, Psalm 23 actually speaks of two figures, the shepherd and the host. Thus, many Bible students outline the psalm in two stanzas: the Lord as Shepherd (23:1-4) and the Lord as Host (23:5-6). It is also instructive to note that while the psalmist speaks of the Lord in verses 1-3 and verse 6, he speaks directly to the Lord in verses 4-5. All of these features signify that the psalm's primary emphasis is not on David the composer but rather on the Lord his God. Christians make a further application of the psalm to Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us (John 10:14-18).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PROVIDES (Ps. 23:1-3)

The first three verses of Psalm 23 demonstrate David's personal faith in the Lord and communicate a profound statement of theological truth about God's character and nature. At the heart of these verses is David's confidence in a God who provides.

VERSE 1

The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need.

The opening words of the psalm declare its primary focus: **the LORD**. This is God's covenant name, also written at times as "Yahweh" to emphasize the four Hebrew consonants that comprise the name. It is the name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:13-15); it can mean both "I am who I am" and "I cause to be all that comes to be." Thus, the name *the LORD* points to God as the eternal, self-existent Creator. That Jesus consciously referred to Himself using the words "I am" reveals that He is not only the Creator but also the Good Shepherd and Giver of everlasting life (John 10:11; 11:25-26).

David described God as his **shepherd**. Poetic writings commonly feature such metaphors. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a familiar object or idea is substituted for a higher, less familiar object or idea. The purpose is not to equate the two objects or ideas but rather to show similarities that provide insight and appreciation. Thus, David was not suggesting that God is merely a shepherd. Instead, he was opening a window into one or more aspects of the Lord's true character.

David understood the shepherding life. As a youth he tended his father's flocks and at times had to protect the sheep from dangerous predators (1 Sam. 17:15,34-35). The shepherd played a vital role in providing safety and care for the sheep. A good shepherd cared about every animal in the flock, working so that not even one lamb would be lost (see Luke 15:3-6). These were (and still are) the kinds of thoughts about God that David wanted to evoke in others when he compared the Lord to a shepherd.

Comparing God to a shepherd is one of the oldest traditions in the Bible (see Gen. 49:24). Shepherds were responsible for feeding, guiding, and protecting their flocks. Kings also were often referred to as shepherds in Scripture, because rulers were responsible for the welfare of their subjects.

David used the personal pronoun **my** to describe the covenant relationship between the psalmist and his God. Psalm 23 is intensely personal in tone, and that is one reason for the psalm's ongoing power as Holy Scripture.

David intended for the hearer or reader to understand that God is the ultimate Shepherd. Once a shepherd but now a king, David saw himself as one of the sheep in the Lord's flock. The Lord held the sovereign power over David's (and every) earthly kingdom. The Lord was the Shepherd who provided for His people and protected their leader, the king.

Just as David recognized the Lord as his Shepherd, we as believers also can understand that God desires to be our Shepherd too. God established the possibility of such a relationship for us through the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ (John 10:11). Thus, what David said about his relationship with the Lord also pertains to believers today.

Since the Lord was his Shepherd, David could say, **"I have what I need"** ("I shall not want," KJV, ESV; "I lack nothing," NIV). The Hebrew text of this statement is comprised of a future-tense verb preceded by a negative particle meaning "not." The verb means "to lack, need, be lacking, or decrease." By using this verb, David may have entertained two possible ideas. First, he may have been expressing confidence that the Lord would take care of his personal, physical needs—in the present and in the future. In the Model Prayer, Jesus taught His disciples to pray with similar confidence in the Heavenly Father's provision of daily food (see Matt. 6:11).

Second, David was possibly thinking about the Lord's commitment to Israel, His covenant people. The Lord had a flawless record of faithfulness in that He delivered the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, provided for them throughout decades of wandering in the wilderness, empowered them to take possession of the promised land, and brought about David's rise to rule over a unified kingdom. No wonder the psalmist declared the Lord would continue to be a faithful shepherd. This is also a promise that believers today—people of the new covenant in Jesus Christ—can affirm just as confidently as David did.

VERSE 2

He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters.

David went on to illustrate how the divine Shepherd provides the necessities of life for His sheep. The verbs in this verse are expressed in a form that reflects continuous action. In other words, these are actions that a good shepherd regularly does for the sheep. Thus, David was using the imagery of shepherding to describe what the Lord does for His people in an ongoing way and on at least two levels. First, by referring to the shepherd as a responsible provider for a flock's food (pasture) and protection, David was emphasizing the physical provisions and protection the Lord gives to His people. In other

words, God's people can trust Him with their actual physical needs. On a second level—the spiritual level—God's people can trust Him to provide for their spiritual needs. That is, the description of God as a shepherd and His people as sheep is figurative; it points to a deeper, spiritual reality. God is eternal spirit (John 4:24), not a human shepherd. Similarly, we are not literal sheep but rather human beings made in God's image (Gen. 1:26). Thus, David used the shepherd-sheep imagery to emphasize the spiritual nourishment and refreshment God offers to those who trust in Him.

In the first line of 23:2, David proclaimed that the Lord let him **lie down in green pastures**. The verb rendered *lie down* was used often to describe flocks resting at pasture (Ezek. 34:14-15) in calm confidence (Isa. 17:2; Zeph. 3:13). Four criteria must be met before sheep will lie down to sleep. First, the animals must be free of fear. Second, there must be no conflict occurring among various animals in the flock. Third, the sheep must be free of attack by swarms of biting flies or parasites. Fourth, the sheep must be free of hunger.

David addressed the fourth requirement in particular by describing his resting place as *green pastures*. This phrase can also be rendered "grassy pastures" or "grassy encampments." The Hebrew word for *green* was regularly used to refer to the tender, new vegetation of springtime (Deut. 32:2-3; 2 Sam. 23:4). The term rendered *pastures* was used at times to refer to seasonal grazing ranges. In some areas of the promised land, such pastures were peaceful, pleasant, and bountiful (Isa. 33:20; Jer. 25:37; Ezek. 34:14; Ps. 65:11-13). Shepherds would camp overnight in these areas rather than drive the sheep back and forth each day. This is a wonderful depiction of the lengths to which God goes to provide for His people.

Further, David declared that God continually leads him **beside quiet waters** ("still waters," KJV, ESV). The phrase rendered *quiet waters* literally is "waters of rest." The phrase can refer either to placid streams or calm watering holes. Sheep are skittish; they shy away from rushing, turbulent streams. Good shepherds know this and seek calm watering places so that their sheep can feel secure as they drink. David used this imagery to affirm the Lord's providential actions to guide His people to peaceful refreshment.

Such imagery actually stands in contrast to much of the dry, rocky geography of Bible lands. Except during the rainy season, many pastures have only scarce amounts of rough grass. Shepherds often must cover long distances to provide adequate sources of food and water for their flocks. On the other hand, this contrast might have been David's exact point. God is no ordinary shepherd. The Lord constantly gave David peace and sustenance even in the midst of challenging circumstances. Similarly, as believers we can trust Jesus the Good Shepherd to give us His true peace and security in whatever circumstances we face.

VERSE 3

He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake.

David continued to describe God's shepherd-like care, declaring that the Lord **renews his life**. The verb rendered *renews* ("restores," ESV; "refreshes," NIV) literally means "to bring back, restore" (see 1 Kings 13:6; Ps. 60:1; Jer. 50:19; Ezek. 39:27). On one level, this statement portrays the restorative effects of green grass and fresh water for exhausted sheep. In some contexts, however, the verb points to a restored relationship brought about by turning back to God (see Hos. 14:1; Joel 2:12). David thus could have been emphasizing that the Lord comes after us when we, like wandering sheep, need to repent and turn back to Him for spiritual renewal (see 2 Sam. 12:7-10; Ps. 51:1-4).

Having found and turned back the errant sheep, the shepherd then **leads them along the right paths for his name's sake**. The Hebrew verb rendered *leads* ("guides," NIV) is found elsewhere in Scripture to recall God's faithful guidance of the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 13:21; 15:13; Pss. 77:21; 78:14,53,72). David undoubtedly expected Israelite worshipers of his day to be thoroughly familiar with the exodus tradition. As the Lord had continued to lead His people in the wilderness despite their faltering steps, so too did David continually experience the Lord's gracious guidance in his life. The Hebrew word rendered *paths* suggests the clear trails laid down over time by a cart pulled with oxen. In other words, these were trails that could be trusted to lead to the correct destination (Ps. 17:5).

On the other hand, the phrase *right paths* could also refer to the destination itself. It is this understanding that is reflected in the translation "paths of righteousness" (KJV, ESV). In this sense, David was pointing to a lifestyle of obedience to God's law (Prov. 2:9; 4:11,26-27; Isa. 26:7). The Lord guides His people to live their lives under His direction. He never leads us to live in life-destroying ways but always in life-fulfilling ways (John 10:10).

David further confessed that the Lord's name undergirded His gracious leadership. The Lord leads us in His ways *for his name's sake*. The phrase *for his name's sake* points to God's perfect character. A good shepherd carefully guarded his good reputation. Being faithful, providing for and protecting the sheep, and leading them safely home enhanced the shepherd's reputation. In contrast, failing to do these things could ruin it. Similarly, the Lord's character is that of a faithful shepherd. He guides and protects His own. By speaking of the Lord's name, David was expressing trust that the Lord would faithfully maintain His perfect character in caring for His people. He would do so not only for the flock as a whole but also for individual sheep. Thus, David was confident that the Lord would provide for all his needs. Believers also can be confident the Lord will faithfully care for us.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Shepherd” on pages 1484-1485 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Based on David’s description of the Lord as a shepherd in Psalm 23:1-3, how does Jesus function as the believer’s shepherd? How has Christ provided for you, restored you, and guided you?

GUARDS (Ps. 23:4)

In Psalm 23:4, David characterized God as a shepherd who guards and protects the flock. The dangers faced by sheep in David’s day included falls into steep, rocky riverbeds as well as threats from thieves and wild predators.

VERSE 4

Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

This verse’s opening words, **even when** (“yea, though,” KJV; “even though,” ESV, NIV), further emphasize the Lord’s faithful character in verse 3. While a good shepherd always strives to lead his sheep along right paths, those paths sometimes wind through treacherous terrain. The Lord never promises His people a complete absence of danger or difficulty. He does promise to always walk alongside His people both in good times and times of distress.

David knew that he had already experienced his share of dark days. One day he would **go through the darkest valley**. The word rendered *darkest* can refer to the darkness of nighttime (Amos 5:8), the anxious gloom of fear (Job 24:17), or the distress associated with a sense of present danger (Jer. 2:6). Shepherds leading their flocks through wadis and ravines experienced the deep gloom of the difficult terrain. David may have faced such darkness numerous times as a young shepherd caring for his father’s sheep.

On the other hand, some Bible scholars note that *darkest* is a compound word comprised of two Hebrew terms that mean “shadow” and “death,” respectively. Thus, the specific valley that David anticipated crossing one day may well have been “the valley of the shadow of death” (KJV, ESV)—that is, death itself. The same Hebrew word appears two times in Job 10:21-22, where the context clearly indicates the word refers to the abode of the dead. David may have had in mind his own journey through this dark valley.

Whether David was referring to life’s difficult experiences or to death, his point was that he would **fear no danger** (“fear no evil,” KJV, ESV, NIV).

The word rendered *danger* can also mean “disaster” or “harm” (Isa. 45:7; Zeph. 3:15). Despite the presence of danger, David could declare confidently that he was not afraid. He could say this because he trusted in the presence and protection of the Lord.

The promise of the Lord’s unending presence with His people is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. God spoke this promise to Jacob (Gen. 28:15), to Moses (Ex. 3:12), and to a host of others. It is the same promise that was the foundational meaning of the Immanuel prophecy Isaiah delivered to King Ahaz of Judah (Isa. 7:14)—the word Immanuel means “God with us.” Matthew’s Gospel points out that Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of that prophecy (Matt. 1:22-23). Further, Jesus assured His followers in the Great Commission that He would always be with them to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). Thus, if we as believers fear the Lord, we need not fear anything else, because His presence is always with us.

David was intimately familiar with the tools of the shepherd trade—the **rod** and the **staff**. The *rod* was used for counting sheep (Lev. 27:32) and for getting them back to the flock (Ezek. 20:37). The *staff* was utilized for support (Ex. 21:19; Zech. 8:4) and protection (Isa. 36:6). David confessed that if any adversity should come his way, he would depend on the Lord’s presence, discipline, and support. As believers, we too can be comforted knowing that God promises His presence and protection in every experience of life.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Sheep” on pages 1478-1479 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How are God’s people like and unlike sheep when it comes to experiencing God’s discipline and support? What are some ways by which the Lord disciplines His people today? Supports them?

HOSTS (Ps. 23:5-6)

In the final two verses of Psalm 23, David moved to describe the Lord as the perfect Host. The scene moves from grassy meadows to a great banquet hall. Yet the psalmist’s poetic purpose did not change. He was still praising the Lord for His goodness, faithfulness, and unending presence.

VERSE 5

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

David identified three ways that the divine Host offered hospitality to him. The first act of hospitality was for God to offer a meal. Three elements in this meal are notable. First, God made preparation. The Hebrew verb rendered **prepare** means to “get ready” or “set out in order.” The verb is used five other times in the Old Testament to describe preparing a table (Ps. 78:19; Prov. 9:2; Isa. 21:5; 65:11; Ezek. 23:41). Such preparation takes time and attention. The good host does not serve leftovers or a dish thrown together quickly. Preparation points to an act of kindness and honor for the guest.

The second element was the **table**. To *prepare a table* implies providing a bountiful and luxurious feast (Prov. 9:1-2). A gracious host would spare no expense, offering sumptuous treats and delicacies to an honored guest (Job 36:16). The third element was the presentation. The Hebrew text implies a dramatic scene. The Lord prepared a feast **before** (literally, “in the presence of”) David. Further, the meal was laid out **in the presence of** (literally, “in front of”) David’s **enemies**. As the guest of the Lord, David was safe to eat and drink, while those who opposed him looked on with frustration. David’s enemies were characterized as hostile adversaries (Pss. 31:11-12; 42:10). The scene delivers a wonderful image of safety and security. Not only does God feed His people, He also gives them security in the midst of threats.

In the second act of hospitality, the Lord anointed David’s head with oil. For a host to anoint a guest with perfume or scented oil was an act of honor (Luke 7:46). David probably was not referring here to his anointing as king (1 Sam. 16:13). The Hebrew verb that is translated **anoint** means “to make fat” or “refresh.” It denotes a time of festivity and joy (Ps. 45:7; Prov. 15:30). In the Old Testament, oil was also used as a symbol of happiness and prosperity (2 Kings 20:13; Eccl. 9:7-9). By anointing David, God welcomed him and provided for his comfort.

In the third act of hospitality, David acknowledged God’s surpassing generosity (**my cup overflows**). The word rendered *overflows* is actually a noun that means “saturation.” David’s life was filled to the brim and running over with God’s gracious provisions. Further, the Lord kept filling David’s life continuously.

VERSE 6

Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.

Psalm 23:6 marks the conclusion of David’s praise of his Shepherd. The word **only** (“surely,” KJV, ESV, NIV) points to all that God’s shepherding and hospitality meant for David. The provision and protection noted earlier in the psalm pointed to a covenant relationship that culminated in ongoing

fellowship with God in His house. This is the destination that David longed for and toward which he desired to move.

Verse 6 contains two lines that describe the Lord's care for David. In the first line, David declared that God's **goodness and faithful love** would **pursue** him. This is unexpected. That is, typically one might speak of the believer pursuing God's goodness and love. By reversing the order, David emphasized not his own efforts but rather the Lord's eternal faithfulness. God pursued a covenant relationship with His people, including David.

The Hebrew verb rendered *pursue* carries a stronger meaning than simply "to follow." It was used at times to refer to a hostile pursuit by enemies, illnesses, or curses (Deut. 28:22,45; Pss. 7:1; 71:11; 143:3). Yet, it could also be used to indicate a positive, worthy chase (Deut. 16:20; Pss. 34:14; 38:20; Prov. 21:21; Isa. 51:1).

Goodness and *faithful love* ("mercy," KJV, ESV; "love," NIV) are covenant terms. *Goodness* is the opposite of evil and describes the things that enhance life (Prov. 2:9; Micah 6:8). *Faithful love* is a term that depicts God's faithful care for His people. It is found more than 100 times in the Book of Psalms. There was no stronger word that David could have used to summarize the nature of the Lord's provision and protection given to him (Ex. 34:7; Deut. 7:12; Pss. 6:4; 33:22; 51:1).

God's pursuit of a covenant relationship with David was not a single event at one place and in one time. David acknowledged that the divine pursuit would continue as long as he lived. Wherever he went, David knew that he would not be separated from the Lord's presence (Ps. 139:7). The Lord would pursue David and not let him out of His eternal care.

In the psalm's final line, David highlighted the place where divine provision and protection was constantly available: **in the house of the LORD**. David may have been looking forward to the temple's being built or speaking about the tabernacle, or tent of meeting. Whatever the exact reference, David recognized that he would dwell in God's presence forever. The phrase **as long as I live** can also be translated "forever" (ESV, NIV). This verse points to the New Testament promise that God will ensure His believing people an everlasting home with Him in heaven (John 14:1-3).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Heaven" on pages 732-734 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are you anticipating as the outstanding features of heaven for believers? How do the Lord's promises about life in heaven help you face both good and threatening circumstances now?

OUR RESPONSE

Thanksgiving is the proper response to God's answer to our prayers.

Nick Vujicic [VOO-yih-chich] is a 34-year-old Christian evangelist and motivational speaker. Having launched his career at age 19, he has traveled extensively in over 50 different nations, telling others about the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ. Born in Melbourne, Australia, to devout Serbian Orthodox parents, Nick now lives in southern California with his wife and two young sons. Amid all of his travel and speaking engagements, he also has found time to write seven books—the first of which, *Life Without Limits: Inspiration for a Ridiculously Good Life*, has been translated into more than 30 languages. On top of all these activities, he presides over an international nonprofit ministry, is a musician and actor, and for hobbies enjoys fishing, painting, and swimming.

If you think Nick's story so far is amazing (which it is), you haven't heard the half of it. Nick was born with a rare genetic disorder characterized by the absence of limbs. You read that correctly. Nick was born with no arms or legs—only two small, deformed feet attached to the bottom of his torso. As a child, he struggled mightily with his disability, both physically and emotionally. He has said in his testimony that he often prayed to God at night that he would wake up the next morning with arms and legs. But that prayer was never granted. He would cry out to God, asking why he was born this way. Then one day Nick read the account in John 9 in which Jesus healed a man born blind. When asked whether the blind man or his parents had sinned for the man to be born that way, Jesus answered in a way that spoke directly to Nick about his own situation. Jesus said, "This came about so that God's works might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). Nick suddenly realized that the Lord had an incredible plan for him. He would both tell and show the world that, in Christ, a man without limbs can live a life without limits.

Nick's story is one of amazing hope and inspiration. He routinely encourages audiences throughout the world to hold onto hope, serve others, and be thankful to God. That same message of hope, devotion, and gratitude toward God comes through clearly in the Bible passage for this session.

Psalm 138, one of many in the Book of Psalms attributed to David, focuses on thanksgiving as the proper response to answered prayer.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 138

In form, Psalm 138 is an individual song of thanksgiving. The psalmist David expressed gratitude for divine deliverance from a crisis or problem. The psalm also has some features of a royal psalm, a song dedicated to or used by the king (see 138:4). Perhaps King David composed this psalm to use in his public sacrifice after answered prayer (Pss. 66:13; 116:19; Jer. 33:11). However, the mention of the Lord's temple (Ps. 138:2) suggests that either David was looking ahead to the time when his son Solomon would build the temple or the psalm was written for David's descendants after the temple was constructed and in memory of the great king.

While individual psalms of thanksgiving tend to follow a set format, Psalm 138 varies from the usual pattern. Instead of an introductory verse that proclaims a desire to give thanks, the sentiment of gratitude appears throughout the text (138:1,2,4,5). In place of a narrative that details the reason for the thanksgiving celebration, the psalm announces, without revealing the details of the request or the answer, that God answers prayer (138:3). Finally, the conclusion of praise to the Lord for what He has done is also mixed in throughout the poetry (138:2b,4b,5b,6-8).

The psalm employs prayer language throughout. Familiar poetic phrases found in other psalms are also used. Some of the poetry can be interpreted in more than one way, and this accounts for Bible scholars' differences of opinion on how some verses are to be understood in English.

The psalm can be divided into three sections. In the first section, the psalmist offered a promise to give thanks to God and a testimony of the reasons he was doing so (138:1-3). Section two portrays the responses of earthly kings who hear about God's promises (138:4-6). The final section returns to the psalmist's testimony of ongoing trust in the Lord (138:7-8).

The lack of concrete details regarding what the Lord had done for David makes the testimony of this psalm easily transferable to today's believers. David did not lose sight of the importance of distinguishing between praise, which focuses on the character or being of God (who God is) and thanksgiving, which concentrates on the acts of God (what God has done). Believers have reason to praise God for who He is even when they do not recognize or understand His providential acts on their behalf.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

I WILL THANK (Ps. 138:1-3)

The first three verses of Psalm 138 can be further divided into two parts. In part one, David promised to carry out four acts of thanksgiving to God (138:1-2). Since the voicing of thanksgiving psalms was part of the ritual of bringing a thank-offering to the Lord, the acts David mentioned were designed to be carried out as a public testimony in the presence of other worshipers. In part two of this section, verse 3, David described the motivation that prompted him to compose this thanksgiving psalm.

VERSE 1

I will give you thanks with all my heart; I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings.

The first two acts of David's thanksgiving appear in verse 1. In the first line of this verse, David promised to **give ... thanks** to God. The pronoun **you** refers to the Lord, the intended recipient of David's gratitude. For clarity on this point, some English Bible translations insert words of direct address, "O LORD" (ESV) or "LORD" (NIV), in the middle of the first line. Careful readers will note that the psalmist himself included the Lord's name in a similar fashion in the first line of verse 4 and second line of verse 8.

The verb rendered *give ... thanks* ("praise," KJV, NIV) appears also in verses 2 and 4. This verb appears more than 100 times in the Old Testament—typically in worship contexts—and as might be expected, most of these appearances are in the Book of Psalms. The word's root meaning is literally "to throw or cast." In the context of throwing or casting words, the meaning therefore is "to confess." As such, it points to two possible applications: (1) to confess or declare God's character and mighty works, and (2) to confess one's sins. David employed the term here to confess that answering prayer is a fundamental feature of the Lord's character.

The words **with all my heart** ("with my whole heart," KJV, ESV) underscore David's undivided loyalty to the Lord (see Ps. 86:11-12). That is, both David's personal commitment and public testimony were the same. There was no hypocrisy, no disconnect between his private and public devotion. He brought an individual thank-offering to the worship sanctuary, yet in doing so David joined other worshipers in openly declaring praise to the Lord.

In the second line of verse 1, David further promised to **sing ... praise** to the Lord. The Hebrew term rendered *sing ... praise* literally means "make music," especially in the sense of making music in praise to God. This could

include adding harmonic vocalization of the poetic lines (chanting, for example) as well as expressing the lyrics to the accompaniment of musical instruments. David had advocated the singing of praises to the Lord on other occasions (2 Sam. 22:50; Ps. 108:1).

That David intended to sing praises about the Lord **before the heavenly beings** (“before the gods,” KJV, ESV; “before the ‘gods,’” NIV) seems curious. The Hebrew word rendered *heavenly beings* is *elohim* [EL oh heem]. This word appears in places such as Genesis 1:1 to refer to the one true God who created the universe. As a plural noun, however, it also was used in Scripture to refer to the many false, or pagan, deities of ancient times (Ex. 20:3; Josh. 24:14). One could hardly imagine King David singing praises in the presence of pagan idols, even if his praise was directed to the Lord.

A more likely understanding is that David used *elohim* figuratively in this context to refer either to the angels of heaven (see Ps. 8:5, KJV) or to other rulers on earth. The second possibility finds support in that David declared in Psalm 138:4 that “the kings on earth” would one day join him in giving thanks to the Lord. Possibly David had in mind a place or circumstance in which he would be in the presence of rulers who served other gods. David’s testimony would then have the powerful effect of declaring the Lord’s glory among the nations (Ps. 57:9).

VERSE 2

I will bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your constant love and truth. You have exalted your name and your promise above everything else.

In verse 2, David described two additional acts of thanksgiving and some reasons he had for offering such gratitude. In the verse’s first line, David announced that he would **bow down** in the direction of the Lord’s **holy temple** (see Ps. 5:7). The act of offering thanks was intensified because David promised to physically prostrate himself in worship and praise. This was more than words or songs; David’s gratitude was expressed in an act of great humility. As a king, David was accustomed to people bowing to him. He humbly bowed in adoration of the King of kings.

The Hebrew word translated *temple* could also refer to a palace or to a mobile sanctuary such as the tabernacle in its day (1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3). Thus, David was probably not referring to the large temple complex his son would later build but rather to the tent of meeting and the ark, the place where the Lord sat enthroned (see Ex. 25:21-22).

In the second line of Psalm 138:2, David pledged again to **give thanks** (“praise,” KJV, NIV)—the same Hebrew verb he used in 138:1—but with a

different application. The verb's form used in verse 2 highlights David's deep desire to fulfill this vow. The difference is that now David vowed to show gratitude for the Lord's **name**.

In most cultures of the ancient Near East, a person's name held great importance. It was thought to reflect the essence of a person, expressing the individual's character or nature. To confess or praise a name was to recognize the person's essential character. David placed his hope in the name of the Lord (Ps. 52:9). He realized that he owed his kingship to the Lord (Ps. 54:6-7).

David went on to explain the reason he desired to give thanks to the Lord, mentioning two terms that describe God's essential character. First, David gave thanks for the Lord's **constant love** ("lovingkindness," KJV; "steadfast love," ESV; "unfailing love," NIV). This term points to the eternal attribute of God that cemented His covenant with Israel. It referred to the Lord's faithfulness in keeping that covenant. David thus praised God for remaining faithful to His covenant regardless of the circumstances.

Second, David gave thanks for the Lord's **truth** ("faithfulness," ESV, NIV). This term focuses on God's fidelity, or reliability. David often paired these two covenant terms together (Pss. 57:10; 61:7; 86:15; 108:4). In fact, God used these two words about Himself in His self-revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:6-8).

A third reason David wanted to express gratitude to God appears in the last line of Psalm 138:2. David noted that the Lord had **exalted His name and ... promise above everything else**. The verb rendered *exalted* means "make great" or "magnify." As mentioned previously, the word *name* ("fame," NIV) can refer to the Lord's fame or reputation (Josh. 9:9; Jer. 32:20). The term rendered *promise* ("solemn decree," NIV) literally means "word." In the Book of Psalms, the term often refers to the words or promises of the Lord.

Did David have in mind a specific promise? If so, the psalm doesn't reveal what that promise was. Perhaps David was referring in a general way to all of God's great promises to His people. Another view suggests that it was the Lord's covenant promise to David of an unending reign and kingdom (2 Sam. 7:11b-16). David understood this divine promise pointed not only to his immediate future but also to the distant future (7:19; compare Luke 1:31-33).

VERSE 3

On the day I called, you answered me; you increased strength within me.

The two lines of Psalm 138:3 offer the nearest thing to a clue as to the occasion for the psalm's composition. That is, this verse states in a general way that the Lord had delivered the psalmist from a crisis or problem. Such a general

context was a typical feature of individual psalms of thanksgiving. This feature allowed other worshippers—then and now—to easily adopt the psalm’s words as their own expressions of gratitude for God’s help. Similarly, when we testify gratefully about God’s answers to our prayers as believers, our testimony can encourage others to trust in the Lord and seek His help. Despite the psalm’s general description of the occasion, however, David likely had in mind an actual event in which the Lord had answered his prayer.

Three key features can be identified in this verse. First, David **called** (“cried,” KJV) to the Lord in prayer. Second, the Lord **answered** him. The pairing of these two verbs also appears in other Davidic psalms (Pss. 3:4; 22:2; 86:7). The phrase **on the day** (“when,” NIV) could refer to a particular moment in time when David prayed. This would suggest that the Lord answered his prayer quickly—that is, on the very day David had prayed. In the Hebrew language, however, the expression could also carry the general meaning of “whenever.” Accordingly, David might have been gratefully confirming that the Lord could always be counted on to answer the sincere prayers of His people, including the prayers David prayed.

The king then declared that something happened to him as a result of answered prayer: the Lord **increased** David’s inner **strength** (“strength of soul,” ESV; “emboldened me,” NIV). That is, the answer that came from the Lord gave David courage and fortitude. David did not specify how the Lord answered him, only that the Lord answered quickly. Nevertheless, the second line of Psalm 138:3 assures that the Lord heard David’s prayer and responded in a way that fortified his faith. David’s point was that God’s answered prayer was sufficient to sustain him in the face of a difficult situation. David was encouraged to declare His thankfulness to God for His love, truth, and answered prayer. Thus, David was able to sing and bow before God boldly in the presence of a congregation of worshippers.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul urged believers to give thanks to God in all circumstances. When was a time the Holy Spirit helped you as a believer offer gratitude to God in the midst of a crisis? How does Psalm 138:1-3 motivate you to show thanksgiving to God today?

THEY WILL BOW (Ps. 138:4-6)

In verses 4-6, David considered what the kings of the earth would do in the future as they saw what the Lord had done for him. David continued

to address God directly in verse 4, but then he shifted to the third person in verses 5-6 to reflect on the reactions of other kings. David listed three reasons why these kings also would give thanks and sing about the Lord.

VERSE 4

All the kings on earth will give you thanks, LORD, when they hear what you have promised.

Although David continued to address God directly in verse 4, he made a shift in the psalm's focus. While he had focused in verses 1-3 on his own acts of thanksgiving and the reasons for his gratitude, he turned in verse 4 to consider the anticipated actions of **all the kings on earth**. These earthly rulers would one day testify to the Lord's sovereign greatness and glory. Since David served the one true God, he expected other rulers to ultimately come to the same grateful testimony about the Lord that he had. David was confident that what he did in giving thanks, others would do as well. All sovereignty belongs to the Lord, and ultimately He rules over all the world's kingdoms (Ps. 22:27-28).

David used the same Hebrew verb to describe these kings' acts of thanksgiving as he had used previously to describe his own (see Ps. 138:1-2). That is, these rulers would **give ... thanks** ("praise," KJV) to the Lord. In particular, they would praise the Lord when they heard what He had promised. Bible scholars propose various views about the exact nature of this event and when it occurs. On one hand, the reference may be to a future time—in the end time, for example—in which David foresaw all earthly kingdoms under the sovereign rule of the one true God (see Rev. 11:15). On the other hand, David may have been referring to a response by other kings of his generation when they heard how the Lord had elevated the young shepherd to rule in Israel.

The phrase **what you have promised** literally is "the words of your mouth." Since the content of what the Lord spoke caused the world's kings to give thanks, the message was more important than general speech. The bottom-line meaning, therefore, is that the kings would ultimately recognize God as sovereign (Ps. 86:8-10). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul declared that one day every knee would bow and every tongue would confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11). David foresaw this reality in his day as well.

VERSE 5

They will sing of the LORD's ways, for the LORD's glory is great.

In verses 5-6, the psalmist moved to third person to further describe the forms of praise the kings would use. Similar to what David did (see 138:1),

the kings would **sing** songs of thanksgiving. The verbs are different yet synonymous here and elsewhere in the Book of Psalms (Pss. 21:13; 27:6; 57:7; 68:4,32).

The theme of the kings' songs of gratitude would be **the LORD's ways**. David had one of several possible meanings in mind here. First, he may have meant that the world's kings would laud how the Lord responds to those who worship Him. If so, they would sing that the Lord is perfect (Ps. 18:30), righteous (Ps. 145:17), and upright (Hos. 14:9). The Lord offers the way of life to those who love and obey Him. In contrast, those who reject Him choose the way of death (Jer. 21:8). Second, David may have had in mind the Lord's mighty acts in delivering the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery, providing for them throughout the wilderness years, and fighting for them as they took possession of the promised land (Ex. 18:18; Deut. 28:9). Third, David may have been referring to the way the Lord protected and guided him before he was king (1 Sam. 18:13-14) and thereafter (2 Sam. 5:10; 22:22). Finally, it is possible that the meaning was not so much about David himself as about one of his distant descendants, the Lord's Messiah, who will reign forever on the throne of David (Ps. 132:11; Isa. 9:7).

The reason that kings will give thanks and sing is revealed in the last line of verse 5: **for the LORD's glory is great**. The term rendered *glory* appears more than 50 times in the Book of Psalms. In the majority of cases, the reference is to God's glory. Indeed, God's glory is said to fill the whole earth (Pss. 72:19; 85:11; Isa. 6:3), to indwell the tabernacle and the temple (Ex. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:11), and to reach the heavens (Pss. 57:5; 97:6; 108:5; 113:4).

VERSE 6

Though the LORD is exalted, he takes note of the humble; but he knows the haughty from a distance.

The Lord is to be praised because, as the sovereign God, He is **exalted** ("high," KJV, ESV). He is rightly magnified above all the nations—past or present (Ps. 113:4). However, David referred to more here than simply the Lord's sovereign status. Since the first line of 138:6 shares the same basic structure as the last line of 138:5, the two appear to be linked. That is, the Lord's glory is great precisely because the Lord, though supremely superior than all human power, is neither distant nor uncaring toward His creation. He deserves to be given thanks because He cares about His people. The answered prayer and encouragement described in 138:3 provide the best evidence for the declaration of truth in this verse.

Although the Lord is sovereign, He **takes note of the humble**. The verb rendered *takes note* ("hath ... respect," KJV; "regards," ESV; "looks kindly,"

NIV) literally means “to see, observe.” Here it carries the extended sense of the Lord’s ability to understand (Ps. 106:44) or to perceive (1 Sam. 16:7). The exalted Lord is fully aware of even the most *humble* (“lowly,” KJV) of His people, those whom the world values little.

Conversely, the Lord **knows the haughty** (“the proud,” KJV) **from a distance**. It is well within God’s power to humble those who will not humble themselves, just as He can exalt the lowly (see 1 Sam. 2:7; 2 Sam. 22:28). In fact, on the coming day of the Lord, He will bring low all human pride (Isa. 2:17; Jas. 4:6). David reminded his readers of God’s recognition of the humble and the arrogant. One day everyone will recognize God’s sovereignty—some out of gratitude, and others in the fearful reality of His judgment.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Glory” on pages 655-656 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How does God’s great glory impact believers today? What are some ways that believers today can testify of God’s glory to the nations of the world?

GOD WILL FULFILL (Ps. 138:7-8)

In the last two verses of the psalm, David returned to his personal testimony in a declaration of trust. David affirmed his confidence in God’s love and perfect knowledge, as well as in God’s power to fulfill His promises to David.

VERSE 7

If I walk into the thick of danger, you will preserve my life from the anger of my enemies. You will extend your hand; your right hand will save me.

The first line of verse 7 presents a hypothetical situation and a divine solution. David began the verse by setting up a familiar situation: stepping **into the thick of danger**. David anticipated that he would continue to face dangerous circumstances in the future. The word rendered *danger* can also mean “trouble,” “distress,” or “anxiety.” Some Bible commentators view the phrase **anger of my enemies** as a parallel idea. If so, David’s anticipation of future times of danger may have pointed to specific troublemakers.

The psalmist saw the solution to future situations of danger in two parts. First was a testimony of trust. David declared that God would **preserve** him. When threats from his enemies appeared again, God would deliver David

just as He had in previous times. The verb rendered *preserve* carries the meaning of “to revive” or “to let live” (see Ps. 30:3).

The second part of the solution specifies that the Lord would preserve David from *the anger* (“wrath,” KJV, ESV) of [his] *enemies*. That is, the Lord would stretch out His **hand** against the wrath of David’s foes. David mentioned the Lord’s hand (or “hands”) three times in the psalm’s final two verses. The *hand* represented power and strength. The Lord brought the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery “by the strength of his hand” (Ex. 13:3).

VERSE 8

The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me. LORD, your faithful love endures forever; do not abandon the work of your hands.

The last verse of Psalm 138 again tilts the theme in the direction of David’s future. David’s words related to his present life, but they also pointed to a long-awaited future. David made a bold statement of faith and then addressed the Lord with a concluding request.

First, David declared that the Lord would **fulfill his purpose** for David’s life and reign as Israel’s king. The verb rendered *fulfill* (“perfect,” KJV; “vindicate,” NIV) can also mean “come to an end.” The fulfillment in David’s day would be to establish David’s dynasty. The future fulfillment would involve God’s universal kingdom in the rule of Jesus, the Messiah-King.

The final half of verse 8 functions as a prayer. David again directly addressed God by His covenant name, **LORD**. David praised God by declaring that the Lord’s **faithful love endures forever**. Similar statements appear in other psalms of praise and thanksgiving (see Pss. 118; 136). David then closed Psalm 138 with a plea for the Lord not to abandon **the work** of His hands. The term rendered *work* points to God’s mighty acts of deliverance. David prayed that the Lord would not forsake the working out of His purposes.

This closing request has implications for the people of God today as well. We are also the work of His hands (Isa. 60:21; 64:8). As those who have been redeemed through the blood of Jesus Christ, we have reason to expect that the work He began in us will be continued to completion (Phil. 1:6). We can rely on God’s power to fulfill His purposes in our lives.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In what ways has the Lord preserved your life in threatening times in the past? How do you see the Lord working out His purposes in you? How can you show gratitude to Him for His faithful love and enduring work?

HIS PRESENCE

Security is found in the assurance of God's presence.

In Exodus 32:7-14, Moses recorded a tense moment that occurred while the people of Israel were camped at Mount Sinai. The Israelites' future as God's covenant people—indeed their very existence—hung in the balance. Moses had been on the mountain for many days to receive the law, and the people did not know what had become of him. In their impatience, they pressured Moses' brother Aaron to fashion a gold calf-idol for the people to worship (32:1). When the Lord saw what was happening, He told Moses that He was ready to judge the rebellious Israelites in His wrath. In other words, the Lord was prepared to destroy the entire congregation and to begin a new nation, starting with Moses (32:10).

Moses interceded before the Lord on behalf of the people of Israel. He was aware of the people's weak faith and stubborn, rebellious nature. Yet Moses was more concerned about the Lord's glory and fame in the world as the keeper of covenant promises. Because of Moses' intercession, the Lord relented on His plan to destroy the Israelites (32:11-14). Then, in a follow-up conversation, Moses pleaded with the Lord to maintain His commitment to the Israelites and to assure Moses that His presence would go with the people (33:12-17). Moses knew that God's close presence with Israel was the one thing that would distinguish the nation from all the other nations.

In Psalm 84, the psalmist (one of the sons of Korah) reflected on the joy of living with the assurance of God's presence. Such assurance gives the worshiper an incomparable peace of mind and sense of security. It foreshadows the wonderful gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit for believers.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 84

The superscription to Psalm 84 provides information on the song's background. The phrase "for the choir director" occurs in more than 50

psalms, and the phrase has been understood to refer to the music director or leader in congregational worship. The phrase “on the Gittith” appears here and in two other psalms (Pss. 8; 81). Its meaning is unclear; suggestions include a type of instrument used for accompaniment, a particular tune, rhythm, or key, or a special kind of ceremony. As indicated in a previous session, the term “psalm” typically refers to a song-poem designed to be accompanied by musical instruments.

The superscription ascribes the origin of Psalm 84 to “the sons of Korah” (see also Pss. 42; 44–49; 85; 87–88). Korah was a descendant of Jacob’s son Levi, so Korah and his descendants were associated with the levitical priesthood and tabernacle worship. During the Israelites’ sojourn in the wilderness, Korah joined in a misguided insurrection against Moses and Aaron (Num. 16). The Lord punished Korah (and other rebels) with death, but some of Korah’s family were spared (Num. 26:10-11). Eventually, the descendants of Korah became early supporters of King David (1 Chron. 12:6), so David assigned them to be gatekeepers in the temple (1 Chron. 26:1-11).

Neither the date nor the specific writer of Psalm 84 can be determined with any precision. Further, the psalm contains a number of mixed elements; thus, its type can be difficult to name. It could be called a hymn of praise, a royal psalm, a song of Zion, a psalm of trust, or a song of ascent. The psalm displays bits and pieces of each of these types. Some Old Testament scholars suggest the psalm was written to be sung by pilgrims while traveling to Jerusalem for one of the major festivals.

One distinguishing feature of Psalm 84 is the fourfold appearance of the divine name “LORD of Armies” (“LORD of hosts” in some English translations; see 84:1,3,8,12). This name emphasizes God’s sovereign rule over heaven and earth, a rule that could be enforced with both angelic and human armies.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PASSION (Ps. 84:1-4)

The beginning of Psalm 84 is a hymn of praise focused on the joy of being in the Lord’s close presence in His house. Verses 1-2 describe the psalmist’s all-consuming passion to be in the Lord’s presence. Verses 3-4 portray the psalmist’s sense of security felt within the Lord’s beautiful sanctuary.

VERSE 1

How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD of Armies.

If this psalm was indeed written as a praise song for pilgrims approaching

Jerusalem to worship, verse 1 expresses the traveler's delight upon first seeing the Lord's house from a distance. (While the Hebrew word for "temple" does not appear in Psalm 84, the psalmist likely had it in mind.) Even in New Testament times, a visitor to Jerusalem could not help but be impressed by and drawn to the temple (Mark 13:1). The psalmist expressed his strong sentiments in the words **how lovely** ("amiable," KJV). The term rendered *lovely* refers to something or someone that is beloved (Ps. 60:5). Yet it was not so much the building but rather the One whose presence inhabited the temple that made it so attractive.

The Hebrew word rendered **dwelling place** ("tabernacles," KJV) is a plural term that literally means "dwellings." The use of a plural form should not be taken to imply multiple temples existed in Jerusalem. More likely, the psalmist was pointing to the structures that comprised the temple complex.

The divine name **LORD of Armies** ("LORD of hosts," KJV; "LORD Almighty," NIV) appears four times in the psalm (84:1,3,8,12). This name points to God's sovereign rule over all nations. On a festive day before a procession entered the temple, pilgrims would sing about "the LORD of Armies ... the King of glory" (Ps. 24:10).

VERSE 2

I long and yearn for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God.

The pilgrim's yearning to worship in the temple is highlighted further in verse 2. The verse is cast in the first person, expressing the individual worshiper's deep desire to be in God's presence. The pronoun **I** can be literally translated "my soul" (KJV, ESV, NIV). The phrase "my soul" parallels the phrase **my heart and flesh** in the subsequent line. In the ancient Hebrew perspective, the soul, heart, and flesh referred to the total human person from three angles. By using all three images in one verse, the psalmist emphasized that his entire being yearned to be in God's presence.

Three verbs are also used to describe the psalmist's passionate thirst to experience God's presence in the temple. Two of the verbs are found in the first line. The verb **long** means "to yearn or long greatly for someone" (Gen. 31:30). The word **yearn** ("faints," ESV, NIV) can also mean "to languish" or "to pine." The third verb, **cry out** ("sing for joy," ESV), appears in the second line of the verse. This word can also mean "to exult" or "to rejoice." These verbs indicate that the psalmist's inner passion could not be suppressed. His yearning poured forth in deep emotional groans and perhaps even songs.

The object of the psalmist's longing appears in the parallel phrases **the courts of the LORD** and **the living God**. Indeed, the second phrase clarifies

the first one. His longing to be inside the temple was really a yearning to be in the close presence of the One who inhabited the temple (Ps. 42:2).

VERSE 3

Even a sparrow finds a home, and a swallow, a nest for herself where she places her young—near your altars, LORD of Armies, my King and my God.

In verses 3-4, the psalmist voiced the thoughts of a pilgrim who must leave the temple to return home after worship but inwardly wishes he could remain there all the time. He even found himself envying the small birds that nested under the eaves and porticoes of the temple. The Hebrew word rendered **sparrow** was a general term that could refer to a number of types of small birds. The term rendered **swallow** might also refer to a type of dove, although another Hebrew term was usually associated with that bird.

In any case, the psalmist's emphasis was not so much on identifying precise species as reflecting on the birds' proximity to God. They built their nests near the **altars** of the **LORD of Armies** ("LORD of hosts," KJV; "LORD Almighty," NIV). In the phrase **finds a home**, the Hebrew term translated *home* literally is "house" (see KJV). It points ahead to the succeeding verse, which speaks of the happiness of those who dwell in God's house. Further, the birds felt safe enough in the temple precincts to raise their young there. If creatures such as small birds were attracted to be close to God's presence, how much more was the psalmist, whose relationship with the sovereign Lord was expressed in the words **my King and my God**.

VERSE 4

How happy are those who reside in your house, who praise you continually. *Selah*

The psalmist wished he could be like the small birds nesting safely in the temple structures—that is, he longed to be a permanent resident at God's **house**. There were, of course, members of the priesthood and temple caretakers who lived on the temple grounds. The psalmist mused about **how happy** those residents must be! They were blessed to be able to come into the Lord's close presence each and every day and to **praise** the Lord **continually**.

We should be careful at this point to recall that Israelite theology did not (and could not) confine God's eternal presence to an earthly building. When King Solomon uttered his prayer of dedication for the completed temple, he declared in no uncertain terms, "But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have

built” (1 Kings 8:27). The Lord inhabits the praises of His people wherever they might be—outdoors under the sunlit sky or the starry heavens (Ps. 19:1-2); in foreign lands where God is not well known (Ps. 18:49); and even in the face of threats from opponents (Ps. 28:6-7). While the psalmist realized the Lord could never be limited to the temple, he also knew that God’s house was a special place where the Lord had promised that His name would dwell and He would hear the prayers of His people (Deut. 12:10-11; 1 Kings 8:29).

Today, we as Christians also must not imagine that the Lord is confined to our church buildings. At the same time, we can depend on His promise to be in the midst of His people in a special way when we gather together in His name for worship (Matt. 18:20; Heb. 10:25). Believers are to passionately worship God in light of His blessings on His people.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What thoughts arise when you reflect on the place of worship where you attend? How would you explain to a non-Christian the value of experiencing God’s close presence at church while affirming that God’s presence cannot be confined to a building?

THE PRIORITY (Ps. 84:5-7)

In these verses, the psalmist expressed the blessedness of those who put priority on traveling to the temple for worship. God will give them strength for the journey, and even greater blessings will await them at their destination.

VERSE 5

Happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

The psalmist began this verse with a beatitude: **happy are the people** (“blessed is the man,” KJV; “blessed are those,” ESV, NIV). The Hebrew term rendered *happy* refers to more than a superficial sense of pleasure regarding one’s general circumstances. It points to a deep fellowship with God—a confident sense of being right with Him and in His care—that produces joy whether one’s general circumstances are pleasant or difficult. While the word translated *the people* literally is “the man,” the psalmist surely intended to let the individual represent the many who decided to make a pilgrimage.

For the psalmist, the Lord was the source of **strength** required to make such a pilgrimage. The word translated *strength* often means “might”

or “power,” but in some contexts it can refer to strength of will or even to provisions needed for a journey (food, water, stamina, and so forth). God’s strength thus equips His people to make their way to His house for worship.

The blessed people are those who have determined to come to God’s house; their **hearts are set on pilgrimage**. The word rendered *pilgrimage* (“the ways,” KJV; “the highways to Zion,” ESV) refers to a raised way or highway. This word appears in other places in Scripture to describe the lifestyle of the righteous (Prov. 16:17) and the way home for God’s exiled people (Isa. 11:16).

VERSE 6

As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a source of spring water; even the autumn rain will cover it with blessings.

For many Israelites in Old Testament times, making a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem was no easy journey. Today’s worshipers in developed countries are accustomed to driving a few blocks or a few miles to their local church sanctuary, worshipping, and then returning home on the same day. This was not the case, however, for the worshipers addressed by the psalmist. They could be away from their homes and businesses for weeks. Their mode of travel was either walking or riding on donkeys.

The psalmist thus envisioned these ancient pilgrims passing **through the Valley of Baca** [BAY kuh] on their way to Jerusalem. Whether this name was meant to identify an actual valley or to serve as a poetic figure of speech is unclear. The word *Baca* appears only here in Scripture, so its meaning is uncertain. On one hand, the term may refer to the balsam tree and thus to a valley known for such trees. On the other hand, the term is similar to a Hebrew verb that means “weeping.” Thus, the phrase *Valley of Baca* may have been a figure of speech the psalmist used to portray any dark, dry, fearful place (or situation) on the pilgrim’s journey to worship the Lord.

By finding their strength in God, the pilgrims made the valley **a source of spring water** (“a well,” KJV; “place of springs,” ESV, NIV). The psalmist did not specify how the pilgrims accomplished this feat. If the phrase *Valley of Baca* was meant to imply a time of great weeping, then the imagery may have been that the Lord transformed the travelers’ tears into fresh drinking water. In other words, through their faith and desire to be in the Lord’s presence in His house, the pilgrims found blessings in the midst of their adversity.

The psalmist anticipated further that **the autumn rain** would cover the valley **with blessings**. The Bible speaks generally of two rainy seasons in the ancient land of Israel. Rainfall was not consistent, however, and some areas often struggled with drought. The word translated *blessings* is close to a Hebrew word that means “pools” (KJV, ESV, NIV). The psalmist thus may

have been using a play on words—the valley of weeping becomes a valley covered with pools of fresh rainwater—to show how the Lord provides for those who passionately desire to worship Him in His house.

VERSE 7

They go from strength to strength; each appears before God in Zion.

Continuing to describe the pilgrims' journey to the temple in Jerusalem, the psalmist declared they got stronger as they drew nearer: **they go from strength to strength**. In the previous verse the pilgrims passed through a valley; here, *they go*. The verb for *go* literally means “to walk.” It is used figuratively in some contexts to refer to characteristic behavior or way of life (Ps. 15:2; Isa. 33:15). In other words, the verb depicts movement or growth.

However, the word rendered *strength* in verse 7 is a different Hebrew term than the one used in verse 5. The word used here can refer to efficiency, capability, wealth, or even military power. The psalmist likely wanted to emphasize that those who find their strength in their relationship with God (84:5) are made stronger, not weaker, as they face difficulties in life. God's strength equips His people to walk capably through life's valleys, including the valley of the shadow of death—life's “darkest valley” (Ps. 23:4).

By this means, the pilgrims would safely arrive at their long-desired goal. Each worshiper would be able to appear **before God in Zion**. In framing the destination this way, the psalmist may have had in mind the command in the law that all Israelite males were to appear before the Lord three times a year in connection with key festivals (Ex. 34:23; Deut. 16:16). The name *Zion* originally referred to a fortified section of Jerusalem. It came to be applied later to the entire city and also to the temple (including in the end time).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Pilgrimage” on pages 1298-1299 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What is the farthest you have traveled to participate in a time of worship? What motivated you to make this journey? How does a worship pilgrimage portray the Christian life?

THE PRAYER (Ps. 84:8-9)

In verses 8-9, the psalmist offered a prayer for the king. He called on the Lord to look with favor on Israel's anointed leader, who was the people's shield.

VERSE 8

LORD God of Armies, hear my prayer; listen, God of Jacob. *Selah*

The careful reader of Psalm 84 will recognize that with this verse the pilgrims have arrived at their destination. Each worshiper now would have the opportunity to stand in God's presence (84:7). What should be said in such an awe-inspiring moment? The psalmist took the lead on behalf of the worshipers, reverently expressing a request for the **LORD God of Armies** ("LORD God of hosts," KJV; "LORD God Almighty," NIV) to hear his prayer.

Some Bible scholars have suggested that verses 8-9 contain a shortened version of a prayer that would typically be offered on festival occasions. As it is, the psalmist supplied only an invocation in verse 8. If the psalm was intended to be sung by pilgrims, and if the word ***Selah*** at the end of verse 8 called for a pause, then the faithful might have been expected to personalize the prayer during the pause.

The words **hear** and **listen**, although imperative in form, are not commands but rather exhortations. Worshipers have no standing to make demands on the Lord God. In light of His grace and faithfulness, however, we are invited to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

VERSE 9

Consider our shield, God; look on the face of your anointed one.

Following his opening invocation, the psalmist sought God's favor for Israel's king. This may have been a customary opening petition in prayers offered at major Israelite festivals. In any case, the psalmist knew that as the king fared the people likewise fared. Thus, the psalmist requested God to **consider** ("behold," KJV, ESV) and **look on the face of** the king. These are parallel ideas, yet the concept of God's looking on the king's face implied that God would show His favor to the king.

In Israelite theology, the king was expected to be the Lord's authoritative representative, leading God's people to be faithful and to live by the law (Deut. 17:18-20). The king thus served as a **shield** for God's people. Figuratively, this image meant that the king was the conduit for the people's protection and deliverance. That is, the Lord ultimately was Israel's shield of protection (Deut. 33:29; Ps. 18:30), but the king served on earth as the Lord's appointed defender and leader of His people.

Second, the king was God's **anointed one**. This significant term can be rendered "messiah," and in some Old Testament prophetic texts the word points ahead to the coming of the ultimate Messiah, Jesus Christ (Ps. 2:2; Dan. 9:26). The psalmist's prayer asked that God would look with favor on

the king and prosper his reign. Likewise, believers are to pray for their leaders and for God's direction (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Messiah" on pages 1111-1116 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some specific ways that believers can pray for and encourage their national leaders? How can we show that Jesus the Messiah is our ultimate Lord and Defender?

THE PRESENCE (Ps. 84:10-12)

The psalmist concluded Psalm 84 with further words of praise. Pilgrims to the temple will never be disappointed by a day spent in God's presence. Indeed, they will experience God's favor by trusting in Him.

VERSE 10

**Better a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else.
I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God
than live in the tents of wicked people.**

In this verse the psalmist returned to the theme of joy over being in God's house. Using a "better-this-than-that" form found in many proverbs (see Prov. 15:16-17; 16:8), the psalmist observed that spending a single **day** in the temple **courts** was far more pleasant and satisfying than spending **a thousand [days] anywhere else**. This contrast between one day and a thousand days was meant to suggest the supreme value of the believer's being in God's immediate presence. Nothing else comes close.

In the second part of the verse, the psalmist moved from the proverbial to a personal commitment: **I would rather stand**. The words *I would rather* literally mean "I have chosen." The choice envisioned by the psalmist was between standing **at the threshold** ("be a doorkeeper," KJV, ESV, NIV) **of the house of my God** and dwelling **in the tents of wicked people** ("of wickedness," KJV, ESV). Some English versions interpret the phrase *stand at the threshold* as referring to the menial work of a doorkeeper. Interestingly, the descendants of Korah (the family responsible for this psalm) are listed in 1 Chronicles 9:19 as those who "were assigned to guard the thresholds of the tent." The psalmist's point is clear. He would rather serve in the humblest job at the temple—since it meant being in God's close presence—than to be in the inner circle of places (or people) of wicked power, fame, and wealth.

VERSE 11

For the LORD God is a sun and shield. The LORD grants favor and honor; he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity.

The psalmist had previously exhorted the Lord to look with favor on Israel's king, because he was the people's "shield" (84:9). Ultimately, however, the Lord was Israel's **sun and shield**. A *shield* meant protection and salvation (Deut. 33:29). Referring to God as *a sun* emphasized that He is the source of light, truth, and joy (Isa. 60:19; Rev. 21:23). Further, the Lord **grants favor and honor**. He shows His favor to pilgrims on the journey to His house (Ps. 84:5) and to the king as the defender of God's people (84:9).

Finally, the Lord **does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity**. The word rendered *withhold* means "to hold back or refuse." The same God who can be trusted to shower blessings on those who seek Him is able also to shut off those blessings in judgment or discipline (Deut. 28:58-68; 2 Chron. 7:13-14). The word translated *integrity* can also mean "blameless" or "upright." This statement should not be understood to imply that our salvation is a result of our ability to live righteously. Our salvation comes only from the righteousness we receive through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-26). That theme is indeed the way in which the psalmist concluded Psalm 84.

VERSE 12

Happy is the person who trusts in you, LORD of Armies!

Psalm 84 ends with a focus on faith. As noted previously, the term rendered **happy** ("blessed," KJV, ESV, NIV) refers to intimate fellowship with God that produces blessing and satisfaction despite outward circumstances. The word rendered **person** ("the man," KJV) refers to any individual who belongs to the Lord (**trusts in you**) and yearns to live in His close presence.

The word rendered *trusts* refers to having secure confidence in who the Lord is and what He does. God is the **LORD of Armies!** Consequently, believers are right to respond to God's faithful presence with worship and praise.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Integrity" on pages 827-828 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What does it mean for believers to live with integrity in today's culture? How does God's indwelling presence in our lives help us live with integrity?

THE CREATOR

Believers should worship God above all else because He is sovereign.

Most United States citizens have never known what it is like to live under the rule of a monarch. England, the kingdom from which the American colonies separated in the 18th century, is now part of a constitutional monarchy known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In a constitutional monarchy, the ruler maintains the position and title of “Sovereign” but exercises authority by and through a parliament of appointed and popularly elected representatives. Nevertheless, most citizens of today’s United Kingdom maintain a strong respect for their monarch. The current queen, Elizabeth II, has ruled the United Kingdom since 1952.

One of my favorite sites to visit in London, the capital city of Queen Elizabeth’s kingdom, is Westminster Abbey. The kingdom’s long history comes alive as one walks through the corridors and among the tombs of the abbey. An astonishing piece of ancient furniture kept at the abbey is the so-called “Coronation Chair.” This is a wooden throne carved from oak for King Edward I at the turn of the 14th century. Since that time, all newly crowned British monarchs (except one or two) have sat in this chair during their coronation ceremonies.

The most interesting artifact to me in the abbey, however, is not the ancient coronation throne or any of the historic burial places. Rather, the most compelling artifact is an inscription painted above the high altar that quotes from the King James Version of Revelation 11:15: “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.” While earthly rulers may reign for their lifetimes over kingdoms and nations, the King of kings rules over heaven and earth forever.

Psalm 95 exalts God as Creator and King. The psalmist David may have been the temporal king of Israel, but even he submitted himself to the sovereign Lord. This hymn magnifies God and calls all people to worship Him. This session will remind us that earthly rulers may claim power for themselves, but God alone has the right to our worship. He alone is truly and ultimately sovereign.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 95

God's majesty motivates worshipers to lift up His name in worship and adoration. The themes of Psalm 95 include recognition of God as Creator, celebration of God as Protector and Sustainer, and worship of God as the sovereign Lord. All of these concepts find their basis in the covenant relationship between God and His chosen people. God's sovereignty is recognized and affirmed throughout Scripture. This psalm calls the congregation of Israel to praise the Creator as their rightful ruler.

Psalm 95 is one of a number of psalms focused on God's sovereignty and His worthiness of our highest praise. Some Bible students view Psalms 93–99 as a connected, thematic group; other Bible students group Psalms 95–100 into a common category. As we study Psalm 95 closely, we will, in fact, observe elements that correspond to similar features in many other psalms. Nevertheless, I believe it is helpful in understanding the context of Psalm 95 to recognize similar features in Psalms 91–100.

Psalm 95:1 is mirrored in Psalm 91 by calling for rejoicing in God's protection. Psalm 95:2 corresponds to Psalms 92; 96; and 98 in that these songs call God's people to sing and shout to the Lord because of His faithfulness. Exaltation of the Lord as Judge and King, a theme in Psalm 95:3, is echoed as well in Psalms 93; 97; and 99. Psalm 95:7-11 expresses a warning that is found also in Psalm 94. Psalm 100 then brings all these elements together in a call to praise and serve God for His goodness and faithfulness.

Psalm 95 in the Hebrew text contains no superscription, thus giving no clues as to the writer or the psalm's occasion. However, the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint], an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, does include a superscription for Psalm 95 that attributes it to David. Certainly David was a ruler who never failed to acknowledge the Lord's supremacy (2 Sam. 22:47-51). We are thus on solid footing to attribute the psalm to David.

Several times throughout this psalm, David invited other worshipers to join him in praising the Lord. Some Bible scholars suggest that David may have addressed the psalm to the soldiers in his army. In the fullest sense, however, the psalm represents the Holy Spirit's inspiring Israel's king to call all people of every nation and generation to celebrate their Creator in worship and praise.

In Psalm 95:7-11, David warned the people about hardening their hearts toward God. These verses hark back to Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:2-13. The writer of Hebrews later quoted from Psalm 95:7-11 to warn Christians as well about the consequences of spiritual rebellion (Heb. 3:7-11).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WHAT (Ps. 95:1-2)

These opening verses emphasize the inclusiveness of the invitation to worship the Lord. As the Creator of all, He is thus the Lord of all; He deserves the adoration of all humankind.

VERSE 1

Come, let us shout joyfully to the LORD, shout triumphantly to the rock of our salvation!

Utter joy oozes from the opening two verses of this psalm. The word rendered **come** can literally mean “to walk with someone.” With rising emotion, then, the psalmist began not with a command but with a celebratory exhortation to share in the joy of the Lord. The verse’s tone is contagious. With the words **let us**, the psalmist urged everyone listening to or reading the verse to join him in joyous praise to God.

The psalmist here urged a jubilant expression of worship. The term translated **shout joyfully** (“sing,” KJV, ESV, NIV) has the root meaning “to be overcome.” The idea is that the worshiper becomes completely engulfed in the act of giving verbal praise. By extension, the word can also mean “to rejoice aloud in song or shouting.” Thus, this expression of praise could include either loud singing or a ringing shout. In the context of worship, the singing and/or shouting would be highly charged with emotions of joy.

The words **shout triumphantly** (“make a joyful noise,” KJV, ESV; “shout aloud,” NIV) express a similar action. This Hebrew term, however, was also used to refer to the thunderous battle cry of a charging army (Josh. 6:5; 1 Sam. 17:52). It carries the sense of celebration found in victory. Together, the phrases *shout joyfully* and *shout triumphantly* remind us that worship ought never to be a joyless, passionless ritual. We have every reason to let our delight in our Creator be evident on our faces and in our songs and words.

David identified the One who deserves our worship with the name **the LORD** and the descriptive title **rock of our salvation**. The name *the LORD* points to Yahweh, God’s covenant name (see Ex. 3:13-15). This name emphasizes God’s eternal nature, His sovereignty as Creator, and His momentous choice to establish a covenant with the people of Israel. The phrase *rock of our salvation* is parallel to *the LORD* and further describes God as majestic, firm, and the source of His people’s deliverance. No individual or nation can claim worthiness of a relationship with God. In His grace, He created a people for Himself. As such, He deserves our worship.

VERSE 2

Let us enter his presence with thanksgiving; let us shout triumphantly to him in song.

We do not worship God at a distance. He invites us to draw near to Him. Of course, the overall biblical revelation asserts that God is omnipresent—present everywhere at all times (Ps. 139:7-12; Acts 17:24). Along with this assertion, moreover, is the truth that God chooses to make His name (presence) dwell in a particular way in His sanctuary (1 Kings 8:29). This is the designated place where God’s people would gather to **enter his presence**. In David’s time, this would have been the tabernacle; in Solomon’s day, this would have been the temple.

The psalmist went on to describe the appropriate attitudes we should display when coming before God in worship. We are to approach Him **with thanksgiving**. We are in no position to come before Him in haughtiness or disrespect. If we truly understand that the Lord is sovereign, loving, and gracious, we will approach Him with humility and praise. Joyful worship is the key to the door of God’s throne room.

The psalmist repeated the call from verse 1 for worshipers to **shout triumphantly** (“make a joyful noise,” KJV, ESV). He added a variation that the shout was to be **in song** (“with psalms,” KJV; “with songs of praise,” ESV; “with music and song,” NIV). Worshipers have every reason to come before the Lord with a victorious song of praise on their lips.

All of creation should celebrate its Creator. These verses convey the joy believers can have as they worship. Worship is a means of offering thanksgiving to the One who gave us life.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What elements of a typical worship service in your church best help you express an attitude of thanksgiving to God? Would joyous shouting in your church’s worship seem normal and appropriate, surprising and refreshing, or confusing and out of place? Explain your response.

WHO (Ps. 95:3-5)

The object of our worship matters. Worshiping any person or thing other than the Lord God is idolatry. The psalmist described God as the great King and Creator. God’s handiwork forms a portrait of Him throughout creation. In worship, we affirm that everything came into existence through our Creator.

VERSE 3

For the LORD is a great God, a great King above all gods.

The primary reason that God alone deserves our worship is His personhood—that is, His nature or being. This verse offers several aspects of God’s nature that, when understood and believed, motivate our praise of Him. First, He is **the LORD**. As stated previously, this is God’s covenant name. It emphasizes not only His eternal and sovereign nature as Creator but also His personal relationship with those who belong to Him. The God who is vastly above and superior to all He created nevertheless chose to interact personally with human beings. He did this by creating us in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). He relates to His people within an established relationship that He initiates. As such, He is worthy of our worship and praise.

Second, He is **a great God**. The word *great* refers not only to size (He is limitless) and power (He is omnipotent) but also to value. God alone is worthy of worship. We might appreciate and respect the value of created things (including humans), but only God deserves to be worshiped (Rev. 4:9-11).

Third, God is **a great King above all gods**. He is sovereign over all earthly rulers and pagan deities. While Scripture acknowledges that unbelievers worship other deities—idols of their own making—it also confirms that those deities do not exist in reality (Isa. 44:12-18; Acts 17:22-29). The Lord God is not first among many; rather, He alone is God and there is no other.

VERSE 4

The depths of the earth are in his hand, and the mountain peaks are his.

The psalmist described God’s ownership of the earth in terms of the broadest spectrum he could imagine. The phrase **depths of the earth** depicted earth’s lowest points. While people in the psalmist’s day might not have understood the earth’s exact shape and dimensions, they knew of caves, chasms, and rifts that revealed a deep, dark, underground level. By contrast, **the mountain peaks** (“heights of the mountains,” ESV) signified the highest points of the earth. The psalmist’s point was that God owned everything from the lowest to the highest imaginable places on earth. He is so big that all of the earth fits comfortably **in his hand**. Thus, it remains under His control.

VERSE 5

The sea is his; he made it. His hands formed the dry land.

Expanding his description of God’s realm, the psalmist used a second contrasting pair: **the sea** and **the dry land**. Genesis 1:9-10 describes how

God, in the process of creating the earth, partitioned the total amount of water into separate bodies by positioning land masses between them. In Psalm 95:5, the psalmist emphasized that by making *the sea* and forming *the dry land*, God made—and thus rules—everything.

The crux of the psalmist's words in verses 3-5 is that if God owns and rules all of the created world, He rules us too. He made us with the capacity to know Him and relate to Him as He truly is: eternal, sovereign, and loving. We relate to Him in worship by loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and by obeying His commands (Deut. 6:4-5; John 15:9-10).

EXPLORE FURTHER

What are some ways you would describe God's greatness as the eternal Creator? As the sovereign Lord? As the loving Savior?

HOW (Ps. 95:6-7a)

The psalmist directed all of creation to approach God with humility, bowing before Him. He used the metaphor of sheep to reemphasize God as the Creator. Just as sheep submit to their shepherd, so too are we to demonstrate reverence in the way we worship the Lord.

VERSE 6

Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

How we approach God can say much about our attitude toward Him. In some Christian communities, believers stand or kneel when they pray to demonstrate respect toward God.

Repeating the invitation to **come** and join him, the psalmist directed his hearers to show God due reverence. He used three words to describe ways in which we worship the Lord. The first word, translated **worship**, literally means "to prostrate oneself" before God. This position demonstrates homage toward the Lord, acknowledging His superiority. The second word, rendered **bow down**, means "to bow before." It conveys the concept of bending forward in submission to God.

A third word portrays yet another aspect of worship. The psalmist charged people to **kneel before the LORD**. The Hebrew term rendered *kneel* is sometimes translated as "bless." In this verse, the idea may suggest that we are to bless God by kneeling before Him in worship. Each of these postures

for worshiping God is appropriate. Whether we bow or kneel, the important issue is that we humble ourselves before the Lord in a way that honors Him.

VERSE 7a

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care.

Worship begins with a proper understanding of who God is, who we are, and the relationship that binds us. The psalmist used several phrases to describe this relationship. First, the words **he is our God** do not express a sense of ownership on the worshiper's part. We do not own, possess, or control God in any way. Instead, the words confess that we acknowledge only the Lord as our God. We worship no other person or thing.

At the same time, we gladly affirm that we are in a subordinate position. He is God, and we belong to Him. Indeed, David the psalmist again brought to mind the example of a shepherd and his sheep (see Ps. 23). That is, those who worship the Lord as God are **the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care** ("of his hand," KJV, ESV). In the analogy God is like a shepherd, and His people are like *the sheep* that are dependent on the shepherd to lead them to pasture and protect them from danger. Thus, we are to worship the Lord out of gratitude for His strong and loving care.

All people should approach worship of the Creator with humility and reverence. He is worthy because He has made us. He is worthy because He cares for us. He is worthy because He is God. Our attitude may be revealed through the manner in which we approach Him in worship and adoration.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Worship" on pages 1686-1688 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are the biblical elements of worship? How do you demonstrate these elements in your worship?

WHEN (Ps. 95:7b-11)

The psalmist David warned against ignoring God and failing to worship Him. David pointed to past failures in Israel's history as illustrations of the penalty for unbelief.

VERSE 7b

Today, if you hear his voice:

Verses were not enumerated in the oldest versions of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, the latter half of verse 7 connects thematically more with what follows it than with what precedes it. This was the conclusion of the writer of Hebrews, who connected verse 7b to verse 8 three separate times (3:7-8,15; 4:7).

In any case, a sense of urgency permeates Psalm 95:7b. Proper worship is vital. It must not be postponed. **Today** is the right time to respond to God's sovereignty and loving care. We need not wait for a particular emotion to arise or happy circumstances to come about before giving the Lord praise and gratitude. He is worthy of our worship no matter what *today* holds.

The idea of hearing God's voice does not imply merely being able to understand what He is saying. The term translated **hear** implies both hearing and obeying what is heard. While the first two sections of Psalm 95 have the celebratory feeling of praise and worship, what follows verse 7b is both an entreaty and a warning from God to His people. If they do not listen to Him and respond obediently, they will fall into the same error as their ancestors. They will risk experiencing a similar form of judgment. Responding to God with genuine worship is not only a wonderful blessing that God's people enjoy but is also an urgent demand they must heed.

VERSES 8-9

Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the wilderness where your fathers tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did.

God knows the hearts of human beings. He knows that one minute we can be on a spiritual mountaintop, gushing with praise for all He has done for us. Then the next moment we can become so self-focused that we ignore Him.

Beginning at this verse and through to the end of the psalm, the psalmist spoke with not only a poetic voice but also a prophetic voice. That is, he delivered the message of God to people in first-person speech. God spoke directly to His people through the psalmist. He warned them not to **harden** their **hearts** against Him. In biblical theology, the heart represented the center of the human will. Decisions were made with the heart, and one's deepest convictions were housed there. Thus, the writer of Proverbs 4:23 urged God's people to diligently guard their hearts, since the heart was the wellspring of life. Conversely, to *harden* the heart was to become callous and indifferent toward God and His ways, to let circumstances or ungodly influences quench one's passion for God in worship. To harden the heart was to replace trust and obedience with stubborn self-will.

The Lord buttressed His warning to David's hearers (and readers) with a historical illustration. The names **Meribah** and **Massah** pointed to an awful

memory of a time soon after the people of Israel had been delivered from Egyptian slavery and were traveling through **the wilderness** toward Mount Sinai (see Ex. 17:1-7). Food and water were scarce. In fact, when they camped at a place called Rephidim, there was no drinking water at all. The people complained to Moses and demanded that he produce water for them. By their actions, they displayed a lack of trust in the Lord—who already had proven time and again that He would provide for them. Indeed, at Rephidim God enabled Moses to miraculously open a spring of water from a rock so that all the people could drink. Nevertheless, Moses tagged the place with the names *Meribah*, meaning “strife” or “quarreling,” and *Massah*, which comes from a root word meaning “to provoke, put to the test.” In other words, rather than trusting God at Rephidim, the Israelites **tested** and **tried** Him (see Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7). They let difficult circumstances harden their hearts against God.

Likewise, when we as believers allow difficult circumstances or ungodly influences to dampen our faith and compromise our obedience of God’s Word, we too will find ourselves on the path of spiritual rebellion. Bit by bit our hearts grow callous to God’s voice; our worship becomes stale and routine; our lives become worldly. Our churches can become like those the apostle John saw in his vision on the island of Patmos: Ephesus (abandoned their first love; Rev. 2:4), Sardis (alive in name only; Rev. 3:1), and Laodicea (lukewarm and sickening to Christ; Rev. 3:16). For both individual believers and churches, either we have a heart for God that expresses itself in worship, or we will harden our hearts and avoid worship.

VERSE 10

For forty years I was disgusted with that generation; I said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray; they do not know my ways.”

Sadly, the Israelites’ display of rebellion against God at Meribah and Massah was not a one-time lapse of faith. They went on to show a consistent pattern of unbelief wherever new challenges arose. They turned to idol worship at the foot of Mount Sinai because they were unsure whether Moses would return from the mountain to lead them (Ex. 32:1). They later complained openly about the physical hardships of journeying through the wilderness (Num. 11:1). They even refused to enter the promised land at first because they were overcome with fear. They accused the Lord of bringing them out of Egypt only to die in battle at the hands of the Canaanites (Num. 14:1-4).

Because of the Israelites’ constant rebellion, God became **disgusted** (“grieved,” KJV; “loathed,” ESV; “angry,” NIV) **with that generation**. Their disobedience had consequences. God consigned the people to live as nomads in the wilderness for **forty years** until all of the unfaithful Israelites died off.

God's diagnosis of the wilderness generation's problem was clear. The people had a fatal heart condition: **they are a people whose hearts go astray** ("a people that do err in their heart," KJV). They stopped loving and obeying their Shepherd-Deliverer. The farther they wandered in their hearts from Him, the less they knew and respected His **ways**. In the previous verse (95:9), the Lord declared that the wilderness generation had witnessed His great acts of deliverance and provision. Here, however, the Lord declared that the unbelieving Israelites had never truly understood—that is, never appreciated—how those divine acts were faith builders. What God does reveals who He is. He can always be trusted and obeyed because He is faithful.

VERSE 11

So I swore in my anger, "They will not enter my rest."

The idea of God's swearing an oath might raise a question for some in light of Jesus' admonition in the Sermon on the Mount to avoid swearing (Matt. 5:33-37). However, Jesus was primarily addressing the problem of breaking one's promises. Swearing an oath only made the problem worse if the person had no intention of keeping a promise. In the case of God's swearing in Psalm 95:11, His oath was no empty promise; rather, it was a sure decree of what He would do concerning the faithless wilderness generation.

Similarly, God's **anger** ("wrath," KJV, ESV) should not be equated with the self-centered anger too often expressed by sinful human beings. God's anger is not tainted by sin; it is directed against sin. The literal meaning of the Hebrew term for *anger* is "to flare the nostrils." It describes what happens physically when a person becomes angry. God's anger is always related to judgment of human sin.

Thus, God's sure word of judgment against the rebellious generation of Israelites was to deny them entrance into the promised land. The words **my rest** portrayed God's promises of protection, provision, and His ongoing presence that would be enjoyed by God's people in the fullest sense when they took possession of the promised land. Spiritually, to enter God's *rest* involves receiving the fullness of God's blessing that proceeds from a right relationship with God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How have you experienced God's rest as a believer? In what ways do you picture experiencing God's rest in the fullest sense in the life to come? Why is it crucial that we not harden our hearts against God even in the face of difficult circumstances or ungodly influences?

GOD REVEALED

God reveals Himself through His creation and His Word.

On Christmas Eve 1968, a turbulent and tragic year in America's history, one bright spot stood out in the December night sky. The three astronauts of the Apollo 8 mission—Bill Anders, Frank Borman, and James Lovell—became the first human beings to orbit the moon. As they skimmed along the lunar atmosphere in their spaceship, the three explorers beamed back amazing video to earth and to the millions of people watching and listening by television. Bill Anders captured what is arguably the most iconic picture of the mission: a photograph of our distinctively blue planet rising halfway out of the darkness of space into the light of the sun.

Given the season and historical nature of the mission, NASA administrators simply instructed the astronauts of Apollo 8 to say or read something appropriate as a message to a vast worldwide audience. The three astronauts chose to read Genesis 1:1-10, the first words of which declare “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” It was an awe-inspiring message that perfectly fit an awesome moment in earth's history.

Fast-forward to few years ago: I had an opportunity to tour parts of the Kremlin complex in Moscow, Russia's capital city. Our guide was friendly, yet she was also indoctrinated in the atheistic views of old Soviet Russia. When I casually asked about her thoughts concerning God, she quickly retorted that many Russian cosmonauts had been to outer space and all had reported they saw no evidence there of the existence of God.

In the 11th century B.C., King David of Israel had neither the advantages of telescopes nor cameras in spacecraft capturing images of the universe. But he had his own eyes that gazed up into the starry heavens from the hillsides around Bethlehem. More significantly, he received the awesome whispers of inspiration from the Spirit of God, who revealed to David heaven's perspective about the created universe. Out of that inspiration came Psalm 19, a poetic masterpiece about the ways God reveals Himself to humanity.

As we look through the lens of Scripture in this session, we will see the truth about our Creator. He does exist. He made the stars, moons, and planets. He reveals Himself to us through His creation and His Word.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 19

The psalm's subheading contains two pieces of information. The phrase "for the choir director" indicates the psalm could be sung in congregational worship. The phrase "a psalm of David" identifies the psalm either as having been composed for King David or, more likely, as having been written by him. Perhaps David wrote the words and then passed them along to the music director, who added musical accompaniment. Another possibility is that the music director would know what accompaniment (or tune) was appropriate by knowing who wrote the psalm.

Psalm 19 contains three distinct but related sections. Verses 1-6 focus upward. The heavens above, including the celestial bodies that inhabit the expanse, speak no words yet constantly reveal knowledge about God as Creator. Verses 7-11 focus earthward—on the law as God's Word. Scripture instructs God's people about life, guides them into wisdom, makes their hearts joyful, and warns them about sin. Finally, verses 12-14 focus inward, on the heart relationship between God and the believer. These verses present a series of short prayers portraying God as the Redeemer who forgives rebellion and cleanses His repentant children from their sins.

This psalm falls under the general category of hymn. Some Bible commentators suggest that the psalm originally may have been two separate songs, one in praise of God as revealed in general revelation (19:1-6) and a second in praise of God as revealed in special revelation (19:7-11). Later the two songs were combined into one hymn emphasizing God's revelation of Himself. Verses 12-14 reflect the worshiper's response to that revelation.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SEEN IN CREATION (Ps. 19:1-6)

The psalmist David celebrated the ways in which the created universe reveals its Creator. The wonders in the heavens and the rising and setting of the sun reminded the psalmist of God's omniscience and awe-inspiring glory.

VERSE 1

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands.

As a young shepherd in Bethlehem, David may have spent many nights under the stars as he and his brothers tended their family's flocks. It is easy to imagine David lying on his back, gazing into the awe-inspiring night sky over Judah. But what would he have thought about the milky-white moon slowly rising and descending across the vast, dark dome? One night it was a thin crescent; another night it made a half-circle; yet another night it was a bright, fully rounded disk. What would he have thought about the countless tiny, twinkling lights scattered across the heavenly canvas? The answer to these questions, according to Psalm 19:1, was as clear as the night sky: David saw and thought about **the glory of God**.

The term rendered **heavens** (a plural noun used collectively) refers to the vast space located far above the earth's surface. It contains the sun, moon, and stars. The parallel term rendered **expanse** ("firmament," KJV; "sky," ESV) sometimes designates the atmosphere closer to earth that contains the clouds. As an inspired poet, David was mainly concerned with describing the vastness and beauty of God's creation.

The two halves of verse 1 provide a good example of synonymous parallelism in ancient Hebrew poetry. The second half of the verse reiterates and emphasizes the first half by using synonymous ideas. For example, the term *heavens* in the first half corresponds with *expanse* in the second half. Further, the parallel verbs rendered **declare** and **proclaims** explain the similar actions going on as David studied the sky. Finally, the phrase *the glory of God* in the verse's first half corresponds with and is clarified by the phrase **the work of his hands** ("his handiwork," ESV). Just as a painting or sculpture "speaks" about the artist's creative genius and ability, the universe by its very existence tells of God's matchless majesty.

Centuries later, the apostle Paul echoed the emphasis of Psalm 19:1 in his Letter to the Romans. Paul wrote that God's "invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made" (Rom. 1:20). That is, God's general revelation of Himself in nature is sufficient evidence of His existence and power. Further revelation of His ways, commands, and expectations for human beings would come in the special revelation of Scripture. Finally, His full and ultimate revelation as Redeemer would come in the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-3). Thus, no one has any legitimate reason to deny God's existence, to rebel against His will, or to neglect His great salvation.

Creation testifies to *the glory of God*. God's glory cannot fully be understood or explained in human terms. It refers to His awe-inspiring holiness and majesty. Yet in Psalm 19:1, the vast expanse of space leads a chorus of praise that celebrates who God is and what He has done.

VERSE 2

Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge.

David continued to use parallelism to emphasize the process of general revelation. He saw the universe continuously talking about God in a language of its own. The corresponding phrases **day after day** and **night after night** describe the never-ending manner of God's revelation through creation. Every day, the sun warms the earth and casts its light over all that God has made. Each night, the stars sparkle throughout the heavens.

To say the heavens **pour out speech** emphasizes that a created object testifies about its Creator by its very existence. Further, the celestial bodies do not simply hang in space void of purpose; they **communicate knowledge**. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the actual reality behind the mesmerizing Hubble telescope photographs of the universe declare God's glory unceasingly and with more eloquent testimony than human words can utter. Creation reveals God in such a way that observers can comprehend elements of His nature and desire to know Him more intimately.

VERSES 3-4a

There is no speech; there are no words; their voice is not heard. Their message has gone out to the whole earth, and their words to the ends of the world.

At first glance, verse 3 might seem to contradict verse 2. However, what seems to be a contradiction actually is a clarification. That is, the psalmist used contrast in verse 3 to emphasize that the universe's testimony of God's glory, while continuous and majestic, is expressed in ways other than through human **speech**. Celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars have no **voice** as humans do; thus, we do not expect them to utter human **words** ("language," KJV). Still, they have a **message** of praise to proclaim, and their silent testimony goes out **to the whole earth**. Day or night, from one end of the globe to the other, individuals can gaze heavenward and hear this message: God exists, and He is great! He created everything visible and more.

VERSE 4b

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun.

In verses 4b-6, the psalmist focused on the most prominent created object **in the heavens** from humanity's viewpoint: **the sun**. Some ancient people groups—the Egyptians, for example—worshiped the sun as a god. In Scripture, however, God reveals that the sun is simply part of His creation.

The words **pitched a tent** (“set a tabernacle,” KJV) bring to mind the idea of giving someone or something a lodging, a place to live. God gave the sun a home in the vast expanse above the earth. This fact not only underscores the greatness of God’s power but also introduces the order that characterizes creation—and thus God Himself (see 1 Cor. 14:33).

VERSE 5

It is like a bridegroom coming from his home; it rejoices like an athlete running a course.

From earth’s point of view, the sun appears to travel across the heavens each day in a regular, ordered manner. To emphasize this dependable feature, the psalmist introduced two analogies familiar to his readers. First, the sun (especially at dawn) can be compared to **a bridegroom coming from his home** (“his chamber,” KJV, ESV, NIV). The Hebrew term rendered *home* can also mean “canopy” or “chamber.” The basic idea is that just as a groom on his wedding day could be expected to appear from his lodging with a beaming face, so too does the sun faithfully appear on the horizon each morning to bathe the earth with its bright, warm rays.

Second, the sun can be compared to **an athlete** (“a strong man,” KJV, ESV; “a champion,” NIV) **running a course** (“a race,” KJV). Scarce evidence can be found in the Old Testament that suggests the ancient Israelites engaged in athletic races in the style of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Indeed, the word rendered *athlete* most often refers in the Old Testament to valiant soldiers (Josh. 1:14; 1 Sam. 16:18; compare 2 Tim. 4:7). In any case, the psalmist’s point was to emphasize the sun’s faithful fulfillment of its purpose. Day after day, the sun runs its divinely appointed course across the sky.

VERSE 6

It rises from one end of the heavens and circles to their other end; nothing is hidden from its heat.

As viewed from the perspective of much of the earth, the sun **rises** on the eastern horizon and sets below the western one. Throughout the day, the sun appears to follow a dome-shaped circuit **from one end of the heavens ... to their other end**. While we know today that the earth actually orbits around the sun and rotates as it does so, we still speak in terms of the sun’s rising and setting each day. Again, the psalmist’s point was to illustrate the orderliness and dependability of God’s creation.

The reminder that **nothing is hidden from** the sun’s **heat** (“warmth,” NIV) suggests a greater application. That is, just as nothing on earth can escape or be deprived of the sun’s presence, neither can any person legitimately deny or

be deprived of God's presence and power. The universe testifies to the truth about the Creator's existence and sovereign power. Therefore, all people are accountable to Him.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Creation" on pages 360-362 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What aspects of creation speak clearest to you about God's existence? About God's power?

SEEN IN HIS WORD (Ps. 19:7-11)

David portrayed Scripture as reliable and worthy of being treasured. He taught that God's Word is the instruction needed to live a God-honoring life.

VERSE 7

The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one's life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise.

Psalms 19:1-6 emphasizes God's revelation of Himself in creation (natural revelation). Verses 7-11 focus on God's special revelation of Himself in Scripture. The New Testament offers a picture of the process of special revelation. The apostle Paul wrote, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Peter added, "No prophecy of Scripture comes from the prophet's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Thus, even as King David lauded the unparalleled value of Scripture in Psalm 19:7-11, he was doing so under the guiding inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God thus revealed His Word to His prophets who then were directed by the Holy Spirit to preserve it in writing. God did this to let us know even more about Him and His ways.

David's descriptions of Scripture are like the facets of a well-cut diamond. These words and phrases display the beauty and intricacy of God's Word even as they highlight different characteristics of God.

First, God uses His word as **instruction** ("law," KJV, ESV, NIV). Behind this term is the Hebrew word *torah*, often rendered into English as "law." The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) is sometimes referred to as the Torah, or the Law. In actuality, the Scripture is much more than

just a compilation of legal statements. It teaches us how to love God and live in accordance with His will. Human instruction is fallible; the **testimony of the LORD** in His Word is both **perfect** and **trustworthy**. The word rendered *perfect* means “complete and without flaw.” God’s Word is always reliable; we can count on its veracity. Consequently, Scripture renews the life (“converting the soul,” KJV; “reviving the soul,” ESV; “refreshing the soul,” NIV) of the one who obeys its instruction. Further, it makes **the inexperienced wise**. The Word of God not only provides the good news of Christ that leads to salvation but also guides the believer toward spiritual maturity.

VERSE 8

The precepts of the LORD are right, making the heart glad; the command of the LORD is radiant, making the eyes light up.

God’s **precepts** (“statutes,” KJV) are decrees given by the Lord in His Word. These are principles of life and conduct, often stated as direct commands. However, God’s *precepts* are not meant to bear down on people like a burdensome weight. Rather, they are **right**, meaning “straight.” God’s commands guide believers to embrace right beliefs and right actions. Thus, obeying God’s commands always makes **the heart glad**.

It should be noted that David again and again attributed Scripture’s good instruction and its blessings to **the LORD**. This is God’s sacred covenant name that emphasizes His eternal nature and sovereign power as Creator. All of these commands and promises arise from the special relationship that God initiated with the people of Israel and that culminated in the saving work of Jesus Christ for all humanity.

VERSE 9

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are reliable and altogether righteous.

This verse opens with an emphasis on worshipers’ having a proper attitude toward the Lord. If we grasp that He is God and we are not, if we humbly seek His favor while owning up to our complete helplessness, then we have begun to display an appropriate **fear of the LORD**. This kind of *fear* is not stark terror that God will respond with evil but instead is **pure** awe that an infinitely holy God would forgive and restore helpless sinners. Scripture teaches that such *fear* is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10).

A proper attitude of reverential fear motivates us to value and keep God’s **ordinances** (“judgments,” KJV; “decrees,” NIV). He is the righteous Judge of all the earth. Therefore, His decrees **are reliable** (“true,” KJV) **and altogether righteous**. They are always consistent with His holy nature.

VERSE 10

They are more desirable than gold—than an abundance of pure gold; and sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb.

In poetic rapture, David reached for analogies that touched the human senses. God's righteous judgments are **more desirable than gold**. No amount of wealth could compare to the value of Scripture's benefits. David considered God's Word to be more valuable than all the glistening gold in his treasury.

Further, Scripture is **sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb**. Nothing was more refreshing to the taste and satisfying than fresh honey. Not even fresh honey could compare, however, to the satisfying sweetness of God's Word to the soul that is hungry for righteousness (see Matt. 5:6).

VERSE 11

In addition, your servant is warned by them, and in keeping them there is an abundant reward.

David treasured God's Word not only because it made his heart glad and satisfied his soul but also because it **warned** him of sin. He knew that even kings could falter and fail. God's direction was always true and good. Obeying the Lord's ordinances always provided **abundant reward**.

Although he sat on the throne of Israel, David acknowledged that his true calling was as the Lord's **servant**. As a servant, David desired to serve the Lord and to live in a close relationship with Him (Ps. 73:25).

Believers are to treasure God's Word. It provides spiritual and practical principles for daily living. Throughout the Scriptures, God reveals Himself and invites us to live in a faith relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Scripture" on pages 1452-1453 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What words would you use to describe Scripture's value to you?

CELEBRATED IN HIS PEOPLE (Ps. 19:12-14)

Verses 12-14 focus inward, celebrating the believer's intimate, personal relationship with God. David changed from third-person description to second-person conversation between him and the Lord. David prayed, laying bare his heart and mouth (speech) for God to cleanse and make acceptable.

VERSE 12

Who perceives his unintentional sins? Cleanse me from my hidden faults.

Creation reveals God's existence and great power. Scripture reveals God's life-giving wisdom, joy, instruction, and warnings. How, then, should God's "servant" (19:11)—the believer—respond to God's revelation? King David knew, because God's Word had taught him the proper response. Depending on when he wrote Psalm 19, David either had been directly confronted as a sinner by God's Word or soon would be (see 2 Sam. 12:7-14; Ps. 51). David wanted God to apply His Word in revealing the king's sins and shortcomings.

David used a rhetorical question to emphasize the human tendency to ignore our **unintentional sins** ("errors," KJV, ESV, NIV). The Hebrew word translated *unintentional sins* occurs only here in all of the Old Testament. It is not one of the typical Hebrew words for sin but refers instead to an error or failure. Too often we as human beings are quick to point out others' shortcomings but overlook our own. David did not want to be guilty of doing that. He prayed for God to **cleanse** ("declare ... innocent," ESV; "forgive," NIV) him from even his **hidden faults** ("secret faults," KJV).

On what basis does God forgive and cleanse us from our sins? The Hebrew word rendered *cleanse* in Psalm 19:12 means "to be found guiltless." In Jesus Christ and His atoning death on the cross, God paid the full penalty for sin on our behalf. Every sin, regardless of intentionality, makes us guilty before a holy God. When we admit and repent of our sin, turning in faith to embrace Christ as Savior, God declares that we are forgiven forever. He washes away both the sin and the guilt!

VERSE 13

Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins; do not let them rule me. Then I will be blameless and cleansed from blatant rebellion.

David foresaw that God's salvation in Christ would also go beyond a cleansing from past sins and overlooked shortcomings. Thus, David prayed for God to **keep** him from committing **willful sins** ("presumptuous sins," KJV, ESV). The word rendered *keep* means "to restrain" or "to keep in check." David knew that he was incapable by his own power to maintain a sin-free life. He needed the power of the God who created the universe and who was perfectly holy.

Willful sins are the product of our fleshly nature and our selfish pride. We want to control our own destinies and chart our own courses, even though these courses lead to destruction. Without God's liberating presence and

power, such attitudes **rule** us (“have dominion over,” KJV, ESV). David prayed—as we should pray—that God would prevent that from happening.

The term rendered **blatant rebellion** (“great transgression,” KJV, ESV, NIV) is parallel to the phrase *willful sins* and further describes the nature of those sins. To rebel from, or transgress, God’s commands involves knowing them yet rejecting them. These terms describe well the kinds of sins David committed in his adultery with Bathsheba and the death of her husband (see 2 Sam. 11). Only a God of supernatural grace and power could render such a sinner **blameless** and forgiven. David understood that the Lord alone could deal with his sinful soul and restore him to a right relationship.

VERSE 14

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

David concluded his prayer and this psalm by focusing on his covenant relationship with God. He again used God’s covenant name, **LORD**, and pleaded that his **words** and thoughts (**meditation of my heart**) would be **acceptable** (“pleasing,” NIV) to God. These words demonstrated David’s humble response to the Creator of the universe and the Lawgiver of Israel.

David also affirmed that the Lord was his **rock**. The word *rock* represents strength, stability, and security. Throughout David’s life, God gave him physical and spiritual strength in the face of wild predators, a giant enemy, death threats from Israel’s previous king, personal sins, and tragic behavior by his own children. Throughout all of these tribulations and disasters, David found strength and security in his relationship with the Lord God.

Most importantly, the Lord had been David’s **Redeemer**. In times of danger, the Lord rescued him. In times of failure and sin, the Lord forgave him. In times of uncertainty, the Lord promised that David’s royal line would continue until it was fulfilled by the King of kings, the Messiah. Jesus Christ would fulfill that promise. He would come as the ultimate Redeemer, not only purchasing David’s forgiveness and freedom but also redeeming a people for God “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Redeem, Redemption, Redeemer” on pages 1370-1371 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what sense does salvation in Christ give you the confidence of being cleansed? How have you responded to God as Redeemer? How is He your rock each day?

HIS LOVE

God's unchanging love gives us reasons to celebrate.

Something about being in love moves us to share mushy, sweet sentiments. They cannot be contained. They have to be expressed. Buying a card at the store isn't enough. We add our own words that describe what the special person means to us.

I recall writing an original poem years ago for the young woman to whom I was engaged to be married. We were college students at the time, and I was about to burst with happiness. One day I sent her an original poem that I was sure would quickly become the world's most treasured love poem. I had spent hours cobbling together just the right words. It described the curl of her hair, the curve of her face, the brightness of her eyes, and the warmth of her smile. It focused mainly on the quality of her life, her gentle kindness, and the way she made my heart race whenever I was around her. The following evening we attended a formal dinner together. As we strolled across the college courtyard hand in hand, I began to sing a popular song about how the moonlight became her. She giggled softly, but she also gripped my hand a little tighter as we walked. I felt nothing could ever surpass that moment.

These days, when my wife and I look back at our keepsakes—including that aging piece of paper with my poem written on it—we enjoy another laugh together. We remember our young love fondly and rejoice over how it has grown sweeter and deeper through the years. We still feel the warm emotions: I look at her with bright eyes and tell her she's pretty; she smiles in return and kisses me; we embrace in a long hug. But we also know that our love is more than tender emotions. We are devoted to each other. We give sacrificially to each other. We are committed to each other for life. We are, in fact, hopelessly in love with each other.

As wonderful as the love is between my wife and me, we both agree that it cannot really compare with the quality and depth of God's love for humankind. In Psalm 136, an unnamed songwriter expressed inspired praise for God's matchless, enduring love. As we explore this hymn of praise in this session, we may find ourselves putting melody to the text and worshipping God with warm gratitude for His everlasting love.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 136

Readers of this psalm notice immediately that it has an oft-repeated refrain extolling the enduring nature of God's love. In all likelihood, the psalm was designed for antiphonal singing. That is, a worship leader or group of worshipers would sing or chant the first line of each verse, then another group (or the congregation as a whole) would respond by singing or chanting the refrain. By continually declaring God's enduring love, the psalm teaches that God's characteristics as Creator and His mighty works in history on behalf of Israel are aspects of His covenant love.

Psalm 136 is sometimes referred to as the "Great Hallel," emphasizing its role as a great hymn of praise, particularly in Jewish worship as part of the Passover celebration. Christian congregations more often use the psalm as a responsive Scripture reading. The psalm's antiphonal structure makes it conducive for this type of presentation.

While the psalm's refrain gives it an overall unity, there also are several distinct stanzas, or sections. Verses 1-3 magnify who God is—His essential characteristics. Verses 4-9 extol God's unique power displayed unmistakably in His mighty acts of creation. Verses 10-22 then recount and extol the acts of deliverance by which God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan as a promised inheritance. The hymn's conclusion in verses 23-26 declares God's faithfulness in rescuing and caring for not only Israel but also every creature. He is indeed the God of heaven whose love is eternal. That truth beckons us to gratefully praise Him.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

IN CREATION (Ps. 136:1-5)

The psalmist reminded the people of God's enduring love. He pointed to the care with which God designed His creation as evidence of that love.

VERSE 1

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. *His faithful love endures forever.*

The psalmist began by calling for gratitude for God's goodness. He also introduced the antiphonal response that concludes each verse and magnifies

God's everlasting love. The refrain can certainly stand as an independent testimonial of praise, but its frequent repetition serves to enhance the specific statements sung at the beginning of each verse.

Let us, then, look first to grasp the meaning and emphasis of the refrain. First, notice that the subject is God's **faithful love** ("mercy," KJV; "steadfast love," ESV). God's love is unique in that its source is the Lord. It is His love, and as such it reflects God's own nature. In the New Testament, various Greek words show the difference between human affection and divine love. Human love often results from some action or aspect of the person who is loved. God's love, however, does not have to be earned or deserved. We receive His love as a result of His nature, not because of our merit.

In Psalm 136, the psalmist used a Hebrew term (*chesed* [KEH sid]) that refers to God's covenant mercy, loyalty, and lovingkindness. God's Holy Spirit inspired the psalmist to use this particular expression to emphasize the nature of God's love. In His covenant love, God bestows mercy on people who deserve only judgment. In His love, God remains fiercely loyal to people who have rebelled against Him. God's mercy characterizes God's love.

Second, take note that God's love **endures forever**. Human love too often is as fleeting as the emotions we equate with love. God's love remains steadfast no matter the ups and downs of our emotions. Even God's discipline is designed to bring sinners to repentance and restoration, not to ruin. He consistently offers His loving mercy because it is His eternal nature to do so.

The timeless quality of God's love does not reflect a linear way of reckoning time. God's love supersedes time. It is not limited by time. Rather, God's love is beyond any limitation.

In view of this understanding of God's love, the psalmist called on the people to **give thanks**. The idea behind this term invokes praise as well as the action of giving thanks. The hymn does not require worshipers to have a certain feeling before offering gratitude. Regardless of our feelings or circumstances, we can (and should) give thanks to our God.

The object of thanksgiving is **the LORD**. This is God's covenant name (see Ex. 3:14-15), a name that emphasizes both His eternal nature and sovereign power as the Creator. Outside of their covenant relationship with the Lord, the people of Israel would have no origin or future as a kingdom. They did not worship a distant (and, in the end, nonexistent) deity as did the world's nations. Their song arose out of a relationship with a God who loved them. This covenant pointed forward to an even greater covenant in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Through Christ, believers gain eternal life in God's kingdom.

Motivation for giving thanks rests not in our having received any particular benefit from the Lord, although His blessings are countless. Rather, we offer our deepest gratitude because God **is good**. The false gods

of the pagan nations were fearsome demons that terrified worshipers. How different is the nature of our God! God's goodness is not dependent on His actions, although all of His activity is good. Goodness is His innate nature. Thus, God's goodness is the first reason for giving Him thanks. As we reflect on His character, we praise Him because His love is eternal.

VERSE 2

Give thanks to the God of gods. *His faithful love endures forever.*

The psalmist did not believe that the Lord was in some way limited to being only Israel's covenant God. The Lord is indeed **the God of gods**. The mention of *gods* in this and other Old Testament texts should not be understood to imply that other deities actually exist. The fact remains, however, that in ancient times (and today), people in their sinful nature exchange "the truth of God for a lie" and worship and serve "what has been created instead of the Creator, who is praised forever" (Rom. 1:25). False gods—deities that exist only in the minds of fallen human beings—have no sovereignty over the one true God. The title *God of gods* emphasizes God's superiority over all human concepts of the divine, including the false gods of the pagan nations that surrounded ancient Israel. He alone loves with everlasting mercy. We give thanks to Him, for **his faithful love endures forever**.

VERSE 3

Give thanks to the Lord of lords. *His faithful love endures forever.*

Similar to verse 2, this verse further extols the supremacy of God. He is the **Lord of lords**. Moses declared that Israel's covenant God was "God of gods and Lord of lords" in Deuteronomy 10:17. The surrounding nations and tribes had many rulers. Rulers arose, ruled, and died. Their reigns were limited by geopolitical boundaries, threats from internal adversaries, and physical age. Their power was restricted by the amount of their wealth or the size and strength of their armies. Not so with Israel's God. The Lord God is above all human power and authority. No earthly power can exist except by His permission and intent (Rom. 13:1; John 19:11). We are to **give thanks** to the *Lord of lords*, because His **faithful love** for His people never ends.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Hymn" on pages 798-799 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some of your favorite hymns that emphasize God's faithful love? Sing one of them now as a way of giving thanks.

VERSE 4

He alone does great wonders. His faithful love endures forever.

With verse 4, the psalmist shifted emphasis. In the first three verses, he focused on God's impeccable character and eternal nature. Now he stressed God's incredible power as revealed in creation. God alone is able to do such **great wonders**. Contrasting the Lord God with the false gods and powerless idols, the psalmist magnified God's awe-inspiring might.

Job also glorified God as One who "does great and unsearchable things, wonders without number" (Job 9:10). God's power exceeds human imagination; thus, the psalmist continued to extol God's power. Psalm 136:4 insists that God **alone** can and does perform such miraculous feats. The greatest act of God's enduring **love** was giving Jesus, His only Son. God's love makes eternal life possible for us through Christ.

VERSE 5

He made the heavens skillfully. His faithful love endures forever.

Among God's uniquely miraculous acts was His creation of all things. In each element of this verse the psalmist glorified God. First, he affirmed that God is the Creator. From the opening words of creation in the Book of Genesis to the culminating words of new creation in the Book of Revelation, Scripture reveals the Lord as the Creator and Sustainer of everything that exists.

Second, the psalmist declared that God **made the heavens**. The word rendered *made* means "to fashion." This term implies the personal attention God gave in the creating process. Because of God's **faithful love**, He took deliberate care to make everything just as it should be. Each phase of creation was punctuated by the declaration that it was good (see Gen. 1:10,12,21).

Third, the specific aspect of creation that inspired the psalmist at this point was *the heavens*. The term rendered *heavens* describes the vast expanse that contains the sun, moon, and stars. This emphasis does not imply that God only made this part of creation. Genesis 1 asserts that God made the heavens and the earth, as well as everything in them. The culmination of creation was human beings fashioned in God's own image (Gen. 1:26-27).

Fourth, God made everything **skillfully** ("by wisdom," KJV; "by understanding," ESV). The creation did not come into existence by chance. God's all-encompassing wisdom is evident in the composition of the tiniest particles of matter and the largest galaxies of the universe.

People can trust God and His plan for the entire creation, because He is good and His love never ends. We can know that His purposes will be accomplished for our good. Therefore, we join the ancient choir in praising Him, because **his faithful love endures forever**.

IN CONQUEST (Ps. 136:10-15)

The psalmist challenged the Israelites to view God's deliverance and provision of the promised land as proof of His enduring love. He again called on God's people to respond by extolling the Lord's faithful love.

VERSE 10

He struck the firstborn of the Egyptians His faithful love endures forever.

As those who interpret the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus Christ and the New Testament, we as believers understand salvation in terms of the forgiveness of sin and the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Ancient Israelites described God's salvation especially in terms of the exodus. In their miraculous deliverance from Egyptian bondage and God's gift to them of the promised land, the people of Israel found salvation and new life as God's covenant people.

The psalmist thus shifted his emphasis from creation to God's actions in history to establish a people who worship and serve Him only. Incidentally, God's love for all of His creation did not lessen. Yet to provide a way of salvation for all of sinful humanity, He acted first to choose a covenant people out of the descendants of Abraham who were laboring as slaves in Egypt.

The account of God's actions to liberate the Israelites is recorded in Exodus 1–15. Out of that account, the psalmist focused on the tenth and decisive plague by which the Lord forced Egypt's pharaoh to release the Israelites. The Lord **struck the firstborn of the Egyptians** (see Ex. 12:29-36). After this stunning plague, Pharaoh expelled the Israelites from Egypt.

Modern readers may have difficulty with the idea of God's love and mercy for one group of people being displayed in the midst of devastating judgment on another group. However, God is always consistent. Any nation that rejects Him and follows false gods comes under His judgment. In this case, the Egyptians suffered judgment as a result of their denial of the true God. When people trust and follow the Lord, they receive the benefits of His **faithful love**. When they reject and rebel, they suffer His judgment. In both cases, He is the same God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In the article titled "Exodus" in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, read the section titled "The Nature of the Event" on pages 524-526.

How did the exodus foreshadow God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ?

VERSE 11

and brought Israel out from among them *His faithful love endures forever.*

The death of the Egyptians' firstborn males was a demonstration of God's judgment as well as a means of bringing the people of **Israel out from among them**. God's eternal purposes can seem unusual when viewed from a purely human perspective. The Israelites had spent several centuries in Egypt. God had led the children of Jacob/Israel to migrate there during the same time that Joseph, Jacob's beloved son, had been promoted to second-in-command in the Egyptian ruler's court. God had providentially worked out this transition to preserve the Israelites during a famine in the promised land.

Why did God leave the people of Israel in Egypt for so long? During those years, the Israelites grew from twelve nomadic families into a congregation of over two million people. As their lives as slaves became more difficult, however, they cried out to the Lord for deliverance.

God not only delivered the Israelites physically but also spiritually. That is, God not only delivered them from slavery but also from bondage to the worship of Egypt's false gods. To say that the Lord *brought Israel out from among them* suggests that God delivered His people from Egyptian influence.

God's faithfulness in bringing His people out of Egypt was another demonstration of His **faithful love**. As the congregation of Israel in the psalmist's day sang through the history of their people, they lauded God for His everlasting mercy and lovingkindness.

VERSE 12

with a strong hand and outstretched arm. *His faithful love endures forever.*

Here the psalmist used anthropomorphic (related to human life) terms to describe God's strength as demonstrated in the Israelites' deliverance. The phrase **strong hand** describes the powerful way in which God rescued His people. Indeed, God had warned Moses that Egypt's king would not release the Israelites until he saw a demonstration of God's "strong hand" (Ex. 6:1). The phrase is an idiomatic expression describing God's power. Just as a person's hand often is the means by which strength is exerted, the Lord's *strong hand* signified His strength in prying loose the Israelites from the grip of Egypt.

The second term, **outstretched arm**, is a metaphor for the reach of God's power. He projected His sovereign will beyond the people of faith and imposed it on an oppressive regime that opposed Him. God had promised the people of Israel through Moses that He would deliver them with His

“outstretched arm” (Ex. 6:6). The psalmist and his fellow worshipers were able to reflect on the fulfillment of that promise and to praise the Lord for His **faithful love**.

VERSE 13

He divided the Red Sea His faithful love endures forever.

After the Egyptian king was forced to release the Israelites, he became furious and decided to lead his army to recapture them as they camped beside **the Red Sea**. Exodus 14:5-31 reports this terrifying event that resulted in the Israelites’ miraculous rescue and the Egyptians’ demise.

As the account reveals, the Israelites found themselves trapped between a sea on one side and a horde of thundering Egyptian chariots on the other side. The people of Israel were ready to panic; they accused Moses of bringing them to that place only to be destroyed, not liberated. They were not prepared to fight against the hardened troops and terrifying chariots of one of the strongest nations on earth.

By God’s instruction, Moses commanded the people to wait courageously and they would see that the Lord would fight for them (Ex. 14:13-14). Imagine their surprise when God told Moses to lead the people forward toward the water! Miraculously, God **divided** the sea and opened the way for the Israelites to cross over the seabed on dry ground.

Thinking about how the Lord had saved the exodus generation, the psalmist’s generation praised the Lord for His **faithful love**. God’s care is not restricted to the past; His love goes on forever. Just as He miraculously parted the Red Sea, He also works for the good of His people today.

VERSE 14

and led Israel through, His faithful love endures forever.

God could have led the people of Israel on a route that avoided the Red Sea. However, God had a purpose in bringing Israel to that particular location. First, He wanted the people to witness His power so that they would trust Him as they pressed onward. Second, the shorter route from Egypt to the promised land—along the Mediterranean Sea coastline—would have led through the land of the Philistines. God chose not to put His people into a prolonged fight with the fierce Philistines before they were ready, lest they give up and return to Egypt (Ex. 13:17). Third, God did not send the people through the sea; He **led** them. This is God’s way, the way of the Good Shepherd. The Lord goes before us into every situation. We can always follow the Lord’s guidance because He will never lead us where He has not already been. We can trust God’s **faithful love** to lead us in the right way every time.

VERSE 15

but hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea. His faithful love endures forever.

God had witnessed the injustice of Egypt against His people (see Ex. 3:9). The Lord wanted the Egyptians to recognize Him as the only true God (Ex. 7:5). Thus, God brought the people of Israel to **the Red Sea** so that His deliverance of them would also be the decisive judgment against the Egyptian army (Ex. 14:1-4).

Pharaoh did not send his chariot force after the Israelites immediately. Over a month passed from the date of the Israelites' release by the Egyptian ruler to their arrival at the shore of the Red Sea. Only after the pharaoh and his officials realized they had lost their slave labor did they have a change of heart (Ex. 14:5). As Pharaoh sent his army to recapture the Israelites, God **hurled** them into the sea, drowning the entire force of the enemy (Ex. 14:9-31). God gained glory through His judgment on the Egyptians (Ex. 14:18).

Centuries after this great act of deliverance, the psalmist and his generation continued to praise the Lord for it. They gave thanks that they could gather and worship the one true God who had rescued their ancestors from bondage. Likewise, we as believers can gather to extol the Lord for His provision of salvation in Jesus Christ. Over 2,000 years ago, God sent His Son into the world to open the way for our forgiveness and eternal life. Truly, His **faithful love endures forever**.

IN COMPASSION (Ps. 136:23-26)

The psalmist called for God to be praised for His rescue of the people of Israel. Such acts of rescue and provision demonstrate His enduring love.

VERSE 23

He remembered us in our humiliation His faithful love endures forever.

The psalmist further praised the Lord for remembering His people during their time of distress and **humiliation** ("low estate," KJV, ESV, NIV). Was this a reference to a specific time of *humiliation*? Bible scholars are not sure. The Israelites' long period of slavery in Egypt certainly qualified as humiliation. However, this suggestion seems to backtrack in the historical narrative the psalmist was following. Moreover, verses 16-22 focus on Israel's years in the wilderness. Thus, the words *our humiliation* in verse 23 could refer to the indignity the Israelites suffered—they brought much of it on themselves through disobedience—while they journeyed through the wilderness.

Whatever the exact historical antecedent for the phrase *our humiliation*, the psalmist's point (and the congregation's emphasis as they echoed the refrain) was that the Lord never abandoned His people. The biblical term **remembered** means "to think again" or "to bring to mind." It represents God's intentional act in response to His covenant and His people's prayers.

VERSE 24

and rescued us from our foes. His faithful love endures forever.

The Israelites who journeyed toward the promised land encountered a number of **foes** even before they entered the land (see Ps. 136:17-20). The word **us** implies that the psalmist included himself and the worshipers of his day in the rescue. When God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, He also delivered their descendants throughout succeeding generations. This concept was more than a collective view of history. It was the Israelites' continuing identification with God's actions for His covenant people. Such actions were evidence of God's enduring **faithful love**.

VERSE 25

He gives food to every creature. His faithful love endures forever.

God's **faithful love** is extended to all of His creation. He cares for **every creature**. God's provision of **food** is one way He demonstrates His love. Jesus taught His followers that God provides for both the birds and the flowers (Matt. 6:26-30). If the Lord provides for these parts of His creation, how much more does He care about and provide for His people?

VERSE 26

Give thanks to the God of heaven! His faithful love endures forever.

The psalmist concluded his hymn of praise with another call for worshipers to **give thanks to God**. Thanksgiving is an intentional act of worship that recognizes God's goodness and God's gifts. Most of all, we worship Him for His magnificent **faithful love** demonstrated in sending Jesus Christ.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In addition to worshipping the Lord in a congregation of believers, what are other ways in which you seek to give thanks to the God of heaven? How can you be an agent through whom God shows His love to other people? How can you be an agent of His provision for every creature?

HIS FAITHFULNESS

God can be trusted as the One who reigns eternally.

Noah embraced Olivia, his wife, as she wept almost uncontrollably. A deeply painful circumstance threatened their family's livelihood. Noah had been falsely accused of improprieties at his workplace. Although he had strongly asserted his innocence, he had been fired. The couple's young children were frightened and confused by what was happening. They didn't understand why mom and dad were so upset. They only knew their parents were hurting.

Olivia and Noah talked about their uncertain future. Without income from a steady job, how would they pay their bills? What would their friends think about them? How could their kids remain in the Christian school where they had attended for several years? Noah considered filing a lawsuit for defamation of character and wrongful termination but decided in the end to rely on the Lord to provide an answer to their dilemma.

Soon the couple's conversation changed. Noah reminded Olivia about a challenging situation they had faced during their first year of marriage. He had taken a stand for Christ at his workplace that resulted in a loss of employment. God not only had led Noah to a better job, but he and Olivia were able to move to a nicer apartment. Three years later, Noah had made a decision to follow the Lord's direction and take another job even though it involved a pay cut. They were able to meet their obligations. When God blessed them with children, the couple handled their family's growing needs by trusting in God's providence.

The unnamed psalmist who wrote Psalm 146 praised God for His faithfulness to His people. This session focuses on the joy that arises from trusting in God the righteous Judge. Jesus warned His disciples that they would face tribulation in the world, but they could also experience surpassing peace and courage, knowing He had overcome the world (John 16:33). Remembering God's faithfulness in the past gave Noah and Olivia confidence that God would provide for them also in the future—whatever challenges they faced. The Scripture indeed urges all who are believers to trust in the Lord during uncertain circumstances. Let's explore Psalm 146 in depth to hear God's voice in this regard.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 146

Nearly every psalm in the Book of Psalms contains some element of praise to God. The final five psalms in the book (146–150), however, have the distinctive feature of beginning and ending with the same word: hallelujah. This term literally means “give praise to Yah.” (“Yah” is a shortened form of God’s covenant name, Yahweh, which appears in most modern English Bible translations as “the LORD.”) Psalm 146 calls for people to praise the everlasting Lord who reigns forever. Psalm 147 praises God because He preserved Jerusalem. Psalm 148 calls on all creation to praise its Creator. Psalm 149 extols God because He takes great joy in His covenant people. Finally, Psalm 150 calls for God to be exalted by multiple means of human praise.

If God’s people praise Him only when their circumstances are pleasant, then their worship will be inconsistent and incomplete. Certainly believers glorify God for His goodness and His blessings. They give thanks for His provision and His protection. Yet the deepest praise often surges from a grateful heart that is struggling with fear, failure, or grief.

The centerpiece of Psalm 146 consists of three reasons for which praise is offered: hope, help, and happiness. The hymn magnifies God, the One who gives hope and help to the powerless. It also glorifies Him as the One who gladdens the hearts of His people. True joy can be found only in the Lord. In Him alone we find ultimate help for life’s challenges.

Psalm 146 employs parallelism throughout the song. This poetic device includes repetition of ideas, words, and phrases, with restatements intended to magnify, emphasize, or explain initial statements. Another literary feature of this psalm is inclusion. By mentioning several items, persons, or ideas, the psalmist intended for individual references to represent larger groups.

Verses 7-9 mention several groups of people who benefit from God’s intervention on their behalf. This list is meant to be representative, not exhaustive. It portrays the full reach of God’s praiseworthy grace. By showing various ways that God blesses people, the psalmist emphasized that such hope is found only in the Lord. He executes justice for the oppressed, offers healing for the hurting, and provides protection for the powerless.

The psalm begins on a personal note. The psalmist declared his determination to praise the Lord continually throughout his life. He shared his experience of finding no hope or happiness in any source but God. As he continued, the writer expanded the scope of praise to include the covenant people of Israel. Yet Israel alone could not contain all the praise of the Lord; all creation was urged to offer the honor and glory due to God’s name.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE DECLARATION (Ps. 146:1-2)

The psalmist declared his intention to remain faithful to God. He would praise the Lord until he died.

VERSE 1

Hallelujah! My soul, praise the LORD.

The soul of inspired composers flows through the lyrics and melodies they write. Whatever resides in the composer's heart finds its way into expression through words and music. Thus, the divinely inspired psalmist began and concluded his expression of love for the Lord with a burst of praise expressed through the word **hallelujah**. Thinking of who God is and what He had done for His people caused the psalmist's heart to gush with praise.

Many psalms address the call for the congregation to worship the Lord. Most often, the verb form involves the plural, as various psalmists challenged the community of faith to magnify God's name. However, this psalm opens (after the hallelujah) with the psalmist's personal expression of praise. Notice the number of first-person references in verses 1-2.

The psalmist commanded his own **soul**—that is, himself—to **praise the LORD**. The sense of these words is more than a simple imperative. The psalmist had an explosion of enthusiasm that God might be glorified. The Hebrew word translated *soul* (Hebrew, *nephesh* [NEF ish]) can also mean "breath." All that makes up the personhood of a human being—mind, will, emotions—was included. The *soul* is the personhood of the individual created in God's image (see Gen. 2:7). Praise may emerge from one's mouth in the form of words and harmonies, but it originates in the soul.

To *praise the LORD* is to glorify, or magnify, God. How do mere humans magnify the incomparable God? How can sinful people add to the glory of God's royal righteousness? We can offer our sincere devotion and adoration. The substance of Psalm 146:1 portrays a worshiper who is immersed in the wonder and awe of God. His heart cries out in joyful praise.

The name *the LORD* is God's covenant name (see Ex. 3:14-15). As has been stated in previous sessions, this name emphasizes God's eternal nature and sovereign power as Creator. God revealed this name to Moses so that the Israelites would understand the unique holiness of the God who had chosen them to be His covenant people. To this day, many descendants of the ancient Israelites show great reverence for this name by not speaking or writing it. They do this to avoid taking the Lord's name in vain (see Ex. 20:7).

The psalmist was overwhelmed that God would establish a covenant relationship with His people. Today, our reason for praise and worship as believers still arises from the covenant's ultimate fulfillment in the saving work of Jesus Christ (see Heb. 9:15).

VERSE 2

I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing to my God as long as I live.

By repeating a theme in parallel expressions, the psalmist emphasized his commitment to **praise the LORD**. Notice four basic elements that are repeated in this verse.

First, as mentioned previously, these statements are warmly personal. The psalmist expressed his deep devotion to God through personal worship. He proclaimed his commitment to God with a repeated assertion: **I will**. His determination to keep on praising the Lord did not waver. The psalmist's commitment to God flowed through his song of praise.

Second, the psalmist used two synonymous verbs to describe the means of his worship. In the first half of verse 2, he used a term rendered *praise*. In the second half he employed the term translated **sing**. Singing is one of a number of ways by which we can express praise to the Lord. Numerous individuals in Scripture, including Moses (Ex. 15:1), Deborah (Judg. 5:1-3), and Mary, Jesus' mother (Luke 1:46-55), used song to praise the Lord.

Third, the focus of praise is *the LORD*, Israel's covenant God. The psalmist's praise was personal, because God is personal. He is the Lord.

Fourth, the singer described the extent of worship. He repeated two parallel phrases to highlight the unending nature of his praise. The two phrases **all my life** ("while I live," KJV) and **as long as I live** ("have any being," KJV; "have my being," ESV) have similar meanings. The psalmist was using repetition for emphasis. His worship was not temporary or based only on pleasant circumstances but was a lifelong commitment of faithfulness.

As believers, we too can praise God for His faithfulness. Our faithfulness may falter, but His is eternal (see 2 Tim. 2:13). God's consistent relationship with His people motivates us to deeper commitments of worship and praise.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Hallelujah" on page 706 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Which of the various reasons for praise that are mentioned most often motivates your worship of the Lord?

THE WARNING (Ps. 146:3-4)

The psalmist issued a warning about trusting too much in human leaders. Unlike the Lord, human leaders cannot offer everlasting salvation.

VERSE 3

Do not trust in nobles, in a son of man, who cannot save.

The psalmist warned against placing too much **trust in nobles** (“princes,” KJV, ESV, NIV). Even the most beloved of ancient Israel’s kings, King David, experienced the fickleness of individuals in high positions. Many of the wealthy and influential landowners of his day supported King David as long as he appeared to maintain his hold on the kingdom. When David’s son, Absalom, rebelled against his father, however, many of these same noblemen shifted their loyalties to Absalom (see 2 Sam. 15:1-13).

The reality of human limitations is another reason to put one’s ultimate confidence in God rather than in human authorities or institutions. The psalmist was emphasizing the inability of humans to **save** (“help,” KJV; “salvation,” ESV). In this context, the word rendered *save* may have referred more to rescue from temporal circumstances rather than to everlasting salvation from sin. The point remains, however, that if human leaders cannot always save others from danger or physical death, they surely cannot save others from spiritual death. Only the Lord can rescue people from spiritual death, the second death (see Rev. 20:14-15).

The word translated *trust* carries the idea of safety and confidence. Human beings may offer limited degrees of help in some circumstances, but they ultimately cannot offer true security. Only the Lord can be trusted in every circumstance. He alone is the sovereign God.

VERSE 4

When his breath leaves him, he returns to the ground; on that day his plans die.

The primary reason for the psalmist’s warning against relying on human help is the frailty and finiteness of human existence. This verse draws on parallelism to point out the obvious fact that all people die. The phrases **his breath leaves him** (“his breath departs,” ESV; “their spirit departs,” NIV) and **he returns to the ground** (“to the earth,” ESV) emphasize human mortality. The wording demonstrates that people do not have the ultimate say over the length of their lives.

The phrase *returns to the ground* reminds us that God created human beings from the dust of the earth (Gen. 2:7). God told the first humans they

would experience death because of sin. The human body was thus brought forth from the ground and will return to it after physical death (Gen. 3:19).

Because people cannot dictate the amount of time they will live, they also cannot guarantee another individual's security. Sooner or later, even the person with good intentions dies. **On that day** ("on that very day," NIV)—that is, at the moment of one's physical death—that person's **plans** ("thoughts," KJV) to personally rescue others perish also.

Failing to trust in God leads to disappointment and ruin. The psalmist was not belittling the help we can and should give others in the Lord's name. Rather, he was emphasizing our need to trust ultimately in the Lord.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Compare Ecclesiastes 1:1-11 with Psalm 146:1-4. In what ways do the attitudes about life in these two passages differ? How are they similar? Which description most characterizes your personal attitude toward life?

THE WORTHY ONE (Ps. 146:5-9)

The psalmist exclaimed that God alone provides true happiness and hope. He remains forever faithful to His people. He always stays true to His character in every situation, executing justice and extending grace.

VERSE 5

Happy is the one whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

God is worthy of our praise because of His deeds, His nature, and His relationship with His people. The psalmist rejoiced in the Lord because He is the source of our **help** and our **hope**. Our help has a source and a result. The source of help is **the God of Jacob**. Unlike the false gods of pagan nations, Israel's God revealed Himself through centuries of faithfulness to His people. His deeds proved His reliability.

The result of God's help is *hope*. Those whose hope is **in the LORD** rest in the confidence that their God is willing and able to help at all times. In the only other instance in which this Hebrew term for *hope* is used in the Old Testament, the psalmist declared, "Sustain me as you promised, and I will live; do not let me be ashamed of my hope" (Ps. 119:116). People who place their trust in the Lord will never be embarrassed or left in despair. God is by nature trustworthy and faithful.

The scriptural idea of being **happy** does not correspond neatly with the modern concept of happiness. People today often equate happiness with pleasant circumstances or personal well-being. The person who depends on the Lord for help and hope is able to be *happy* regardless of external circumstances. This Hebrew term can also be rendered “blessed.” It points to the condition of being blessed because one is in a right relationship with God.

VERSE 6

**the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them.
He remains faithful forever,**

Why can people find ultimate happiness, help, and hope in the Lord? In Psalm 146:3-4 the psalmist warned about trusting too much in human resources. Now he gave reasons that God could always be trusted. First, while people have limited abilities, God is the **Maker**, or Creator, of everything.

God created **heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them**. The term rendered *heaven* includes the sky as well as the expanse above earth’s atmosphere containing the sun, moon, and stars. This is the psalmist’s likely understanding. Yet God also made the *heaven* in which He dwells, the dimension beyond the physical universe that comprises the spiritual realm. Similarly, the term *earth* refers foremost in the psalmist’s mind to the planet on which human beings dwell.

Notice that the psalmist used the word *sea* in a collective sense. That is, the writer was not specifying a particular body of water such as the Mediterranean Sea. Rather, he was pointing collectively to all of the world’s oceans, seas, lakes, and so forth.

The writer’s fourth category described the extent of God’s creation: *everything in them*. The Lord formed all creatures that walk on the ground, swim in the sea, or fly in the air. At the pinnacle of creation, God fashioned human beings in His image. Since He made everything, He can be trusted to care for what He has created.

A second reason for trusting in God’s faithfulness involves His consistency. He **remains faithful forever**. God’s nature is to be reliable. The concept of *faithful* in this verse derives from two Hebrew words that literally mean “to watch (in the sense of keep) truth.” God is true, and in Him dwells no darkness or falseness (1 John 1:5). His nature is to express truth without fail. Since He is eternal, his faithfulness also lasts eternally.

VERSE 7

**executing justice for the exploited and giving food to the hungry.
The LORD frees prisoners.**

In this verse, the psalmist offered more reasons for trusting the Lord. He expressed three illustrations of God's faithfulness. First, God is continually **executing justice for the exploited** ("oppressed," KJV, ESV, NIV). God condemns the practice of using other people for one's own purposes. God can be trusted not only because He treats everyone fairly but also because He ultimately will bring about justice for all.

A second example of God's faithfulness is His provision of **food to the hungry**. This statement does not mean that God's people will never go hungry. Many believers throughout history, in fact, have suffered hunger and hardship. However, what food we have comes ultimately from the Lord because He created the sources of food. He caused the plants to grow and animals to multiply.

The third illustration applies God's faithfulness to the fact that **the LORD frees prisoners**. This description of His grace should not be misapplied to suggest that God will not allow criminals to be incarcerated. Rather, this word points to people who have been taken as prisoners unjustly.

The idea of God's freeing prisoners also has a spiritual application. Jesus, quoting from Isaiah 61:1, declared that part of His mission as the Messiah was to set prisoners free (Luke 4:16-19). Jesus is faithful to free believers from the shackles of sin so that we might be free indeed (see John 8:34-36).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Justice" on pages 968-970 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How should we understand the nature of human efforts to establish justice in light of the divine source of justice? What can you do to help establish justice in your community?

VERSE 8

The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD raises up those who are oppressed. The LORD loves the righteous.

Three more reasons for trusting in the Lord's faithfulness appear in this verse. These motivations for faith have their foundation in God's covenant name, **the LORD**.

This verse continues the theme of ways in which God helps the helpless. He **opens the eyes of the blind**. The phrase *the eyes of* does not appear in the Hebrew text but is implied by the context. The law sought to protect the blind from people who would take advantage of them (Lev. 19:14; Deut. 27:18). The aspect of healing the blind also was part of Jesus' mission as the Messiah.

A second group mentioned in this verse is the **oppressed** (“bowed down,” KJV, ESV, NIV). This term is similar in meaning to the word rendered “exploited” in Psalm 146:7. However, those who are exploited by others often have been defrauded, while the oppressed have been beaten down—whether by wicked people or by difficult circumstances. The psalmist praised the God who **raises up** (“lifts up,” ESV) those who have been bowed down.

The third part of verse 8 is one half of a poetical contrast that is completed in the final part of the subsequent verse. That is, God **loves the righteous**, but He “frustrates the ways of the wicked” (146:9). The Lord recognizes and rewards people who love Him and follow His ways. The term *righteous* refers to people who live in a right relationship with God and who receive that righteousness by faith in Him (Gen. 15:6). They live moral, upright lives as a result of God’s transforming work in their hearts.

VERSE 9

The LORD protects resident aliens and helps the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

The psalmist continued his list of the powerless who can trust in the Lord for His help. The three groups mentioned here are often mentioned together in Scripture. **Resident aliens** (“strangers,” KJV; “sojourners,” ESV; “the foreigner,” NIV) were non-Israelites who relocated to the promised land from other countries either as workers or immigrants. Because resident aliens were outside the Israelite covenant community and thus lacked legal standing under the law, unscrupulous people often preyed on them. Similarly, orphans (**the fatherless**) and widows (**the widow**) were especially vulnerable to exploitation, since they often did not have family members to provide for them or to protect them.

Numerous passages in Scripture address the responsibility of God’s people to care for orphans and widows. Among the laws God gave to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai was the injunction, “You must not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, they will no doubt cry to me, and I will certainly hear their cry” (Ex. 22:22-23). The prophet Isaiah proclaimed God’s judgment against Israelite rulers who did not uphold the rights of orphans and widows (see Isa. 1:23). In the New Testament, James reminded the church that pure religion involves caring for orphans and widows in their distress (Jas. 1:27).

Psalm 146:9 closes with a warning to **the wicked**. Such individuals cannot expect to receive the Lord’s help. Instead, God **frustrates** their **ways** (“turneth upside down,” KJV; “brings to ruin,” ESV). Godless people may conspire against the helpless, but ultimately God will overthrow their plans.

THE REALITY (Ps. 146:10)

The psalmist proclaimed that God's reign is forever. He gives His people reason to rejoice.

VERSE 10

The LORD reigns forever; Zion, your God reigns for all generations. Hallelujah!

When we recognize the reality of God's eternal sovereignty, our hearts rejoice. The psalmist concluded his hymn by expanding on his initial theme. He started with personal praise for the greatness of God. He ended by reaching out to his nation, calling on **Zion** to praise the Lord. The name *Zion* often signifies the mountain on which the temple was built. Here the name refers in a general sense to the nation of Israel.

Using parallelism for emphasis, the psalmist declared that **the LORD reigns forever**. God's rule is not limited to one nation or region of earth. He rules over the entire universe. At the same time, the people of Israel could depend on the Lord because He chose them to be His covenant people.

Notice the personal way the psalmist addressed the nation—**your God**. The people of Israel could rightly claim a covenant relationship with the Lord. This relationship, however, was not based on any worthiness on their part. Rather, it was a matter of God's sovereign grace. He chose them.

The second part of Psalm 146:10 uses the phrase **for all generations** as a parallel statement of the Lord's limitless rule. Human leaders may claim power for a period of time, but they eventually die, and their influence fades from the scene. God's power endures forever. He is the ever-present One. He is just as powerful and authoritative today as He was in the days of the kings of Israel. His power is limitless, and His rule is eternal.

Meditating on the faithfulness of a supreme, enduring God, the psalmist shouted in conclusion, **Hallelujah!** He voiced God's praise and called on the congregation of God's people to join in worshiping the Lord.

Today, believers also live in the light of God's eternal reign, praising Him not only as the Creator of the universe but also as Redeemer and Lord. His covenant relationship with us through Jesus Christ gives us confidence in the reality of His faithfulness.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What emotions do you experience when you reflect on God's power as Creator? On His love for you as Redeemer? On His authority as Lord?

THE CONFESSION

The realization of sin should move us to confession and repentance.

No one enjoys feeling guilty, but a proper sense of guilt can be a blessing. It can serve as an early warning system that something isn't right. If we ignore the work of God's Spirit as He warns or confronts us about our sinful behavior, serious consequences follow.

Sometimes, however, people can experience an unjustified sense of guilt. They might do nothing wrong, but they feel responsible for something bad that happens. For example, Ken provided tender care for his wife throughout years of an incapacitating illness. He sacrificed much time, energy, and their life savings to provide for his wife's good care. Nevertheless, when she eventually succumbed to the disease and died in her late forties, Ken struggled with feelings of guilt. Although the couple had pursued every medical option that offered even a glimmer of hope, Ken chastised himself for not having done more. His feelings of guilt in this instance were really expressions of grief.

Christine, on the other hand, felt genuine guilt. One day a former boyfriend contacted her through social media. Christine had been married for 10 years. She and her husband had two children. Yet when the boyfriend sent her an online hello, Christine began to recall fond moments of their past romantic relationship. Mentally arguing there was no reason not to reconnect with an old friend, she began exchanging email messages with him. This led to their having longer conversations in private chat rooms and, finally, to a clandestine meeting. What began as an innocent hello then turned into an affair that caused widespread wreckage to multiple families. Time after time, both Christine and her former boyfriend felt pangs of guilt for what they were doing. But they ignored those warnings and reaped terrible consequences as a result of their sinful behavior.

Behind Psalm 51 lies a similar story of sinful behavior and guilt. In this psalm, King David expressed the depths of his guilt surrounding an adulterous affair, his awareness that only the Lord could forgive and restore him, and his repentant plea for that divine cleansing. This session can help us face our own sinful behavior and turn to the Lord for His forgiveness.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 51

Although there are exceptions, the 66 books of the Bible exhibit a general chronological order from beginning (Genesis) to end (Revelation). However, not every Bible book is organized internally with a chronological framework. The Book of Psalms is one of the books in Scripture that does not have a detectable chronological framework. The only clues to an individual psalm's occasion (the historical event that prompted the psalm's writing) usually are found in the superscription—if the psalm indeed has a superscription.

Psalm 51 has such a superscription, and it reveals three pieces of background information: (1) a musical notation; (2) an attribution; and (3) a note of historical background. The musical notation “for the choir director” may indicate either that the psalm was intended for use in worship or that the music director was to take cues from the other two pieces of information as to how the psalm was to be sung.

The attribution “a psalm of David” could mean either that Israel's beloved king personally wrote the psalm or that it was part of his collection. That the psalm was written from start to finish in intimate, first-person, confessional language strongly supports the conclusion that David wrote it. This conclusion is strengthened further by the historical notation that connects the psalm with a specific event in David's life—“when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.” That event, including its prelude and aftermath, is chronicled in 2 Samuel 11:1–12:25.

David had risen to become the ruler over all the tribes of Israel (2 Sam. 5:1-3). Moreover, David was a man of great faith in the Lord. God had established an everlasting covenant with David that foreshadowed the future coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ (2 Sam. 7:12-16; see Luke 2:31-33). Yet even a man of faith such as David was vulnerable to spiritual disaster.

During a time when his army was engaged in battle, David stayed in Jerusalem. Walking along the palace rooftop one evening, he saw Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers, bathing outside her home. He sent messengers to bring her to the palace, where David committed adultery with her and got her pregnant (2 Sam. 11:1-5). To cover up his sins, David sent word to his army commander for Bathsheba's husband to be given a furlough. In David's scheme, the grateful and homesick soldier would sleep with his wife and later assume that he had fathered their newborn child. However, when the dutiful soldier refused to go home to his wife, David sent him back to the front along with orders for the commander to station the soldier in the place of fiercest fighting—where his death was all but certain (11:6-15).

After the soldier's death, David brought Bathsheba into the palace as his wife. Perhaps the king imagined that he would be seen as doing the right thing by caring for his soldier's widow. But the Lord saw the truth. David was guilty of vile sins and contemptuous spiritual rebellion. So the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront the king and to declare the consequences David (as well as his family and the nation) would face (2 Sam. 12:1-12). When the confrontation took place, David admitted his guilt and confessed his sin (12:13). Psalm 51 probably represents a later, fuller confession that reveals David's intense inner struggle with the guilt of what he had done. (Psalm 32, the Scripture focus of session 11, expresses what may well have been David's joy over having been forgiven of these sins.)

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GUILTY AS CHARGED (Ps. 51:1-5)

The psalmist David declared his guilt as a sinner, confessing his sin against God. The psalmist placed himself at God's mercy, his only hope.

VERSE 1

Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion.

As king, David had decided legal cases that were brought before him. He understood the nature of justice according to God's law. Now he was the guilty individual standing before the bar of God's justice. Nothing was hidden, and David knew what punishment he deserved. Yet David also knew that in the law the Lord had revealed He is "a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin" (Ex. 34:6-7). David's only hope was to plead for God's mercy. Thus, the king begged for God to **be gracious** ("have mercy," KJV, ESV, NIV) to him. The word David used describes God's favor. Although David was established as Israel's king by God's sovereign choice, he knew that God bestowed favor based on His will, not on human merit.

Significantly, David addressed his prayer to **God**, using the general term for deity. In many of his psalms, David included God's covenant name, "the LORD" (for example, Pss. 3-9; 13-32; 34-41). The king might have claimed special consideration since God had established a covenant relationship not only with Israel but also with David. However, David had broken the covenant by not obeying God's commands.

Knowing that he had no other basis on which to claim God's favor, David prayed for mercy according to God's **faithful love** ("lovingkindness," KJV; "steadfast love," ESV; "unfailing love," NIV). The phrase also can be rendered "steadfast mercy" or "ongoing grace." David knew that God's nature was unchanging. He appealed to the Lord's consistent mercy. He also made his request in light of God's **abundant compassion** ("multitude of thy tender mercies," KJV). God offers limitless love for His people. David understood God's grace and prayed that the Lord would respond based on His benevolence.

A vital aspect of David's plea involved his honest and full confession of wrongdoing. In the first of three statements, the king admitted his **rebellion** ("transgressions," KJV, ESV, NIV). David did not try to minimize his sin. The term rendered *rebellion* involves a deliberate trespass against God and His law. David asked the Lord to **blot out** his rebellion. He wanted God to eliminate his sin as though it never existed. God was able to remove David's sin as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12), but David prayed that God would erase his transgressions altogether.

VERSE 2

Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin.

Similar to his request in the previous verse, David asked God to **wash away** ("wash me thoroughly," ESV) his **guilt** ("iniquity," ESV, NIV) and to **cleanse** him from his **sin**. The terms rendered *blot out*, *wash away*, and *cleanse* share a common meaning. Each term described the total elimination of wrongdoing.

VERSE 3

For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.

Some people are willfully blind to their sin. They blame circumstances, other people, or even God for their problems. David, on the other hand, was fully **conscious** ("know," ESV, NIV) of his **rebellion** ("transgressions," ESV, NIV). He confessed that when he remained silent about his sin, God's convicting power was like a bone-shattering heaviness (see Ps. 32:3-4).

Although he had tried to hide his adultery, treachery, and murder from other people, David could not escape from God or from his own conscience. He was constantly aware of his rebellion. His guilt followed him relentlessly.

VERSE 4

Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge.

David's sins had wide-ranging consequences on many people, not the least of which were Bathsheba, her husband, and the child born of David's adultery. David could not make the claim that his sinful actions hurt only him and were no one else's business. He also recognized, however, that ultimately all sin is an affront to God (**against you—you alone**).

David further acknowledged that his actions were **evil** in God's sight. The standard against which David stood in judgment was not his own or that of the current culture. He could not point to the surrounding pagan nations and argue that all the world's kings acted in similar ways. David was accountable—as we all are—to live by God's standards of holiness.

David confessed that God had the **right** (“justified,” KJV, ESV) to pass **sentence** (“verdict,” NIV) on him. The king deserved whatever the Lord decided. Further, David recognized God to be **blameless** in His judgment. The word rendered *blameless* means “to be pure” or “to be justified.” David recognized that everything God did in judging him was right and fair.

VERSE 5

Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.

David was deeply convicted about his sin. His statement about being **guilty** (“sinful,” NIV) **when he was born** (“brought forth in iniquity,” ESV) shows the deep roots of sin in human nature. Other than Jesus, every person born since Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden has inherited a sinful nature. David, however, did not blame his sin on something beyond his control. He felt conviction for his actions.

The second line repeats the idea of the first statement in an example of poetic parallelism for emphasis. In other words, David acknowledged that sin infects fallen human nature from the first moment of existence (**when my mother conceived me**). He was not implying that human reproduction in itself was sinful but that sin had invaded every aspect of human nature.

All people have committed sin and are therefore guilty before God. We are sinners by nature, and we also are sinners by choice. Trying to justify our sins by blaming others will not gain God's favor. We must respond to God's conviction by confessing our sins in humble repentance.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the section on “Sin as Rebellion” (p. 1505) in the article titled “Sin” in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What evidence do you see in your life of sin's pervasiveness in human nature?

PLEA FOR CLEANSING (Ps. 51:6-13)

David asked God to cleanse and purify him from the guilt of sin and from the sin itself. The psalmist realized that he would have no joy until God acted in mercy toward him.

VERSE 6

Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within.

David focused on attributes of God as the basis for his request for forgiveness. He knew that God wanted His people to live with **integrity** (“truth,” ESV; “faithfulness,” NIV). In his current condition, however, David could not make the assertion that he was living with integrity. His sinful actions showed, in fact, the very opposite. Integrity refers not just to an outward veneer of respectability but to a genuineness **in the inner self** (“inward being,” ESV; “in the womb,” NIV). Jesus once described religious hypocrites of His day as “whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity” (Matt. 23:27).

David could not claim ignorance of God’s ways, for the Lord had taught him **wisdom deep within** (“hidden part,” KJV; “secret heart,” ESV; “secret place,” NIV). The concept of spiritual wisdom emphasizes that God does not want us merely to amass more knowledge but to use spiritual understanding in applying His truth in practical ways every day.

VERSE 7

Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

The first mention of **hyssop** in Scripture involves its use by the Israelites in Egypt to smear the blood of a Passover lamb on their door posts to escape the tenth plague (Ex. 12:22). Later, the law called for the use of hyssop and blood in purifying a contaminated home or tent (Lev. 14:48-49). David understood that the actual hyssop plant had no inherent power to cleanse his sinful heart. Only God could make David clean from sin’s contamination.

The second part of Psalm 51:7 uses a similar metaphor to express David’s prayer for cleansing. He asked God to **wash** him so that he might be **whiter than snow**. Washing portrayed the reality of God’s spiritual cleansing. David needed God to *wash* his heart as well as his entire being. He wanted to be truly clean before the Lord. The imagery of forgiveness as being made *whiter than snow* emerges later in the prophet Isaiah’s writings (see Isa. 1:18). David longed for the complete spiritual cleansing that God alone could do.

VERSE 8

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

David's burden was of his own making. Still, he felt God's judgment so severely that it seemed as though God had **crushed** ("broken," KJV, ESV) his **bones**. Even in his despair, David knew that God could restore him. He longed to hear **joy and gladness**. Notice that David did not ask to feel joy but to **hear** it. Only God's voice declaring his forgiveness could fulfill this request. God had pronounced his sentence; only God could restore David's joy.

VERSE 9

Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt.

In verse 9, David requested that God **turn** ("hide," KJV, ESV, NIV) His **face away from** David's **sins**. To turn away the face was a Hebrew idiom for putting something behind, no longer taking something into consideration. Previously, David had confessed that his sin was always before him (51:3). Now the king asked God to put David's sins behind him and to **blot out** David's **guilt** ("iniquities," KJV, ESV; "iniquity," NIV), removing them so that neither he nor God would see them again.

David did not want merely to feel better. Neither was he seeking a temporary fix to his problem. Centuries after King David, the apostle John wrote to believers that "if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). In his confession, David asked God to do just that—to cleanse him from all unrighteousness.

VERSE 10

God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

David's sinful actions had their origin in his rebellious heart (see Jas. 1:14-15). He needed God to **create** a new one for him, a **clean** ("pure," NIV) **heart**. The Hebrew word rendered *create* is the same word found in Genesis 1 that describes God's creation of the universe. It describes the creation of something out of nothing. David thus pleaded for God to give him what was not there before—a *clean heart*.

The idea of a **steadfast spirit** ("right spirit," KJV, ESV) is parallel to a clean heart. The word rendered *steadfast* describes both rightness and stability. David wanted a stable inner life that would give rise to faithfulness to the Lord regardless of temptations or circumstances.

VERSE 11

Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

David wanted to enjoy the close **presence** of God again. His greatest fear was that God would **banish** (“cast,” KJV, ESV, NIV) him as a king might send a disloyal servant into exile. David’s reference to God’s *presence* likely was another way of speaking about the covenant relationship. In other words, David begged the Lord not to abandon that relationship.

Similarly, God’s presence involves the activity of the **Holy Spirit**. The New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit indwells believers at their conversion (1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 1:13). In Old Testament times, the Holy Spirit came upon people of faith to empower them to serve God. The Spirit also could abandon an individual who was disobedient. David had seen this happen to King Saul (see 1 Sam. 16:14); he did not want God’s Spirit to abandon him as well.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Holy Spirit” on pages 773-774 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What gives you confidence as a believer that the Holy Spirit lives in you and thus is with you at all times? How would you describe the way that the Holy Spirit helps you live for Christ?

VERSE 12

Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit.

For the believer, falling into sin does not result in the loss of salvation, but it can and does quench the Christian’s joy. That David asked God to **restore the joy** of his salvation meant that David had experienced God’s salvation and now was keenly aware that his actions had not been consistent with that relationship. Because God is holy, believers’ sins grieve Him (Eph. 4:30). We cannot enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit and at the same time continue to disobey His commands.

At the same time, David asked God to **sustain** him by giving him **a willing spirit**. The term *spirit* in this verse may refer to one’s attitude rather than the human spirit. The translation of this part of the verse in the King James Version implies that the term *spirit* refers to God’s Spirit. In that case, it is God’s Spirit who not only restores joy to the forgiven sinner but also sustains, or upholds, the repentant ones in their joy.

VERSE 13

Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you.

The word **then** at the beginning of this verse likely refers to all that David had requested in 51:7-12. If only God would hear his prayer and grant forgiveness and restoration, David would be able to minister in the name of the Lord. David was not trying to bargain with God. He did not offer service in return for God's cleansing. Rather, David would be empowered to teach God's ways to **the rebellious** ("transgressors," KJV, ESV, NIV) because he had been cleansed of rebellion. He could urge **sinners** to repent and turn to the Lord for forgiveness because he had sinned, had repented, and had been forgiven.

Forgiveness of sin comes only through God's provision. God's plan for human salvation centers on His Son, Jesus Christ. Only through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus can we experience God's forgiveness. In Christ, we receive God's Holy Spirit and can serve Him in the joy of salvation.

DELIVERANCE THROUGH BROKENNESS (Ps. 51:14-17)

David called on God to deliver him. The psalmist declared that only broken and humble repentance would lead to forgiveness.

VERSE 14

Save me from the guilt of bloodshed, God—God of my salvation—and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

David not only felt the guilt of adultery with Bathsheba, he was also responsible for the death of Bathsheba's husband. David was deeply convicted and broken because of the **bloodshed** ("bloodguiltiness," KJV, ESV) he had caused. He knew that the just penalty for sins such as these was death. The law was clear; thus, David could only cry out for mercy to the One who could **save** ("deliver," KJV, NIV) him.

The words **God of my salvation** reveal two key truths. First, the pronoun *my* indicates David knew he already was in a covenant relationship with the Lord—although he had violated that relationship. He could ask God to forgive him of his sins because God had already saved him. Second, if David was to be delivered from his guilt and sin, only the Lord his God could do it. David was prepared to **sing** of God's **righteousness** that also had room for divine mercy (see Rom. 3:23-26).

VERSE 15

Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

The name **Lord** (Hebrew, *adonai*) in this verse is not God's covenant name but rather a term of address that signified respect for authority. Here David was humbling himself as a lowly servant before the King of kings and Lord of lords. The poetical imagery in this verse portrays David as unable to speak before his divine Lord because of his shame and brokenness. Only through God's permission and prompting would David dare to utter a sound. Yet he longed not only to speak but also to **declare** God's **praise**.

VERSE 16

You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering.

David knew what the law demanded for sin offerings. The sin offering for a ruler involved a blood **sacrifice** (Lev. 4:22-26). People wanting atonement also had to confess their sin (Lev. 5:5; 6:4). David not only confessed his sin when the prophet Nathan confronted him but also wrote this psalm as a confession to be sung by the people of Israel as they worshiped.

Yet David recognized that God required much more than the sacrifice of an animal. If that were all that was needed, David would **give it** ("bring it," NIV) gladly. David's predecessor, King Saul, had learned that God's forgiveness could not be bought with animal sacrifices (1 Sam. 15:22-23). What, then, would be an acceptable offering for David's sins?

VERSE 17

The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.

The phrases **a broken spirit** and **a broken and humbled** ("contrite," KJV, ESV, NIV) **heart** are parallel ideas. They refer to having a genuine sorrow about one's sinfulness and a desire to turn to the Lord for forgiveness and renewal. God sees through and rejects any hypocritical human efforts at making a show of repentance. Only when we are genuine in our repentance will He do the work of transformation in our hearts that frees us from sin's bondage and gives us new life.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How does Romans 12:1-2 expand on what Psalm 51:17 teaches about sacrifices that please God? What are some ways that you can declare your praise for God's forgiveness and new life?

THE CLEANSING

God's complete forgiveness of those who turn to Him in faith produces gratitude.

John had moved to east Tennessee in hopes of escaping an addiction to crack cocaine. Soon after moving there, he fell in with the wrong crowd again and returned to abusing drugs. When he ran out of money, John turned to crime to support his habit. One day he walked into a local doughnut shop and robbed the place of three hundred dollars. He quickly found a dealer and purchased what he thought would be his next high. He later admitted, however, that he was so ashamed of his actions that he didn't enjoy the drugs.

John soon left east Tennessee and moved to Kansas, but his guilty conscience followed him. Eventually he grew tired of wrestling with what he had done, so he called the police department in the town where he committed the robbery and admitted his crime. A detective convinced John that the best way for him to make things right was to return to east Tennessee and turn himself in. When he did so, John's court-appointed attorney worked out a plea deal by which John would plead guilty for the robbery and receive a six-year sentence.

As his court date drew near, John began to think that he might receive an even lesser punishment—time served plus probation for the remainder of the six years. That was not to be, however. The presiding judge was a no-nonsense jurist who took a look at John's past unsuccessful rehabilitation efforts. Instead of probation, John was sentenced to serve out his time in prison.

Ironically, John now says that his time in prison was the best outcome for him. Although he admits that prison time was the hardest thing he has ever done, it was also the place where his life turned around. He found God there, and he met some people who genuinely wanted to help him overcome his addictions. Not only that, as part of his recovery after being released from incarceration, John decided to repay with interest all of the money he had stolen from the doughnut shop in east Tennessee.

In Psalm 32, King David likewise expressed joy over the forgiveness of his sins. As we study this psalm, we too will discover that people can find forgiveness and peace when they confess their sins to God.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 32

Psalm 32 can be categorized as a penitential psalm—that is, a psalm of repentance. Other psalms of this type include Psalms 6; 38; 51; 102; 130; and 143. In Psalm 32, the psalmist recounted his experience of being forgiven and restored to a right relationship with God.

In the superscription this psalm is called a “maskil.” Bible students are not certain of this term’s meaning, although one suggestion is that it derives from a Hebrew verb that means “to make wise, instruct.” Consequently, the term might reflect that the psalm is part of the Hebrew wisdom tradition. Other Bible students suggest that the term either marks the psalm as a skillfully composed song or signals the worshiper to spend time reflecting on the psalm’s content.

The superscription also identifies Psalm 32 as being contributed by King David. Longstanding tradition further connects the psalm to David’s plea for forgiveness following his committing adultery with Bathsheba and subsequent conspiring to have her husband killed in battle (2 Sam. 11–12). Since an extended period of time elapsed before David was confronted with and confessed these sins, and since this psalm speaks of the anguish of unconfessed sin over a period of time, Psalm 32 came to be connected with that experience. As a result, Psalm 32 appears to be a sequel to Psalm 51.

In that scenario, Psalm 51 was regarded to be David’s first prayer for pardon. Psalm 32 then was understood to be written later as a follow up on David’s commitment to teach the ways of God to sinners so that they would return to Him (see Ps. 51:13). It should be acknowledged, however, that Psalm 32 may reflect another time when David sinned and was slow to confess. What is true in either case is that in Psalm 51 David poured out his heart in repentance over his sin and sought God’s forgiveness. In Psalm 32 he rejoiced over the gracious forgiveness offered by God.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE CONTRAST (Ps. 32:1-4)

In the first four verses of Psalm 32, David contrasted the joy of being forgiven (32:1-2) with the anguish of unconfessed sin (32:3-4). In beginning this way, David described the movement that progresses from the hope of forgiveness to the anguish over sin to the act of confession to gratitude for forgiveness.

VERSE 1

How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!

Psalms 32:1-2 contains a two-part proclamation of blessing. Both parts begin with the same phrase, **how joyful**, which is then followed by two poetic lines. The phrase *how joyful* is actually one word in Hebrew. The term appears more than two dozen times in the Book of Psalms and is often rendered “blessed” or “happy.” Jesus used the corresponding Greek word repeatedly in the Beatitudes section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-10).

The two poetic lines that follow the phrase *how joyful* are similar in grammar and structure. In the rest of verse 1, **transgression** corresponds to **sin**, and **forgiven** corresponds to **is covered**. The focus is on a type of human sin set aside by a response of forgiveness.

David used four different words to describe the full dimension of human evil. The first two of these words appear in verse 1. *Transgression* refers to acts of rebellion against God. The term *sin* designates an offense, usually by missing the mark or turning away from the right path.

Both of these violations are paired with an appropriate image of deliverance (32:1). The Hebrew word rendered *forgiven* involves lifting up, carrying, or taking away the burden of rebellion (see Ex. 34:7; Ps. 25:18). The word translated *is covered* means to hide or conceal the sin (see Ps. 85:2; Neh. 4:5). By organizing the poetic lines in this fashion, David was able to contrast sinfulness with forgiveness. His emphasis was on the joy, or blessing, of receiving forgiveness. In other words, being forgiven is a truly joyous experience. David did not say in this verse who was giving the forgiveness, but the answer becomes clear in verse 2.

VERSE 2

How joyful is a person whom the LORD does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit!

David began verse 2 by repeating the phrase **how joyful**. As in verse 1, he then identified another type of human evil and a response of deliverance. But now David clearly identified **the LORD** as the One who can and does offer forgiveness.

The third word David used to describe human evil is translated here as **iniquity**. This is a Hebrew term that portrays distortion, criminality, or a lack of respect for God’s will. Deliverance occurs when the Lord **does not charge** (“imputeth not,” KJV; “does not count,” NIV) guilt to a person’s account (see 2 Kings 12:15; 22:7). The phrase **in whose spirit is no deceit** describes the individual whom God has not found guilty. *Deceit*, the fourth

word used in verses 1-2 to describe human evil, denotes fraud and deception, especially as carried out by a scheming, plotting person. While the first three terms commonly appear as synonyms for sin in the Old Testament, the term rendered *deceit* is used only about 15 times. The rare occurrence of this word sets it apart from the other three.

Verse 2 does not seek to describe a person who has never committed a sin. Rather, its aim is to describe the individual who aspires to be true to God, one who may enter the temple and come before Him. The individual *in whose spirit is no deceit* is the one who is willing to confess his or her sin to God. Only when repentance and confession are without deceitfulness can forgiveness be experienced as a true gift of God. In Romans 4:7-8, Paul quoted Psalm 32:1-2 to emphasize God's matchless grace.

VERSE 3

When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long.

In contrast to the joy of forgiveness, the anguish of unconfessed sin is like a cancer in the soul. In verses 3-4, David described the distress of allowing a deceitful heart to remain silent in the presence of acknowledged but unconfessed sin. It was debilitating and painful. The poetic lines portray the depth of David's anguish.

The torment began when David **kept silent**. Evidently, for a time after David knew he had sinned, he refused to repent and confess. The Hebrew verb translated *kept silent* carries the basic idea of intentional noncommunication, expressed as not speaking or hearing (Ps. 35:22). David didn't want to talk to God, because he knew that if he did the Holy Spirit would convict him of his transgressions.

As a consequence of David's stubborn silence toward God, David's physical being became a battleground (Pss. 31:9-10; 38:2-8; 102:3-5). His **bones became brittle** ("waxed old," KJV; "wasted away," ESV, NIV). The term rendered *brittle* can also mean "worn out" (see Josh. 9:13; Ps. 102:26). The word translated **groaning** was also used to describe a lion's roaring (Isa. 5:29; Ezek. 19:7; Job 4:10). In regard to human subjects, however, it could refer to screams of pain (Ps. 22:1; Job 3:24). The *groaning* David recalled came as the result of his trying to live with guilt. The suffering was not experienced for a moment of time; instead, it lasted **all day long**. The effects of sin are relentless.

VERSE 4

For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was drained as in the summer's heat. Selah

Here David further amplified the portrayal of anguish caused by unconfessed sin. The unrelenting pain persisted **day and night**. The agony of unconfessed sin did not cease. Thus, David felt that the **hand** of God **was heavy** on him. The phrase *hand was heavy* describes the weight of God's judgment, whether in a sinful conscience or in physical affliction (1 Sam. 5:6,11). Even when David was attempting to avoid talking to God, the Holy Spirit nevertheless was convicting David of his need to repent and confess. This pressure weighed on David's mind and heart. Perhaps David recalled that the Lord's heavy hand had brought a terrible epidemic against the people of Ashdod after the Philistines had captured the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 5:6-7,11).

The second half of Psalm 32:4 continues the description of the debilitating effects of unconfessed sin. David said that his **strength was drained** ("dried up," ESV; "sapped," NIV) **as in the summer's heat**. The term rendered *heat* has been understood by some Bible students as a dry heat or drought. Dehydration can quickly and dangerously sap all energy from an individual who has no source of refreshment. The image of wasting away in such conditions is dramatic. Unconfessed sin drains a person spiritually and physically. Believers must confess their sins to the Father or face the possibility of becoming spiritually withered and despondent.

The term ***Selah*** appears here and two other times in Psalm 32 (see 32:5,7). The meaning of the term is uncertain. It may indicate a pause for reflection but doesn't have an effect on the overall structure or meaning of the psalm.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Forgiveness" on pages 596-597 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. How would you describe the inner struggle with unconfessed sin? What are one or two other Scriptures that give you confidence God is able and willing to forgive those who confess their sins?

THE DECISION (Ps. 32:5)

The psalmist David reported that he reached a turning point in his distress. He confessed his sins to God. Divine forgiveness then came quickly.

VERSE 5

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not conceal my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

With clear intent, David included in this verse the same words for human evil that appear in the opening two verses of the psalm: **sin, iniquity, and transgressions**. These terms signify the thoroughness of David's confession and completeness of God's forgiveness.

Using first-person language to underscore his personal act of confession, David declared first that he **acknowledged** his sin to the Lord. The verb rendered *acknowledged* implies a sense of intimacy, indicating that David may have offered his confession in prayer or as an act of personal worship.

Put in another way, the king **did not conceal** his wrongdoing. By his own admission in verse 3, David for a time did keep silent about his sins, and that silence continually crushed his soul. In verse 5, therefore, the emphasis is not that David immediately acknowledged his sin. Rather, once he began his confession he left nothing hidden. He uncovered his entire heart before the Lord. The verb translated *conceal* here is the same verb rendered "is covered" in verse 1. The irony in these two usages of the same root word is instructive: when God covers our sins with His forgiveness, it is utter joy; to get to that place of joy, we must uncover our sins before Him—concealing nothing, confessing all.

The words **I will confess ... to the LORD** indicate David's personal resolve to end the physical and emotional pain that came from harboring sin in his heart. The verb rendered *confess* occurs more than 60 times in the Psalms. It can mean "to praise" or "to give thanksgiving" as well as "to confess one's sins." Here David clearly meant the confession of sins. The term rendered *transgressions* refers to acts of defiance against God's law.

How did God respond to David's full and sincere confession of sin? David reported that the Lord **forgave the guilt** ("iniquity," KJV, ESV) **of my sin**. David had opened Psalm 32 with a declaration of the blessedness—pure joy—of being forgiven (32:1). The Hebrew word for *forgave* literally means "to lift up, to take away a burden." God took away both the guilt and the sins David had committed in response to the king's contrite confession.

David found peace from his guilt only after confessing his sins to the Lord. In the same way, people today can find rest and mercy when they sincerely confess their sins to God.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Confession" on pages 327-328 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, paying particular attention to the section on confession of sin. How does your church congregation help worshipers who seek to confess their sins before the Lord? What more could be done?

THE COUNSEL (Ps. 32:6-9)

After sharing his personal testimony on the anguish of unconfessed sin, David counseled others to do as he had done. In verses 6-7, David praised God for being available to His people in times of trouble. In verses 8-9, God (through David) instructed others not to be stubborn but to admit their sins.

VERSE 6

Therefore let everyone who is faithful pray to you immediately. When great floodwaters come, they will not reach him.

In verses 6-7, David addressed his praise to God in a prayer. The first part of the prayer contains a wish that others who were weighed down in their sins might also pray and confess their sins (32:6). The second part provides a personal testimony of David's deepening relationship with the Lord (32:7).

The use of **therefore** at the beginning of verse 6 links David's prayer-counsel to others with his personal realization of divine forgiveness in verse 5. Because David understood the life-restoring impact of God's forgiveness, he wanted others to experience it as well. Thus, he pleaded with the Lord to allow (**let**) all of the **faithful** to approach Him **immediately** ("while you may be found," NIV). The *faithful* are those who practice covenant faithfulness with God. David did not want them to compound their wrongdoing—as he had done—by trying to hide their sins.

For one thing, trying to hide our sins doesn't work! God knows what we've done. He sees the condition of our hearts even when we try to conceal them. Further, the longer we try to hide our sins, the more callous we grow to the Holy Spirit's pleadings for us to repent and seek forgiveness.

David recognized that troubles would inevitably come to God's people. He used the imagery of **great floodwaters** ("rising of the mighty waters," NIV) to represent the chaos that confronts human beings living in a sinful world. Only God can rescue us from these chaotic forces. Indeed, He ensures that those forces will not **reach** (so as to overwhelm and destroy) the one who has an ongoing relationship with the Lord (Ps. 124:4-5; Isa. 43:2). God's care enables His faithful people to be braced for the bombardments of life without being dislodged or overwhelmed.

VERSE 7

You are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance. Selah

In the second part of his prayer, David affirmed the deepening nature of his relationship with God. Having been forgiven, David declared his faith.

First, David declared that the Lord was his **hiding place**, or shelter. David understood that God would hide the faithful in the protection of His presence (see Ps. 91:1). The Lord would conceal His people from the schemes and plotting of others.

Next, David proclaimed that the Lord would **protect him from trouble**. The word translated *protect* carries the idea of keeping watch over someone in order to shield them from harm. David knew that God would protect him during the difficulties that were sure to come in life. The Hebrew noun rendered *trouble* can refer to narrow or tight places. God will protect the faithful in the midst of this kind of distress.

Finally, David anticipated that God would **surround him with joyful shouts of deliverance** (“songs of deliverance,” KJV, NIV). The term rendered *joyful shouts* may derive from a root word used to describe the sound of a rattle. The word rendered *deliverance* has the basic meaning of “escape.”

VERSE 8

I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with my eye on you, I will give counsel.

Verses 8-9 contain the Lord’s direct reply to David’s prayer in the two previous verses. The response continues the idea of David’s offering counsel to others, but verse 8 presents that counsel as coming directly from the Lord in first-person language.

God used three verbs in verse 8 that are common to Hebrew wisdom literature. First, God said that He would **instruct** David. This verb generally means “to comprehend” or “to understand.” It can also mean “to make wise, insightful.” Hence, to make someone wise means to teach or train them.

The second verb, **show**, can also be rendered “teach.” It may be related to the Hebrew noun *torah*, which is often translated in Scripture as “law” but can also mean “instruction” or “guidance.” David’s point is that God was intent on directing David (and other sinners) in His perfect way.

Third, God declared that He would **give counsel** (“guide,” KJV) to David and others. This verb can also mean “to plan” or “to give advice.” The Lord may frustrate and thwart the counsel of rebellious people and nations, but His counsel to His people will stand forever (see Ps. 33:10-11). That counsel would be carried out with His **eye** on David. The eye of the Lord represents His personal, providential care (see Pss. 33:18; 34:15).

VERSE 9

Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding, that must be controlled with bit and bridle or else it will not come near you.

In verse 9 God’s direct reply to David turns to the issue of stubborn pride. The focus here is on whether David—and by extension, all believers—will learn from experience. To emphasize this point, God put the basic idea of what He wanted to convey in the form of a proverb.

God challenged David (and others) to **not be like a horse or mule, without understanding**. The picture is that of a stubborn animal that requires a **bit and bridle** to restrain it along the way. Without these controlling measures, the animal would not **come near** (“stay,” ESV) its owner; it would instead run unrestrained—even into situations of grave danger.

The key interpretive word in the verse is the term rendered *understanding*. The root idea of the term is “to discern”—that is, “to have insight or understanding about a subject or teaching.” In the context of Psalm 32:9, the term carries a dual application. First, since a work animal has no insight or understanding, trying to teach or counsel it is futile. It will not learn. Sadly, the same is true for a stubborn sinner who has no understanding.

Second, and in contrast to the undiscerning work animal, the gift of discernment is available to those who fear the Lord (see Prov. 9:10). With this gift, believers can discern righteousness, justice, and integrity (see Prov. 2:9). Understanding this, believers can encourage others as well, teaching them out of our spiritual successes and even from our spiritual failures that are followed by confession, forgiveness, and growth.

EXPLORE FURTHER

What is a recent time in which you found the Lord to be a “hiding place” of protection or comfort for you? How could you use your experiences of receiving God’s forgiveness to help others seek His forgiveness?

THE CONCLUSION (Ps. 32:10-11)

The conclusion of Psalm 32 describes the true happiness of those who trust in the Lord. The psalmist employed two literary devices to make this point: a wisdom proverb (32:10) and a call to praise (32:11).

VERSE 10

Many pains come to the wicked, but the one who trusts in the LORD will have faithful love surrounding him.

David summarized here what he had learned about confession and forgiveness in a two-part proverb of contrast. In this type of proverb, the

first part opposes, or contrasts with, the intent or meaning of the second part. One part depicts a desirable outcome or situation, while the second portrays an undesirable circumstance.

David first presented the undesirable situation: **Many pains come to the wicked.** The Hebrew word rendered *pains* (“sorrows,” KJV, ESV; “woes,” NIV) can also mean “suffering.” The term *wicked* denotes the ungodly, those who rebel against God and are guilty of committing sins in His sight. The increasingly burdensome weight of unconfessed sin eventually will overwhelm the wicked. The hand of God will keep pressing down heavier and heavier on them (see 32:3-4).

Next, David presented the desirable situation—a contrasting portrait of **the one who trusts in the LORD.** Those who confess their sins to God and seek His forgiveness immediately find that His **faithful love** (“mercy,” KJV; “steadfast love,” ESV; “unfailing love,” NIV) surrounds them. The word rendered *faithful love* (Hebrew, *chesed* [KEH sid]) is the Old Testament’s highest expression of love; it designates a love that remains constant regardless of circumstances. Hence, God’s loyal love will surround and protect the one who trusts in Him.

VERSE 11

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

The psalm ends with a resounding call to praise. The first group called to praise the Lord are the **righteous ones.** These individuals are in a covenant relationship with God and seek to live by His ethical and moral standards. Parallel to the righteous are the **upright in heart.** These are people who are not double-minded but are loyal to the Lord.

The righteous and the upright are called to offer praise to God. First, the righteous are commanded to **be glad in the LORD and rejoice.** The two verbs rendered *be glad* and *rejoice* serve in the Psalms as a fixed pair of praise terms that express an act of devotion (see Pss. 31:7; 149:2). Second, the upright are called to **shout for joy.** This verb carries the basic meaning of “call out loudly,” either in a cry of jubilation or a song of rejoicing. In like manner, believers should respond to God’s forgiveness with gratitude and joy.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How have you experienced God’s faithful love surrounding you? What are ways that the righteous and upright today can praise the Lord?

THE PROTECTOR

Believers should seek refuge in God because He is the only One who can give them strength to face temptation and evil.

Jessie had been at her new job only a few months. But already she had begun to feel out of place. All of the other employees on her team knew one another well and had established seemingly good work relationships. Yet they didn't appear ready to let Jessie into their circle. She knew from the start that the company fostered a strong competitive atmosphere within its employee ranks, but she did not expect to meet such a level of hostility. Every day some new drama occurred that added stress to her job.

From her first day, Jessie had tried to be a team player. She made efforts to help other workers and to make a positive contribution to the business. However, nothing she did seemed to make a difference. She constantly encountered hurtful remarks and cold shoulders. Finally, after a particularly difficult morning, Jessie asked Callie, one of her coworkers, for advice. Callie had been decent to her, so Jessie hoped she might offer some insight. The basic issue, according to Callie, came down to Jessie's openly Christian lifestyle. The other workers liked to have a drink at lunch or go to a bar after work. They didn't think Jessie fit in. Callie's counsel was for Jessie to "loosen up." Otherwise Jessie might end up losing her position in the company.

Jessie needed her job. Her husband was out of work, and the family depended on Jessie's income. She was tempted to compromise to lessen the pressure she was feeling. When Jessie shared her problem with her best friend at church, that friend listened sympathetically. Instead of telling Jessie what to do, the friend prayed with her and promised to help her stay focused on her commitment to Christ. With her Christian friend's encouragement and help, Jessie was able to maintain her faithful stand and eventually found a job that did not pressure her to compromise her Christian lifestyle.

As we explore Psalm 141 in this session, we will focus on the way David prayed to the Lord in a difficult period of his life. He and his men were in danger. David did not depend on his own strength; rather, he asked God to intervene. Whether we need protection from physical harm or deliverance from temptation, as believers we can pray for God's help with confidence.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 141

Prayers, like songs, come in different forms and have various purposes. Because psalms are poetic expressions of prayers and songs, they also contain many variations. Some psalms celebrate God in praise and worship. Others are prayers for God's help in troubling circumstances. Still others take the form of complaints to God about attacks from enemies—both spiritual and physical enemies. Penitential psalms are open confessions of wrongdoing mixed with pleas for God's forgiveness.

Psalm 141 is a psalm of prayerful lament. Combining several different forms, David asked God for help against wicked opponents. He offered his request for help as an act of worship. Acknowledging his own liability before the righteous Judge, David prayed that God would protect him from wrongdoing. The heart of the psalm contains David's plea for God to intervene against David's enemies. Closing with an expression of trust in God's faithfulness, David took one final swipe at his wicked adversaries.

The historical background for this psalm is unknown. Some Bible students have suggested that David wrote it during the period when King Saul was trying to kill him. Saul had grown extremely jealous of his young warrior-champion after David slew the enemy giant Goliath and suddenly became more popular than the king. Saul grew to be so paranoid and violent toward David that the young man had to flee for refuge into the wilderness areas of Judah. David remained popular with the people and gathered around himself an army of several hundred followers, but King Saul constantly sent his troops after David with orders to kill. David could have written Psalm 141 at any point during this period.

Another suggestion, however, is that David wrote the psalm as an evening prayer for use in both personal and congregational worship. If David composed this psalm primarily for congregational use, then he likely wrote it after he became king. During his reign, David experienced a number of dangerous situations. Any of them could have prompted David to seek help from the only sound source of security—his God.

Today, Psalm 141 can teach us several key principles about prayer. First, we ought to pray during bad times and good. No one should hesitate to call on the Lord during extreme difficulties. Second, if we ask God to intervene against others, we must be willing to open our own lives to His righteous judgment. Third, we can and should be authentic in our praying. He understands our hearts' turmoil when we are attacked unfairly. And fourth, we can and should balance our prayers with both praises and petitions.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PLEA (Ps. 141:1-2)

The psalmist David voiced his plea for God to hear his prayers as a pleasing sacrifice. David considered his prayers to be acts of worship.

VERSE 1

LORD, I call on you; hurry to help me. Listen to my voice when I call on you.

On what basis can God's people pray for His help? Perhaps David might have claimed special privilege in light of his position as God's anointed ruler over Israel (see 1 Sam. 16:12-13). Or perhaps he could have pointed to the victories he had won for God's people as the basis for his petition. But David made neither of these claims his reason for approaching the Lord. He did not (and could not) ask for favor based on personal merit. Instead, David came before the Lord with the humility of a former shepherd. He reverently addressed God as **LORD**. As has been stated in previous sessions, this is God's covenant name that emphasizes both His eternal nature and sovereign power as Creator (see Ex. 3:14-15). In other words, the basis of David's prayer was the covenant relationship God had established with His people in general and with David as Israel's anointed king (see 2 Sam. 7:11b-16).

David called on his God (**I call on you**) and not on his generals, allies, or closest friends. David knew that only the Lord could aid him in his troubles. If this psalm was written during the time that King Saul was pursuing David's life, the young, anointed prince could have solved the problem by killing Saul when he had the chance. Twice David was in a position to take Saul's life, but he refrained from doing so because Saul was still the Lord's anointed ruler (see 1 Sam. 24:1-4; 26:1-12). David depended solely on the Lord to save him.

David's use of the pronoun *you* emphasized the personal nature of his prayer. He appealed directly to the Lord with the attitude of someone accustomed to talking with God. To David, the Lord was not distant and dreadful but close and comforting. His relationship with the Lord gave David confidence that God loved him and would respond to his prayers.

David's petition was not only personal but also urgent. He asked God to **hurry** ("make haste," KJV; "come quickly," NIV) **to help** him. This urgency can also be seen in Psalms 22:19 and 38:22. Interestingly, God rarely reveals Himself as being in a hurry; He is always on time. David was the one who was pressed for time. His opponents appeared to be closing in on him, and he needed God's help immediately. Like David, we often want God to answer

our prayers and deliver us from our distresses yesterday. When God delays (from our perspective) in responding to our prayers, we need to remember that He is all knowing. He does what is best at precisely the right moment.

Finally, David's petition was bold. He asked God to **listen** ("give ear," KJV, ESV; "hear me," NIV) to him. Years after David's time, the prophet Isaiah would remind God's people that "the LORD's arm is not too weak to save, and his ear is not too deaf to hear" (Isa. 59:1). With complete reverence, David was entreating God to give heed to him as he prayed.

VERSE 2

May my prayer be set before you as incense, the raising of my hands as the evening offering.

Israelite priests used **incense** in their worship rituals. God instructed the people of Israel at Mount Sinai to construct an altar of incense as part of the tabernacle furnishings (Ex. 30:1-10). This altar was to be positioned directly in front of the curtain that secluded the ark of the covenant within the holy of holies. Further, incense was to be burned on this altar twice daily—once in the morning and once in the evening. The fragrant incense smoke filling the sanctuary would represent the people's prayers rising before God.

With this dramatic background, David asked God to allow his prayer to **be set** ("be counted," ESV) before the Lord in the same way. The phrase rendered *be set* could also be translated "be established." David was determined in his supplication.

While many Christians today might pray with their heads bowed and hands folded, the people of God in David's time often prayed with their eyes open and their hands lifted toward heaven. Employing this imagery, David wanted the Lord to equate the **raising of David's hands** to the **evening offering** ("evening sacrifice," KJV, ESV, NIV). Each day at the tabernacle (and later at the temple), Israelite priests sacrificed two yearling lambs as burnt offerings at the altar of the tabernacle. One sacrifice was made in the morning, and the second was made in the evening (Ex. 29:38-41). These sacrifices were considered to be sacred acts of worship.

The reference to the *evening offering* might also suggest that Psalm 141 was designed for use during evening worship times. Some psalms refer to morning prayers (Pss. 59:16; 88:13; 92:2). As the sun set and David gazed at the emerging stars in the sky, he may have reflected on his days as a shepherd. As he guarded his father's flocks in the open pasture, David may have established a practice of praying during the quiet evening hours.

Today, we as believers also can approach God in prayer with confidence, knowing that He hears our prayers. He is our Heavenly Father. He loves for

us to talk with Him about our needs. When we pray as an expression of worship, we experience a deeper aspect of our personal relationship with the Heavenly Father.

EXPLORE FURTHER

How confident are you that you can come boldly before God, praying for His help in a given circumstance? What gives you this level of confidence? How does verse 2 teach the importance of daily prayer in a believer's life?

THE REQUESTS (Ps. 141:3-7)

David identified his need for protection from temptation. He called on God to provide righteous people to hold him accountable for remaining faithful. He also prayed for the demise of the wicked and their leaders.

VERSE 3

LORD, set up a guard for my mouth; keep watch at the door of my lips.

David understood his need for discipline and accountability, both in his prayers and daily living. He asked the Lord for help with his words and his attitude. Too often we speak, even in prayer, without careful thought. David understood the damage that misspoken words can cause. He had urged King Saul to disregard false testimony that some people had spoken about him (1 Sam. 24:9). David did not want to be guilty of sin in respect to his words.

David prayed that God would **set up a guard** (“a watch,” KJV) **for his mouth**. Usually a guard kept unwanted people or animals from going into a house or other structure. In this case, David wanted the Lord to watch over what came out of his mouth. David wanted his words to honor the Lord; he asked God to protect him from saying anything offensive in prayer.

The second part of verse 3 follows the principle of parallelism. David repeated the idea of the first part, using different terms. Asking God to **keep watch** expressed the same concept as stationing a guard. The **door of David's lips** corresponded to his mouth. Such repetition demonstrated the psalmist's seriousness about wanting the Lord's help in controlling what he said.

VERSE 4

Do not let my heart turn to any evil thing or perform wicked acts with men who commit sin. Do not let me feast on their delicacies.

David needed God's assistance not only in his words but also in his attitudes and actions. The thoughts of his mind and the deeds of his life emerged from his **heart**. David wanted to live in purity before the Lord, but he knew his fleshly nature would not do so without God's help. So he asked God to keep his heart from turning **to any evil thing** ("to what is evil," NIV).

David also understood the potential influences for good or evil that can come from other people. He wanted the Lord to protect him from joining the **wicked acts** ("wicked works," KJV; "wicked deeds," ESV, NIV) of **men who commit sin** ("men that work iniquity," KJV; "evildoers," NIV). David had in mind individuals who deliberately and continually engage in wickedness, sometimes in clever, deceitful ways. David prayed that God would guard his heart so that he would not perform such evil deeds.

David further prayed that God would not let him **feast on their delicacies** ("eat of their dainties," KJV). Again, the wording of his petition shows that David knew he needed the Lord's help in this matter. As strong physically and spiritually as David might be, he knew that he could not overcome his sinful nature without God's help.

The phrase *feast on their delicacies* points to sin's empty promises. Sin may appear alluring on the surface. In reality, every wicked act harms both the evildoers and other people around them. The psalmist understood the deceptive nature of evil. Wickedness ultimately leads to God's judgment and results in the sinner's ruin.

VERSE 5

Let the righteous one strike me—it is an act of faithful love; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let me not refuse it. Even now my prayer is against the evil acts of the wicked.

Accountability partners can be tools in God's hand to help us resist sin. David encouraged the Lord to **let the righteous one strike** him if that would keep him from committing evil. In Proverbs 27:6, the Scripture declares that "the wounds of a friend are trustworthy, but the kisses of an enemy are excessive." David knew that some people, for various reasons, might speak well of him and pretend friendship when they really intended to harm him. David wanted trustworthy companions around him who cared enough about him to call out wrongdoing, even if doing so caused pain.

David considered such intervention **an act of faithful love** ("kindness," KJV, ESV, NIV). A godly friend loves us enough to rebuke us when we are on the wrong path. Correcting someone who engages in sinful deeds requires true care and courage. Only someone who truly loves us would be willing to risk a hostile response in order to keep us from destructive paths.

David was prepared to view the rebuke of a true friend as **oil for David's head**. In ancient Israelite culture, oil was used in several ways. Rulers were anointed with oil as a symbol of God's favor and authority. In this verse, David may have recalled his days as a shepherd. He probably had used oil to tend the wounds of sheep that had been injured by a predator or in an accident. In the same way, David considered the rebuke of a true friend to be an instrument of his healing when he went astray.

David asked God not to let him **refuse** whatever aid was necessary to keep him from evil. Like a father who disciplines his children, God corrects His people when we sin (Prov. 3:12). Instead of resisting chastisement, David received it as a blessing from the Lord.

At the same time, David prayed for God to help him maintain righteousness in his life. His prayer was against **the evil acts of the wicked** ("in their calamities," KJV; "deeds of evildoers," NIV). David wanted God to punish those who sought to take his life. It is significant to note that David did not pray against the wicked but against their *evil acts*. Whether through the aid of faithful friends or divine intervention, David wanted God to keep him from committing such deeds.

VERSE 6

When their rulers will be thrown off the sides of a cliff, the people will listen to my words, for they are pleasing.

God's justice ultimately prevails. Wickedness might endure for a season, but God's righteous judgment inevitably falls on evildoers. David depicted **rulers** ("judges," ESV) who would be **thrown off the sides of a cliff** ("overthrown in stony places," KJV). The pronoun **their** looks back to the perpetrators of wickedness mentioned in verse 5. The rulers had led their people into evil deeds. Kings and princes would not be exempt from God's judgment. The phrase *thrown off the sides of a cliff* likely did not point to a specific historical event but rather portrayed the dreadful nature of God's judgment on leaders who influence others to sin.

When God holds rulers accountable, the **people** will witness the public judgment of sin and **listen to** the words of righteous leaders such as David. If sin runs unchecked forever and the wicked always prosper, people might be tempted to ignore wise counsel and join the unruly mob. On the other hand, if they see God's justice executed with firmness, people are more likely to heed godly advice.

David described his words as **pleasing** ("well spoken," NIV). The wise words of the righteous are pure (Prov. 15:26). They are like honey in a honeycomb, "sweet to the taste and health to the body" (Prov. 16:24). When people revel

in doing evil, however, they reject godly words as repulsive, because such words remind them that God condemns their wickedness. If they recognize the danger of their ways and repent, they begin to value godly wisdom.

VERSE 7

As when one plows and breaks up the soil, turning up rocks, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of Sheol.

David complained that the attacks of the wicked against him were severe. He felt as though the **bones** of the righteous were being **scattered at the mouth of Sheol** (“grave’s mouth,” KJV; “mouth of the grave,” NIV). In Old Testament theology, the word rendered *Sheol* described the grave, the abode of the dead. It commonly referred to death and the grave. This metaphor portrayed the damage that evildoers were inflicting on godly people. David prayed that God would intervene and spare his life from the onslaught of the wicked.

David used a familiar word picture to portray the danger that sinners risk by flaunting the Lord’s counsel. The sight of a farmer guiding his plow through the dirt behind a team of oxen was common. Along with the **soil**, the plow also turned up **rocks** lying just below the surface. The farmer would remove the rocks from his field, either using them to make a fence around the field or tossing them out of the way. Translators of the King James Version interpreted the Hebrew terms in this verse as referring to the work of a woodcutter. The thrust of the imagery is the same in either case.

Believers today also can hold one another accountable for living in godly ways. David’s son Solomon understood the strength of two or three persons supporting one another (see Eccl. 4:12). By encouraging and correcting one another, Christians demonstrate true love. Given the terrible consequences of sinful acts, we need to lovingly help each other repent and follow the Lord.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In practical terms, what are some ways that God has helped you guard your words, both in prayer and in everyday life? To whom do you turn for aid as a spiritual accountability partner? What are the advantages of having one or two fellow believers serve as accountability partners?

THE PROMISE (Ps. 141:8-10)

David promised to remain focused on God, trusting God to direct him. He asked God to protect him from any traps the wicked might set for him.

VERSE 8

But my eyes look to you, LORD, my Lord. I seek refuge in you; do not let me die.

In contrast to the wicked who reject the Lord's direction, David declared that his **eyes** would look to God for help. The words **LORD, my Lord** feature two different titles for deity. The first term, rendered *LORD*, translates God's covenant name. The second term, rendered *Lord* (note the absence of small capital letters), translates the Hebrew term *adonai* [ad oh NIGH]. This term emphasizes God's role as the sovereign Master. David wanted to acknowledge God not only as his covenant God but also as his personal Lord. Together, the terms exalt the supremacy of God.

As stated in the Understand the Context section, David may have written this prayerful hymn in the midst of personal persecution. He had many enemies who opposed him. But David refused to focus on them. Instead, he determined to **seek refuge** in his God ("in thee is my trust," KJV). When warriors of David's day sought a secure shelter, they sometimes hid in natural caves found on the sides of mountains. These positions provided protection from adversaries and temporary sanctuary for rest and recuperation. David, however, knew that true security came only from the Lord.

David's adversaries sought to take his life. Thus, David asked God to protect him and **not let him die** ("leave not my soul destitute," KJV; "leave me not defenseless," ESV). This phrase in Hebrew literally means "let me not be poured out." The theme of God's preservation of life can be found in other Davidic psalms. In Psalm 22:20, David prayed, "Rescue my life from the sword, my only life from the power of these dogs."

VERSE 9

Protect me from the trap they have set for me, and from the snares of evildoers.

Evildoers ("workers of iniquity," KJV) usually do not like to be lone rangers. They try to entice others to join them in their evil deeds. Having others participate with them in their wickedness heightens their devilish delight. If they can tempt good people to participate, evildoers often feel vindicated.

David recognized that his enemies had set a **trap** ("snares," KJV) for him. For emphasis, he repeated this idea in a second phrase, **the snares of evildoers**. The word rendered *trap* described a device often used to capture birds. Similarly, *snares* were various instruments used to capture small animals. Both kinds of mechanisms depended on two components: deception and bait. A trap or snare had to be hidden from plain sight or it would frighten away the prey. It also needed some type of bait to attract the

quarry into its clutches. Wise believers learn to recognize many of the devil's traps and thus keep themselves from the lures of temptation.

David saw the danger his enemies had set for him. Their actions were deliberate and despicable. By keeping his focus on the Lord, David was able to identify the snares of wicked people who sought his destruction. With God's help, he could resist whatever lure they might use to entice him.

David also recognized the weaknesses of his sinful nature. In the New Testament, the apostle James wrote about the link between temptation and the flesh. He understood that the source of much temptation is human lust (Jas. 1:14-15). Like David, we need to pray that God will give us spiritual insight and power to resist temptation, regardless of its source.

David prayed that the Lord would **protect** him from these traps. His appeal reminds us of Jesus' Model Prayer. The Lord taught His disciples to ask God to keep them from temptation and to deliver them from evil (Matt. 6:13). We as believers can confidently seek God's protection from anything that threatens to hinder our relationship with Him.

VERSE 10

Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.

God does not stand by idly while His children undergo attacks. He readily responds to their prayers for help. David asked that the wicked would **fall into their own nets**. In Psalm 35:8, David similarly prayed that his enemy would fall into the net that had been hidden to ensnare him. The evil plans that wicked people make against God's people often fall back on them.

The term **wicked** in this case refers to people who engage in deliberate rebellion against the Lord by enticing His children to spiritual and physical harm. Evildoers hate God, but they cannot overcome Him. Instead, they develop schemes to harm God's children. Jesus taught His followers that because the world hated Him, it would hate them as well (John 15:18-21).

We can trust God to help us live godly lives by keeping our focus on Him. Believers will inevitably encounter difficulties and dangers, both physically and spiritually. However, we can depend on our Heavenly Father to help us as we commit to following Him.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Life" on pages 1036-1038 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. In what ways do you depend on God for protection of your physical life? How does God's promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ give you a sense of security regarding life now?

THE LONGING

The hope of God's presence serves as encouragement during discouraging times.

Two memories often challenge me to reflect on my life as a believer. Both memories involve the untimely deaths of men who loved God deeply and served Him fearlessly. One of these men was my longtime friend. In nearly every conversation we had over the years, somehow he got around to talking about his deep desire to know Christ better and his passion for introducing others to Christ. This man loved and served Christ, yet he also wrestled at times with bouts of spiritual depression. He died suddenly one night of an unexpected medical complication. At the funeral, his wife shared how Christ had calmed her spirit in the midst of her sadness and loss.

The second memory involves the martyrdom of a man who made a significant impact on many people. His love for Christ was infectious. Working with people who suffered because of the illegal drug culture, he influenced hundreds of them to escape that culture. Because this man was a financial threat to the drug traffickers, they assassinated him in front of his home. His wife later shared her testimony that while she grieved over his loss, her heart was at peace because of Christ.

Living by faith does not mean never having to deal with discouragement, desperation, or grief. Believers, like all human beings, have to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But we do not walk through the valley alone. In this session, we will explore Psalm 42, a song in which one of the sons of Korah poured out his discouraged heart before the Lord. He longed to find himself again in the close presence of God.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALMS 42–43

Bible scholars conclude that Psalms 42 and 43 are closely related. Some even suggest that the two psalms actually are two parts of one song. The primary

evidence for this conclusion is a thrice-repeated refrain in 42:5,11 and 43:5. Another clue, however, is that Psalm 42 includes a superscription that is lacking in Psalm 43. In addition, both psalms express the same theme.

The superscription for Psalm 42 indicates the psalm is a “maskil.” Some possible meanings of this term are presented in the Understand the Context section of session 11. In addition, the psalm is attributed to the sons of Korah. This family of singers and musicians was part of the tribe of Levi; they helped lead the people of Israel in worship (2 Chron. 20:19).

Indeed, Korah was the great-grandson of Levi (son of the patriarch Jacob) from whom God created a family of worship leaders (see Ex. 6:16-21). Tragically, Korah joined a rebellion against Moses and Aaron during the Israelites’ time in the wilderness. In judgment, God destroyed most of this family of poet-singers. Obviously some were spared, and their descendants later became gatekeepers in the temple (1 Chron. 9:19).

Psalm 42 introduces the primary issues behind the psalmist’s deep discouragement. The psalmist found himself isolated from the tabernacle, the center of worship. He may have written this psalm while living near the headwaters of the Jordan River near Mount Hermon (42:6-7). He missed the days of experiencing the refreshing presence of God as he worshiped in Jerusalem (42:2,4-5). One reason for his conflicted emotions involved ongoing persecution from enemies who denied the reality and power of his God (42:3,9-10). In some ways he felt as if he had been abandoned by the Lord (42:9a), yet he continued to put his faith and hope in God (4:11).

In Psalm 43, the psalmist sought the Lord’s help from oppression by his opponents. The point of view for this psalm called directly on God in a prayer of lament and supplication. This form of address also introduced the first verse of Psalm 42. The writer confessed his depressed spirit and longed to find help in the presence and worship of God (43:3-4).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THIRSTY (Ps. 42:1-4)

The psalmist agonized over his spiritual dryness, remembering the days when he had worshiped joyfully with others at God’s house.

VERSE 1

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God.

Have you ever been isolated from someone or something you loved? If so, then you can identify with this psalmist. He was far removed by time and

distance from the worship he had enjoyed in Jerusalem. More significantly, he felt separated from God's close presence. He was experiencing spiritual drought. Interestingly, in the opening verses, the psalmist used a metaphor of thirst, while in later verses he described emotions associated with drowning.

The psalmist began by addressing God directly. He longed to worship again in God's close presence. He compared his longing to the panting of a **deer** ("hart," KJV) for **flowing streams** ("water brooks," KJV; "streams of water," NIV). Any believer who has reveled in the presence of God in vibrant worship can understand the dejection of missing that intimacy with the Lord. The psalmist desired more than a mere intellectual knowledge of God; he longed for intimate fellowship with God.

VERSE 2

I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?

Like a deer exhausted and dehydrated from being chased, the psalmist longed for relief. No stagnant mud puddle would do. He longed for the fresh, cold, thirst-quenching streams that provided the water of life: **the living God**.

The water courses that formed in the region to the north of Israel originated in melting snow from mountain ranges. The water in these streams and rivers usually was clear and refreshing. Just as a panting deer longed for such streams, so too did the spiritually dehydrated psalmist thirst for God's close presence.

The psalmist's question **when can I come and appear before God** may reveal a sense of discouragement at not being able to make a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem sanctuary. We can only speculate about what might have prevented such a journey. One suggestion is that the psalmist, a servant of the sanctuary, was exiled from the worship center for some disciplinary reason. Another suggestion is that life circumstances prevented the psalmist from making the trip. The Mosaic law stipulated that all Israelite males were to come before the Lord in worship three times a year (Ex. 23:14-17). Perhaps the psalmist simply longed for the next pilgrimage opportunity to arrive!

VERSE 3

My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long people say to me, "Where is your God?"

Other factors contributed also to the psalmist's spiritual depression. Evidently he was living in an area dominated by spiritual doubters, if not unbelievers. These were **people** who openly scoffed at the idea of God's presence and care. Because the psalmist loved the Lord so much, any attack

on the faithfulness of God affected him personally. He wept constantly (**day and night**) and was unable to eat as the psalmist's detractors challenged him to demonstrate the reality of his God.

A common attack unbelievers make against Christians involves the suffering of godly people. Perhaps the psalmist's personal plight gave his opponents a reason to question whether his God cared about him. He was grieved that he had to endure their questioning **all day long**. This phrase suggests the psalmist was surrounded by unbelievers. Wherever he went, he encountered people who not only rejected his God but also mocked Him.

VERSE 4

I remember this as I pour out my heart: how I walked with many, leading the festive procession to the house of God, with joyful and thankful shouts.

Another factor that intensified the psalmist's sorrow was his memory of what he had once enjoyed. As the psalmist sought to **pour out his heart** ("soul," KJV, ESV, NIV) to God, he recalled former pilgrimages to worship at the house of God. The phrase *pour out* portrays a complete emptying of one's soul. The psalmist was so overwhelmed by his emotions that he laid his heart bare before the Lord.

To remember something is to bring it to mind. In the midst of skeptical opposition, the psalmist recalled former times when he worshiped at God's sanctuary. During the reign of David in Israel, the tabernacle in Jerusalem was the central place of worship. The phrase rendered **the house of God** reflected the concept that the tabernacle represented the dwelling place of God. The eternal Creator cannot be contained by heaven or earth, much less in a house made with human hands (1 Kings 8:27). Yet, God gave the people of Israel this temporary structure to aid their worship.

The sons of Korah were ministers at the tabernacle. Some served as gatekeepers, while others led in various aspects of worship (1 Chron. 9:19). This son of Korah recalled how he **walked with many** ("the multitude," KJV; "the throng," ESV; "under the protection of the Mighty One," NIV) on the way to the tabernacle. Instead of being alone, he had enjoyed the fellowship of other worshipers. Even so today, believers benefit by sharing in the community of faith, which is one reason Scripture urges us not to forsake congregational worship (Heb. 10:25).

The psalmist not only participated in worship but also was involved in **leading the festive procession**. During the various feasts, worship leaders paraded through the city. As they wound their way through the streets to the tabernacle, people joined them as they marched to the worship sanctuary.

Imagine the exhilarating emotions the psalmist felt at the time as he walked at the head of the procession! His reference to **shouts** included not only exclamations of praise by others but also his own exaltation of the Lord.

The joyful atmosphere of previous times of worship contrasted with the sadness of the psalmist's current situation. Perhaps remembrance of such delight made the sorrow of his condition more painful. As believers, we should pay attention to our spiritual lives. Do we long to spend time with God? Are our hearts thirsty for His presence? Have we mourned over the skepticism of our secular society? We should develop such a love for the Lord that we cannot rest until we enjoy sweet fellowship with Him and His people.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Festivals" on pages 567-573 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. What are some special worship events that you look forward to? How do these events encourage you in your Christian faith? How does ongoing congregational worship encourage you?

DROWNING (Ps. 42:5-8)

The psalmist looked at the overwhelming nature of life and compared it to being swept under by a storm at sea. Even in the middle of that storm, he declared his trust in God.

VERSE 5

Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God.

Here is the first appearance of the refrain repeated in verse 11 (and 43:5). The refrain is characterized by the psalmist's addressing himself (**my soul**) with rhetorical questions and challenging himself to keep on praising the Lord.

First, the psalmist asked himself **why** he was **so dejected** ("cast down," KJV, ESV; "downcast," NIV). The word rendered *dejected* can have various shades of meaning. In Proverbs 14:19 the word refers to bowing down before another. In Isaiah 2:11, the term describes the humbling of human pride. The psalmist used the term to convey the idea of being emotionally and spiritually downcast. He did not know why he felt this way; he only knew that he did.

The psalmist also questioned the **turmoil** ("disquieted," KJV; "disturbed," NIV) that he felt. This Hebrew word refers literally to the sound of growling

or a roaring clamor. Someone who knows the Lord in a covenant relationship should have a peaceful heart, not one full of agitation and frenzy. The psalmist identified the emotions he was experiencing but rhetorically asked for what reason he should sense these emotions.

The mixture of personal pronouns might appear confusing, but the words **your** and **I** refer to the same person—the writer of the psalm. Like someone gazing in a mirror, the psalmist reminded himself to **put ... hope in God**. The psalmist said he would **praise** God regardless of his circumstances.

Most believers find it easy to worship the Lord when their lives are pleasant. True praise, however, puts hope in God even when times are tough and discouragement digs deep into the heart. A personal relationship with the Lord provides the basis for hope and praise in difficult days.

The psalmist reaffirmed that the Lord was his **Savior and ... God**. The double use of the pronoun **my** emphasizes the personal nature of this relationship. Interestingly, the psalmist chose a word for *Savior* that shares the root meaning of the term from which we get the Hebrew name for Jesus. The psalmist's God was his Deliverer and the source of his salvation.

VERSE 6

I am deeply depressed; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

In spite of his faith in the Lord, the psalmist continued to feel **deeply depressed** (“cast down,” KJV, ESV; “downcast,” NIV). Believers today might find this statement ironic and confusing. How can someone put hope in the Lord and remain discouraged? The psalmist did not try to conceal his emotions but honestly expressed them to the Lord. If he did not face the truth about his feelings, the psalmist would never take the first step toward receiving God's encouragement and healing.

The psalmist used the word **therefore** to link his expression of unhappiness to his sole hope for help. Because he was downcast, he would **remember** his God. In verse 4, the writer recalled how he had participated in worship at the tabernacle. In verse 6, he remembered the Lord. His use of the second-person form of address (**you**) demonstrated his personal relationship with God.

Wherever he went, the psalmist could reflect on the Lord. He specified three geographic points not merely to identify his location but to emphasize that wherever he went, God was already there. The **land of Jordan** likely referred to an area northeast of Jerusalem along the Jordan River.

At the northern border of Israel rose Mount **Hermon**. The reference to its **peaks** (note the plural) probably described the three pinnacles of the mountain rather than the entire mountain range. As the tallest mountain

in the region, Mount Hermon offered a panoramic view of the area. **Mount Mizar** literally means “little one” or “little mountain.” This verse contains the only scriptural reference to this mountain. It may refer to one of the smaller mountains of the Hermon range.

As the psalmist put his hope in God despite his dejection, he repeated this stance in verse 6. Not merely in spite of his feelings, but because of them, he turned his thoughts toward the Lord.

VERSE 7

Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your billows have swept over me.

People who experience spiritual discouragement may sometimes compare the feeling to drowning. The sufferer feels overwhelmed by circumstances. The psalmist identified with those sentiments. He spoke about feeling as though he were directly beneath thundering **waterfalls** (“waterspouts,” KJV). The phrase **deep calls to deep** expresses a sense of going from bad to worse in terms of discouragement.

The psalmist described his feelings in terms of powerful waves (**your breakers ... your billows**) crashing over him. These dual terms for waves poetically depict someone caught in a riptide of problems. That the psalmist referred to them as coming from the Lord emphasizes that he believed God was in control of his life. Like Job, the psalmist asked whether we were right to “accept only good from God and not adversity” (Job 2:10). He recognized that God knows everything about us and can be trusted in every situation.

VERSE 8

The LORD will send his faithful love by day; his song will be with me in the night—a prayer to the God of my life.

While the psalmist believed that God knew about and permitted the overwhelming waves of difficulty in his life, he did not blame God for evil. Instead, he expressed trust that **the LORD** still loved him. The psalmist intentionally used God’s covenant name here and connected it to a divine expression of **faithful love** (“lovingkindness,” KJV; “steadfast love,” ESV). He could count on receiving God’s mercy and lovingkindness each day—whether that day brought further difficulty or needed relief.

Similarly, God’s **song** would accompany the psalmists **in the night**. The phrase *his song* could be understood either as a song from the Lord or about Him. Either way, the song would serve as the psalmist’s **prayer to the God of his life**. The Lord is God of all of life, both in good times and bad. He is always present with His people, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you felt overwhelmed by a set of circumstances? What things might hinder believers from expressing their honest feelings of discouragement to the Lord in prayer? How can remembering the Lord's faithful love make a difference in your perspective?

CRUSHED (Ps. 42:9-11)

The psalmist declared his allegiance to God even in times when opponents taunted him and questioned the power of God.

VERSE 9

I will say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about in sorrow because of the enemy’s oppression?”

Many believers experience ambivalent feelings at times when they are faced with hostility or opposition. Like the psalmist, with one breath we can express our belief that God is our **rock**, and in the next moment we wonder why it seems He has **forgotten** us. Repeatedly, however, the psalmist affirmed his trust in the Lord. He knew firsthand of God's power and promise.

The psalmist had previously referred to the Lord as “the living God” (42:2), “my Savior” (42:5), “the LORD” (42:8), and “the God of my life” (42:8). In verse 9, he referred to the Lord as his *rock*. This term described a cleft in a mountain that provided a stronghold of safety. The psalmist looked to God for refuge.

Nevertheless, the psalmist struggled with feelings of abandonment and separation, much as David must have felt when he penned Psalm 22:1. Jesus expressed a similar sense of abandonment on the cross, revealing His deep suffering in that moment by quoting Psalm 22:1 (see Mark 15:34). Acknowledging our sorrow and confusion does not mean we lack faith altogether. It merely lays our pain before the One who can answer our questions, heal our hurts, and deliver us from difficulties.

VERSE 10

My adversaries taunt me, as if crushing my bones, while all day long they say to me, “Where is your God?”

Returning to the theme of verse 3, the psalmist repeated the question with which his **adversaries** taunted him. When they asked where his God was,

these scorners were not making a legitimate inquiry. They were mocking the psalmist's faith. Hardened unbelievers often use any excuse to discredit God. They doubt His existence or deny His goodness.

Such constant assaults can result in believers' feelings of dejection. The psalmist described the effects of his opponents' harassment as a **crushing** of his **bones** ("deadly wound," ESV; "mortal agony," NIV). The psalmist was using a figure of speech to describe his pain, yet he may also have been suffering physically.

VERSE 11

Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God.

The psalmist repeated the refrain that he introduced in verse 5. The refrain stitches together the psalmist's emotional (and perhaps physical) pain with his enduring faith. He was enduring great pain in the forms of dejection and **turmoil**. Nevertheless, he still had **hope**. His hope was **in God**, and he longed to return to the house of God in Jerusalem to worship. There he would **praise** the Lord and enjoy once again the close presence of his **Savior and ... God**.

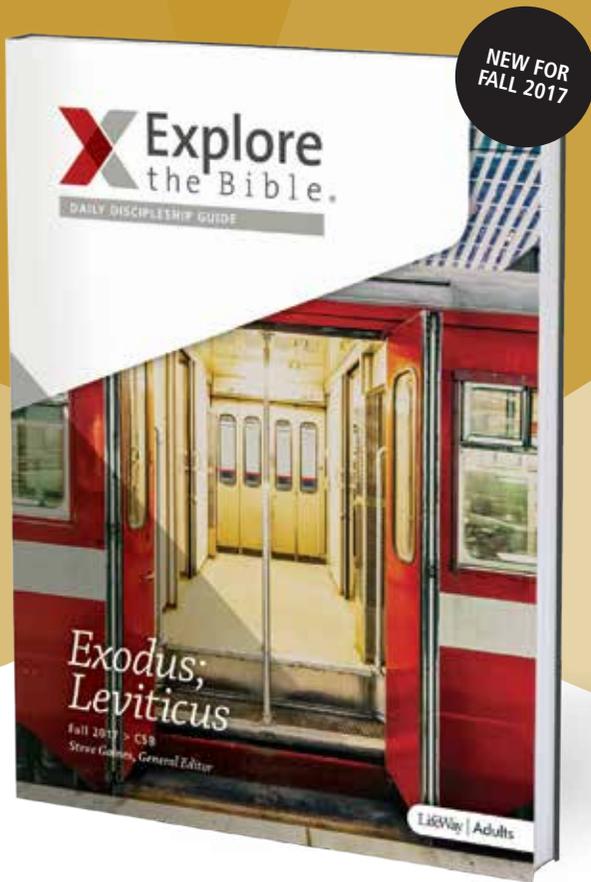
Some of the greatest spiritual giants of Christian history have suffered emotional anguish during periods of persecution. Like them, we may suffer stress caused by the persistent attacks of personal antagonists. Our doubts, fears, and worry sometimes find their origins in difficult circumstances that may be temporary or long lasting. Sin also results in spiritual strain as the Holy Spirit grieves over our lack of holiness. Nevertheless, we can and should turn to the Lord, who is our hope. He has not forgotten His people; He remembers us, and He knows what we're going through. His love is eternal, and He gives us His song to sing in the night.

EXPLORE FURTHER

When have you felt a sense of abandonment and separation from the Lord? What helped you overcome those feelings and be reminded of God's enduring love and presence? What is a song or psalm that has greatly encouraged you in your faith?

Egypt and the Holy Land





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