

GOING MY WAY?

STUDIES—PSALMS

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1. THE TWO WAYS

Psalm 1.

The Psalms are part of the “wisdom literature” of Scripture. The first Psalm is a fitting introduction to this whole body of literature, for it expounds the doctrine of the two ways, a major motif in wisdom writings.

1. Two paths

Two paths are noted, “the way of the righteous” and “the way of the wicked.”

Jesus referred to them as the “narrow way” traveled by “few” and the “broad way” traveled by “many” (Matthew 7:13-14). In a moral universe the quality of the way is not determined by the number who pursue it.

Each person must choose his or her way, but all else--character, behavior and destiny--flows from that choice.

2. Two pilgrims.

Two pilgrims pursue these two pathways, the “righteous” and the “wicked.”

The righteous are marked by what they avoid and by what they enjoy. They shun the counsel, life-style and gatherings of the wicked. They reflect upon the word of God and seek guidance from its pages. As a consequence, they prosper like well-watered evergreens.

The wicked, by contrast, are weightless, like the chaff separated from the wheat in the process of winnowing. They are blown away.

3. Two prospects.

Two futures confront the two pilgrims on these opposite pathways.

The righteous are protected by the Lord and brought into “life.” The wicked “perish” (compare Matthew 7:13-14). It is fair to say that the psalmist had in mind prosperity and perishing that related chiefly to this world. However, since Jesus came, the righteous are defined in relationship to him. He also defines life. The second Psalm contains a special word of wisdom for us: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way.... Blessed are all those who take refuge in him” (v. 12).

In the Psalms, as in all Scripture, the happy are the holy, and holiness is a right relationship to God.

2. KISS THE SON!

Psalm 2.

Though lacking solid evidence, scholars affirm a coronation ritual in ancient Israel to which they assign this Psalm. They may be right, but the psalm really fits but one king, and his name is Jesus.

1. The installation: “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill” (v. 7).

The anointing of the divine king occurred at Jesus’ baptism, where the Spirit descended upon him as the power for his ministry.

The installation of the divine king occurred at Calvary, for he reigns from a tree, reigns in self-sacrificing love.

Through Jesus, “The One enthroned in heaven” rules on earth in the hearts and lives of his followers.

Jesus is the “Lord of lords” and “King of kings” destined to rule everywhere and forever.

2. The rebellion: “...the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One” (v. 2).

The early Christians found this scripture fulfilled in the collaboration of “Herod and Pontius Pilate...with the Gentiles” to crucify Jesus (Acts 4:27). They raged against him, plotted his death, and thought Calvary ended his disturbing career.

God laughed, the earth quaked, and the resurrection occurred. Jesus is the mighty conqueror of sin and death, and he will be acknowledged by all as Lord.

3. The proclamation: “I will proclaim the decree of the Lord” (v. 7).

The decree includes the affirmation of Sonship, the promise of inheritance and the prophecy of conquest, all of them applying to Jesus. Wisdom dictates, therefore, that rulers and their followers “Serve the Lord” and “Kiss the Son.” The alternative is his righteous wrath. No one and nothing can prevent the fulfillment of God’s purposes. We align with them or destroy ourselves.

The psalm ends with a beatitude. “Blessed are all” connects with “Bless is the man” in Psalm 1. The king, opposed but triumphant, is a refuge--the only refuge--for all who come to him for salvation from sin and death.

3. IN TIMES OF TROUBLE

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1).

This Psalm is a classic lament. It is the outpouring of a man who is deeply hurt, confused and saddened. He is undergoing a crisis of faith. Three things especially trouble him.

1. He is troubled by the arrogance of evil.

The “wicked man” who arrogantly and cruelly “hunts down the weak” distresses the psalmist. The wicked man “reviles the Lord” and “sneers at his enemies,” confident that he will escape retribution. “Nothing will shake me,” is his proud boast.

2. He is troubled by the impotence of good.

In contrast to the haughty wicked man who plots and traps and kills “the innocent,” the victims of evil seem so utterly “helpless.” They are caught and crushed under the weight of their oppressor. It seems to them, as it seems to their oppressor, that “God has forgotten.”

3. He is troubled by the absence of God.

God seems remote, hidden and indifferent. While the wicked gloat and the helpless suffer, God seems to be doing nothing, though the afflicted cry out to him.

The Psalmist rallies his faith, however. He affirms that God does see and does care and does hear and will take things “in hand.” The Lord will “arise” and call the wicked “to account.” He will encourage and defend “the fatherless and the oppressed.” “The Lord is King for ever and ever.” In his time and way he will bring justice to the nations.

The opening and closing words of the Psalm are instructive. In times of trouble, the first words of the afflicted are, “Why, O Lord?” In times of trouble, the last words of God to the oppressor are, “no more.”

3. TAKE REFUGE

When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do? (Psalm 11:3).

The foundations of family life, school life, political life and even religious life are being destroyed. Hopes for national unity and for international peace are collapsing into the chaos.

1. What is God doing?

Before we ask, “What can the righteous do,” we must ask, “What is the Righteous One doing?”

God seems to be indifferent or helpless, and many despair of his love, even of his existence. “The Lord is in his holy temple” but cynics wonder if that temple has windows opening on the world.

The psalmist assures us that God “observes” and “hates” the evils that plague our lives. He “loves” justice. He will destroy the wicked and preserve the righteous.

When? We don’t know. God marks his own calendar and calls his own shots. We can only say, “Sooner or later” the Lord will set things straight.

History gives hope. Calvary reminds us that God is involved; Easter assures us that God is triumphant.

2. What can we do?

The psalmist’s answer: “In the Lord I take refuge.” Every lesser refuge will fail. Only God is eternal. He is a refuge that will stand when all the storms of evil have spent their fury.

We who believe “will see his face.” He will wipe the tears from our eyes and welcome us to endless fellowship in a perfect environment. Unbelievers sneer at this as “pie in the sky,” but it’s the only pie anywhere. If, in our pride and unbelief, we dismiss this refuge, no other hope remains.

Trust in God whatever happens. He is our only hope of ultimate and eternal victory.

Samuel Young began a message with the question, “What can you do when you can’t do anything?” He answered with Hebrews 12:3: “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” That’s all we can do at times, but that is enough to bring triumph over despair.

4. THE MEASURELESS

For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great (Psalm 25:11).

The psalmist declares that God is “good and upright” (v. 8). Because he is “upright” forgiveness is necessary. Because he is “good” forgiveness is possible. The wisest prayer a sinner can pray is our text.

1. The enormity of sin is measureless.

The psalmist calls his iniquity “great.” He doesn’t specify it but he does quantify it. Sin is the heaviest load that human life can bear. Paul called himself “the worst of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15, 16). Every sinner, when under conviction, feels that he or she has replaced Paul in that category. Awakened to the enormity of sin our instinctive cry is for mercy and pardon.

2. The abundance of grace is measureless.

With trust in the Lord (v. 1) the psalmist prays “forgive my iniquity.” He is confident that divine grace reaches deeper than human sin. John Bunyan entitled his autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. That’s what grace does—it abounds. It isn’t dribbled out but poured out. God is more willing to forgive than we are to repent. “Take away all my sins,” the psalmist cried (v. 18). No sin is too great for grace to forgive.

3. The glory of God’s name is measureless.

The psalmist prays, “For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive...” There is no reason in us for God to show favor. Our only hope lies in the fact that “God is love.” His name alone has saving merit and power (Acts 4:12). There are powerful names among men, but none can deliver from sin. The glory of God’s name shines brightest in his saving deeds.

Do you need to echo the psalmist's prayer today? The best time is now. The best place is here.

5. A HARD LESSON LEARNED

But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you (Psalm 9:7).

In this psalm we hear the cry of a man who awakens to the fact that he has missed the true meaning of life. He had focused on the wrong goals and now seeks a course correction.

1. He looked for fortune but found disappointment.

Verse six implies that he sought identity and security in material wealth. He likely sought his fulfillment, as millions do, in an “upwardly mobile” life. For all his frenetic activity, what goods he accumulated did not satisfy. He awakened to the truth that he would lose or leave riches: “He heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.”

2. He looked for longevity but found illness that threatened death.

Verses 4-5, 10-11 implies that loss of health, perhaps as a direct result of his hurry and worry--“the rat race”--had brought a sobering awareness of the fragility and brevity of life. He attributes his reversal of fortune to the Lord, who has imposed suffering and loss as means of discipline, as a “wake-up call” to their victim: “You are the one who has done this. Remove your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand.”

3. Lessons learned, he looked to the Lord as life's ultimate meaning.

When first afflicted he bit his lip. He didn't want the wicked to hear him complain against God. But silence is hard to maintain when one is hurt, baffled and frustrated. The inward anger had to be vented: “As I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue.”

Realizing that God was his only hope, his speech became prayer: “Hear my prayer, O Lord, listen to my cry for help” (v. 12). He petitioned wisdom: “Let me know how fleeting is my life” (v. 4). He petitioned pardon: “Save me from all my transgressions” (v. 8). He petitioned healing: “Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more” (v. 13).

If we look for anything but God as ultimate reality, ultimate good, we will self-destruct. When our relationship to God becomes our first and greatest concern we are on track for authentic life, both here and hereafter.

6. GET YOUR EARS PIERCED

... my ears you have pierced (Psalm 40:6).

This is a difficult text of Scripture to translate and to interpret. It is as challenging as it is difficult. We can profit by giving it our attention.

1. Translations.

Literally translated from the Hebrew, the text reads, "You dug out my ear."

Some English translations read, "You opened my ear." Isaiah 50:5 is cited as a parallel: "The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious..." The meaning would then be: God causes his servants to know his will. He speaks and they hear and obey.

Preferring the Hebrew text, some scholars insist that its background is the law found in Exodus 21:5-6. The slave who loved his master and refused the liberty provided in the seventh year would have his ear pierced with an awl and remain with his master in permanent servitude.

2. Applications.

The text is applied to Christ in Hebrews 10:5. There the Septuagint version is quoted: "a body you prepared for me."

In his body Christ became a sacrifice for sin, doing the will of God that we might be saved. His devotion to the Father's will was total because his love for the Father was total. He refused to live except as the servant of the Father's will. Jesus was a servant with a pierced ear.

We must apply the text to ourselves. We must become servants with pierced ears. We must be so dedicated to the will of the Lord that we find our true liberty in complete obedience to him.

Let him pierce your ear. Let him prepare you a body in which to serve his purpose for your life. This he does by filling you with his Spirit and controlling your life from within. Give yourself without reservation to permanent service for the Lord.

Translated either way, the text summons us to complete consecration to God. God's response to that consecration is a cleansing and filling grace that enables us to say with the psalmist, "I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

7. FROM SHOCK TO SURETY

You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? (Psalm 43:2).

This Psalm was probably joined to the previous one originally. The common theme and the identical closing words suggest that it was. We hear in the psalm the lament of a “downcast” and “disturbed” soul. The psalmist thirsts for God like a running deer thirsts for water. He recalls better days spent with the people of God in the house of God. Now he feels “forgotten” and “rejected.” He is “oppressed” and “mourning.” If you can’t identify with that your life has been sheltered.

1. His lament. “Why...”

God has allowed him to be pursued by “deceitful and wicked men” who seek his life. That he wants God to plead his cause suggests that he is the victim of oppression. In such circumstances, that people reject us is often surprising, but that God rejects us is always downright shocking. We can fathom the confusion and grief that wrings a tortured “why” from the psalmist’s lips.

2. His prayer. “Send forth... bring me...”

He knows that the very God who seems to have forgotten him is his only source of help. He is too deep in trouble to rescue himself. He pleads for a guide--“your light and your truth”--that will rescue from darkness and deception. He names a goal--“the place where you dwell”--where he will rejoice in worship with the “festive throng” again. Deliverance *from* is never enough; deliverance *to* is desired.

3. His hope. “Put your hope in God...”

He is talking to his own soul, and giving it sound advice. A man who can say “my Savior and my God” will emerge from trouble a victor. Three times in the two psalms this hope is confidently affirmed. The last word of the trusting soul is not “why” but “my”--my God, my savior.

We may *feel* forgotten and rejected, but God never forsakes his people. We change, but he does not. He is the “rock” that winds cannot blow away, that floods cannot wash away. He is the “stronghold” that no assault can capture or crumble. He stands through all that knocks us down, and he will deliver us from oppression.

8. WEALTH AND DEATH

For all can see that wise men die; the foolish and the senseless alike perish and leave their wealth to others (Psalm 49:10).

Psalm 49 is a “wisdom” psalm, a collection of reflections upon wealth with reference to death.

1. A call to hear (vv. 1-4).

The speaker was first a listener and then an expositor (v. 4). He speaks as a “wisdom teacher,” a man in Israel to whom God had given deep and true insights into the meaning of life. His speaking is marked by (1) urgency--“hear,” (2) sincerity--“from my heart,” and (3) clarity--“I will expound my riddle.” To such a man the wise will listen.

2. A message loud and clear (vv. 5-19).

His message is that (1) every person dies. Death respects no person. The rich and poor, the wise and foolish “alike perish” (v. 10). “They are destined for the grave” (v. 14). God accepts no ransom (vv. 7-9). Continued life is a gift but never a bribe.

His message is that (2) every person dies poor. What they leave behind may vary, but in every case all is left: “They leave their wealth to others.” Landed estates shrink to the size of graves (v. 11). Those who “trust in themselves” (v. 13) and “trust in their wealth” (v. 6) are being herded “like sheep” to their graves. In death none will be richer or poorer than others (cf. Isa. 14:4-17).

3. A conclusion that both brings and removes fear (vv. 5, 12, 16, 20).

The certainty of death makes the fear of men foolish and the fear of God wise. For commentary on these verses read the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:28. We meet God and not our enemies beyond death. We should fear God and not men in life.

The psalm has universal application, typical of wisdom literature. It is addressed to all. It applies to all. Lessons for us:

- (1) Don't fear--or envy--the rich.
- (2) Don't make wealth a priority. You will lose it or leave it.
- (3) Don't let death find you unprepared to face God. He can redeem you from death and take you to himself (v. 15).

19. A PURE HEART

Create in me a pure heart, O God (Psalm 51:10).

This “penitential psalm” was ascribed to David by some early editor. It fits the occasion referred to--his adultery with Bathsheba and his rebuke from Nathan. Whoever wrote it, whatever occasioned it, the psalm delivers some crucial truths to our hearts.

1. Our sins are rooted in our hearts.

We can't justly blame them on external factors or other persons. They are our choices, our actions, arising from our hearts.

The power of negative influences is great. The psalmist was aware of a defective heritage and environment, as we are. We are sinners “by birth” and “sinful” from conception. We are members of a fallen race and inclined to evil from the inception of our lives.

Innate depravity and hostile environment make sin easy but not necessary. The fault lies, not in our peers, our stars, our ancestors, our neighborhoods, but in us. The defiled life springs from a depraved heart.

2. Only God can radically change our hearts.

“Create” translates a verb (*bara*) that always has God for its subject. It first occurs in Genesis 1:1. Only the power that translated God's thought into the universe can make us inwardly clean and steadfastly loyal.

We can resolve and strive, but our efforts will only result in repeated failure and deepened frustration. Only God can make us “whiter than snow.” Our efforts merely rearrange the dirt.

What can we do? Cast ourselves upon God's "mercy," "unfailing love" and "great compassion." His creative power achieves the rest. We are the problem; he is the solution.

Bring to God a "contrite heart" in earnest prayer, and he will give you a "clean heart" from which a holy life may flow.

10. FROM REST TO REWARD

My soul finds rest in God alone.... Surely you will reward each person according to what he has done (Psalm 62:1, 12).

This psalm moves from rest to reward. It speaks to our condition and for our comfort.

1. The rest: “My soul finds rest in God alone...” (vv. 1, 5).

The rest comes during the storm, not after it. The calm results, not because all is sunshine but because God is present in dark days, creating hope. That’s the rest we need, for storms follow each other closely.

Deceivers, who blessed him with their mouths and cursed him in their hearts, assaulted the psalmist (v. 4). He was aware of his weakness, like a tottering wall under the blows of a battering ram (v. 3). His rest, therefore, issued not from self-confidence but God-confidence.

2. The rock: “He alone is my Rock...” (vv. 2, 6, 7).

Some 40 times the O. T. uses “rock” as a metaphor for God, with emphasis on his presence and power. Resting in God, the psalmist will not be shaken down by those who harass him. The rock is his security.

He renounces two false refuges: (1) persons, who are “but a breath,” whose power is an illusion; (2) riches, for though wealth increases it does not secure. One will lose or leave riches (vv. 9-10). The rock is the only true refuge.

3. The reward: “Surely you will reward each person...” (v. 12).

Our trust is grounded in love, not power alone. Loveless power would be disastrous.

Our loving God can be trusted “at all times.” Two benefits result: (1) He is accessible to us. His people can pour out their hearts to him, knowing he loves and cares (v. 8). (2) Our service to him, loyally rendered in sunshine and storm, will be rewarded. He rewards us, not for what we have but for what we have done.

Rest upon the rock. Trust and serve him in good times and bad. Your soul will be secure; your reward will be sure.

11. MY PSALM

In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge... (Psalm 71: 1)

This psalm is our word from God for today. To hear it as our cry and God's response will change our lives.

1. Make the psalmist's refuge yours.

"In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge." "Be my rock of refuge to which I can always go."

A refuge is needed when storms occur and life is imperiled. When "evil and cruel men" oppress, God alone is an adequate deliverer. He comes through. He is there for us.

2. Make the psalmist's reliance yours.

"You have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you..."

Throughout his life the psalmist had trusted in God. He is filled with praise because God had never forsaken or failed him. Past mercies become the ground of continuing faith and hope.

3. Make the psalmist's request yours.

"Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone." "Do not be far from me, O God; come quickly, O my God, to help me."

He prays that the refuge of his youth will be his rescuer in old age. His life was in danger and his enemies mocked, but he knew that prayer would bring deliverance.

4. Make the psalmist's response yours.

"I will praise you more and more." "I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone." "Who, O Lord, is like you?"

He responds to answered prayer with fervent praise. He responds to mercies granted with words of witness. He will not boast of himself, but exalt his incomparable God. That is the only proper response to who God is and what God does.

I have especially personalized verse 18. It contains my prayer, my purpose and my proclamation.

Viewed through New Testament eyes, verse 20 looks beyond this world's troubles to the resurrection.

12. WORSHIP STEADIES

...I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood... (Psalm 73:17).

The psalmist was going through tough times. He envied the "carefree" lives of the wicked, their health and wealth. Then he "entered the sanctuary" and gained new perspective on life that steadied his soul. We sometimes duplicate his problem; let us duplicate the solution.

1. He experienced a new awareness of God.

God is the "refuge" of hurting people. He holds them, guides them and strengthens them. He comforts them, not by reversing their fortunes, but by cleansing their hearts, for the basic problem is not external but internal. The "pure in heart" see God and discover what really matters.

2. He formulated a new definition of good.

Good is not the prosperity and pleasure of the wicked. Good is the presence of God. "God is good..." The health and wealth of famous sinners can disappear overnight. Material things and wicked people have no durable quality. They can be "suddenly" and "completely" destroyed, "swept away" by the winds of judgment. What is good is "to be near God," for he alone satisfies our craving for reality.

3. He realized a new dimension of glory.

"Glory" is the "afterward" of an earthly life guided by the "counsel" of God, not by the warped notions of the world. The path of glory leads, beyond the failure of flesh and heart, to a reception into heaven: "afterward

you will take me into glory." Little or much, storm or calm, hardly matter in the light of final destiny. The person who can say, "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" lives and dies truly rich.

Worship corrects our vision and re-orders our priorities. Worship separates reality from illusion, the significant from the unimportant. Thus, worship steadies our lives in the crises of faith. "Being with God," we "desire nothing on earth." God matters, not things. God endures, not things. God satisfies, not things. Worship God!

13. WISELY USING TIME

Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands (Psalm 78:7).

Some people live in and for the past, the “good old days.” Some live in and for the future, the “good times coming.” Some live in and for the present, saying, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” The text tells how we should use each phase of time.

1. Use the past as a memory of miracles.

“They would not forget his deeds.” The psalm records the miracles that brought Israel out of slavery and into the promised land. Miracle was piled on miracle.

Israel “forgot what God had done and “continued to sin against him.” He chastened them but did not destroy them. Instead, “He forgave their iniquities,” his greatest miracle.

Recalling how God in Christ provided our salvation will give us strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

2. Use the present as a life of loyalty.

“They...would keep his commands.” The present lies between mercies received and mercies expected. We should make it an offering of loyalty to our faithful God.

This is what Paul teaches in Romans 12:1. “In view of God’s mercy”-which is both past and promised--we should “offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices.” Grateful service is the right response to saving miracles.

3. Use the future as a hope of help.

“They would put their trust in God.” Hope is the believer’s optimism. Dread is the unbeliever’s pessimism. Dread surrenders the past, present

and future to evil. Hope trusts in God for the final conquest of evil. Dread looks for the end of the world. Hope looks for a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells. Dread rests upon history books. Hope rests on God's book.

14. REVIVE US AGAIN

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you? (Psalm 85:6).

“Revive” implies former life (vv. 1-3). The Lord had shown favor to his people. He had forgiven their sins. He had averted his wrath.

“Again” implies repeated need (v. 5). Disobedience incurred the Lord’s displeasure. The people’s need and the psalmist’s cry are for renewed favor and forgiveness.

1. Revival comes when we pray.

We will not receive that for which we do not ask. Failure to pray is a denial of need. Failure to pray is an approval of sin. Failure to pray is an exhibition of apathy, rebellion or both. God revives a praying people.

2. Revival comes from divine love (v. 7).

The “salvation” for which the psalmist cries is a demonstration of the Lord’s “unfailing love.” His love pities sinners. His love inspires repentance. His love provides atonement. His love patiently endures our indifference. His love is freely bestowed, a “grant” and not a reward.

3. Revival comes by listening to God (v. 8).

Love persuades but does not coerce. We must “listen to what God the Lord will say.” “He promises peace to his people.” Peace comes only when sin is forgiven. Peace remains only when our hearts are utterly divorced from idols--hence the warning against “return to folly.”

4. Revival comes in response to faith (v. 12).

“The Lord will indeed give what is good.” The psalmist is confident of revival, but not because of his prayers or the people’s reforms. The ground of his confidence is the Lord who is good and does good. The constancy of divine love is all that keeps the inconstancy of human life from being self-destructive.

God gives revival. The gift, though undeserved, is conditioned. Our obedience, our repentance, our intercession “goes before him and prepares the way for his steps” (v. 13). Unless we prepare the way, he will not come to us with revival. When we prepare the way, nothing can keep him from coming.

15. I AM. YOU ARE. TEACH ME.

I am poor and needy.... You are forgiving and good.... Teach me your way, O Lord... (Psalm 86:1, 5, 11).

Some of the values of the Psalm cluster around these phrases: "I am..." "You are..." "Teach me..." The first is confession, the second adoration, the third petition.

1. The confession: "I am..."

The phrase occurs twice: "I am poor and needy.... I am devoted to you..." He cannot boast of his own resources; they are inadequate for "the day of trouble." But he is confident of conquest, for he calls upon and trusts in the Lord.

It's not ruinous to be poor and needy if you are devoted to the infinitely wealthy and mighty God. (Acts 3:6-8).

2. The adoration: "You are..."

This phrase is used four times: "You are my God.... You are forgiving and good.... You are great and do marvelous deeds.... You are a compassionate and gracious God..."

The character of God assures the psalmist of an answer to prayer. "In the day of my trouble I will call to you, for you will answer me." Divine love and power will combine to deliver him from a desperate situation.

"You are" becomes "You have." "You have delivered me from the depths of the grave." "You, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me."

If you can say of this God, "You are my God," you can be victorious over all that seeks to destroy you.

3. The petition: "Teach me..."

"Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name." This God is not a last resort to bail us out of trouble; He is the God we should continually worship and serve. Beyond deliverance is a lifelong process of moral education and spiritual growth.

Listen to the "I will" phrases: "I will call..." "I will walk..." "I will praise..." "I will glorify..." Prayer leads to practice and practice to praise.

For this life-style we need help. The psalmist prays, "Grant your strength to your servant," and "Bring joy to your servant." The joy of victorious living comes from the strength given by the Lord.

"I am..." "You are..." "Teach me..." The whole gamut of salvation and service flows from those phrases. Make them yours as personally as did the psalmist.

16. TOO LITTLE OF A GOOD THING

It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord... (Psalm 92:1).

Here is a good thing we cannot get too much of. If we lived in the spirit of this psalm every day would be Thanksgiving Day.

1. The psalm describes a good way to give thanks to the Lord.

“To sing praises to thy name, O Most High...to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre (vv. 1, 3).

Gladness in the heart brings praises to the lips. And since music is a universal expression of joy, it is eminently fitting that we rejoice in the Lord through music played and hymns sung.

2. The psalm suggests a good time to give thanks to the Lord.

“To declare thy steadfast love in the morning, and thy faithfulness by night” (v. 2).

Morning and night we should give thanks to the Lord. In the morning, believing that he will be with us throughout the day--blessing, guiding and using us. By night, acknowledging that he has been with us, and that we have been recipients of his faithful love. The day so bracketed with praise will be a true holiday.

3. The psalm names a good reason to give thanks to God.

“For thou, O Lord, hast made me glad by thy work; at the works of thy hands I sing for joy” (v. 4).

The works of the Lord occupy the remainder of the psalm, and fall into two categories:

(1) The ultimate doom of evil (vv. 5-11). Evildoers may flourish, but they are “doomed to destruction forever.” Knowing this, the Lord’s people can sing praises in the midst of conflict and suffering.

(2) The continual blessing of righteousness (vv. 12-15). Like palms and cedars the Lord’s people remain green and strong in all seasons. The Lord keeps his people fruitful. The life within them is greater than the death around them. “In the midst of death we are in life.”

We who read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament have even greater reason to begin and close each day with thanksgiving. In the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus sin has been conquered and will be destroyed forever.

17. BIBLE FACTS FOR OLD FOLKS

Psalm 92:14; John 21:18; Isaiah 46:4.

These days, scriptures relating to old age get my attention quickly.

I'm especially attracted to promises. Whoever they were originally addressed to, I claim them for myself. Of course, I don't claim them all. When Abraham was 99 years old God promised, "Your wife will bear you a son" (Gen. 17:19). My heart wouldn't stand that much strain.

But I am happy to share with you some passages that do apply to me and to you.

1. The possibility of a useful life.

Psalm 92:14 declares, "The righteous shall still bring forth fruit in old age."

There are no age limits to the grace of God. An old man can find new life, as Jesus assured Nicodemus (John 3:3-8). An old man or woman can also grow in grace. Further, they can effectively witness for Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17-18).

2. The prospect of a troubled life.

To Simon Peter, Jesus said, "When you were young you dressed yourself, and walked where you wanted to; but when you are old, you shall stretch forth your hands, and another shall dress you, and carry you where you don't want to go" (John 21:18).

These words were related to Peter's death. Peter was crucified in his old age at the command of a maniacal Roman emperor.

Old age won't be all sunshine and shuffleboard. Besides the suffering that is normal, as creaking machinery wears out, there may be suffering to endure "as a Christian," and "according to the will of God" (1 Pet.4:16, 19).

When suffering occurs, Jesus says, "Follow me."

3. The promise of a victorious life.

In Isaiah 46:4 the Lord promises, "Even to your old age I am he; and even to gray hairs will I carry you: I have made and I will bear ... you."

When I see a mirror and hear my joints, I know I fully qualify for this promise. As my strength declines, God remains ageless and almighty. Furthermore, nothing that befalls me surprises him. He is not baffled by my problems. He is not bankrupted by my needs. He will never let me go, never let me down. He saved me in my youth, and he will sustain me in my age.

These promises say to those of us who are old-timers: Be fruitful! Be faithful! Be forward-looking!

19. THE HOLY HOUSE

...holiness adorns your house for endless days, O Lord (Psalm 93:5).

Psalm 93 exalts God as universal sovereign. He occupies a throne that can't be shaken and speaks a word that can't fail.

His people behold in the beauty of his house a reflection of his being.

1. God's house is his people.

"House" cannot be restricted to the temple. At its dedication Solomon confessed, "The heavens...cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built" (1 Kings 8:27). Hebrews describes Christ as the Son who is faithful over his own house, and adds, "we are his house" (Heb. 3:5-6). God identifies his house as his people. He inhabits "the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15).

2. God's people should be holy.

House and grounds reflect the character and values of a resident. God's people should reflect His holiness. Unholy people dishonor the Holy One.

Doris and I passed a seedy looking church building. Everything about the place screamed habitual neglect. To my dismay, it was one of ours! I said to her, "For the first time in my life I am tempted to commit arson." That wretched sight was a travesty on holiness.

3. God's majesty assures the possibility of our holiness.

God is mightier than “the breakers of the sea,” the forces of chaos that threatened his creation.

He makes and keeps his people holy by the power of his word. By promise, prayer, command and example the Bible declares that the holy God can create a holy people as his earthly dwelling.

“Endless days” include here and now, our present situation. We can be holy in this world for he who is invincible deigns to live in us. Jacob discovered “the house of God” in a lonely desert place (Gen. 28:16-17). God’s house is not a building but a people.

His people are summoned to holiness. His majestic wisdom and power make that holiness possible.

20. WORSHIP AND WARNING

Come, let us sing.... Come, let us bow down.... Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts... (Psalm 95:1, 6, 11).

Psalm 95 is a call to worship, one of the most frequently used in churches everywhere. It is also a solemn warning, one that worshipers need to hear from time to time.

1. The call to worship.

The Psalm exhorts to jubilation: "Come, let us sing.... let us shout ... let us come before him with thanksgiving..."

The call to worship implies that God is present with the worshipers. He is the creator of the world, the savior of his people. His creative power and redemptive mercy have produced our gladness and earned our gratitude.

The Psalm exhorts also to prostration: "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care."

Kneeling is the posture of respect and submission. Kneeling admits our dependence on God for all that sustains our lives.

The mighty sovereign is also a gentle, caring shepherd. We kneel but do not cringe, for his banner over us is love.

2. The word of warning.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts..." This sounds like a jarring note appended to the exciting call to worship. Some scholars have even argued that it does not belong to the original psalm.

The Lord knows how prone some are to go from services of worship to lives of sin, as though he were not our maker and ruler. He speaks to us in worship, speaks to rebuke our sins, to promise his forgiveness and cleansing. He offers us direction and guidance for our journey towards heaven.

If we rebel, as did Israel in the wilderness, we incur his anger. The reduction of worship to empty forms, followed by lives that adopt the world's values, standards and objectives, invites his awful judgment. The temptation is real; the warning is needed.

We have hymned his praises. We have confessed our dependence and celebrated his mercy. We have heard his word, a word that spans centuries and targets our hearts. As we go from the place of worship, let us not cancel the meaning and power of worship by disobedience. Let us live for his glory and rest in his grace.

21. CELEBRATING GOD

The Lord reigns.... The King is mighty.... the Lord our God

is holy (Psalm 99: 1, 4, 9).

The Psalm celebrates God. Men are mentioned but not praised. Only the name of God is exalted.

1. Worship celebrates God's holiness.

Each strophe ends, "he is holy." Affirmations of his holiness close with exhortations to "exalt the Lord" in worship and praise. He is "exalted over all the nations." This essential and moral distance is the meaning of his holiness.

We can draw near to God but we never erase this distance, never remove this mystery. "Worship at his holy mountain" becomes also "worship at his footstool"--a humbling experience.

His otherness is not remoteness, however. He is present and involved as our peerless sovereign.

2. Worship celebrates God's power.

"The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned...let the earth shake." He occupies the mightiest of thrones.

Human movers and shakers strut in his shadow, supposing that they are in charge. In his time they are deflated and judged.

"Only God is great," said a court preacher at a royal funeral. To fear him is to place others in true perspective.

3. Worship celebrates God's justice.

“He loves justice.” He does “what is just and right.” His “statutes” and “decrees” are consistent with his holiness and power. Unjust rulers have been the bane of history. God rules in righteousness.

Does that mean we all are doomed, since we all have sinned? No. He was “a forgiving God” to Israel and will be that to us.

Moses, Aaron and Samuel interceded for Israel and were favorably answered. Jesus, a greater than them all, intercedes for us and assures our pardon. He is both priest and sacrifice, and God accepts him and all who come in his name.

This is the God we celebrate in worship-the holy one, the mighty one, and the forgiving one. Let us exalt his name forever!

22. FULL OF SAP

The trees of the Lord are well watered (Psalm 104:16).

The KJV reads “full of sap” instead of “well watered.” The difference is slight at most, for only well watered trees will be full of sap.

The first Psalm uses a tree as a metaphor for God’s blessed man. Trees are frequently used as metaphors for persons in Scripture.

Some simple lessons for us:

1. The sap is the life of the tree.

Christ came to give abundant life (John 10:10). Scripture was written to instrument eternal life (John 20:31). The gospel that proclaims Christ as savior is “the word of life” (Phil. 2:16). Everywhere you turn in Scripture the accent is on life, life, life! Dead churches cannot truly represent the living God. God wants his people to be full of life.

2. When a tree is cold the sap drops and death is easy.

Men often “girdle” trees in the winter in order to kill them. When the sap declines the fruit dries, the leaves drop, the roots wither. Unless the church and the believer keep the fires of devotion going, coldness and barrenness will soon result.

3. When a tree warms the sap rises, the leaves appear and the fruit blossoms.

Just as earth needs its springtime, so the church needs revival, as does the individual believer. We need to warm up, branch out and blossom forth to the glory of God.

A petrified forest may attract tourists, but not settlers. Folks may visit a dead church but they won't keep coming back. They are seeking life. For the world's sake, we need to stay alive in Christ and for Christ.

We can be living trees or rotting logs. The choice is ours.

23. FULL REDEMPTION

...with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption
(Psalm 130:8).

This psalm is from the “songs of ascent” collection. It was probably used by worshipers approaching the temple to meet with God. Strongly personal, it is also communal. It has a message for the Christian and the church today.

1. The psalm speaks of trouble (vv. 1-4).

The psalmist cried to God “out of the depths.” He was “in over his head” as we commonly say. All he could do was yell for help.

His trouble was the consequence of “sins” and his only hope of rescue was “forgiveness” from a gracious God.

How does that mercy reach us?

2. The psalm speaks of trust (vv. 5-7).

He “waits” for the Lord, and his “hope” is in the Word. The one against whom we have sinned is the only one who can save us from sin. Like “watchmen” eager for dawn, the psalmist waited for divine action.

His hope was not vain, for the Lord has “unfailing love” and offers “full redemption.” His word contains promises and stories of redemption that inspire trust. The psalmist awaited the word of pardon.

3. The psalm speaks of triumph (v. 8).

The Lord “will redeem Israel from all their sins.” This is the only place in the Old Testament where “sins” is the object of “redeem.” Usually the

Old Testament speaks of redemption from political foes or social ills. The psalmist discovered that “full redemption” must include deliverance from sin.

We read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament, in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We know that atonement for sin has been made “once for all.” Waiting is unnecessary. God is ready to speak pardon and peace to anyone who comes to him through Christ.

Redemption, provided by Christ, can be experienced at the junction where God’s promise and your faith intersect. That can be here and now.

24. THE ARCHER

Your arrows have pierced me (Psalm 38:2).

Metaphors can be flexible and versatile. Paul spoke of “the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16), and here the psalmist speaks of the Lord’s arrows. Both the devil and the Lord are viewed as archers. I don’t want to talk about the diabolic archer; I want to talk about the divine archer.

1. The Lord always hits the target.

Ahab was slain in battle when an enemy archer “drew his bow at random” (1 Kings 22:34). The lucky shot caught the king in an unprotected spot, mortally wounding him.

The Lord does nothing by chance. He selects his targets wisely and hits them squarely. The psalmist speaks of “vigorous enemies” who “repay my good with evil” (vv. 19, 20). He speaks of some who “seek my life” and “set their traps” (v. 12). These were unable to drop him, but the Lord’s arrows pierced, the Lord’s hand struck him down (v. 2).

When the Lord has you in the cross hairs you are going to get hit.

2. The Lord wounds in order to heal.

The psalmist speaks of festering wounds and searing pain (v. 5). He speaks of failing strength and failing eyes and a heart filled with anguish (vv. 7, 8, 10). All of this had resulted as a judgment upon his sins (vv. 3, 5, 18).

His only hope is mercy and this he expects from the Lord, calling him “my Savior” (vv. 15, 22). God’s healing includes the wounds and the sins that made the wounding necessary.

“The wounds of a friend can be trusted” (Proverbs 27:6). A friend will hurt you only to help you. How much truer is that of the divine friend!

Has the Lord wounded you? Has he laid bare your sin and guilt? Has he acted to make emphatic the truth that sin brings death? Then do what the psalmist did--pray and trust the archer to be your savior.