

George Philip Bible Readings

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Psalm 73 to 119

73:1-17	89:15-37	104	118:17-29
73:18-28	89:38-52	105:1-12	118:17-29
74	90:1-6	105:13-19	119
74	90:7-12	105:20-36	119:1-8
75	90:13-17	105:37-45	119:9-16
76	91:1-8	106:1-12	119:17-24
76	91:9-16	106:13-23	119:25-32
77	92	106:24-39	119:33-40
77	93	106:40-48	119:41-48
78:1-8	94:1-11	107:1-32	119:49-56
78:9-22	94:12-23	107:33-43	119:57-64
78:23-32	95:1-7	108	119:65-72
78:33-55	95:7-11	109	119:73-80 (
78:56-64	96	110	119:81-88
78:65-72	97	110	119:89-96
79	97	111	119:97-104
80	98	111	119:105-112
81	99	112	119:113-120
82	100	112	119:121-128
83	101	113	119:129-136
84	102:1-11	114	119:137-144
85	102:12-22	115	119:145-152
85	102:23-28	115	119:153-160
86	102:23-28	116	119:161-168
86	103:1-5	116	119:169-176
87	103:6-14	116	149:169-176
88	103:15-22	117	119:169-176
89:1-14	104	118:1-16	

73:1-17

Such words as these make sense in a world full of evil that is so sure of itself and so devoid of shame that it makes no attempt to hide itself. It must be admitted that at times every true Christian may feel that the battle and struggle unto holiness and faithfulness is a pointless and unrewarding thing. The Psalmist felt the same, and was so burdened that he found his way into the house of the Lord and no doubt heard the word of the Lord. Then he understood the end of the wicked. This is what we must remember. The end is not yet. But the end comes and God pays wages to the full. "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small; Though with patience He stands waiting, with exactness He grinds all." Never forget it, and when you begin to get things out of focus so that evil distresses you unduly, it is time to get into the presence of God and see things as they really are. It surprises you when you see it. Then surprise becomes peace. Some commentaries suggest v. 1 should read, "Truly God is good and nothing but good to His people." Remember that truth when circumstances seem to deny it!

[Back to Top](#)

73:18-28

Never envy the wicked, for their prosperity is only a show; it is hollow and doomed to inevitable disintegration and destruction. Their feet shall slide in due time (Deut. 32:35) and they will be tremendously surprised for it will take but a moment to accomplish their overthrow. This need not be postponed to the day of final judgment. God has many days of reckoning and some of us have lived to see them with our own eyes. There comes a time when God simply says, 'Enough!' and that is the end of pride and presumption. Little wonder the man is ashamed of his doubts, and he consciously reminds himself of his God and draws near to Him for safety and comfort. That is always a good thing to do, for it is there, in the presence of God, that you learn the truth of v.24. Here is something that is worth all the world can give put together. It is worth everything, and that is exactly what it costs you. You part with this world's empty glory and you lay hold on eternal verities that cannot be moved. God is the strength of my heart (26). This is rigorous faith. But it works, and makes a real man or woman of you.

[Back to Top](#)

74

On the face of it, this Psalm is a picture of desolation when all that is holy seems to have been quite overthrown. The land is overrun by heathen enemies; the temple is desecrated and the city of Jerusalem in ruins; the people of God have suffered many casualties and have become the scorn of those round about; and God seems to be quite indifferent. This needs little application to the present generation wherein the marvel and shame is not in the absence of the unconverted masses from the house of God but the absence of those who profess faith and who ought to know better than to give God the dregs of the week's time and energy. Let every converted person who reads this ask why he has not been this week and every week at the stated prayer meeting of the fellowship to which he belongs or should belong. This strange abandonment of the place of prayer is in great measure the answer to the Psalmist's question in v.1, and is by no means unconnected with the fact that in spite of much activity amongst God's people, God is still a stranger in the land. If special meetings are to be convened, let them be weekly meetings for prayer, and the attendance at such meetings will be a far truer indication of the hope for the future than the attendance at any other gathering where people, under the guise of worship, will *enjoy* lots of singing of various kinds and a good speaker if he has lots of nice illustrations and stories, and does not go on too long.

[Back to Top](#)

74

There is a strange reluctance among Christians to learn from the record of God's dealings with Israel and to believe that God is quite prepared to let His own people go into captivity and bondage without raising a hand to prevent it. God did this, as Old Testament history records, and as this agonised prayer testifies. When God finally turned again the captivity of His people and brought them to their own land it was not only their joy that was increased, but their holiness and righteousness. They would not learn righteousness in peace and

prosperity, therefore they were sent to the furnace of captivity. This affliction accomplished what all else failed to do: it transformed verbal religion and outward performance into spiritual and moral righteousness. Their experience of desolation did not mean God had forgotten them. The message of v. 12 is that their unchanging God is working salvation. They may not be aware of this and need to be told because the sore travail was there in plenty. How long will it go on (10)? Why does God not move in his power (11)? He has done it in the past (13-17). Arise, O God, it is Thy work not ours, and it is Thy name that is dishonoured by the poverty of Thy people. God knows, and would have it otherwise, and His attitude and method are still the same. The heathen shall know..... when I am sanctified in you before their eyes (Ezek. 36:23 AV).

[Back to Top](#)

75

Just as God seems often publicly inactive, appearing to give evil unfettered operation, so at times there is a signal demonstration of His sudden and sovereign power to shatter and crush all human and devilish opposition to His work and His people. This short Psalm declares one such breaking in by God upon proud and pretentious enemies. It is all rather frightening, but it must be so, else God becomes a laughing-stock among men and demons because they count Him weak. The second verse could read: "When I reach the appointed time, I will judge." God is never too early or too late. In spite of all the seeming confusion of earthly situations, God maintains His own order (3). The word 'Selah' means 'Think on that'. Now think on what follows. God declares that He has warned people not to persist in their arrogant and flagrant refusal of His will and word. A cause is not advanced or promoted by scavenging support from any earthly direction. It is God who sets up and casts down. He is the one we must deal with. Now, read v.8 and let the trembling of your heart bring wisdom to your actions. Make sure that you are dealing rightly with what belongs to God. Touch not the Lord's anointed nor His work, for God is judge (1 Chron.16:21-22; Ps.105:15).

[Back to Top](#)

76

The circumstances surrounding and distressing the people of God can change with a suddenness and completeness that is explained only by the miraculous intervention of God. God overrules and the courage, strength and energy of the foe simply fly away and disappear. Sometimes of course the wrath and fury of the enemy may not decrease; his stated desire to hurt and destroy may be declared more strongly and his schemes be laid with greater craft and vindictiveness than ever before. But somehow nothing seems to work out for the enemy as planned. God has spiked their guns, just as He shut the mouths of the lions for Daniel, and the enemy is trapped in an unseen but terribly effective cage. They are not able to carry out their plan for the simple reason that God incapacitates them. But sinners are so proud that they tempt God by flying in the face of all His holy commands, and for a long time, even for years, God bears and forbears. Then come to pass the events of verses 7-9. He is a real God, and in the end the opposition of the godless accomplishes two things. Firstly, it demonstrates and seals the righteousness of the judgment of the wicked, and secondly, it shows forth the glory of God. Selah! Think on that!

[Back to Top](#)

76

It follows from what we said yesterday concerning this Psalm that God is not one to be bargained with. Vows made in moments of emotion and then disregarded in the cold calculating light of daily life are of little value in God's reckoning. Vow and pay! (Eccles.5:4-7). We vow when we are in distress, and what great things we promise God, if only He will deliver us. Then we live the lie to our vows and prayers with all their intensity, for in a short time, God is not in all our thoughts. What sin! What judgment! But there are those who pray in distress of soul because they are true to this God and know the cost of being faithful to Him. They see the answers to their prayers and they marvel. For this God not only triumphs over evil, He uses evil as the instrument for His victory. God can allow the wrath of man, with all the evil and hurt it can invent, to have all the scope it desires up to the point where it will serve His holy purposes. Beyond that point God will not allow it to go, no, not one inch or one second (v.10 cf. AV). The remainder of wrath God girds upon Himself to do

His bidding and He turns it to begin the destruction of itself. We must be persuaded of this if we are ever to be at peace in the work of God in a world like ours.

[Back to Top](#)

77

Take careful note of the change that comes over the Psalmist halfway through this Psalm of sorrow and complaint. In verses 1-11 (AV) he keeps on saying 'I', 'my', and 'me', no less than twenty-five times. But in verses 12-20 he speaks 'thy' and 'thine' eleven times. Our attitude and reaction to life will depend a great deal on the direction of our thoughts. If they are turned in upon ourselves we shall most surely mope greatly and dispense great clouds of gloom upon all our companions. But if they are turned towards God, and to what He is and what He has in fact done before our eyes in times past, there will be an absence of lamentation and the beginning of wonder and worship, and incidentally also the enjoyment of peace that passes all understanding. This does not mean life will be easy to bear or to understand. Life is not and cannot be simple, especially for the Christian, because he is drawn into the ways of God which are far too vast for our little minds to understand fully. There is always much more happening than we realise, for God shows us *only* what we can grasp and bear (Acts 1:7; John 16:12). But the Psalmist sees all his days, the easy and blessed days and also the days of turmoil and apparent desertion by God, as all being in the right hand of God. The hand of His strength orders all things, and for that reason the man of faith says "All is well". His times *are* in God's hand (Ps.31:15). There is no better or safer place.

[Back to Top](#)

77

There is much to meditate on in this Psalm, for its realism is a healthy antidote to the facile, optimistic piety that passes as Christianity. In v. 1-3 the Psalmist, a man of faith, testifies that his soul found no comfort in prayer as he poured out his complaint to God. Israel was in exile and verses 4-9 tell of the man's sore pondering of the facts of the situation, wondering if God had fully and finally cast off His people. There are many reasons why God should do this, as there always are! Everything had gone against them and there were no statistics of triumph. They were a small insignificant people and work, compared with the massive and impressive works of men in their power and noise. That is something the remnant of God must bear to this day. It is not easy to lead or to be part of a work that is outwardly unimpressive. It is only when the Psalmist begins to consider the facts of the situation that he comes to an attitude of rest. Then he says (13), Your ways, O God, are holy (right and perfect in every way). You have redeemed your people (15) and that was not for nothing, it was planned and for clear purpose! Your ways are full of wonder (16-19). You led your people in the past and until now. Have you stopped doing this, O God? Is our God dead? No! But our thoughts of Him, His person and His purposes tend to be far too small.

[Back to Top](#)

78:1-8

This long Psalm traces the history of Israel and the story of God's patient dealings with a stiff-necked people. The purpose is stated in today's verses. It is to draw warning and instruction from a consideration of past history and then to apply the lessons to our own day and generation, lest we, committing the same sins of forgetfulness of God and disobedience to His laws, fall under the same judgments. These first verses make plain that God desires that parents should be the first to tell their children about God's ways and dealings, firstly with them in their personal lives and then with the congregation and nation. One of the most powerful influences at work in our day is the worldly example and influence of parents, schools, the media and magazines on children, so that the teaching of Sunday School teachers and ministers is snatched away from their minds and hearts before it can take root. Read v. 7-8 and face the truth that our children are likely to have a faith (or lack of it) much the same as their parents. If we are living on second-hand faith passed down from our parents, which is not faith at all but just religion, then our children will be one step further from God than we are. That is how a landslide starts. All hell is being let loose on the world (and it has started in the moral sphere with a disappearing of standards). If we set our children's hope on anything but God, we are helping to destroy them. That makes God angry; very angry. (Matt. 18:6-9).

[Back to Top](#)

78:9-22

Here is factual truth confirmed every day we live. The truth is this: no matter how much God does for an individual, a family, a congregation or a nation, in redeeming them from their plight and misfortune and leading them forth to a new life and hope and purpose, in countless numbers of instances there will not be the slightest gratitude to God for what He has done. Nor will there be the slightest desire to yield the life to God to serve the One who has given them all they have and made them what they are (Dan.5:23b AV). Indeed, when God lays claim to their obedience they will resent His laws and His interference in their lives. This is what people want: they would have God to be their servant, providing all that they need so that they might use and enjoy it in their own carnal, ungodly desires and schemes. Think deeply. Where would you and your family and congregation have been but for the kind grace of God that forgave and gave a second chance? What difference has it made to your life and profession of faith? Israel forgot, disobeyed, and sinned the more against the God to whom they owed all. This is not an exaggeration nor too much to believe. We see it every day.

[Back to Top](#)

78:23-32

Yesterday's passage told how the goodness of God failed to win the hearts and lives of Israel and caused them to be hardened in their sinfulness. Now we read of how God, though He supplied their needs, yet punished them for their sins. What God did was this: He answered their prayers and the answers became judgments, for the people were not separated from their lusts. Never trust people who say they will obey God *if* He will give them certain things. Israel got what they asked and still they sinned. This minister will never forget an office-bearer in a certain congregation being challenged about the contemptuous and flagrant inconsistency of his life. His eyes blazed with fury and almost spitting out the words, he said: "I am not disposed to change my way of life." He strode out from the office-bearers meeting and banged the door behind him. That is the kind of spirit that lands a man in Hell. That is the sin of many who have known the coming to their congregation of a living ministry of the Word of God. Israel would not change in spite of the goodness and severity of God and they fell in the wilderness under God's displeasure and God forbade their entrance into the land of His rest. How sad! Paul spoke of this kind of thing in 1 Cor.9:24-27.

[Back to Top](#)

78:33-55

God continued to deal with His own people whom He had purposed and promised to bless, but His further chastisements brought only superficial and temporary amendment of life (33-37). Then we have the staggering statement of v.38. What God puts up with from the creatures who would be derelict apart from His grace! But how did His children answer His persistent forgiveness? They took advantage of it. They turned back from obedience in their hearts and in so doing limited, for a season at least, the scope of His working in and through them. They did not remember (42) all their God had done for them, and were not moved by gratitude unto practical response. It seemed that the more God gave them of blessing the more they recompensed Him with contemptuous rebellion. Then to reveal their sin in its full shame, the Psalmist contrasts God's stern dealing with the Egyptians with the gentle grace and care He showed to Israel. Spend a lot of time with v.52-55. God led them out, led them on, led them towards the goal and, by removing the enemy, led them into their inheritance. Having loved His own, He loved them unerringly through thick and thin right to the end (John 13:1AV; Jer.31:3). It was love that had to lead them into many distresses, but it was love that would not and did not let them go.

[Back to Top](#)

78:56-64

The love of God is a vast and strong shelter, but it is not a soft love, and though God bore with His own people in loving kindness and oft-repeated forgiveness, yet He could not turn a blind eye to the fact that by their sins His people were harming themselves, hindering the advance of the work and dishonouring the name of their God among the heathen. Therefore God was angry. He withdrew the grace of His conscious presence, and He

delivered His own people into the hand of their enemies (59-61). The distress was not short-lived and it was harrowing and painful. There is something quite frightening about the extent to which God is prepared to let His own work go down into seeming public disgrace and defeat. You see, He is more concerned with a pure work than with a big work. A vast successful organisation that is rotten with duplicity under a surface veneer of piety is of no value or use to God, and He lifts the restraint on evil men and evil powers, that they might become the scourge of His people to purify them and accomplish their return in righteousness. God is in earnest. We need to be the same.

[Back to Top](#)

78:65-72

While God uses evil, whether men or demons, to do His bidding (and of course they are compelled to serve God since He is greater than they are), He never condones the actual evil that they do. In due season, when they have served their purpose, God brings the persons of evil to their own day of reckoning. Note how God reckons the enemies and detractors of His people to be His own enemies. In the end, God will deal with all such far more swiftly and severely than we would. He sees them for what they are: anti-God and anti-Christ, inveterately and irrevocably. This is no contradiction of the earlier verses about the loving-kindness of God. God's punishment of His own is in love for their correction. But His punishment of the wicked is retribution and, if there is no repentance, it is for ever. The last verses of the Psalm bring us back to the wise gentleness of God, which is reflected in the person and work of David. It is one of the wonders of Christian experience to look back to see just how perfect and balanced God's dealings with us have been. Oh that we would learn to trust Him when all is dark! He is never wrong, nor late, nor rough, nor extravagant. He is a glorious God.

[Back to Top](#)

79

Here is another Psalm with the same balanced lesson as the previous one. The man refuses to explain the fortunes of God's people and work in terms of bad luck, or coincidence, or social pressures, or any other material circumstance. God is displeased with His own people and as a result they have been brought very low. Their calamity has brought them to their senses, and they recognise the part played by their iniquities whereby they have exposed themselves and the holy work of God to the assaults of the powers of evil and the taunts and slights of men. Now, the man who wrote the words of this Psalm recognised that there is something more fundamental and vital than the discomfiture of himself and his companions. His plea for God's intervention is for the glory of God's name and the reinstating of God's true honour among the heathen (9-10). It is all very well to see and criticise the sins of the unbelievers, and their shameful treatment of the things and people of God, but the sins of the saints do God's work far more harm. These sins destroy the work from inside and the others only from outside. Quisling activity is far more dangerous and worthy of far more punishment than any other. If God delivers from the present distress, will His people be a better and holier people? That is the burning question. God knows the answer and eases or prolongs the pain accordingly.

[Back to Top](#)

80

Israel is God's vine and the pattern of His dealing with it is given us in wondrous detail in John 15:1-8, a passage that should be read again and again. It is love that purges the vine that it might be a better plant and bring forth better and richer and more abundant fruit. This is the explanation of much, if not all, of what comes our way in daily experience. It is all too easy to revert to a former wild and uncultivated form of life whereby all vital energy is dissipated in fruitless activity of foliage. That is why the Psalmist prays, though still knowing distress, that God will keep His hand on him to keep him from going back (17-18). There is a new mellowness of hope in this whole Psalm. Its thrice repeated refrain in verses 3, 7, and 19 speaks of a man's heart that is opening towards the smile of God, so that all shadows might be chased away and the soul dwell in love and hope and peace. There is a ripe grace in some saints of God that is very attractive and enviable. These are men and women to whom the smile of God's pleasure has come to mean more than anything else in life. Such saints are tenderhearted and with them God has much fellowship and pleasure, and so have other people.

[Back to Top](#)

81

The first five verses are a call to celebrate the Feast of Trumpets with shouting and singing as God had ordained (Lev.23:24; Num.29:1). The rest of the Psalm portrays God grieving over Israel because of their shameful ingratitude and disloyalties. He longs for their hearts' affection and obedience. On the one hand there is God's unfettered desire to bless and to give to His people in abundance (10). On the other hand there is the people's strange reluctance to launch into the full-hearted commitment of service and loyalty (11), a thing that still manifests itself and baffles the hearts of God's ministers. Why should there be such a holding back with so many reservations? Are there no longer enthusiasts for God and His Kingdom? Is it false intellectual pride that hinders? The height of our wisdom and learning is foolishness compared with God's and, after all, God gave us our brains, we did not make them. Is it no longer the accepted thing to be wholehearted about Jesus? It would seem that many make a conscious effort to pursue a middle course of decorum, being neither cold nor hot. That makes God sick (Rev. 3:16). Can it be that we want to be "in with" worldly approval and God's best at the same time? It cannot and will not be (Matt.6:24), and if God has a purpose for your life then you will know the pain of v.12. He will let you fail so that in the end He may deliver you from failure with all its bitterness.

[Back to Top](#)

82

The message here concerns justice and righteousness in the administration of human affairs. God stands as judge in the solemn assembly and gathered around Him are the earthly judges who are His representatives on earth and who are responsible and answerable to Him for all their acts. God challenges the earthly administrators and upbraids them for their injustice and partiality, for they are misusing their place and power. Their verdicts and punishments are either too harsh or too lenient, and as a result of their malpractice the foundations of society are being shaken. But the men with power will not heed the evidences of their misrule, and society becomes more and more of a jungle, ruled by the laws of the jungle, with lust and greed and terror stalking through society, unafraid because punishment has become a thing unknown. This is the plight of modern society that has lost the courage to inflict retributive justice and allows the victims of crime to suffer more than the criminals. The Psalmist's heart cries out, as does the heart of God, against all iniquity and declares the coming of a day of righteous retribution.

[Back to Top](#)

83

When once you have seen and known the vicious hatred of people against the word of God and the holy work of that word; and when once you have seen the extent to which people are prepared to go in persecuting the saints and servants of God; and when you have seen the flaming light of hellish antagonism in the eyes of so called 'nice' people; then you will never have any trouble with understanding the fierce sentiments of a Psalm like this (John 15:18-20; 1Pet.4:12-19). We must learn to be prepared to meet the most implacable opposition if we are to be faithful to the calling of God. There will be enemies who, though they will make periodic truces, will never be reconciled to the King of Kings, and if we love the Lord and His Holy Church then we must be clear in our thinking as to the end of all opposers. They must fall, and they will fall. But the executing of justice must never be snatched at by man. That is God's province, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay saith the Lord" (Rom.12:17-19). People must be made to know this. The Psalmist seems to be saying, O God, assert yourself and keep not silence (1). But when the silences of God are broken, then dread days are come throughout society. God has come to assert Himself and people will hear His voice and be afraid, as He calls them to reckoning (Gen.18:20-21)..

[Back to Top](#)

84

How we love to sing the metrical version of this Psalm in worship in the house of the Lord. It comes today as a sweet blessing and a savour of matchless grace. It is not so much that the Psalmist would have God to come to him as that he might go to God. With God is his true home and happy abiding place. He would rather have the humblest place in the eternal courts of the Lord than dwell in importance in the tents of wickedness. This is

what true conversion does for a sinner. It spoils him for everything else except the blessed Lord and His house, whether on earth or heaven. Sometimes it takes us years of miserable attempts at compromise before we learn that there is no rest for the longing soul anywhere but in the presence of Jesus (Eccles.3:11; Matt.11:28-39).. This is life; and it is full of exultation. Who can read v.11-12 without a thrill at the heart? If you are not moved it must be because there is no grace in you. "O Thou that art the Lord of Hosts, that man is truly blest, who by assured confidence on Thee alone doth rest". Yes, pick up the metrical Psalter and sing your worship and desire and the Lord Himself will bless you.

[Back to Top](#)

85

The Word of God speaks individually but also to the Church and to the nation, for all are involved in His righteous dealings. These three strands are always involved together and we must not be too quick to think that circumstances can be explained only in relation to our personal lives. The issues are often on a far broader scale, and that should be our comfort. What God is doing at any given moment we may not understand, but in the meantime the perplexity of our immediate experience should be the means of bringing us nearer to God in a new eagerness to hear what He will have to say to us. In this Psalm Israel has returned from exile but is despondent because of the smallness and feebleness of the remnant that has returned. The thrill of immediate release has given way to the demand of the slogging grind of re-establishing the city and the temple. The first seven verses of the Psalm express the thoughts and longings of the people, and the remainder is the firm conviction of the man of faith who encourages the people by the reaffirmation that the glorious purposes promised by God will in fact be fulfilled. But it will not be easy. It never is, and that is why we must always exercise the ministry of encouraging one another, lest any one believer be crushed by neglect. Keep in mind the narrative in Ezra and Nehemiah which records not only the hard slog and the difficulties, but also the opposition and distractions of the work of the enemy, both human and devilish.

[Back to Top](#)

85

Against the background of yesterday's reading we see the significance of the cry in v.6. Such a request can be very superficial and may indicate merely a carnal desire that we, the people of God, might no longer be a despised minority with nothing of the plaudits of the secular world. When we desire a 'big' work we need to be very sure of our motives. The prayer for revival may also arise from the dullness and lack of pleasure in our present spiritual condition. Revival can be desired for many wrong reasons, and it took the nation of Israel a long time of decline and fall, and captivity, before they learned to pray this prayer aright. It was only when they realised they were in danger of being laid aside as of no further use (1 Cor.9:27) that they began to deal rightly with God. The second half of the Psalm makes plain the grounds on which God deals with His own people for quickening and revival. He requires righteousness and truth. These will mark out the ways of God and set us in His steps. There is great hope held out, but the warning in v.8 is very sorely needed. We need also to remember that the objective of all our life and work is to show forth the glory of God (9). Nothing must be allowed to cloud or be a distraction from that.

[Back to Top](#)

86

This Psalm is composed of fragments and quotations from other Psalms and the Books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Jeremiah. It might be a good exercise for some to trace them all by using a good concordance. The Psalm is obviously personal. The man is in distress and pleads his need before God. There is no pleading of merit or deserving in v.2 for it could better read, 'I am one whom you love.' It is amazing and comforting to find how persistently David reminds himself of the wonderful love and forgiveness of God (5). When the soul is aware of need of pardon, to rest in the fact of forgiveness is a thing to be fought for by faith. It is so amazing that God forgives that we can scarcely believe it at times. Marvel at v.13. Have you known anything of that? But we focus on v.11. Here is vital spiritual and psychological truth. A divided heart will never have peace or power to serve, but will know the abiding torment of uncertainty. The man declares that he will walk in God's truth. But you can have intellectual grasp of fundamental truth that is frighteningly devoid of

warmth and devotion of heart. There can be preaching (and pulpit prayer) that is meticulously correct in biblical doctrine but fails to warm or move the heart. It makes all the difference to person and work when the flame of living love is kindled. You have to love Jesus to serve Him. Do you? Read 1 Cor.13.

[Back to Top](#)

86

We spend a second day here because we are shown so much of the inner feelings, fears and prayers of someone who was a true man of God and one mightily used in service and leadership in spite of his well known sins. Distress came to him and violent and terrible men rose up to oppose and persecute. David describes them well in v.14 and pinpoints the two basic truths about them: pride and godlessness. They have no regard for God, or His Word, or His work, or His people. We must learn to see beyond the plausible exteriors of some people, even when they walk in ways of apparently Christian service. There is pride that refuses to submit to the commanding, slaying word that God speaks, although the excuse given for refusing has usually to do with the preacher's defects. There is a basic godlessness that exalts itself into deity and would rule the world if it only got the chance. This is what David met, and is the occasion of his prayer in v.17, where he asks for some signal working of God that will testify to all, that David is in fact the man upon whom the hand of God rests for good. Many a time God does just this, but again there are the experiences of Job and that of our Lord in His forsakenness on the Cross. Always remember in the absence of vindication that the end is not yet! Judge nothing before the time and remember that in practically every situation we know only part of the facts. (1 Cor.4:5;13:12)

[Back to Top](#)

87

This Psalm which still points into the future is a word of prophecy which expands the glorious theme of v.9 of the previous Psalm. The coming victory of the Kingdom of God is not a local and limited thing. It is national, international and indeed cosmic, for all worlds shall come to the God-glorifying end for which they were first created. The third verse brings us to hymn "Glorious things of Thee are spoken", that we love to sing. In the words of that hymn, sung together in worship, our doubts and fears are done away with in the glad expression of our confidence in the final triumph of all that belongs to God. We are apt to spiritualise these thoughts too much and postpone the victory to the future and the heavenly Jerusalem, whereas the first application has most certainly to do with an earthly triumph. God is not to be chased out of His own world. We do not surrender God's world to the Devil, who has no right to any of it. There will indeed come terrible conflagration, and it cannot be avoided as evil comes to harvest, but in and through the fires will come the triumph of God. It must be so, for the foundation is in the King of Righteousness. In that day there will be found within the Kingdom many who were its enemies at one time, for God has made peace through the blood of the Cross for those who have believed. And there will be songs of joy, solid joy and lasting treasure. Ignore the world's derision and pity. The world and all it signifies will pass away. Glory, as the Psalmist does, in the name of your God.

[Back to Top](#)

88

There seems to be no gleam of light in this sad cry and the last word is sadness and darkness darkness. Here is the pathetic cry of hopeless despair in the throes of unrelieved suffering. This man knows the burden of long continued suffering, increased in anguish by the lack of understanding, his own and others. He feels the ostracism shown by his friends. He is a lonely sufferer, and in the midst of it all he does not know why the way of God with him is like this. He paints the picture of his experience with heartrending words and asks many questions of God: Why is it so? How long will it go on? Is there any betterment? Why me and not others? But in all his questions there is no note of bitterness and all he says he says to his God. He believes he is in God's hand in spite of all the evidences. The anchor of his soul is in this, that he makes his way to meet with his God at the break of every new day (13). He is not embarrassed by the way he speaks to God. He believes that God not only allows us to express our doubts and fear, but in fact encourages us to do so. In a very human ways God tells us "to get it off our chest". We must be honest with God and not pretend to ourselves or others that we are totally spiritual and always able to cope..This man is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He is worn

down and worn out by the demands laid upon him with no mortal able or willing to share the costly cross. What can a man do in such circumstances? He must learn to lean more patiently and trustingly on the breast of his Saviour until the day break and all shadows flee away.

[Back to Top](#)

89:1-14

Right at the beginning the singer states his theme, which is the loving kindness and the faithfulness of God. He is persuaded that these can never fail since it is God Himself who has spoken the promise and covenant to David. Beginning in v.5 we have a recital of the glorious attributes of God which the Psalmist tells forth to be an encouragement to the people. There is none like unto this God. The heavenly order of beings knows this (5-7). The testimony of nature and of history conspire to tell His greatness and His power. The arm of God's strength has scattered His enemies effortlessly and all His ways of justice and judgment are mingled with mercy and truth (8-14). Let our minds linger on the majestic sweep of verses 11 and 13. This is the Psalmist's God. He is a big God, as men and nations and legions of demons have been compelled to acknowledge. This is your God and mine. O you of little faith, why did you doubt? (Matt.14:25-31) God *is* our refuge and strength. If we really believe this, we will not be afraid.

[Back to Top](#)

89:15-37

It is little wonder that the Psalmist breaks into exulting song as his lips try to keep pace with the rejoicing of his heart. As he speaks the privileges of this people whose God is the Lord, he almost unconsciously replaces the word "they"(16) with "our" (18). Whenever we are speaking about the greatness of God we need to remind ourselves that this is *our* God. When you sing the hymn "The God of Abraham praise" make sure you thrill to the words, "Hail, Abraham's God and *mine*". From v.19-37 the Psalm deals with the covenant that God made with David, which is now spoken of in great detail. Take special note of the determination of God's grace. He has chosen David and He will bless him (20-24). One might almost say, "Woe betide the man who gets between God and the object of His love." God is in earnest in his plans for this man. Of course God knows all David's sins and deals with them resolutely, as we read in the stories of 1 and 2 Samuel. God means business. Cf. Amos 3:2. Look at v.30-33 of the Psalm. Yes, God is going to keep His word, and although the repeated emphasis on the words 'for ever' points forward to a greater than David, the truth of the Psalm is still mightily applicable to the servants and the work of God now. Our unfaithfulness may modify and affect the process of the outworking of God's plans but the will of the Lord shall be done for He has spoken it. See to it that the Lord's will is done with us and not in spite of us.

[Back to Top](#)

89:38-52

Now we go down again into the throes of perplexing and painful circumstances. The past glories and the future promises of glory seem unsubstantial in face of present troubles and dishonour. Has God broken His promise? No! That cannot be. But His ways of working it out are different from ours. The ultimate triumph of God was worked out through a cross that seemed to be the end of all the work of Christ. Does not one of our hymns say that Jesus won the world through shame and beckons us His road? Whether on a personal or corporate level it is out of the presses of pain that there comes the soul's best wine. There are many contradictions between the Christian hope and its realisation if we read only immediate evidences. But when the soul is driven back to basic reliance on obedience to the spoken word of God, it comes to the place where it can voice with confidence, even in the black darkness of the most hellish persecutions that men can invent, the doxology with which this Psalm closes. If you want an example of this in practice, read Acts 27:22-25.

[Back to Top](#)

90:1-6

This Psalm is entitled as a prayer of Moses and there are echoes of the narrative in Genesis 1-3, not least the words there "and to dust you shall return". This Psalm does not make for easy reading in a generation that by and large refuses to think and speak about death. We have these words paraphrased in the familiar hymn "O

God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.” That is the emphasis: God has been our past help and is our future hope. We must feel this as well as understand it mentally. The everlastingness of God in whom there is no change (Jas.1:17) sets in relief the transitoriness of human life. Not only is the span of life brief, it is altogether at the disposal of God who made us for Himself. But while mortals rise and perish God endures unchanging on. The passing of time does not harass Him, and while puny man and all that he has made and achieved returns to the dust, leaving little or no trace of his existence, God and all that pertains to Him abides and endures, because what God does is for ever. This is not only a humbling rebuke to our human pride and vanity and self-importance; it is a guide to the nature and manner of our service. We must work for that which is eternal in ourselves and others. The superficial is not worth the effort.

[Back to Top](#)

90:7-12

Here is a practical word for those who live their lives without any thought of death. We travel towards the One to whom we must give account of all our days. The secrets are all known and recorded and by the time you read these words another page will be added to the record of your life. When this record is brought forth will it embarrass you, if not confound you, when the voice of the Lord calls you to give account? It will be a sorry tale for many, the record of a life with scarcely a serious thought, let alone a godly one. Compare the story of two different men regarding the end of their days on earth. Read Daniel 5:23b and 2 Timothy 4:6-8. Scan the pages of your life-story that are already written. Do you see any reference to God and the things of God, or is it a tale of eating, drinking and making merry? Tomorrow we die. Start counting the days, whether you are young or old. Too many of them are frittered away already, and many a Christian is already in danger of appearing empty-handed before the face of the great King. Don't waste time. It cannot be recalled and you will have deep regrets, yes, even in heaven, where you will wish you now shone more brightly to display your Saviour's grace in glory. Think on these things. Not many sermons are preached these days on 1 Cor.3:10-15 or Rev.14:13. We are becoming what we will be when this life is over.

[Back to Top](#)

90:13-17

Here is the singer's prayer that God would so shine His favour upon His people that they would rejoice and be glad in Him. After all, if you are quite sure that all is well between you and your God with neither neglect nor estrangement of friendship, nothing else really matters. This is the peace that rules in our hearts no matter the outward storms. While the night of doubt and sorrow still lingers, the Psalmist asks in v.14 that in the early dawn of a new day God might bless, and that His blessing would be in proportion to the depth of his affliction and repentance (15). He prays that God's favour, His saving providence would be manifested on behalf of His servants. He goes on to ask that the beauty or pleasantness or gracious kindness of the Lord should be upon us, on all the ordinary occasions of daily life and not merely on the special and critical occasions. It may not be strictly accurate exegesis, but the last verse gives legitimate ground for quoting words sometimes used as a prayer expressing desire to be all that God desires. "Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me, All His wondrous compassion and purity. O thou Saviour divine, all my nature refine, Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me." That is fruit that abides for ever. Perhaps we should end the study of this Psalm by referring to the Aaronic blessing of the people of God. It is found in Numbers 6:22-27. Do we really think of these words when we sing them? If we fail to do so we miss a great and rich blessing.

[Back to Top](#)

91:1-8

The warm and tender security breathed by this Psalm scarcely needs any comment at all. It is a Psalm to be savoured, loved and enjoyed. It is for all believers in all manner of situations. He who has his permanent home in the secret place of the Most High God will pass the night when he is travelling under the safe shadow of the same Almighty God whose eye, and heart, and safe-keeping grace will follow him wherever he must go. Verse 3 begins, it is HE who shall keep you. Just think of it, letting your mind try to grasp the grandeur of the glorious God. It is He who shall keep *you*. Since that is so you have no need, indeed no right to be afraid of any thing or

person, for the end of the day shall demonstrate the reward of the wicked. Ah, we say wisely, but there is a Devil. Yes, indeed, but he that dwells close to the side of the Lord is in a place where the enemy dare not come save as a suppliant, and what he is then permitted to do cannot be too much for you to bear. It is when we wander from the Saviour's side that we are exposed to danger. Then why wander? The temporary excitement is dearly paid for. It is good from time to time to read Jesus' words in John 14 where v.1 is not really a piece of advice but rather a command. After all, if we believe the familiar words of Psalm 23 that the Lord God Almighty is our shepherd and that His goodness and mercy follow us everywhere, all the time, should we not feel safe?

[Back to Top](#)

91:9-16

There are two instances of cause and effect here. Because the man has made the Lord his habitation (AV) or his permanent address (dwelling NIV) he is guaranteed safety. Then in v.14, because the believer has set his love upon the Lord, the Lord speaks Himself, declaring that the man will be the object of His blessing and protection. On the face of it the saints of God appear to be promised freedom from all that would trouble them. But as we know, and as all the saints in the Bible knew, trouble does come, but in it and through it all nothing is allowed to harm the saint. He is guarded from the destructive power of all that he meets. God's Daniels do end up in the den of lions, but God shuts the mouths of the beasts. God's young men do at times end up in the fierce fires of human hatred but the flames do not kindle on them and they emerge the richer since they have met the Son of God in a new way in the midst of the flames. Perhaps for some despised soul the promise that God will honour (15) is the sweetest word of all the Psalm. God will grant continuance, satisfaction and in the end salvation. In the story of the fiery furnace in Daniel 3:16-18 note the words "But even if he does not". Faith believes even when it cannot be sure of the actual outcome of the trial.

92

It is indeed a good and a necessary thing to give thanks to the Lord. Gratitude is acceptable both to God and man, and many a time our spiritual life gets completely clogged and stagnant simply because we do not fulfil this duty. This gratitude is a practical thing and no person really desirous of expressing gratitude will ever lack the opportunity or opening to do so, and you may be quite surprised at the felicity God will give you in word and deed. Just try it and you will see! Let this psalm open the springs of praise in your soul as you review what the Lord has done for you, and who knows but that you will experience a fresh anointing of the oil of the Spirit of God. The old hymn tells us personally to count our blessings, to name them one by one, and it will indeed surprise us as we realise just how much God has done for us. Every single one of us is in need of such an enlarging of heart to make us outwardly and tangibly express our response to the kindness of God. Let the people of the Lord praise Him for His goodness. But there will always be a cloud on your soaring spirit, for you will come across many brutish people, that is, people in whose make-up of personality there is absolutely no capacity for registering spiritual values. It is a soul-chilling experience to meet them and it should make us all the more grateful to God who has opened our hearts to receive the word of His salvation. Read v.8 and see that the Psalmist's objective is that the Lord should be exalted. Then read v.14 and smile if you are no longer young,

[Back to Top](#)

93

Someone has said that the metrical version of the Psalms expresses the savour of the meaning of the Hebrew better than any other form of words. We cannot comment on this but certainly the marriage of words and music (Tune Stroudwater) when we sing this psalm in church leads into worship that must surely please the heart of the Almighty. Hear the people of God as they glorify their King. The Lord really does reign, and His throne is established from everlasting to everlasting. The floods of men and devils lift up their voices but the Lord is greater by far than the storms and when He speaks they must subdue themselves, they cringe from His presence. Remember how Jesus stilled the storm on the sea of Galilee and asked His disciples why they had no faith (Mk.4:35-41). The testimony of God's word (Scripture) is sure and has no need to fear the criticism of clever men. His word can be relied upon and it tells us that He is a glorious God and that those who stand in His courts

must be partakers of His holiness. There is no psalm of praise like a consistent life of holiness. This is pleasing to God. Praise and worship are practical matters.

[Back to Top](#)

94:1-11

When Christians run away from facts they build up a world around themselves that is false and bound to collapse sooner or later. When a Christian lives his life of service always looking for and measuring the fruits and successes he will be desolated in no time, for all through history the work of God has been marked by conflict, criticism and apparent failure. There is conflict and persecution in this psalm. There are the blasphemous words of those who hold holy things in contempt and stand aloof and pass by on the other side anything that claims to be issuing from the living God. There are those who openly sneer at all work that is truly evangelical and Biblical. Now faith must face these facts and work in the midst of them, but should never for a moment lose heart nor, and this is very important, become embittered. But how long will it go on? How long must we suffer people saying that God is not with us nor caring for us? We cannot tell, but the Lord knows (11). The Psalmist began with a virile prayer (1-2), in which he asks God to make Himself known as a God of recompense. It is Jehovah who has the power and the right to punish. It is the mighty God who works completeness of retribution. The language of this Psalm is blunt and searching (8) and those to whom the truth is addressed may not like it. Nor will they be disposed to be friendly to any preacher who speaks like this. But remember, it is the truth of Romans 12:19 that leads to the prayer at the beginning of the Psalm: Lord God, show yourself and make your righteous power known.

[Back to Top](#)

94:12-23

The strong message of yesterday's reading now becomes the comfort of God's people. The psalmist now encourages his fellows by telling them that present experiences are part of the educating processes of God; that in the end right must and will prevail; and that in both the righteous and the wicked God will have glory. It is only a fool who rebels against discipline and instruction. A person who realises he is being chastened and instructed by God knows that the issue is benefit that lasts forever. The Christian is not expected to enjoy chastening, for that would betoken a sick and morbid mind (Heb. 12:11), but he is required to see things in perspective. The dashed hopes and unfulfilled longings are not accidental. God is in them all, working painstakingly for good to them that love Him (Rom.8:28). The psalmist declares that it is the Lord who does the chastening. Can we not trust Him in the dark? When the heart aches, can we not find comfort in thinking that God has provided for us some better thing not yet made manifest (Heb.11:40)? Look at v.14. That is without question the word for today to some particular minister or missionary or battling Christian. In v.19 (AV) the word "thoughts", which could be read as anxiety or cares, refers to doubts or distracting thoughts which divide and distress the mind. When such thoughts crowded in, it was the knowledge of God's loving kindness that kept and strengthened him (18). The feelings may come and go but the fact remains that God is our defence. The end is never in doubt.

[Back to Top](#)

95:1-7

This section of the psalm is a call to worship and is followed by a warning concerning disobedience. Spiritual worship and practical obedience go together and abide in that order of precedence. When a Christian begins to wander into forbidden places you can be quite sure that the decay has been operating in the heart for some time. Secret backsliding of heart takes time to become obvious, but it always does. This is one reason why we must constantly draw near to God with thanksgiving for what He has done for us in the past, and reverent submission in all He has ordained and prepared for the future. Take plenty time to consider v.3 for our thoughts of God are constantly too small. When we let God be God and take His place as the ordering and disposing God we come to the beginning of worship. When we begin to grasp the greatness, the glory and the holiness of God, then we worship and bow down, not just in reverent posture in church, but in glad and willing surrender of our whole life to the good and acceptable will of God (Rom.12:2). It is not too much to say that our basic sin is that we try to unseat God and rule in our own and others' lives in His place. The chaos which results from our interfering

planning of other lives should warn us against ever trying it again. But there is a God whose ways are perfect and exquisite in strength and tenderness. Are things assailing you? Can you not trust Him? We are the people He shepherds with personal care. Trust Him, and worship.

[Back to Top](#)

95:7-11

These verses, beginning with the last sentence of v.7 are used in a stern application in Hebrews 3:7-11, where we have a warning against backsliding which has its origin in disobedience. God and His servant Moses were faithful to Israel but the people murmured, complained, became critical and discontented, and progressively disaffected from the servant of God, the work of God, and God Himself. That is the abiding pattern and we see it still. Do not deny the final alienation from God! We have it in Israel's history. They refused to go on and God eventually forbade them to go on. God blocked their way and a whole generation fell in the wilderness and their skeletons testified to the barrenness of their wasted lives. Notice that the work of God did not fall with the proud, soured, sullen Israelites. It was given to others. The work goes on, as it must do, and those who do not keep pace are left increasingly far behind. Israel tried to put God to the test to see just how much they would get off with. We do exactly the same when we piously say that God won't let us go too far wrong while we play and trifle with the whole range of emotions and activities. If you are hearing God's voice, don't refuse the word, else you too might fall in the wilderness.

[Back to Top](#)

96

Here is an anthem of praise called forth by the exhortation of Ps.95. It is possible that the occasion of the psalm was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem after the Captivity. God had done a mighty thing for His people in turning their captivity, they had returned from Babylon to their own land, and they were looking to the future with unbounded enthusiasm as they thought of the Temple becoming a house of prayer for all nations. This people were to show forth God's praises (Isa. 43:21), but their witness was not to be confined to any one place or any specially convened occasion. It was to be a daily duty to manifest the wonders of God amongst men (3). The heathen were to judge God by what they saw of His greatness and grace in His people (Ezek.36:23 AV). They must be shown salvation (2), greatness (3-6), worship that stems from holy living (9), and a life that is persuaded that God does in fact rule and govern among the nations. Last of all, testimony must be borne to the fact of a coming day of reckoning for the world of men. All this is referred to in the call to show forth God's salvation. Such witness cannot be done by words alone but by the clear, practical witness of a life that is proving the truth of God day by day. It is only if we are being saved that we can tell of salvation. Read again God's balanced word about fruitful service in Ezekiel 36:23. Is this the secret explanation of why we have so few converts? Do they see anything to be converted to? Let the Word become flesh (in our daily lives) and dwell among them!

[Back to Top](#)

97

The section of the Psalter from 95-100 comprises a set of songs in praise of God, highlighting different aspects of His being and power that are the grounds of the glad rejoicing of His creatures and their confidence for both present and future. Practically every phrase of this psalm is borrowed from elsewhere and is woven into a poem of praise by a man who has obviously been moved in mind and heart by his thoughts of God. This is a vital part of true religion. It constantly amazes us that so many people can talk in elegant and even exquisite language about God and His mighty works without any sense of awe or passion or wonder or sheer amazement. There comes a time when the rules of grammatical expression are a hindrance rather than a help and if we are to be true to the 'feel' of the message as well as its content, we must be swift to answer the leadings of the Spirit who can waft us and our hearers into the presence and awareness of things unseen and eternal. This is no warrant for the unseemly excesses of emotionalism that serve only to distract from the pre-eminence of God and His Christ, but a necessary plea to open the heart as well as the mind to the healing illumination of the truth concerning God. Real preaching should do this, and if it affects *only* the mind *or* the heart it is not preaching. It may be instruction, even biblical and theological instruction, but that does not kindle the heart or feed the

hungry soul. God is big, mightily big; His ways are past finding out; He is always at work, and He cares for you and me. Wonder of wonders: the King of glory lifts up the worms of the earth. What a thrill!

[Back to Top](#)

97

Although this psalm celebrates some particular manifestation of God working for the victory of His people, its message is wider and fuller. Verses 1-6 speak of the awe of God felt throughout the whole order of creation while v.7-12 speak of the results of His manifestation or coming amongst people. The Lord reigns. That is true regardless of the immediate material evidences, for His ways are often hidden and secret, though none the less effective. No matter the mystery of His workings we need neither fear nor doubt, for righteousness and judgment are the ground of all His actions. There is something quite frightening about the picture of His irresistible advance described in v.3-6. There shall be dismay among all who serve other gods, for all powers, human and spiritual, demons and angels, real or imaginary, all are compelled to serve the purposes of this one true and living God of Israel. But lest we get carried away by enthusiasm that too easily assumes that God is on our side, read the first challenge of v.10. Prove your love for the Lord by hating evil. Let there be an utter abhorrence of all compromise and trifling and half-heartedness. There can be no truce with sin. Hate evil, not only in your friends, in others and in society, but in yourself. This is the way of safety and deliverance and light shines on the path of the righteous.

[Back to Top](#)

98

If we could only grasp the truth of these psalms as we sing them in Church, our worship would be lifted on to a far higher level. Familiarity breeds contempt and a good tune often dulls the spiritual senses (as does a bad tune). We must be careful lest our praise: descend to a babbling of words that exercises the lips but not the heart. What a God we have! He is always doing some wondrous thing and when we are taken aback by the effortlessness of His performance He simply but searchingly says "O, you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matt.14:31) There are so many different personal messages and applications here that each must seek and find his own. The word speaks of God's glorious workings in the individual, the fellowship, and out to the uttermost: corners of the universe. But wherever the glorious deeds were done they were done by a God who needed help from no-one. His right hand and His holy arm have won Him the victory. He willed it and He performed it and it was not done in a corner. Now do we begin to sense what Paul meant when he said, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom.8:31). That is a challenge. Who indeed dare be against us? God is for us.

[Back to Top](#)

99

Here is a word to chase away sentimental and anaemic ideas about God that portray Him as a docile, grandfatherly being who smiles indulgently at the foibles of men and nations. The Lord reigns, the peoples tremble and the earth shakes for His name is great and terrible. He is a God to be reckoned with. Do not the Scriptures say that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31)? Of course you can fall into His hands as an adversary or as a child. How many have found as they have crashed in life that underneath were the everlasting arms of this same God! He is holy (v.3). He is holy (v.5). The Lord our God is holy (v.9). That is why all our dealings with Him must be holy. There were and are people who call upon God and He answers them. They are people of faith who walk in righteousness and obedience to His holy command and will. Their obedience testifies to the reality of their faith. We begin to pray when we obey and we cease to pray when we turn to our own way. The answers to our prayers are pardon and grace but nevertheless He still vindicates His holiness by chastisement. God never makes light of sin and even Christian men and women must not expect to get off with it. In fact, no one ever does, and the price is high. The only thing to do is to stop sinning.

[Back to Top](#)

100

One hesitates to comment on this psalm that has so often in so many different experiences been the mighty rock of the soul, the vehicle of praise of overflowing hearts and the source of tremendous assurance and peace. The paraphrase of these words in the hymn “Before Jehovah’s awful throne” gives them a slightly more solemn note than here in Scripture but the message is the same. It speaks of a God of almighty power who knows nothing of the decaying influence of passing years. He abides the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb.13:8; Jas.1:17). We are told to sing with cheerful voice, to serve with mirth, yes with exultant laughter full of happiness, and to tell forth His praises. Why? The answer is in v.3. Away with all proud thoughts of self-made men. (That is why there are so many poor specimens). It is God who has made us and not we ourselves. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. Remember the story of the ninety and nine sheep in Luke 15:4-7. The one that was lost was missed and valued enough to be searched for. Do you grasp what it means? The great and good shepherd knows and cares for His flock, and according to the Bible He knows each sheep by name (John 10:1-4). It is almost too much to grasp. *He* cares for *me*. Some of us as children were taught these words and truths that have stayed with us all our lives: “God who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea, who gave the light its birth, careth for me”. That is the God who sent His Son to die for us. What infinite blessing! He cares for me. What a difference that makes! The world is no longer a seething mass of anonymous people nor a barren wilderness. There is Someone to whom it matters about me!

[Back to Top](#)

101

There is reason to believe this is a psalm of David relating to the time when he purposed bringing the Ark of God to Jerusalem (cf. 2 Samuel 6:1-10 with v.2). It was God's judgment on Uzzah's irreverence and presumption in touching the Ark that caused David to ask when, if ever, the presence of the Lord would dwell with him. At first David was annoyed with God, as many another has been, but soon his longing could not be denied and he so desired that God would dwell with him that he began to make preparation. We could compare this psalm with Psalm 15. He begins his resolution with his own inner life, then as he goes on he deals with his actions, his companions and his dealings with people under his jurisdiction. His counsellors will be men of integrity. It is all very well to pride ourselves on being broadminded, so that we tend to indulge in and enjoy the company of evil and unprincipled men. We can do this especially if we think they can advance us and procure an increase in salary or an expense account that is not too closely looked into by those in authority. But anyone who lives life on that basis will never know anything of the blessing of God in personal or family life and certainly never in any kind of service, no matter how Christian it may seem to be. When will God come to your house? The answer is before you in the Psalm. Read it again..

[Back to Top](#)

102:1-11

This is reckoned as one of the penitential psalms and the title indicates the occasion for its use rather than the circumstances of its composition. There are three sections : v.1-11, 12-22, 23-28. The first and last are very alike, being full of personal pronouns, while the central section begins and continues : “Thou, O Lord.” Today's verses speak of a man who surveys his present experience and finds no gleam of light. He is suffering. But why? Is it for righteousness' sake, through being faithful to his God? Or is it like the case of Job where a man is drawn, unknown to himself, into the mystery of God's conflict with evil? Or is this man suffering because of his sins? It seems in v.10 that he thinks the last explanation is true. But if he is a man of God, then mingled with the stern rebuke that God brings on His children there is the fuller and wider purpose of good that is being worked out in such a way that even the sins of the saints are used to become instruments of righteousness. This does not minimise sin nor the loss it brings to Christians in the life that is to come (1 Cor. 3:10-15). These verses of the Psalm reveal just how great a toll sin can bring. It often takes this to bring us to the place of prayer that we find in the next verses.

[Back to Top](#)

102:12-22

How often in the Scriptures these two words, “But God”, form the bridge from despair to hope. They do so here. Over against the frailty and uncertainty and perplexity of man, there stands the eternal sovereignty of God which is the sure pledge of the ultimate restoration of God's people in the full glory of His perfected purpose. Into the darkness of suffering comes the light of the knowledge of God's set times. Then, no matter the existing circumstances of dereliction (as was the case after the Jews were returned from captivity in Babylon, cf. Ezra and Nehemiah), when God arises to bless and to prosper His people and work, then no man, power or devil can stop Him (Isa.43:13). Then out of the rubble that testifies to a people who have dishonoured their God by sinful disobedience, God will create a new people who will praise His name. Note, however, that v.17 suggests the part played by the prayers of faithful souls whose hearts grieve over the barrenness of the house of the Lord. There is no greater testimony to the authenticity of a work of God and to the power of the Word of God than to see a new people of God arising out of a situation certified by men as hopeless. This is witness and evangelism and those who see it, and more those who live in the midst of it, are left without excuse if they refuse to believe and share in such a mighty work of God. How different in contrast are those in v.14 whose first love is the Lord's house and its good.

[Back to Top](#)

102:23-28

From contemplating the future with its glorious consummation, the man of God returns to view the present toil and labour, so sadly lacking in the evidences of success and achievement and vindication. His sore experience is expressed in v.23. He is worn out and old before his time and he pleads that he may not meet an early death for he longs to see the issue of his labours and the victory of God. But of course that can never be fully here on earth, for people play their part and vanish from the scene while the work of God moves on through many generations to its climax. Then the Word declares that the work of God is one work down through the passing generations, and those who have shared in it by faithful service have not fallen to the ground to be forgotten. They shall continue, for they are part of what God has made. This is why Christians must be prepared and willing to suffer all manner of slights and disappointments and persecutions. They are dealing with things that last for ever, and are more concerned with the eternal quality of character than with cheap results that last but a few years.

[Back to Top](#)

102:23-28

I quote here some words by Rev J Stuart Holden who selects the first statement of v.23 as a seed thought on this psalm: “God has sometimes not only to lay a restraining hand upon us, but to make us conscious of our own weakness by placing upon us burdens far heavier than we can bear unaided, and by bringing us into circumstances which make helplessness our most vivid consciousness. Only so can He bring us to entire dependence upon His strength. This is the interpretation of the unexpected withdrawals of health, of mental vigour, and even of moral force, which have so often perplexed us almost to the point of doubting His care It is by suffering ourselves that we acquire sympathy with those whose entire lives are spent in weakness and pain. We are quite unable to help others who faint under life's burdens unless we too have felt the pressure of such burdens to be too much for us. Only they whose hearts have been broken by the love of God can minister to those whose lives are broken upon life's wheel. Hence it is that He weakens our strength, compelling us away from our ordinary toils to listen to His voice in quietness, and to acquire, in communion with Him, qualities by which alone we can fruitfully serve others. How entirely it would take resentment out of our spirits if we always remembered that life is vicarious and that we neither live - nor suffer - unto ourselves”.

[Back to Top](#)

103:1-5

The Christian life and the sanctuary of God are no places for laziness or carelessness. We are required to stir, gather and co-ordinate all our faculties so that we may give right and necessary expression of praise to God for all the wonders of His grace to us. We need to compare this command with the moaning, complaining spirit that

marks so much of our private and personal devotion. We are sorry for ourselves because the way of Christ is hard. The demands of discipleship are costly. The road is narrow and vexatious to our carnal selfishness. Well, would you rather not be a Christian at all? Would you be better pleased and more deeply satisfied if all that Christ has done in your life was undone? Would you part with the satisfaction of purpose in your life and go back to the aimless, demoralising way of the worldling? Perish the thought! Then praise the Lord. Note how the psalmist summons all the facets of his human personality to offer praises. Your brain, your voice, your gifts of art, literature, music, your capacity for kindness, your depth of feeling, all are needed, and it is for you to give or withhold the praise that is due unto your God. He forgives, heals and redeems the life so that we shudder at what we might have been. He crowns with kind tenderness, satisfies and renews, so that we marvel at the powers of recuperation both physical and spiritual that are found within us. "Bless the Lord and forget not all His benefits".

[Back to Top](#)

103:6-14

How expansive are the thoughts of God expressed by the holy men and women of the Bible. They were "far ben" (in close company) with God and knew Him well, and very often it was the stringency of their daily battles that led them nearer to His side. These verses tell how gracious God is in His dealings with people and how tender is His forgiving love. All His ways are holy and true and such is His forbearance with the gainsaying of sinners and saints that He is slow to anger. But there comes a time when He must rebuke in His displeasure, but even then, for His children, His anger endures only for a season until the gracious work is done. Is God a hard One to deal with? Can you say that in the light of v.10 or v.12 or v.13-14? He knows what we are like and He remembers when we have had a spell of demanding service and calls us aside to rest awhile. He knows our frame and makes allowance when sheer physical weariness seems to drain all spiritual vitality out of us. Remember how He ministered to the overwrought prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4-8. God put him to bed to sleep and watched over him. What a God! He knows our physical, mental and emotional condition, and makes full allowance for it, and yet will be content with nothing less from us than the full exercise of our redeemed personalities. He knows what we are capable of. See that we give it.

[Back to Top](#)

103:15-22

This singer of Israel is very realistic when he speaks of and faces up to how frail and transitory and insubstantial man is. Soon he is gone and in fact forgotten and the world grinds on. But those who fear the Lord and obey Him in keeping His commandments rest in the assurance of His eternal faithfulness and grace. The future is not in doubt for those who are His people. Every step and all the development of political, international, ecclesiastical, moral and spiritual issues are in His power. There is only doubt and of course fear for those who by the proud perversity of their hearts and wills are at cross-purposes with the Almighty. The end is sure because God is sure. Read v.19 and when you really believe it you will understand the exultation and worship of the remaining verses. The psalmist calls the whole order of creation to sing the praises of their God and his God. He visualises a tremendous host of heavenly beings who not only sing perfect praise but operate in the heavens and the earth to do the will of God. This is what lies behind the seeming *coincidences* of Christian life and explains the fantastically sudden collapsing of many blasphemous schemes of the ungodly. God has His armies, and they are faithful. They do His will. So do we. Bless the Lord, O my soul, for in the distance the triumph song is already being sung.

[Back to Top](#)

104

Read quickly right through this long Psalm. Here is a man who walks through life with his eyes open to the wonders and beauty around him in creation, from the tiniest flower in a crevice of rock to the soaring mountains and the rolling sea. He walks through the trees, hears the birds, sees the animals and lets his imagination range through to the idea of sea monsters. What a marvellous God to have planned and created all this beauty. Just think. If a fallen world can thrill like this what will it be when we see it and share it in its full perfection? Perhaps the best place to study this psalm would be away from everybody, alone on the hills of our native land

or out on the waves of the rolling sea so that we might become aware of the reality of the God from whom all this proceeds. But this God who made it all is present in it all. What we are reading could well be a commentary on the creation chapters of Genesis. It is also linked with Romans 1:19-20. The verse that fastens on the mind of this commentator is Gen. 3:8, the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. He was there to rejoice and be glad in the work of His hands and in fellowship with the creature He had made. The psalmist speaks of this in v.31 and then pictures himself walking with God (34) and it was sweet and he was glad. That is what happens when the spoiling effects of sin are done away. The Psalmist speaks of meditation, that means taking time just to sit and think about God, His greatness and His goodness. We will not *find* time to do this. We must *make* time.

[Back to Top](#)

104

The message of this psalm is not only that of the wonder and glory of God's creation but the wonder of it all being so perfectly under His control. God did not make the world and then leave it to its own devices. It all depends absolutely on God for its continuance. The details of the natural elements and the living creatures and man himself are all spoken of and we are told that all look to God (27). There is a detailed order in the providence of God which tells us that even the small happenings of the world and its history are not accidental. It is all known and ordered. Two particular thoughts are of tremendous comfort in these grim and uncertain days in which we live. The words may primarily apply to creation but in their wider sense they tell us of an ordering, predestinating and working God. In v.9 we are told of a God-set restraint beyond which no power of the sea or man or devil can pass. Cf. Jeremiah 5:22. But what of storms that shatter the sea walls and breach fields and homes. Such things are unavoidable in a world that has gone wrong in a very basic way. There is no cause to panic. It is permitted and governed to work the purposes of God. That brings us to the second thought, in v.30, which is of the ever present, ever operative Spirit of the living God, who knows no restriction but moves and works where and how He chooses. We are deceived into doubt because we do not believe what we are told in Scripture. The present historical situation is not chaos. God knows exactly where He is heading. Read Daniel 4:17,25,32. Power belongs to God and to no-one else. It is God who rules and directs history. If the Bible says this to arrogant rulers three times in one chapter we had better believe it. For your comfort and encouragement read Jesus words to the Roman governor in John 19:8-11.

[Back to Top](#)

105:1-12

Here is a lesson on how to read history and how to praise God when you see the marvel of His workings. It is one of our sins that we get so despondent and disheartened at times. When the road seems very uphill and the work of God particularly full of problems we forget what God has in fact accomplished. When you are climbing one of the mighty mountains of our land it is good and necessary to stop to get your breath and in doing so to look down to the ribbon of the road far beneath you. You can be amazed by how far you have actually come. So it is with the work to which we are called. Look back. Remember where and with what you started: sometimes very little! Is not the transformation rather staggering? Then why be so miserably despondent? Do we wilt because we are part of what we would call a small work, unknown and unrecognised? Let v.12 fill your mind and heart. They were few, very few, and they did not even belong to the place, but God for a long time had had His eye upon them and His heart set on them. He promised, and He is faithful to His covenant (8). Mind you, it took time, several generations, but to each one the oath of God was confirmed and strengthened by the knowledge of a God who could not lie, and each went on in his ordained allocation. This God, who preserved and prospered a handful of strangers and gave them the land, has not changed.

[Back to Top](#)

105:13-19

These are wonderful words indeed and we should never go hungry in soul as long as there are psalms like this in the Bible. God's chosen people were a wandering people with no continuing city on earth. There was a divine restlessness within them and they journeyed on. In their journeyings it was God Himself who guarded them even to the rebuking of kings for their sakes. Read of it in the stories of Genesis. God would not suffer men to

harm them, not because they were sinless, they weren't, but because they were God's private property (1 Pet.2:9-10). That is why the word remains to this day as a strict warning to every person who would harm God's people or work: touch not ... do no harm ... for you will have an angry God to deal with (15). Now right alongside such thoughts we have the human aspect of the advancing work of God: Joseph, a prepared instrument of blessing, worked hand in hand with God though he did not know it when he was sold as a slave. Was that slavery a contradiction of God's delight in him? By no means. But Joseph was then in prison, and although Genesis does not record any ill-treatment, we are told here that it was a grievous burden to the sensitive young man, and the literal words of v.18 say that the iron entered his soul. It was sore. The rejection through jealousy by his brothers, the degradation and dishonour in the eyes of the public were a cross indeed. The explanation is in v.19. Until it was time for God's operative word to begin to work, the speaking of God to Joseph, through the circumstances He had ordained, prepared the man for service that was to be his glory on earth and in heaven. That makes sense! Comforting and encouraging sense.

[Back to Top](#)

105:20-36

The story of God's wonder-working power moves on through the experience of Israel in Egypt. On the face of it they were a people cast off and forgotten, but God remembered. Right from the start He had prepared and laid His plans well. When the time came, prison could not hold the man God wanted. God took him out. God was with Joseph out of prison as He had been with him in prison and soon the young man was Prime Minister of Egypt. That made it safe for God to send the whole family of Jacob into Egypt. God made the children of Israel fruitful but just when they seemed to be getting right on top of things God stirred the hearts of Egypt to persecute them (Exod.1:6-14). If that had not been, Israel might have become so comfortable in Egypt, as the Church has become in the world, that they would have been deaf to the commands of God. But God has His effective methods of keeping things going and there is enacted before us the twofold working of God, even judgment and mercy. We must learn to expect these two to be operative together. That is the Biblical pattern. Note that in this phase too God had His man, Moses; a very different man from Joseph But of course he was needed for a very different phase of the one work of God. With God, everything is always just right and if we are prepared to wait on His word we shall not go wrong.

[Back to Top](#)

105:37-45

We were tempted to write that we come now to the end of the story but that would be terribly wrong. We come to the end of the psalm, but God moves on and is still moving, calling His servants, preparing both them and the circumstances of His deliverances. And His word still comes to every ear open to receive it unto obedience, as opposed to responding with curiosity or mental gymnastics. God brought them out, provided for the journey, protected them from danger and personally led them through the wilderness and settled them in the land of Caanan as He had purposed and promised. Why did God do this? That He might have a people who would keep His word and obey it. This is God's constant work. He is manufacturing a people who will really be His people. Recall how it is written in the last verse of John 2 that Jesus did not commit Himself to them because He knew what was in them. That explains much barrenness in Christian fellowships. There is no unction of the Spirit enlivening and sweetening the soul because there is not a desire to obey. The blessing of God is not easily won, nor when once won is it easily retained. We dare not become complacent (cf. Deut. 4:1, 40; 2 Cor. 6:1; 7:1; 1 Cor. 9:27). God is holy and His people must be like Him.

[Back to Top](#)

106:1-12

The previous psalm spoke of the faithfulness and grace of God to His people and this psalm deals with the unfaithfulness and ingratitude of the people towards the God to whom they owed everything they were and possessed. The story is the same to this day. Like our fathers before us we still resist the Holy Ghost (Acts 7:51-53). The record of our dealings with God is a testimony to our constant failure to understand His will and purpose and a consequent resisting of His will and a battling against His ordinances. We cannot even plead our misguided sincerity. We ought to have known better for we have been taught by God in word and deed. All

through this psalm we see the tragedy of a greatly blessed community deteriorating spiritually until it was a dishonour to God. What is the reason for such a frightening situation? The answer is simple: SELF. In these first verses we are told that when God did for Israel what they desired and asked, they then believed His word and praised His name. They were like some “wonderful” Christians, full of gladness and enthusiasm. But is that not a good thing? Does that not testify to faith? No! Just wait until that kind of Christian wants something that has taken his fancy and God refuses to give His permission let alone His blessing, then you will see the heart. Hymns of consecration are easily sung but in the grind of daily experience when it is a choice between God's will and yours it is a different story. Thy will be done? Do you say it grudgingly, or even resentfully, or fearfully? The last is the best of the three.

[Back to Top](#)

106:13-23

There was unbelief and hence disobedience in yesterday's passage and now three further sins are enumerated in the life of God's people. They lusted for the things of the flesh (13-15). They were jealous and resentful of spiritual authority (16-18). They worshipped the calf and revealed their impatience with God, rebelling with brash presumption and shamelessness against His direct commands (19-23).. In so doing they came perilously near to losing their birthright, for God was angry. If it had not been for the mediation of Moses God's hand would have been against them to cast them off for ever. Now go back to v.13-15. It was very soon after God's mighty deliverance that they forgot His blessings and began to murmur and complain. Always be suspicious of those who are forever “girling” or complaining: they have a wrong spirit. They forgot. They did not wait for God's counsel. Their pride made them impetuous. They were shocked at God “having the nerve” to keep them waiting for their heart's desires. Surely God knew how they were eating their hearts out for these tempting things. Use your own heart longings if you want an example. God knows what He is doing. He withholds what we are not yet ready to receive and if we insist, He may well grant our request with the same fatal consequences as here: leanness to their souls (15 AV). The whole of their life dried up and even their precious lusts had lost their attraction. But, they had got them and had to live with them!

[Back to Top](#)

106:24-39

How relentlessly this psalm ranges through specific instances of Israel's sin and failure. The margin references of your Bibles will lead you to the passages relating the various incidents, but the word as it stands here is sufficient in itself to point the spiritual lessons. On the borders of Caanan they evidenced cowardice and grumbled in their tents instead of preparing for advance. Notice, it was in their tents, out of sight of the leaders and as they thought, secretly. But God saw and heard. Then they joined in with the evil of false worship (Numbers 25) and some of the men of Israel were openly boasting of their evil when one of their own nation, Phinehas, stood up and executed judgment so that this thing should not continue amongst the people of God. In v.32-33 we have the story of how long strain finally brought down Moses the man of God (Numbers 20). What a tragedy when it is the Christians and not the unbelievers who are the heartbreak and the crushing agents of the servants of God! The Bible says that Moses should not have lost his patience and temper, and as a result he was excluded from literal entry into Caanan. But were not the men of Israel also to blame? Had they not been carried, and helped, and led by this man whom they so constantly despised until finally he fell? Then after Moses' day the people entered the land and proceeded to corrupt themselves with its evil. Look at v.34-36 and the issue in v.39. That is the reason for the command of Scripture to come out from evil and have no part with godlessness (2 Cor. 6:14-18). None of us is strong enough to trifle and take chances. It is fatal.

[Back to Top](#)

106:40-48

The whole course of Israel's history was marked by the pattern of chastisement, misery, then repentance, pardon, restoration and relapse. The reason, first stated in v.13, is echoed in v.43 which speaks of how the people provoked God. Their sin was self-will wherein they drove God to the limit of His patience. These thoughts are almost blasphemous but is it not a fact that we see these very things in our own lives and in others round about us. Repeated blessings and deliverances are recompensed to God with repeated rebellions. Now

note two things. First see just how much “rope” God gave them with which to lash and thrash themselves with their own folly, and secondly tremble at the thoroughness with which God brought home their iniquity to their lives (cf. Jer. 2:19). God even allows our enemies to oppress us and lord it over us so that we squirm in our frustration. And it is all our own doing! Then it is at this point that we grasp with something akin to desperation v.44. Why does He put up with us? Why does He not cast us off forever and find a people who are more worthy of His loving kindness and grace? It is that God is determined to make something of us in the end. He will not give up. He will finish the job He began. That is redemption. Now if God bears and forbears like that with us, is it not time that we became more human and allowance-making towards our fellows? Let all the people say, "Amen", to that, and do it.

[Back to Top](#)

107:1-32

After the opening three verses which call the people to praise, this section of the psalm divides into four parts each giving a vivid picture of the goodness of God in delivering His people from their distress in answer to their prayers. Read the passage now in relation to your own experiences as a Christian believer in a fallen world. In v.4-9 travellers in the desert who have lost their way are guided to a safe city. In v.10-16 prisoners in the dungeon or exiles suffering for their transgressions are released. In v.17-22 sick men, sick because of their sins, are restored to health. And in v.23-32 sailors, all but wrecked in the storm, are brought safe to their destination. We select just two verses to crystallise our meditation and worship today. In v.7 we read that God led His people not by the easiest, simplest, most pleasant nor most direct way, but by the *right* way. Just look back over the path you have been led. Has it not been right for your personality and nature? God understands us and leads by *His* wisdom and not *ours*. Then in v.20 we see that it was His word that was the means of their deliverance. It is a word often with a healing hurt and we must never refuse it as it comes day by day. Read in Job 5:18 and consider God's ways with you in terms of a skilled surgeon whose objective is to restore you to health so that you might live a good and healthy life. Do you see why this Psalm repeatedly calls us to give thanks to the Lord?

[Back to Top](#)

107:33-43

The theme of the last part of this psalm is God in His sovereign providence overruling amongst people in all kinds of experiences whereby with suddenness and radical action He turns a whole situation upside down. He raises up and He casts down. He makes fertile lands barren and wildernesses He makes to blossom with life and sweetness. This He does, not according to some fickle inclination of His heart to get amusement from men, but according to His righteousness. In this outworking of His holy and righteous purpose none can forbid Him. There is no power that can withstand Him. The oppressors of God's people and the resisters of His grace may swell their ranks and growl with many threatenings, but with a breath of His mouth they are overthrown and their downfall is public and obvious to the everlasting chagrin of evildoers. Now, says the Psalmist, when you take time to consider these facts you will see more clearly than ever the loving kindness of God. His eye never for a moment leaves the people and the work that are precious to Him. He is its shield and defender and He alone will prosper it to its fulfilment. That brings us back to v.7. He leads by the right way. Circumstances are always changing but God is steady. That is why He is referred to as the rock and refuge of His people (Ps.46:1-3,7,10-11). But we are not good at being still. That is why we often miss what God is saying and doing.

[Back to Top](#)

108

This could be called a borrowed psalm. Verses 1-5 are an enthusiastic utterance of praise taken from Ps. 57:7-11, where David had been in personal peril at the hands of Saul. Verses 6-13 are from Ps. 60: 5-12, where the prayer was for national deliverance in time of war. (The slogans in v.8-9 could be likened to the shouts of victory after a football match). In selecting these parts of two psalms the distressing circumstances are largely omitted and we are left with a song of sheer confidence that has been forged in their past experiences of God working in the nation. Here is a man whose heart is solely and wholly devoted to God. This is what really matters to David. His will is so given up to the will of his God that, whenever there is conflict or strife between

the two, David cannot be at peace until he is reconciled and yielded to God.. Then when he begins to pray, we find him possessed of a tremendous confidence as to the issue. One of our abiding concerns is that of wondering at any given time of service if God will be with us, and we do well to be exercised in that way, never taking it for granted that God will be with us.. But this man is sure, because what he does is not his own will but his God's. Who will bring me to my appointed victory? You will do this O God, unless you have become fickle and changeable just as men are and have cast me aside. It may seem to be so. But God is not like that. The Psalmist's heart is fixed on God, His love and faithfulness (4), and even though he recognises that God has been chastising His people, he is still sure about the issue. God will give His people the victory (13). It will be God's doing, and the glory will be His alone. This is echoed in the New Testament , for example, in 1 Corinthians 15:57.

[Back to Top](#)

109

The man of God appeals for help against a gang of enemies who seek his downfall by treachery and slander.

He singles out the leader and instigator of this persecution and invokes on him and all that are part of him the retribution which his evil conduct deserves. In v.21-25 the Psalmist reveals his pitiful state and sore wounded heart, and from that point on his words become a prayer that rises into confident anticipation. If we take note of the repeated use of the word "may" and the nature of what is asked in prayer, we might think the spirit of retribution in this psalm is too strong and sub-Christian, we have not yet sensed the devilish depths of evil inspiration that prompt and empower people to rise against the Lord and His anointed. The Psalms allow us and encourage us to express honestly to God what we are really feeling. But we leave it to God to decide what is to be done. There comes a time, when we pray the words of v.1, that we have reached the level of recognising the elemental opposition of evil where there can be no compromise: either God rules or the Devil. Either God's people are prospered and the Devil's human agents overthrown, or the world collapses in a chaos of immorality and unrighteousness. Look at v.17. The truth is that whatever a man sows that shall he also reap (Gal.6:7). But consider v.21, where David asks God to deal well with him. In the AV it reads "do for me". Do what? David does not stipulate, for God does not need to be told. He knows what is to be done and, if the truth be told, He is well on the way to bringing it to pass before the man cries to Him. Leave it to God, especially if you are vexed, baffled and brokenhearted this day because of evil opposition to you and to the Gospel. God is mindful and He is righteous.

[Back to Top](#)

110

This Psalm is quoted more often in the New Testament than any other. It divides into two parts: v. 1-4 speak of the King, who is also a Priest, and his army, while v.5-7 tell of his warfare and victory. The earthly term used throughout could well be applied to some human king, and only typically to a heavenly king (as is the case in many other Psalms), but the use and application of the Psalm in the New Testament, especially by Jesus, declares this to be a direct prophecy of the Messiah who was to come. The main references are: Matt. 22:43-45; Mk. 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34-35; Heb. 1:13; 5:5-6; 10:12-13. The Psalm speaks of "Great David's greater Son" and David the Psalmist utters here the word of Jehovah like a prophet, which in fact he is! The Messiah King, Jesus Christ our Lord, is seen exalted to the right hand of God, participating in the executive power of the throne and carrying out its purposes to completion. Note how the picture combines the idea of sitting in undisturbed tranquility with that of unceasing warlike strenuousness. Can you imagine your great King Jesus sitting at God's right hand and yet going forth with His armies into every battle (cf. Mark 16:19-20)? But the King who leads into battle and victory is also the unchanging and eternal priest who enters the presence of God on behalf of His people (Heb. 5:6; 6:20; 7:1-3, 15-17, 24-25; 8:1). This one Psalm could provide the readings for a whole month, but if this note encourages us to have great and glorious thoughts about Jesus it has served its purpose.

[Back to Top](#)

110

Without diminishing in any way the Messianic character of this Psalm, its words can be applied to become a great message of encouragement to all who are engaged in the work of the Lord. It is a work directed in power from the throne of the heavens and personally supervised on earth in all its detail. There is no doubt whatever as to the outcome, but let us face the stark facts of the second half of the Psalm: the issue is judgment as well as salvation. Read, for example, Revelation 19:1-16. The choice for every person is to be crushed beneath His conquering feet or to be exalted with Him. The reference in v.7 may be to the refreshing water that is supplied in the heat of the battle or, as some suggest, it may speak of the waters of affliction Christ drank on the way to His victory. If this be so we can parallel this verse with Phil. 2:7-9. The sure and certain victory of Messiah's kingdom is not to be won without human agency and we must see in v.3 the gracious, enlivening work of the Holy Spirit by which the people give themselves as "freewill offerings" to the Lord. This is no forced, reluctant service of duty but the swift willingness of a people who love the Lord. In a congregation it is great when you have people who are willing not having to be pleaded with or urged. Like the mysterious but plentiful dew in the morning their youth shall be renewed to them in warfare. But this is spiritual warfare and the soldiers of the King must be clothed in garments of holiness. What a picture of an army like dew born in the morning out of the womb of the night. This is God's doing. What hope is enshrined in the picture of a people willing in the day of God's power when He assembles His forces to work significant victory.

[Back to Top](#)

111

This Psalm and the next are closely connected, each beginning with the word "Hallelujah," Praise the Lord. In this Psalm the praise of the Lord centres on His works (2), all His doings in the past which He has worked on behalf of His people (6). There is a suggestion in v.3 that His work, His deeds, indicates His present, continuing work full of majesty and splendour before the eyes of men. But these glorious works are sought out and considered only by those who delight in them, and we are faced with the astonishing fact of experience that in all ages there are those who see the mighty workings of God before their very eyes, in circumstances and in the lives of those they know, and are yet quite unimpressed and certainly unattracted. Think of Jesus' words in Matt. 11:20-24. We need to remember that the pearls of God's grace are not to be thrown down carelessly for people to trample on with profane feet (Matt.7:6). The glories of God are to be searched out by those with earnest desire to have them (Matt. 7:6-8). When we do give ourselves to consider the ways of the Almighty we are astonished by the majesty, faithfulness and justice of all His words and works. But even more, we begin to understand that what the Lord does is for ever, and this contrasts with the transience of the works of proud man who, with his works, crumbles to the dust with amazing swiftness. Note also the tenderness of God in His provision for His people, and in the faithfulness with which He remembers His covenant promise to them. He still feeds us and gives us our heritage as He did to our fathers in the past. What a God! How great He is and how greatly to be trusted.

[Back to Top](#)

111

It is impossible to place too much emphasis on the last verse of this great Psalm which throughout has declared that it is those who have tasted of the goodness and power of God who are most hungry for Him. He is the God who works redemption sovereignly and gloriously and He is the covenant keeping God with whom there is no shadow of change. He is a God whose name is holy, and history is the record of His awesome acts, that is, acts which cause people to be hushed and awed in His presence. To reckon on this God as living and active at all times and in all places; to be prepared to meet Him in the common ways of life; to know that our lives are lived before His scrutiny and that all our ways and thoughts are known to Him; and to be persuaded that we must give an account to this same God in eternity; this is the beginning and the main part of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10; 4:7). It is the fool who says in his heart that there is no God (Ps.14:1) and who lives in this state of illusion. It is the careless man, be he ever so religious, who does not have God in his thoughts and thus lives life in imbalance. It is the profane man who lives without the fear of God governing and restraining and inspiring his whole life (Ps. 10:4; Ps. 36:1). Note how the Psalmist begins with the fear of the Lord, moves on to the theme of obedience and concludes with abiding praise. The fear of the Lord is not simply dread of the almighty and

eternal God, and it is certainly not cringing terror which inhibits personality. It is the willing yielding of the whole of life to do the will of God and to glorify Him. This is the fear of the Lord and the beginning of enjoyment. Read Psalm 19:7-14 and realise that the enjoyment stems from an attitude of reverence, bowing down and waiting on God which is of the essence of worship. It is not good when we are too familiar with God. Have we lost the concept of being still (Ps.46:10-11) and of bowing down before God, or are we too intent on enjoying “worship”?

[Back to Top](#)

112

Right through the Psalter there runs the theme of the divergent ways of the godly and the wicked, and experience testifies that this is in fact part of life. This Psalm, taking up the theme of the end of Ps. 111, declares that the source of all true happiness and fulfilment is in that godly and clean fear which leads to cheerful and thorough obedience to God's commandments. This is the life that is full, grows fuller and whose blessedness overflows to others. When we begin to envy those whose lives seem marked by spiritual fullness, stability, influence and peace, remember that there is an explanation. It is not merely that they have faith. They have learned obedience which has stamped the hallmark of quality upon their lives. There will never be an outward joy in the doing of God's will until there is an inward delighting in His law. If you look carefully at v.3 you will see especially in the second half of the verse, and also the second half of v.4, that there is a most striking resemblance between the attributes of God and those of the godly man. It may be too much to suggest that man's righteousness is seen here as a gift from God (through Christ) but it is not too much to say that the godly man becomes a reflection of God amongst others. Is this not what Christ called His people to be in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:16)? The man spoken of here is established in heart. That is his secret. He is God's man. This is the fundamental thing about his life and from it he will not be moved.

[Back to Top](#)

112

A simple division of this Psalm will help us to make it very practical and we would do well to read with it Matt. 5:1-16. The theme is the blessedness of the man who fears the Lord. We are given his description. (a) He is a God-fearing man and this governs all his attitudes and relationships. (b) His home is the testimony to his spiritual life for his riches are not material and his children are mighty in the things of God. (c) He is a man who gives of himself as well as his substance, and his life is a light to others. (d) He is inevitably a man of strength who does not panic in the face of evil tidings, because his heart being fixed, he knows that evil never has the last word. In fact, in the over-ruling providence of God, evil ultimately serves the purpose of God for good in the lives of those who trust Him. (e) Such a man as this will often be hated. This is the final proof of his genuine goodness. His experience will be like that of the Son of God. People will invent evil accusations and will twist and pervert every possible utterance for the simple reason that the sight of a good man is a convicting thing in the lives of those who do not fear the Lord. The righteousness, fidelity, grace and compassion of God are reproduced in this man. The word of God becomes flesh again in this man's life and when people see it they react as they reacted to Jesus. They took counsel how they might kill Him.

[Back to Top](#)

113

Psalms 113-118 form the Hallel, or Hymn of Praise, sung by the Jews at the three great Festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. In the Jewish home at the Passover Psalms 113-114 are sung before the meal and Psalms 115-118 after the meal. This particular Psalm would have been sung by our Lord in the upper room with His disciples while the Cross loomed before Him. It is in this spirit that we must read the great call to praise in v.1-3 for it recognises the immediacy of God and the glory of His working. The threefold emphasis on the name of the Lord refers to the total revelation God has made of Himself in word and in work. This fact is both the ground and the object of the Psalmist's praise. These words, sung in the upper room as they remembered the great salvation of the Exodus, lift up to view the glory of what the Saviour was about to accomplish on the Cross. It was indeed a world-embracing event covering both time and eternity (2-3). The second section speaks of God's exalted greatness (4-6), and the final section tells of God's amazing condescension to the dust and the

dung-hill to lift up the fallen. The Lord God is seen in His glory far above the highest heavens and yet He is not in any sense remote, for He stoops down to regard the earth with compassion and care. He is not a careless God but is mindful of men and women like us and visits them in order to save them and lift them up from their misery and to give them a place amongst the highest. There seems to be a reference in v.7-9 to the story of Hannah in 1 Sam. 1:4-11; 2:1-8. The immediate application may be to a king who wrote these words while waiting for the birth of his firstborn son, or the reference may be to the wonderful grace of God that restored His people from their captivity. But we do best to allow the Psalmist, by the Spirit, to cause our thoughts to centre on our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Back to Top](#)

114

Here it is possible that Israel, restored from exile, is looking back over past history and thrilling afresh at the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, an event for ever marked by the Passover Feast. It is a true means of grace to recall from the past the great things God has done on our behalf, and to allow such memories to inspire us in respect of the future. Note that the reference to Jordan as well as to the sea (3) reminds us that salvation is not only *out of* Egypt with all its bondage but *into* the land of promise to take possession of it, by warfare, and so to allow the full outworking of the purposes of God. The tragedy so often is that, in terms of salvation, we stop short of all that God has prepared for us. There is no need for this to happen and no excuse when it does happen, for God is always manifesting Himself on behalf of His people. Look back to your beginnings in spiritual life and salvation and see the sovereign working of God (1-2). Look down through your experience of life as one of the people of God and recall how the mighty obstacles that worried you so much were moved and melted from your path (3-4). What is the explanation (5-6)? It was the Lord's doing (7-8): He who is able to transform the most stubborn elements of experience and compel them to serve His purposes of mercy. If God be for us, who can be against us? Men and devils will rage and storm, as they did in the dark events of Calvary, but the issue belongs to God. You cannot escape the feelings of the convulsions of nature in this Psalm, and people are called to tremble at the presence of the Eternal God so near and so active. One translator renders the beginning of v.7, "Be in birth throes, O Earth," and thus we are reminded that it is not without travail and strain that new life and experience is born. Remember Gethsemane.

[Back to Top](#)

115

This is the beginning of the hymn sung by our Lord and His disciples after the institution of the Lord's Supper and before they set out for Gethsemane (Matt. 26:26-32). There is a note of confidence throughout as the people express their hope and trust in God. "Trust in the Lord, forever trust, and banish all your fears" (Scottish Paraphrases 20). The people of God have been taunted by their enemies concerning their God and His apparent indifference to their plight and His seeming inability to help or deliver them. But the answer of faith in v.3 stands as a rock of confidence. God may be invisible but He is never inactive. His workings may be beyond our comprehension and seemingly contrary to His own best interests (cf. Jesus' cry "My God why hast Thou forsaken Me?"), but the outworking of events declares Him to be perfect in His purposes. Some commentators link this Psalm with the time immediately after the Jews' return from captivity in Babylon, when the little company of Jews seemed so pathetically weak in the face of the contempt and enmity of those around them (Ezra 4:1-5; Neh. 4:1-6). If this is the true historical context, then the humiliation of Babylon was still in their minds and v.3 is an acknowledgment that even in failure and discipline they were still in God's will and safe-keeping. The battles of the men of faith are not proofs that God has abandoned them, but signs that they are in fact involved in the battles of the Lord. Do you see what this Psalm must have meant to Jesus on the dark night of His arrest when all forsook Him and He stood alone?

[Back to Top](#)

115

"The prayer in v.1-2 beautifully blends profound consciousness of demerit and confidence that, unworthy as Israel is, its welfare is inextricably interwoven with Jehovah's honour. It goes very deep into the logic of supplication ... There must be thorough abnegation of all claims based on self, before there can be faithful urging

of the one prevalent motive, God's care for His own fair fame God has given pledges for His future by His past acts of self-revelation, and cannot but be true to His name. His loving kindness is no transient mood, but rests on the solid basis of His faithfulness. If Israel goes down before its foes, the heathen will have warrant to scoff" (McLaren). This Psalm reveals how self-distrust and trust in the Lord go together in proportion, and we begin to see the reason for much of God's dealings with us. He would bring us to an end of ourselves so that we might begin to trust in Him. It is very important that we should have right thoughts about God because we grow to be like the gods we worship (8). A man's religion can never be hidden. You need only look at his personal life and the pattern of his activity and you will see what he believes in. The man whose life is grounded in the sure and certain promises of God does not sink in the storms that must surely come. His strength is both quiet and confident because his hope is in God and not in himself. In all his tenure of life on earth (16) his desire is to please God and to praise His name. Think of the parable of the talents in Luke 19:12-23 and cf. 2 Cor. 5:6-15.

[Back to Top](#)

116

This is a very personal Psalm giving thanks for deliverance from great and almost overwhelming distress. In v.1-9 we have the story of the man's peril and God's deliverance which evokes a confession of life-long praise and devotion. But we all know how, on both the human and the spiritual level, it is so easy to forget past mercies. We say, "I will never forget you for what you have done to help me," but all too soon our fickle hearts have forgotten. Our goodness is like the morning dew (Hosea 6:1-4) and all too soon we have returned to our old complacency and self-preoccupation. The Psalmist declares this will never happen, for he had been brought to the point of extremity and desperation in human experience and there he had found God in a new way. Death and Hell are spoken of as lying in wait for him, and whatever actual experience he referred to it was obviously deeply marked in thought and feeling. Derek Kidner suggests we could read v.3 as the cords of death and "the narrows of hell", If so, we begin to see a man feeling he is driven into a narrow gorge from which there is no human escape. From the depths, like a mighty rocket, his cry goes up to God, and it is not in vain. God answers far above his asking. He would have been content with mere escape from an evil day, but God wipes away his tears and grips him with a strong arm, leading him into fellowship with others who also have known the goodness of God in the land of the living. Why art thou cast down, O my soul? (Ps. 43) Return to the place of rest beneath the shadow of the Almighty (Ps. 91:1-2) and hear Him speak the words of salvation (Ps. 35:3b). But when we speak the words of v.9 (I will walk AV) we need the caution of Eccles. 5:1-5.

[Back to Top](#)

116

The saints of God, as we find in Scripture, are human and open to the normal fears of human nature and to the bitterness of the Devil. How often have we all spoken the words of v.11 (all men are a vain hope AV) when life has been hard and friends a bitter disappointment. But has not the Lord proved Himself then, giving us not the bare minimum consistent with safety but the maximum we were capable of receiving? In v.10 the RSV reads, "I kept my faith, even when I said I am greatly afflicted." But the Psalmist hurries on to speak of the God who has come so bountifully to his help. It is as if he searches his heart to think of what he can do to show his gratitude to God. Then he seems to sense that his best thanksgiving is to take more fully what God is offering to him in the cup of salvation and in that ever deepening fellowship to bless the name of the Lord before others. Read these verses over and over again and let your soul rest in the word "precious" in v.15. Do you not want to make v.16-18 your own prayer? It is a surrender and a commitment you will never regret.

[Back to Top](#)

116

We give this comment from Dr. G. Campbell Morgan as a final meditation on this wonderful Psalm. "In the series constituting the Hallel it is the song of the delivered rather than in any sense of the Deliverer. Delivered from death, from tears, from weakness, the soul asks: 'What shall I render unto Jehovah, for all His benefits toward me?' Here is the answer. The cup of salvation is the cup of blessing, which is given to the soul. Let the soul take it and drink it, but let him remember that the very partaking is in itself of the nature of a pledge of loyalty; it is the oath of allegiance in which he calls upon the Name of Jehovah. When the disciples joined in

this song, their Lord had already taken a cup from the Passover Board, and given it to them to drink, declaring it to be 'My blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many unto remission of sins'. If He (Jesus) joined them in that song, and it is most probable that He would do so, He sang as the One Who, by entering into all the experience of their desolation, Himself being sinless, was able to fill the cup with blessing for them. Within a very little while after this singing, He, in Gethsemane, spoke of a cup, and, in complete surrender to His Father's will, consented to drink it. That was the cup of sorrows, of bitterness, of cursing. Having emptied it, He filled it with joy, with sweetness, with blessing. When we take that cup let us never forget the cost at which He so filled it for us."

[Back to Top](#)

117

This shortest of all Psalms is quoted by Paul in Rom. 15:11 as one of the Old Testament statements which foretold the extension of God's mercy and salvation to the Gentiles. Here is a word that must shatter for ever all narrow exclusiveness, and bring home to the hearts of a privileged people that they have been blessed signally by God *in order that* they might become a blessing to others. How easy it is to sit back and admire our own spirituality, and in doing so make our possessed salvation into a dry and dusty object shut up in a glass case, and altogether unattractive. What a contrast to the glorious Gospel message that tells of the great mercy of God towards even the greatest of sinners! Verse 2 could read, "His loving kindness has been great over us and His pledge of love is for ever." In New Testament language it declares to our needy hearts that, "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20 AV). What a Gospel to declare to the world of sinners. Little wonder the Apostles were not ashamed. Think of these words on the lips of Jesus as He moved towards His death on the Cross. In that Cross we see for ever the truth about human sin and at the same time the truth about the mercy of God. Truth alone gives us no hope, for like the law it condemns. Mercy alone apart from truth strikes at the fundamental righteousness of God and leaves us without certainty. But mercy and truth meet together in the Cross, and this is life and hope. Read Rom. 5:6-8, 19-21. Praise the Lord.

[Back to Top](#)

118:1-16

This was Martin Luther's favourite Psalm to which he turned when it seemed no man could help him. It is the last of the Hallel Psalms and is filled with a spirit of jubilant thanksgiving. The words are so vivid and personal that it is scarcely necessary to give any exposition. We are not concerned to suggest a historical context for this Psalm, nor to draw out the various allusions to high points in Israel's history. This is a word to all engaged in the work of the Lord and it applies to the work and also to our private persons in relation to all the enemies, human and demonic, that we must surely meet. We are to recount our deliverances and draw assurance from them with regard to the future. Whatever circumstances seem to suggest, no power can ultimately harm, let alone overthrow, the person or the work that is in the hand of God. How often the Psalmist cries of being hemmed into a narrow gorge, trapped hopelessly according to all human assessment, only to be delivered and led into a large or open plain by the intervention of the Lord. This is not Old Testament, pre-Christian experience no longer to be faced by the Lord's people. Think of Paul in 2 Cor. 4:7-12. Do you not see your own experience described in v.10-13, unable to get rid of your tormentors who are all around you, buzzing like angry bees or crackling like a thorn bush on fire with sparks everywhere and acrid smoke stinging the eyes? If the word "quenched" in v.12 (AV) is the true translation think of the sizzling noise and the cloud of smoke or steam which, although it is startling, signifies that the fire is finished! We could well apply v.13 to the hand-to-hand wrestling with the Devil as well as with men. BUT, the Lord was there to take our part (6-7). Add to this Psalm the words of Isa. 54:17. Now, give thanks to the Lord for He is good.

[Back to Top](#)

118:17-29

Note how the singer brings together the strokes of the enemy and the chastening of the Lord, recognising that even the most wicked deeds of evil people are overruled and conscripted into the service of the Lord to act as means of blessing and advancement for His people. The bitter dealings of men and devils are intended to destroy, but the strong disciplines of God have a purpose of healing. This we must remember, and learn to

recognise and discern the Spirit that is at work in our circumstances. It is with thoughts such as these that the people draw near to the House of God where the gates of righteousness signify the conditions for entrance. Those who enter in must be righteous like the God who dwells there. Let us never forget this. There is a "holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). This is exactly what God has accomplished for His people and given to them so that they can enter His presence with boldness and hope (v.5, 14, 21). Think of Wesley's words: "Clothed in righteousness divine." And this salvation is not complete until the people do in fact come in the fullness of salvation into God's presence to worship and have fellowship with Him. In a full spiritual sense we are delivered from all our enemies, our sins, fears and struggles, and we begin to enjoy the God of our salvation as He enjoys us. If we keep the interpretation of the Psalm on the human and historical level of Israel, then v.22-24 speak of the weak and contemptible Israel, tossed aside and counted as nothing by men, now being seen as fundamental to the purposes of God. It is always God's method to choose the weak things of the world to confound the things that are strong (1 Cor.1:26-29). He has declared it will be so, but when He does it for us in a way that involves the strong crying and tears of prayer, we are astonished. When we begin to believe the sure promises of God and to recognise His everlasting faithfulness, we shall begin to let God's peace rule in our hearts, and this will teach us the sacrifice of praise.

[Back to Top](#)

118:17-29

It would be wrong to conclude our study of this Psalm without allowing v.22, 26 and 27 to lead our hearts to the New Testament and to Jesus, who applies these words to Himself in a solemn warning to the Jews of the consequences of rejecting Him. Read Matt. 21:42-46; Acts 4:10-12; 1 Pet. 2:1-8; Eph. 2:19-22. See also Matt. 11:3; 21:1-11; Mk. 11:8-11; Luke 19:37-41. The exact meaning of the reference to the horns of the altar in v.27 is not clear, but we note that this was where the blood of the sin-offering was sprinkled (Lev. 4:5-7) and the person who fled to the horns of the altar was in fact safe there (1 Kings. 1:50). The word "sacrifice" (AV) is obscure and may mean "festival" which would seem to suggest that the verse speaks of the people being summoned to gather round the altar in an act of worship, thanksgiving and praise. But to the Jew, the altar is always the place of sacrifice where atonement is effected by the death of God's appointed lamb. Whichever way we take it, can we not imagine these words on Jesus' lips on the way to Gethsemane and the Cross? It makes one think of Isaiah 53. G. C. Morgan writes, "All that was coming was necessary. He was bound to suffer and to die; but He was in the one place of sanctuary, of safety. In His co-operation with God on the sacrificial pathway He was assured of perfect victory. He was accomplishing the Exodus." Now go to Luke 24:25-27, 44-48, and let this be your guide in all your Bible reading - Christ in all the Scriptures.

[Back to Top](#)

119

A general introduction to the long Psalm is necessary before we take many days to read it section by section. The all-pervading theme is the Law of the Lord in all its fullness, variety and glory, and the power of the Psalm lies in the unwearied reiteration of this grand theme. One or other of the words for the Law of God, such as, word, saying, statutes, commandments, testimonies, judgments, ways or precepts occurs in every verse except v.122 and 132. The Psalmist's prayer is that God will teach, revive and preserve, and his promise or vow is to keep, meditate, observe and delight in God's law. From every possible angle of human experience the Word of God is considered and extolled. "The Psalmist is one whose earnest desire and steadfast purpose is to make God's law the governing principle of his conduct, to surrender all self-willed thoughts and aims, to subordinate his whole life to the supremely perfect Will of God, with unquestioning faith in His all-embracing Providence and unfailing love." (Kirkpatrick) To the Psalmist the Law is not a mere code of rules, moral or ceremonial, but the record of all the revelation God has given to us of His will and His saving purpose. Such a study is counselled in Dent. 6:1-9 and its spiritual fruit is spoken of in Jer. 31:31-34. We shall find that in practically every verse God is addressed in some way by this man whose desire is to please Him. The theme is living fellowship with God through His word, and this we will learn as we study the Psalm in detail.

[Back to Top](#)

119:1-8

To obey is always better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:2) and the Psalmist recognises that obedience to the law is the source of man's true fulfilment and holiness. He therefore prays that this word of the Lord might become the fixed rule of his life and that he might learn to understand it better. Integrity of life is defined as walking in God's law, and this "walking" consists in ordering the decisions and activities of life in conformity to God. This is a continuous decision, and practical obedience is both the consequence and the proof of a whole-hearted seeking after God. But further, the person who sets himself to do the will of God in this way is the one who is preserved from evil. Think of the tremendous statement of Jesus in John 14:30 affirming that the Devil had no foothold in His life by which he could work evil. This is indeed part of the blessedness of the believer who delights to do God's will. The Psalmist goes on to marvel that God has not allowed us to remain in the uncertainty of silence but has spoken clearly and plainly, not merely to instruct but to claim obedience. It is this thought which makes the Psalmist turn to prayer so that all the purpose of the God who has so spoken might be fulfilled and realised in his life. We shall see more and more that the Word of the Lord creates appetite and hunger, as well as satisfying, and this is one reason why we must see to it that our Bibles are not neglected. That may well be the secret of the spiritual failure of many.

[Back to Top](#)

119:9-16

God's law is the purifying safeguard of life from youth through to old age, and in a generation of moral corruption we must seek to ground the thinking of the young in the pure truth of God. In like manner we must warn those who are past their youth that they may not take any liberties. The Christian world is full of men and women who in their earlier days were eager and ardent in the things of Christ, but who with advancing years have fallen away tragically. The Word of the Lord is a treasure which can never be exhausted, and we need at all stages of life to be examining, not only the Word, but also our lives and loves in the light of the Word. To the young, whose lives are being shaped and planned, the Psalmist counsels that they should consider themselves, where they are going and what they are becoming. What tenderness of spiritual conscience there is in v.11. Here is a believer who wants to walk close to God and never stray. In v.10 he first declares the integrity of his position and his desire; then, in the same breath, recognising the subtle deceit of the human heart, he prays that he may not wander. Think of the many who have made shipwreck of their lives, remaining spiritually fruitless, lacking drive and direction. They have retained their doctrinal position, guarding against any defect or innovation that is not in agreement with the Word; but they have wandered, through not examining themselves (9), through neglect (11), through lack of witness (13) and through preoccupation with worldly riches of various kinds (14). They did not mean to apostatise, but they wandered. How very sad (Judges 16:20). But there is hope!

[Back to Top](#)

119:17-24

There will always be hope for the one who can pour out his heart in prayer like this and God will not withhold His answer. In v.20 the Psalmist declares that his soul is crushed with longing for the fuller knowledge of God's Word and Will, and in v.17 his confession is that his desire for life is that he may have continued opportunity to obey and serve the Lord. This is life as far as he is concerned (Phil. 3:7-14; 1:20-24). As we note the desire of this man's life and the total lack of reluctance in his attitude to serving the Lord, note also that his circumstances were far from easy. There is a false idea among many that it is easy for the saints to be saintly. Far from it! It is those who go hardest against the tides of evil who know most about the strength of evil and the bitter retaliation of evil people against true and gracious godliness. Little wonder then that this man is possessed with a sense of homelessness (19) for he is indeed a stranger and pilgrim in an alien world (Heb.11:13 AV). All the more reason then why he should plead for the opening of his eyes to see and receive ever new revelations of grace in the law of the Lord. It is trite to say it, but so fundamentally true, that yesterday's grace is not sufficient for today's needs.

[Back to Top](#)

119:25-32

Human experience is seldom simple and we are brought face to face with the mystery of iniquity and the marvel of the permissive will of God when we see the choicest saints suffering the most bitter agonies. We think inevitably of Job in the Old Testament and Paul in the New, and begin to realise that the dimension of our spiritual service can seldom be interpreted or understood only in terms of *our immediate* experience. Paul wrestled with his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10) and battled with relentless circumstances (2 Cor. 4:7-12; 11:23-33) as the Psalmist does here. In each case these men of God were driven to the quickening Word of God for life from the dead, for instruction, for strength and for hope. This is no vain thing, for having cried to the Lord, the Psalmist is heard and answered, and this again ministers strength to go on and to ask for more and more understanding. He has no desire to escape from the battle, but is determined to wage a good warfare right to the end (1 Tim.1:18; 2 Tim. 4:7). In v.27 understanding and meditation are brought together: "I will meditate on thy wondrous works." Take time to ponder what God has done with you in the past, lest you miss the promptings and indications He gives concerning the future. "Many a sunbeam is wasted for want of intent eyes." Blessed is the man with eyes to see God at work in his own life and times.

[Back to Top](#)

119:33-40

If we feel there is a great deal of repetition in this long Psalm it may indicate that the writer is aware of how easily circumstances and the flesh can cause even deep devotion to cool. When our hearts are stirred, it is all too easy to spill out the kindled emotion on objects that are far from the best and far from God, and indeed calculated to do nothing but hinder our true and pure service. It is one thing to confess the desires of the heart towards God but another to translate them into deeds. This is the Psalmist's concern in this section and he knows how dependent he is on the good grace of God to enable him to be and to become all that he should be. "The heart is often led astray by the eyes. The senses bring fuel to its unholy flames To look longingly on earth's good makes us torpid in God's ways; and to be earnest in the latter makes us dead to the former. There is but one real life for men, the life of union with God and of obedience to His commandments." (McLaren) Taking it in its widest meaning, earth's glamour has a strong pull and constitutes a most powerful rival for the affections of the heart over against God and His will. Consider 1 John 2:15-17; 1 Pet. 2: 11-12; Rom. 12:1-3; 2 Cor. 6:14 - 7:1. Again, taking the words in their fullest sense, what shall it profit us if we gain the whole world, and lose our souls in the process? This is a good time to be assessing the things that mean most to us. We can then pray in the words of v.40 for a quickening of languishing desire.

[Back to Top](#)

119:41-48

In this section the Psalmist is concerned to witness a good confession before others, believers and unbelievers, and we need to remind ourselves of the spiritual necessity of this part of Christian life and service. Consider Rom. 10:8-17 and 1 Pet. 3:12-16. We will never be able to bear such witness apart from our living association with the Word of God, which is spoken of in v.43 as "the word of truth". But if we speak the truth, instructing the people in the things of God, without knowing these truths in a dynamic and personal way in our own lives, it will be evident to all that our religion, however sincerely we hold it, is theory rather than practical experience. It is for this reason that the Psalmist asks that the experiences of God's loving kindnesses and mercies (unfailing love v.41) will be granted to him, so that in the face of contemptuous dismissal of his faith, he may answer in the way that brooks no denial or contradiction. We must be able to say, "Whereas I was blind, now I see" (John 9:8-25). This does not mean, of course, that all critics will be silenced by facts, nor won over by evidences of God's gracious power in human lives (Acts 4:13-22). But it will produce in the believer an ever deeper desire to delight in the truth of God and so to make his witness continually before the highest in the land if the need should arise (v.46). When we come to v.48 we find ourselves once again in the place of prayer. We are never far from this place, if we are living witnesses to God's truth.

[Back to Top](#)

119:49-56

The only petition of this section is in v.49 and in it the servant pleads his relation to his Lord, affirming that as God has encouraged hope in his heart, so God must intend fulfilling it. This is a great affirmation of the integrity of God. He is neither fickle nor perverse, and He does not play with those who trust in Him. The kindling of hope encourages faith to lay hold on the expectation of answer, and this is a lesson we must learn concerning prayer. We must be alive to the promptings of God the Holy Spirit who is always seeking to lead us on from the stagnation of unbelief to positive intercession and trust (Rom. 8:14-27). Note how the Psalmist was the target of derision as the proud hurled their darts of contempt at him because of his trust in the Word of the Lord. Be careful of the mockers. "To be laughed out of one's faith is even worse than to be terrified out of it". Hot indignation (horror) mingled with sorrow fills his heart as he sees men abandon the ways of righteousness and this confirms his awareness of being "a stranger and a pilgrim" (54) a lodger, a thought that is mingled with songs rather than sorrow. This is because the Psalmist, in the midst of all the changeable experiences of life, some of them very painful, has remembered the name of the Lord and all the character of God that is revealed in His name. He is indeed the all sufficient God, El Shaddai, Gen.17:1 footnote) the "enough God"!

[Back to Top](#)

119:57-64

If we have God we need nothing else; if we have not God we have nothing at all. If God be for us, who can be against us (Rom. 8:28-39)? If God be against us we have no hope at all (Ps.34:15-16). But note how the Psalmist is clear that he did not win over God by keeping the law, but is moved to keep the law because God has found him and laid hold on him. Again we see no complacency whatever (v.60) and he brooks no delay in carrying his worship into obedience. It is one thing to "maintain the spiritual glow" (JBP) throughout the day, but when weariness overtakes us and physical and mental limitations assert themselves many a faithful servant of the Lord fails (1 Kings 19:1-8). But this man, even in the wakeful seasons of the night, fills his thoughts with God. The more he looks throughout the earth, the more he sees the mercies of God. Our jaundiced eyes seem conditioned to focus on the faults and failures of things and people. How we need to learn to count our blessings. We would be astonished by the goodness of God. Try it!

[Back to Top](#)

119:65-72

This section deals with God's goodness to His servant in all experiences, even in the discipline of affliction. It is often only in looking back over a lengthy section of life that we realise how accurate and well adjusted God's ways with us have been (Ps. 107:1-8). There is scarcely any need to comment on v.67, 71, save to point to Heb. 12:3-13. The prayer of the man of God is to be taught good judgment (v.66) which is literally "goodness of taste", that is the power to distinguish swiftly, surely and sensitively between right and wrong. This is the desire of the man who has been through the furnace of affliction and it is wonderful to behold someone so concerned to walk right in the centre of God's will. Remember how deep the waters are that many of the saints have had to go through in this kind of spiritual education in holiness. But remember also that Satan can exercise a tyranny over the saints by terrorising them with fears of going wrong. This is the work of hell, because it slanders God and makes Him out to be One who is waiting for His children to err so that He can smite them in rebuke. God is in fact more the Father of the prodigal, allowing the misery of the far country to do its work, but waiting to receive the wanderer back home. Let us finish by pinpointing the statement of v.68 and linking it with Deut. 8:10-20.

[Back to Top](#)

119:73-80 (

It is clear that in the school of affliction the Psalmist has learned the inestimable preciousness of God's law, for he has tasted of its instruction and benefit and strength. Now he prays that he may taste the exquisite comfort of that same law, not merely for his own sake, but for the encouragement of his fellows who have watched God's dealings with him (v.74, 79). The opening and closing verses of this section are virtually a prayer that God will go on and complete His work in His servant's life. There are two thoughts stemming from this. In the first

place we have confidence from the Scriptures that God who has begun a good work in us will perform it to the end in relation to our personal salvation and also to our service (Phil. 1:3-6; Gen. 28:15). The second lesson concerns the testimony of our lives and the influence of our example on others of the Lord's children. We can never escape from the challenge that we *are* our brother's keeper, and the liberty we enjoy in our lives must always be tempered by the spiritual responsibility to show a good example (1 Cor.8:11-13; Lk. 17:2 AV, where offend means "cause to stumble"). It is a happy Christian indeed who is able to say to others, "Follow me, as I follow Christ". (1 Cor. 4:15-16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17, 20) This is the standard.

[Back to Top](#)

119:81-88

Do you ever wonder at the constant difficulties, persecutions, battlings and trials in the lives of the saints in the Scriptures? This is explained of course by the fact that God's people are strangers in an alien world, and also engaged in an unremitting battle against the powers of evil who will never miss an opportunity for an attack. We must not be surprised by the rigorous conflict, nor must we be preoccupied with it, nor must we fall into the trap of going out of our way to seek trouble (1 Pet. 1:3-9; 3:12-17; 4:12-19). Whatever our particular trial, be it difficulty or ease, we must go constantly to the Word of God to be instructed in understanding, and to find in person the God who we believe is ordering our path. The Psalmist here speaks of his eyes straining for the answer to the prayers of his heart, and being stung as if with acrid smoke from his many troubles, but still he waits for a word from God, believing it must come. The picture in v.83 is of a wine-skin (bottle) hung up in the rafters and gradually becoming blackened and shrivelled by the smoke. The emphasis seems to be on the bad rather than the beneficial effects of suffering and persecution. Let us never be too pious in dealing with those who are struggling and suffering. They may be very near the precipice of capitulation and even though their captivity be turned, many scars are carried for the rest of life. If we have inflicted such scars, let us be very careful and restrained in the future.

[Back to Top](#)

119:89-96

The whole order of nature and creation is seen to be upheld by the Word of the Lord and governed by His will from beginning to end. The will of God is no static thing but is the sustaining energy of all things, which things in their totality are conceived of as being the servants of God. It is no vain thing to declare that *all things* work together for good to them that love God . (Rom. 8:28-32) and unless we learn to see all the circumstances of life conspiring together to do God's will (Eph. 1:8-12) we shall in fact perish and disintegrate in our affliction, as the Psalmist nearly did (92). Now there is only one way to stand on this sure ground of confidence and that is to bring the whole of life constantly under the scrutiny of God's Word, to be cleansed and fed and stabilised. It is the Word that renews life (93) and that is why it is always so obvious when a Christian stops his or her reading of the Bible. It is also by the Word that we have a true sense of values, finding the truth of 2 Cor. 4:16-18 to be a thoroughly sane and practical basis for our philosophy of life. Life's experience has taught the Psalmist that there is a flaw in every human excellence, and a limit to what one may legitimately expect from ones fellows. But there is no end to the broad commandment of God and its promises are sure, waiting to be laid hold upon by each one of us.

[Back to Top](#)

119:97-104

There is no petition or request in this section, for the Psalmist is concerned only to pour out his testimony to the effect that he has found the word of the Lord a fountain of sweetest wisdom. He is not slow to recognise the wisdom of his enemies, of the world's teachers, and of those of long years of experience (98-100), and we do well to be of like mind. There is much to be learned from these sources and we must be humble enough to sit at the feet of those who are wiser and more qualified in certain fields than we are, though they are not necessarily more spiritually instructed. But the wisdom of the world is always limited, for the simple reason that it lacks the eternal dimension. The world reasons on a horizontal plane, but true wisdom comes down from above (Jas. 3:13-18; 1 Cor. 1:19-31). Heavenly wisdom is never the possession of the casual enquirer. It must be pondered, meditated upon and digested (99). Even then we must not stop. It is as we carry the knowledge thus won into

practice that we come to know it with ever greater assurance and conviction and dynamic. This in turn requires an abstinence from all that would militate against the truth, and this again leads to sweeter delight in the Word and a deeper and truer spirit of discernment. It is a good and happy day when a believer learns to detest all that is false and sinful and hypocritical towards God, especially if he hates these characteristics in himself rather than in other people.

[Back to Top](#)

119:105-112

"A lamp is for night; light shines in the day. The Word is both to the Psalmist. His antithesis may be equivalent to a comprehensive declaration that the Law is light of every sort, or it may intend to lay stress on the varying phases of experience, and to turn our thoughts to that Word which will gleam guidance in darkness, and shine, a better sun, on bright hours." (McLaren) We must never think of the Bible as a word to be turned to only when we are up against it and when all other possible sources of help have been tried and found wanting. To have this attitude is a great insult to the Almighty. It signifies little personal knowledge of God in His grace; and it explains why so many find the Bible a dull book of utter mystery! Note how the Psalmist is glad to speak of the Lord and of His Word, and be sure that this testimony was not uttered only in the company of like-minded believers. What consternation there would be in shop, bus, factory, office and college if some Christian accepted the first *natural* opening in conversation to say, "I found a wonderful thing when I was reading my Bible this morning before leaving for work. Would you like to hear it?" Of course, there are not many who read their Bibles in such a way as to be bubbling over with delight in its truth. This delight leads to determination which, in a world like this, leads inevitably to criticism and even affliction. But that in turn will make the true believer even more hungry for God's word and more determined to stand by it. Note how this man says that even when his hands are full with his own problems, he still does not forget God's law (109). This is faith, and where there's a will there's a way. This is the right way to end a day..

[Back to Top](#)

119:113-120

What is next week or the next year going to hold? What kind of people are we going to be by the time it has run its course? The opening words of this section "I hate double-minded men," are very blunt and refer to people who are neither one thing nor the other. They are half spiritual and half carnal, sometimes enthusiastic for God and sometimes cold hearted and casual (cf. 1 Kings 18:21; James 1:8). The Psalmist is very aware of the basic division between those who have a single eye for God's glory, and those who are prepared to mortgage God in the interest of their own desires. In v.113-115 he declares his determination to hold fast in God and this passes into prayer in v.116-117, for the man is aware both of his own weakness and of the strength of temptation. How often we forget one of other of these. How dangerous if we forget both in the day when we have opportunity to do evil! In v.118-120 it is the awareness of the fate of those who despise the statutes of the Lord that intensifies the Psalmist's adherence to God and to His Word. Note how the thought of separation from wrong company is clearly a part of this man's spiritual life of discipleship (115). This is a principle confirmed in the New Testament in 2 Cor. 6: 14-7:1. If we choose to be constantly in the company of those who water down the precepts of God and sit lightly in consequence to eternal and spiritual values, we shall most certainly be contaminated by them. But if the demands of duty require us to be in constant association with the godless, and we see to it that we hide the law of the Lord in our hearts as we are learning to do in this Psalm, then we shall be a saving and sanctifying influence upon our fellows. Salt that keeps its savour is a blessing this world sorely needs (Matt. 5:13-16; John 17:6-20).

[Back to Top](#)

119:121-128

How wonderfully these godly men give expression to the deepest thoughts of their hearts in the presence of God. Not many can say the words of v.126 without coming very near to presumption and unbelieving complaint. But you find a similar prayer in Acts 4:23-31 and again in Gen. 18:22-33. This is the fruit of the determination to make God's Word our choice. But note how quietly sure the Psalmist is that he has in fact done right by God (v.121). There is no pride or self-righteousness here, nor throughout the Psalm, for this man is

constantly referring to God's mercy (love), that is His undeserved kindness (v.124). Yet he calls on God to stand surety for him and to stand between him and his enemies, so guaranteeing his safety. This of course is Gospel truth, for we have One who in fact stands surety for us at all times (Heb. 4:14-16; 9:24-28). And it is this assurance of faith that causes us to express our confidence in God, often to the astonishment and exasperation of others (Rom. 8:31-39, cf. Isa. 54:17). We do not dare to prescribe to God the exact timing and method of His intervention, but in the boldness of prayer we do call upon Him to act, believing Him to be the God who answers prayer. Of course, we must also in faith be willing and prepared for God's answers and for living with them in the life of society of which we are a part. This is yet another thought which constrains us to have constant recourse to God's law.

[Back to Top](#)

119:129-136

"Devout souls do not take offence at the depths and difficulties of God's word, but are thereby drawn to intenser contemplation of them. We weary of the trivial and obvious. That which tasks and outstrips our powers attracts. These wonderful testimonies gave light, notwithstanding, or rather because of, their wonderfulness, and it is the simple heart, not the sharpened intellect that penetrates furthest into them and finds light most surely (v.130). Therefore the Psalmist longs for God's commandments, like a wild creature panting open-mouthed for water. He puts to shame our indifference. If his longing was not excessive, how defective is ours!" (McLaren) In v.130 the word "entrance" is better read as "opening" for the significance is in the unfolding and setting forth of the words of God. Note how close a relationship the Psalmist always finds between God and the words He speaks. For us also, it is in the Word that God is to be found, and the finding of Him is no cold clinical theological discovery. We begin to think and feel like the God whose Word we are constantly receiving and pondering and desiring. Earlier in v.53 the Psalmist speaks of righteous indignation towards the wicked, but here (v.136) he feels a deep sorrow, pity and yearning compassion for those whose own folly and unbelief are leading them into paths of destruction. No one who sits lightly to the Scriptures has ever had a real burden for the salvation of the souls of others nor has been impelled to seek them.

[Back to Top](#)

119:137-144

The fundamental attribute of the Author of the Law is righteousness and this determines the nature of all His attitudes and actions. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right!" (Gen. 18:25). This must be our confidence when life baffles us with the careless and arrogant prosperity of the wicked. We must face it; evil men do prosper and the brash joviality of the godless sometimes makes us wonder if we have committed ourselves to God in vain. But we need to remember that God is not obliged to settle all His accounts day by day, or even year by year. His ways are mysterious, but confident, for He knows the end and is sure He will accomplish His righteous fulfilment. Righteousness alone can face wickedness with equanimity. Let both grow together until the harvest (Matt.13:36-43), and keep in mind the truth that the delays of God are more explained in terms of mercy than in thoughts of carelessness and indifference (2 Pet. 3:9, 15). Read also Psalm 73:1-28 and when you become aware that the Law of God which we are being taught is a transcript of the pure, tested righteousness of the eternal God Himself, you will begin to find a great platform of stability beneath you. You will also begin to find that being a partaker of the righteousness of God and also in friction with the unrighteousness of the world, a spark of zeal will be kindled in your soul (v.139).

[Back to Top](#)

119:145-152

The man of the Word will always be a man of prayer, not spasmodic prayer on religious festival occasions, but prayer as integral to life as breathing. How we need a baptism of this kind of prayer which is so earnest, realistic and married to obedience. Note how in the first few verses we find the note of determination which will not take 'no' for an answer, mingled with a spirit of expectation which in no way contradicts his quiet submission to the will of God. In v.147-148 the word "prevent" (AV) has the meaning of "anticipate" and in the NIV reads as "rise before" and "stay open". The Psalmist compares himself with a sentry who wakes before it is time to go on duty. You can always tell the Christian who is in the habit of praying; it is evident in the public prayers of the

prayer meeting, in the spirit of worship in church and in the indefinable but real spirit of grace that marks the whole of life. How could it be otherwise with someone whose normal dwelling-place is in the presence of the living God. If we company much with Him who is called the Rose of Sharon we will carry something of His savour. If we go out much to Him who is found outside the camp, He will constantly re-write the message of His grace upon our lives and we will go back into the world of daily life to be living epistles, easy to read, and our message will be Christ. It is a happy person indeed who can testify (v.152) that in his past experience he has proved the trustworthiness of God. The practical convictions of a lifetime are not easily shaken by the passing storms of life.

[Back to Top](#)

119:153-160

The opening words are not a vain prayer, for God has made it plain that He is mindful of His people's distress (Ex. 3:7; Isa. 63: 7-9). Here is a man who is learning in the practical experiences of life to cast his burden on the Lord. The only answer to bondage is to take everything to God for discussion, elucidation and verdict, for in the end only His verdict matters. There is a great release in maintaining this attitude of trust and confidence in the face of the malicious and strident accusations and actions of others. You stay silent and hand over your case for God to plead and to execute (2 Sam. 16:5-14; Matt. 5:11-12). This is an attitude which in no way tries to ignore your own faults nor to justify them. You leave it all to God and are prepared to accept His findings without question. This does not ignore the manifest hurt that comes so unjustly at times, and it is in this context that the Psalmist three times prays to be revived or quickened (renewed and preserved). He is asking for the removal of his calamities which have tormented him for a long time. But at the same time he is crying for a quickening of spirit, for he feels that his soul has somehow been deadened over a spell of time, and now he longs for the refreshing of God's grace. Note, however, that this man does not say that he has been backsliding. He claims that he has held fast to the Lord and His word, even though the delights of faithfulness have not been his experience. This is real faith, for it is grounded objectively in the unchangeableness of God and not in the changeability of subjective human feelings.

[Back to Top](#)

119:161-168

It is striking to note in this section that after mentioning unjust persecution in the first verse, the Psalmist immediately dismisses it and proceeds to rejoice in God's peace and hope. This is the table of rejoicing that God prepares in the presence of enemies (Ps. 23:5) and in the banqueting place of love and joy (Song of Sol. 2:1-4) you become aware that your enemies are under the restraining hand of the great God of grace and glory. This is the peace of God which passes understanding and we must be glad in it when we see this man who has suffered so much and so long giving thanks to God. Here is a man who believes that every day will bring its own particular help to meet particular need (Deut.33:25), and yet this does not breed spiritual or moral lassitude (v.166). He is earnest to discern even the slightest indications of God's will and eager to obey them. Little wonder he testifies of peace in v.165 even though his outward circumstances are turbulent. He does not say that nothing troubles or hurts him, for that would be untrue and also a denial of his humanity. But, "Nothing can make them stumble," (v.165b). They walk firmly and safely on the clear path of duty. Such men as these know their God and are not only safe themselves, they become like the shadow of a great rock to many others. It is not vain to suffer for Christ's sake. You become an understanding servant of others (2 Cor. 1: 3-11).

[Back to Top](#)

119:169-176

This is a fitting and comprehensive conclusion to the long Psalm, and consists of four pairs of verses. The many petitions throughout the Psalm are concentrated in v.169-170, into a prayer for inward understanding and illumination, and for outward deliverance of life. But fellowship with God in prayer is not complete without the next two verses which are concerned with the grace of thanksgiving and spoken testimony regarding the goodness of God. If we would only think more often of the manifold mercies of God and the innumerable blessings He bestows on us, our souls would find immense release in thanksgiving. What a contrast to our perennial spirit of complaint against God, which finds expression in criticism of our fellows both in respect of

what they do and of what they fail to do. That this critical spirit betokens a spiritual sickness is seen if we consider the word "murmured"(AV) or grumbled in the story of the people of Israel. Read in Exod.15:24;16:2;17:3; Num.14:1-3;Deut.1:27; Josh. 9:18; 1 Cor.10:6-13. Some in a congregation are never pleased, especially with their leaders. This canker of complaint, this jaundice of discontent, this forgetfulness of the debt we all owe to the goodness of God is a very serious spiritual condition. It cost the Israelites their entrance into the promised land and their share in the developing stages of the glorious work of God. We commend the following passages for careful consideration: Phil. 4:1-8; Rom. 14:1-13; Ps. 78:32-42; Heb. 3:7-19; Matt. 18:21-35. There is much profit in asking God to give us grace to see ourselves as others see us.

[Back to Top](#)

149:169-176

The first half of this section ended with rejoicing in the righteousness of the statutes of God. All His words and ways are hallmarked by integrity. Now, in v.173-174 the Psalmist "pleads three reasons for an answer to his prayers:- he has deliberately resolved to obey God's precepts; he has long been waiting eagerly for deliverance from the hindrances to obedience which surround him; his devotion has been no grudging service, but his constant delight." (Kirkpatrick) This man is not pleading merit nor justifying works. He knows full well that salvation is all of grace and mercy, but at the same time since God has challenged him to trust Him, he finds it inconceivable that God will now break trust. Whatever man may be and however even the best of human loves and loyalties may decay (it is not inevitable that they should decay!), God abides great in His faithfulness and altogether worthy of our absolute trust. The Psalmist cannot imagine God standing idle when His children cry to Him for help. The last two verses mingle the thoughts of wandering like a straying sheep and at the same time he makes a profession of keeping the commandments of God. There is no contradiction here. "They who fain would serve Thee best are conscious most of wrong within" (Twells "At even when the sun was set..."). How could it be otherwise? It is in drawing near to God in holy fellowship that our consciences are made tender and we begin to learn what it means to say, "I delight to do Thy will, O God."

[Back to Top](#)

119:169-176

We dwell on this section because it is so comprehensive an ending to the whole Psalm. Read today John 10:1-16; Luke 15:1-7; Matt. 18:10-14. Now think of the words of the General Confession in the Book of Common Prayer, "We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts..." Link that confession with the confession of the Psalmist and his deep and earnest petition in v.176. It begets a sense of sadness due to failure, but that is not our final note. "Our sense of having wandered should ever be accompanied with the tender thought that the lost sheep *is* a sheep, beloved and sought for by the Great Shepherd, in whose search, not in our own docile following of His footsteps, lies our firmest hope. The Psalmist prayed, 'Seek Thy servant', for he knew how continually he would be tempted to stray. But we know better than he did how wonderfully the answer has surpassed his petition. 'The has Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.' "(McLaren)

[Back to Top](#)