

Commentary on Psalms

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Introduction to Psalms

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The English name of this book arises from the Septuagint and is a Greek word (*psalmoi*) meaning songs accompanied by a stringed instrument (psalter). David started the collection with older existing material and wrote many more. Quite a few were added later and it's hard to be sure who and when. The Hebrew language and culture do not lend themselves to our kind of precision in attributing authorship. Most Scripture was regarded as property of the nation via the Covenant of Moses. David had wanted to build the Temple and commenced collecting the materials, including these songs. By the time Solomon actually finished the Temple, much of the organization for worship was already in place, including a very large choral group and orchestra.

Because this collection had a distinct official use in ritual worship, it was arranged, and perhaps the songs edited, up until the time of Ezra when it reached the shape we see today. There is a sense in which all the scholarly discussions of the various types of songs and how they were used may not reflect what the author had in mind. Somewhere between the raw original and historical significance is something we can use to build our own faith.

We could hardly pretend to know how the ancients sang these songs, and it's unlikely many today would have much appreciation for that style of music. So, while something is lost in the translation across centuries and cultures, we can still fulfill the central purpose in seeking to understand something of Hebrew worship. Because of the Psalms' enduring popularity, it is very easy to find all sorts of commentary celebrating just about every aspect of these songs. Rather than bog down too much in all the academic details, what follows here is a very focused search for moral significance. If these songs do not contribute to changing us in our context today, it's hard to justify all the work in preserving the ancient knowledge.

Book 1: Psalms 1-41

This portion of the Psalms appears to have started out as David's private collection. Only a few fail to specifically mention David as the author. Scholars note the predominance of God's covenant name – "Jehovah" in English – though English translations often render it merely as "the Lord" and typically in all caps. This is significant chiefly in that David personally used that name to call on God.

Psalm 1

Our first song offers a conceptual contrast between just and unjust hearts. Scholars noted long ago the common Hebrew progression of walk, stand and sit representing a progressive fall into wickedness. How happy is the man who can avoid this vicious slide into sin! The moral justice of God is its own reward, incomparable to whatever it is sinners strive to gain by taking moral shortcuts. This man never takes his eye off pleasing his Lord.

We know that grass and some shrubs simply go quiescent in drought, but such are easily removed when dry. Trees generally require a perennial water supply. However, they are far more valuable, particularly in the semi-desert land of Palestine. Men who commit themselves to pleasing God are like trees fortunate enough to grow along a real stream instead of a seasonal wadi, with roots spread far and deep. This fellow is fully in touch with how God created the universe to run and hardly shakes when the storms of life come. His life is morally fruitful. The person who truly desires to please God seldom fails because God does not measure mere performance. Instead, He enables it.

Contrast such with the wicked. They are like what's left when the harvest is done, discarded and allowed to drift on the wind. They don't belong anywhere in particular but are especially out of place when God's wrath falls. The wording specifically avoids the idea of eternal judgment in favor of the human experience. The image shows that the wicked won't be welcomed among God's people, won't be supported and defended from trouble.

The summary is how God holds the just in high regard and protects them, but the unjust wander off into destruction.

Psalm 2

This psalm is not as provincial as it might seem on the surface. If I'm serving God and you are serving God, it's possible we'll still be knocking up against each other, but highly unlikely. God chose King David of Israel to rule the nation He chose as His earthly means to revelation. This psalm assumes that David and Israel are engaged in that mission faithfully. It doesn't assume they never sin, but it also doesn't chase the rabbit of when and where David as king or Israel as a whole sinned against God.

When David and Israel were faithful, no nation was permitted to stand in their way. So far as we can determine, this is historically accurate. David didn't fail in war against external enemies. It's not as if no one sought terms of peace with him. It wasn't hard at all. The nations weren't required to join the Covenant of Moses but could not oppose it. David made peace with plenty of pagan rulers whose religions were of no concern to him. His were not wars of religious conquest, but a matter of securing the opportunity for Israel to proceed with their religion and the mission that came with it. That mission was to demonstrate the truth so that those whom God called would be drawn to Him.

The parabolic implications are obvious. David was a type for Jesus. Those who faithfully serve Jesus have nothing to fear from this world. Whatever authority secular powers exercise cannot hinder the gospel message for long. When our mission reflects the genuine calling of the gospel,

the Lord opens doors to the message and protects the mission. Obviously, our measure for faithfulness is far more subtle than merely observing Moses. Jesus made much greater demands than Moses, not so much in terms of performance, but in terms of personal commitment. Christ is our King with none of David's weaknesses. Whatever problems we face are not from sin in our King, but either our own sin or something we may never understand. More importantly, whatever problems we face are our Lord's problems; our mission is to remain faithful. The possibility of moral failure is a dark and threatening cloud on the horizon, just a reminder.

Psalm 3

The context is inserted by tradition, not a part of the original words, referencing events in 2 Samuel 15. It is by no means implausible. This psalm reveals how David was hardly arrogant; rather, he was quite confident in the power of moral purity. We could argue that David's sorrows were often of his own making. He was overly indulgent of his kin, particularly his sons and his cousin, Joab. Such was the source of much evil during David's reign. No one argues David had no failings, but He was deeply and personally loyal to his God like no one living on this earth. His primary virtue was his utter humility toward the Lord.

At the point when David and his court fled over the ridge towards the Jordan Valley, it certainly appeared God did not favor him. David knew better, because the problem was with David's choices, not God's. The Lord is not fickle as humans are, so David felt certain things would run their course. Eventually God would restore him to the throne of Israel. Meanwhile, David had no reason to believe this was the hand of God turned against Him, so he maintained his faith. He presents the image of God patiently waiting in His tent in Zion for David to return, this being before the Temple was built. Meanwhile, God had His own plans for events and David must ride out the storm.

With this divine assurance, David had no trouble sleeping peacefully at night. Being surrounded by human enemies was no significant threat because God had already seen him through worse. Remember Goliath? In God's good time, He would rise and strike most decisively. That's how God handled people who served His purpose.

Psalm 4

Scholars consider this a song of the evening. It's another of those psalms that sound far better in Hebrew than in any translation. What comes across as simple and simplistic truism is actually quite majestic in tone. Hebrew language never pretended to carry much truth but served as an indicator of things for which no words exist. Thus, this is a case of words serving as mere signposts to vast lands just waiting our exploration.

David calls out to the sole source of a life worth living, the God who is righteousness defined, and who supplies what it takes to lay hold of righteousness. It matters not the facts of his context. David knows that in the tightest place God will give him room to breathe His Spirit. Thus, already David has established that here is nothing new. While he may have failed God countless times, God has never failed him.

Who are David's enemies? Mere humans are no match for God, and hardly capable of understanding what David values most. In vain do they attempt to make him look bad or feel bad. They cannot touch, much less take, what God has given him: divine favor. They aren't even fighting on the same battlefield with David. Unless they repent and consider the vast difference between their desires and his, they can't even understand how David rose to his position. Their envy alone is proof of their impending failures.

David warns them to walk in God's moral justice, to embrace the revelation in full trust. All they see is David's privilege and comforts and assume this is what it's all about. They assume God is just a vending machine; pay your dues and get your reward. It's not like that. The most valuable thing on this earth is God's smile and personal warmth. If that comes at the price of privation, so be it. David is ready to make that trade.

David symbolizes the ultimate value in this world by his ability to rest peacefully. He has peace with God, the Maker of All Things. What else could possibly matter?

Psalm 5

This is a morning song. The context is clearly David as King, perhaps in a warm-up to more formal worship. In the quiet of his first rising, David appeals to God as a king beset by a royal court loaded with charlatans.

This song is far more lyrical than many English translations can capture. David calls out to God, addressing Him as his Liege Lord. Surely a greater king understands the anguished sighing of one who rules. Not yet fully out of bed, David can already sense the constant tension between the need to get things done against the certainty that he faces any number of secret enemies. So, the first order of business is to come before his Lord and wait for that sense of divine peace before he starts grappling with the divided loyalties of those who pretend to serve him.

David rejoices in the assurance that his Lord has no tolerance for such deception. Sincere servants of any ruler would seek to absorb their master's character, and David hopes he can develop the same intolerance for deception, the same sensitivity for injustice, that characterizes his master. So, the first order of business is to appear for the morning offering at the Tent of Meeting that David had erected in his courtyard. Calling it a house or temple is a figure of speech; wherever one encounters God is a holy place. A great potentate is at home throughout his domain. David was eager to meet with God wherever He wanted and would gladly wait for Him as long as necessary.

As a senior servant on earth in God's domain, David knows how often some crafty servant will pretend to obey, but raise up hindrances, pretending to misunderstand through legalistic wrangling. So, David asks according to protocol that his Lord grant him a mandate to waltz through all that nonsense and proceed directly with the divine mission. David knows he is surrounded by all sorts of scoundrels who take advantage of their position, trying to skim off an unjust portion of the traffic they handle for the king. They make the pretense of being the king's most faithful servant and make all the right noises, but their mouths are loaded with slippery lies. Let them be caught in their own traps, O God! It matters not that they have rebelled in their hearts against David, but they have rejected God's reign.

By contrast, David sees no harm from those who are faithful to God. David would rather be troubled by honest men than pampered by liars. So, he prays that God would give the just a sense of strength and courage to demand David's best. People who are loyal to Jehovah should fear nothing from David, who is likewise His humble servant.

Psalm 6

As always, Hebrew poetry beckons to a place above both emotions and mere intellect. Thus, it is not necessary to see in this penitent song a specific historical reference. It offers a broad and generic call to live in penitence.

The stricken conscience calls out for God to leave the door open to His courts. The image of God's anger symbolizes a loss of access, of having been marked as God's enemy, no longer His servant. The penitent is shaken to the very core of his being, in a state worse than death. David asks if he can be told the length of his sentence. It's not about any real physical threat or illness, but the sense of no peace with God that disturbs him most.

His cry for mercy is an appeal to the character of God, not anything the penitent can muster. It's not as if David isn't willing to taste death for his sins, but it would mean the end of any chance to bring God glory. Far too many assume David is suggesting God will miss out on His due praise and worship if David dies. On the contrary, David doesn't want to miss out on God's victory parade. Nor should we see here a literal explanation of David's view of the afterlife. The image of Sheol is a literary device taken literally only by those poorly educated, and David was among the elite nobility with a high and proper schooling. Otherwise, he would not be able to write such fine Hebrew poetry.

David describes the depth of his sorrow at disappointing God, unable to sleep at night for the weeping. This is no doubt literal enough, but it's more important for what it signifies in terms of David owning the full depth of sorrow as his own fault. He can't keep living like this.

Suddenly, his tone changes. The vultures in his life had been gathering in their deathwatch, but he puts them to flight with a renewed sense of mission and calling. He announces ecstatically that God has restored him, and the old warrior David returns to do battle again.

Psalm 7

People who don't understand the Hebrew style of logic regard this psalm as wandering from one idea to another. They even imagine it might be several short bits thrown together, as if Hebrew scholars were no wiser than half-grown children. It's easy to discount what one does not quite grasp.

The heading of the psalm mentions someone from the Tribe of Benjamin. Never mind God's revelation, that tribe generally regarded David as a usurper. The background tension was never forgotten, so we could hardly be surprised that David felt the sting of persecution from anyone of that tribe. However, we cannot identify who Cush might have been, or if it was a symbolic name.

David never forgot that it was God who placed him on the throne, and that it was God who kept him there. In this case, we sense that the matter was a campaign of slander against David. It was a peculiar symbol of Hebrew honor to volunteer for examination when slandered, demanding the proof be brought forward. David thus requests that God investigate him thoroughly. Should he be found at fault, David was asking to be turned over to his worst enemies. Otherwise, let the false accusers face the punishment they hoped to bring down on David, something specifically required and promised under the Covenant of Moses.

David notes that God is the Divine Judge of all humanity, so it was no insult to submit to His examination. It wasn't arrogance but David's confidence and peace with God that made him eager to face God's test. That his God is the definition of righteousness makes David comfortable with embracing whatever he might face. Whatever sin clinging to David would be cleansed and his character made yet stronger to rule. Who could ask for anything better?

Meanwhile, he characterizes the wrath of God against sin as relentless. Thus, those who opposed God's moral character would find themselves inevitably trapped by their own evil. Moral blindness is its own punishment. David is grateful beyond words for that purity of God's moral character actively at work in Creation.

Psalm 8

Not only do we have several modern songs taken from this, but it also stands as a prophetic message. Not prophetic in the popular Western notion of literal meanings hidden in the words as if by magic, this hymn asserts fundamental moral precepts that manifest again and again throughout the ages. This is a revelation of God's character in the sense of how He does things here in His Creation.

It begins with a winsome assertion of God's worthiness using His covenant name and title: Jehovah Our Lord. It's hard to miss, since He has made His glory greater than the beauty of twinkling stars of night, or the blinding power of the sun in daylight.

Indeed, glory and power are inseparable. In the Hebrew symbolism, we see the power of a child's lungs in a cry that no one can ignore. Such power to compel adults to act! Just so, the power of His glory plucks the heartstrings that only the truly dead can ignore. This was inherent in the Savior's satirical comment to those who complained that kids were running around acting like Jesus was the Messiah, calling Him the heir to David's throne. The religious leaders were unable to ignore children calling for their attention to the glory of God manifested in this troublemaker rabbi. Jesus was hinting that the leaders were God's enemies for opposing any opportunity to glorify the Father.

And it was in that beauty of the clear night sky that David saw a reflection of God's glory. Compared to that humbling sight, what concern could God have with mere people? How is that God has placed man one step below heavenly beings for their short time on this earth? In the Covenant of Noah God reaffirmed that humans would dominate this world, even though they so thoroughly failed to give Him His proper due. By comparison, the writer of Hebrews notes that of all humans, Jesus alone most assuredly held His high place over the Universe as master and Lord, the obedient agent of His Father's revelation. Indeed, whatever Jesus taught was as

close to God's character as any human could come. So it was that Creation, in its limited time of existence, was waiting for the full revelation of Christ's lordship in how His followers conquered life by His teaching.

Perhaps David saw none of that, yet we are assured he would have understood it. That is, he would hardly reject what the writer of Hebrews made of his words any more than he would argue with how Jesus used them. David could not fail to recognize the truth of God however it was manifested, regardless of his penitent recognition of his own mortality and inability to live up to that glory. Thus, he closes this song back where he started, declaring the ineffable glory of his God.

Psalm 9

This psalm appears to have originally been published as the first half, with Psalm 10 as the second half. Together the two form a Hebrew acrostic, each verse beginning with one of the 22 Hebrew letters in alphabetic order. At some point, someone decided that it was two different songs. This part addresses external enemies, while Psalm 10 concerns domestic ones. Still, most Bibles in English have them separated.

As usual, David skillfully keeps things on topic and follows a strong logical thread of development. He begins by announcing that he cannot avoid worshiping his Lord. Were he not already required to do so by custom and specific command, David could hardly remain silent for his own enthusiasm. How could you keep something like this to yourself?

Noting that God is the ultimate supreme authority in the universe, David remarks how God never fails to defend him. Never mind what David might do; God takes it personally when folks oppose His anointed king. It was more than mere personal favor, but God revealing His divine justice. We already know David was humble before Jehovah, so it's not a question of arrogance toward the morally defiled Gentile kingdoms around him. David wanted nothing more than what God promised, so any force opposing those promises was already on the wrong side of things. David didn't set out to harm anyone, but stoutly defended what God had granted Israel.

So, if they refused to bow before God, David had no choice but to fight. He would fight until they surrendered or there was no one left to fight. His victories would not be possible without God's backing. Whatever God does is justice by definition. It stands to reason that those who turn to Him in trust would outlast all opposition in this world. Let them be careful to give God proper credit in full view of those nations. Let them further declare God's generous offer that they, too, can get in on this covenant.

David rejoices with those who have turned to God in full faith and commitment. His promises never fail. David quotes their cry for mercy, and notes that it rightly includes the commitment to keep on giving God glory for their safety. That witness starts in the Gates of Jerusalem but would naturally spread throughout the human race.

Sadly, there will always be those who reject that message. They'll dream up various ways to resist but will perish from their own devices. What they threaten will fall back on them. In their arrogance, they'll be forgotten, buried in the dust of history. While they may persist long

enough to make life miserable for the righteous, God graciously notices their sorrow and wisely arranges for oppression to end when the time is right.

David ends by cheering God on, thoroughly enjoying the chance to watch God's wrath and glory manifest in human affairs.

Psalm 10

As noted before, this continues the acrostic order of the previous psalm. However, in a sort of parallel, while the previous addressed external enemies, this one mourns over internal enemies.

It is unlikely David failed to understand, at least in his better moments, how God operated as the Ultimate Sovereign of human affairs. Some things will always remain outside our limited grasp. People will always have a measure of freedom to choose moral justice or pursue any number of other interests. We understand from His Word as a characterization of trends that His wrath falls on sin, but not always according to our personal sense of justice. Thus, David's question is largely rhetorical. A more literal statement is that we long for His hand to execute justice that is beyond our grasp.

The psalm is a long recitation characterizing the sort of predators we find in every society. No one really expects God to answer in any concrete way just why He tolerates such creatures. Whether they suffer for their sins is not always obvious to us, as they seem to snicker at the very thought. This is the nightmare of every shepherd soul, which we know precisely David was. It is the one truly most unpleasant part of justified human political power to have to control the evil that arises in one's own home, as it were. We note in passing that David was notoriously indulgent of his own kin who were immoral in part because he knew his own weaknesses.

Still, he stands with the righteous even at the risk of his own dose of wrath. Even looking in the mirror, David shouts: "Don't let him get away with it, Lord!" As the chief executor of justice in Israel, David needs help carrying out the task of making divine justice more obvious to the people he rules. Here, as with the previous chapter, David ends with a declaration that God is not one of us mere mortals, and that we often need reminding of our mortality.

Psalm 11

David was born in a noble household, fully educated in Hebrew culture. It is preposterous to suggest he would have been so shallow as to have written these songs from a silly, Westernized literal mindset. We enter a series of shorter songs that contain a depth easily missed. Not merely in the artistry, but David hints at far deeper meanings that require an Eastern turn of mind to discern and understand.

David first declares that he has surrendered completely to God as Lord and Emperor. On the one hand, it's obvious there is no risk of God failing. On the other hand, anyone who lived under an Eastern potentate realizes that this also means embracing the ruler's whims and anger. Whether or not David enjoys how this turns out, he has no intention of searching other options. He was resigned to whatever fate attaches to his commitment to Jehovah.

Thus, well-meaning advice to play it safe against very real-world threats is almost insulting to David. It's not as if David is unaware of the danger. When in human history have there not been people plotting against others? To take any throne is to paint a target on oneself. The psalm quotes a hypothetical question that wonders if Israel loses her righteous king – the foundation – how can she keep the kingdom standing?

To Western minds, David's reply is a non sequitur. The Temple had not yet been built, so the reference is to God in His divine Temple Courts in Heaven. That is, Jehovah is not dependent on David's continued existence; He is not harmed if Jerusalem is wiped off the map. Since God can read every human heart and knows all things before they transpire, He's not up pacing and wringing His hands at the threats to David. If David's God sits placid on His throne in Heaven, David can afford to remain perched on his where God put him on this earth.

It's not as if God isn't paying attention, either. He is active in human affairs. He is also sovereign and does things to suit His own counsel. For David to call down fire from Heaven on the heads of the wicked is a well-established image that only incidentally might turn out literal. So, whether David sees literal wrath from God on their heads hardly matters, since the final judgment of God takes place in Heaven. God's divine fire of wrath in that realm above is surely worse than anything He can do in this fallen realm. In like manner, those who obey Him here will surely get their reward there in the hyper-reality of Heaven, even if they see little reward here. Meanwhile, living obediently in moral justice is its own reward.

Psalm 12

Some days it feels like your world has tumbled into the pits of Hell. Hyperbole is a common feature of the dramatic and symbolic Hebrew narrative.

David begins with a common cry equivalent to our modern "God help us!" Have all the righteous disappeared? David feels surrounded by demons and other servants of the Enemy. While not perfect himself, David remained morally sensitive. It was a painful fact of life that where power is concentrated, there the predators gather. The best of kings would find himself surrounded by the worst of humanity.

At the very least, David had to deal with constant deception. Could he ever get a straight answer from anyone? Does his entire court rely on flattery and lies? If it's not the subservient weasels, it's the boastful and arrogant hucksters. They proclaim him the greatest king in human history and in the same breath promote themselves as the only ones heroic enough to be fit servants.

There's a difference between hyperbole and outright lying. When David catches these jerks in their lies, they simply insist this is how powerful men ought to act. To whom are they accountable? Why, even David could not remain on his throne were it not for their deft tongues and expert management – so they boast.

But these same people insist it is necessary to walk on the peasants as if mere pebbles in their path. If you aren't arrogant and tough, you never know when they might revolt! But God has a different viewpoint on these matters. He has promised to rise and crush the arrogant who abuse

His people. David affirms this kind of promise is like purified silver. (We have reason to believe it was not until Solomon's reign that gold became more valuable than silver in Israel.) God's promises were the very national treasure of Israel.

So let these elitist thugs be forewarned: God will not fail to bring down the proud snobs. That would mean a pretty rough time ahead, because David felt like they were all over the place, gauging from what he saw in his palace.

Psalm 13

It's not a question of whether the Psalmist is close to literal death, but that he faces an experience of death on a broader level. David could live without his crown, but was altogether worried that his situation signaled he had moved outside of God's favor.

As noted previously, hyperbole is not deception. In Hebrew culture, the purpose of language was to bring to life something the listener or reader did not personally experience. It was entirely appropriate and expected to address your superiors with dramatic exaggeration. Thus, David cries out to his God in deep exasperation. This amounts to a rhetorical question, asking how long the Lord would fail to respond to his cries.

Continuing in the same vein, he asks whether God has noticed that David languishes under the apparent victory of his enemies, with the obvious implication that these are also God's enemies. Will the Lord allow these nasty people to get away with publicly tarnishing His name? David wails that it is just like dying for him to think God has no interest in His own reputation. David asks for a fresh moral vision of how God works in this fallen world.

Does God truly intend to let David end like this? Has David fought so hard and so long in the name of Jehovah only to fall at this critical moment? Will his enemies be the ones who celebrate their human power over God's man?

Of course not; despite the rhetoric, David does the right thing in calling out to God because it shows where he places his trust. It might be heart-pounding close, but David refuses to quit. God has never failed him. In a standard Hebrew parallelism, David asserts that he will praise God as God while he fights, and rejoice in God when he wins. He's warming up the harp for that latter tune already.

Psalm 14

In Hebrew thinking, the concept of "fool" is someone devoid of moral perception. Almost every other human talent can be present in abundance, but without using God's revelation as a reference point, you cannot possibly be acceptable to Him. The opposite is humility before God's Word. Specifically, it refers to moral reasoning in the Hebrew intellectual traditions. You can't understand God's revelation until you embrace the mindset of the people through whom He spoke. In general terms, David refers here to those under Moses who reject covenant demands, and those outside of Israel who rejected Noah's Covenant. You cannot pretend the Creator has no interest in human affairs.

The popular English translation of the first phrase is misleading. We cannot imagine a human in that time and place embracing philosophical atheism. There was plenty of cynicism about divine character, but outright atheism would be incomprehensible in that context. Rather, it defines as a fool anyone who is insensitive to God's stated concerns. It's not as if you couldn't get good information on those concerns if you cared. Without that frame of reference, there is no way to understand how Creation works.

Dramatic overstatement as a poetic expression indicates something fundamental to fallen human nature. David recognizes that people do not naturally seek God but tend to avoid Him. We are born in sin, in the sense that we cannot turn to God without His direct intervention.

It stands to reason such people would hardly be honest friends of Israel. At every point in Old Testament History, we note a significant presence of outsiders who understood all too clearly that this nation was a project of the Almighty. Resistance was plain stupid. Attacking Israel might seem to pay off in the near term, but God never forgot. Sooner or later, He rose to defend His Covenant, and the offender was crushed.

Yet by the same token, God eventually defended others from His people when the former was righteous and Israel was wrong. Again, He defended the poor of this world from oppression at the hands of sinners among the ruling class. How idiotic it was to ignore God's promises! In this sense, the name "Israel" was restricted to those who embraced the full demands of the Covenant. This is the Israel that God defends. Let the Lord fulfill His promises to those who love Him.

Psalm 15

Between the ineffable spiritual truth and mere legalistic literalism is a place of moral commitment in the soul touched by eternity. In the Hebrew mind, spiritual birth was not necessary when the entire cultural slant assumes feudal obligations – everyone serves someone. Further, that feudal awareness includes a tacit understanding that one must be committed to God's peace (*shalom*) in terms of social stability. So, David describes here what makes for that moral peace of God through moral commitments.

Who would be welcomed as a resident foreigner in the tents of God? Who should be allowed to hang around Zion? This assumes David had already purchased the plot of land he dedicated for the future Temple. The person who is welcome in God's domain is one who is morally solid, firmly committed to Jehovah as Sovereign Lord.

The earmarks of such a commitment would include several things. English translations vary, but the idea is confessing frankly what one has embraced. When you honestly care about God's stated interests, you tend to operate accordingly. Sometimes speaking is a euphemism for action; if your actions and words don't match, you have a problem.

This man has no political agenda. He's willing to put up with unpleasant neighbors who aren't outright criminals. He's not a busybody trying to provoke the community or the authorities against someone for petty stuff. On the other hand, he won't do many favors for someone who has rejected God's moral standards. He reserves his resources for those who cling to God. This

isn't legalistic perfection as Westerners might measure such things, but a moral commitment that recognizes human frailty because he sees plenty of it in the mirror.

He's willing to carry through on promises when his mouth overloads his capabilities. He loans without interest because he knows how destructive interest is. He's willing to make loans he knows can never be repaid. He's willing to engage in this social fiction to preserve the dignity of his neighbor when poverty forces that one to come calling for a loan. He doesn't bother to record that loan but trusts God to repay it. Indeed, money is just a tool for justice in his eyes; you can't bribe him to lie.

People like this are God's people. The whole world could collapse, but God would stand next to such a man.

Psalm 16

In the Hebrew mind, the highest good was *shalom*. More than simple absence of distress or conflict, it was much broader. Perhaps a better term would be "social stability" – a combination of salient factors working together to provide a stable life for the community. It was tied to the idea of moral justice; if you live by the Laws of God, you should expect life to be as tolerable as can be, given our fallen state. In David's mind, it didn't get any better than this. It was possible to have too much stuff, too much fun and excitement, too much learning and thinking, too much of a lot of things not so bad by themselves. But the whole picture depended on trusting God and obeying His moral demands and executing His divine justice.

This is what David has in mind very specifically here. He accepts whatever shelter comes with taking refuge in Jehovah's feudal lordship. The concept of protection is an aspect of *shalom*. In rather literal terms, David notes that nothing good for him is available outside God's will. By comparison, David notes a significant portion of his nation is given to idolatry. The language here is hard to translate with any precision, but it's easy enough to see where it points. Even as king, David knew that enforcing covenant provisions against idolatry with too much vigor would be oppressive. He is aware that people are pursuing idolatry, but there is only so much he can do to stop it. So, at the very least, he is faithful himself and refuses to participate at all. He is careful to remain ritually circumspect.

Again, David asserts that it is Jehovah who provides all the things these other people believe they can obtain by idolatry. It would be fair to say that *shalom* means stability, prosperity and security. He equates it with a rich inheritance of fertile lands that no one can take from him. He commits himself to testifying of God's goodness and investing in frequent periods of meditation – this is not something you can make into simple ritual. Sincere commitment brings a sense of peace and contentment that offers clear thinking in turmoil. If you give yourself to the joy of serving God, there won't be room for worry or agitation, and thus, fewer miscalculations when things go bad.

The business about Sheol and the Pit (in literal translations) is a standard Hebrew parallelism portraying stagnant putrid mucky holes. Both terms are roughly equivalent in the symbolic sense of pervasive corruption. Our fallen existence is bad enough and we seek God's justice to make the best of a bad situation. Wallowing in it is to embrace corruption and death rather as an

idol. Whether you are physically alive won't matter; you serve Death and belong to Death. The use of this particular verse by Peter and Paul is not an unreasonable semantic stretch. Whoever walks in justice need not fear the end of this life; death is more a friend than a ruler. Literal applications do not violate the underlying symbolism. Jesus was not in the tomb long enough to stink, so the symbolism continues with His literal resurrection. His human body died but did not decompose. David's choice of words was particularly apt and prophetic.

All the more so in the final verse, where it gives us the feeling that you simply cannot afford to miss a moment in feudal service to God here on earth.

Psalm 17

In Ancient Near Eastern feudalism, one would present before the sovereign emperor a petition against injustice. The natural assumption is not that the Lord doesn't know, but that He won't necessarily act if you think you can handle it. Delegation is a necessity of life, but when someone else interferes with your assigned domain, it may be necessary to seek enforcement from a higher authority. The question presented here is not asking God to judge on some question, but to enforce His own declared Laws.

In that culture, stating the obvious is simply a matter of offering context. David cries out for justice, not mere revenge. The issue is God's reputation. Unlike an earthly sovereign given to human boredom, God doesn't play head games, though it might seem like it by our Western standards. David is wholly unafraid to come before God because his life is an open book. David's heart was committed to God's moral character. The biblical concept of violence was using unjustified force for unjustified gain, and David was careful to understand and avoid that mistake.

At God's whim, He may elect to restore justice in some spectacular fashion. When a situation becomes truly unjust, that may be what's coming. David doesn't complain if God takes His time responding, because it can only signal His intent to do something glorious and unmistakably the work of His hand. David has seen such things with his own eyes before. He compares God's miraculous care to a man's instinct to protect his eyes. David suffers no arrogance about being so highly favored of God but is awestruck.

And he is no fool about how God allows some folks enough rope to hang themselves. So, it's not a panic-stricken call that he feels surrounded at times. The cold winds of his own demise seem to blow often in his life. The threats are all too real, but so is God's protection. Thus, he calls on the Lord to humble the enemies and restore His own divine justice. While some seem to profit from injustice and it appears all is well for them, David has no quarrel with their earthly prosperity. Such is not the real measure of God's favor. What David wants is divine favor as expressed in something far more subtle and eternal. He wants a clear vision of what pleases his Creator, because this moral truth is more valuable than the whole world.

Psalm 18

Picture him now, marching victoriously at the head of his column of troops. It's a long hike, and David is full to bursting with thanksgiving. With his natural grand talent for what was music and poetry among Hebrew people, he burst into song. All along the path for quite some distance, the phrases kept bubbling over in his mind. Every common expression of victory heard in the Hebrew tongue was not enough, even piled altogether in one song. David sang the initial composition of this song after a series of victories that confirmed his reign, a song first recorded in 2 Samuel 22. This is a somewhat updated version of that same song.

Could we have caught any other commander in a similar context in those ancient times, he would have praised his war deity in just this manner. But David had only one God to receive this torrent of praise, a God who was also his emperor, and David his vassal. The first few verses are typical of someone bringing news of victory to his Lord. It starts with an open confession of adoration, as one did not enter any august presence with anything less. There could be no God as great as David's Lord.

David admits it looked grim for a while. He had been cornered more than once, but always escaped. That's because David called out to God. Only with a strong moral clarity and sense of calling would someone in dire straits know whether his calling on God would lead to resigning one's spirit into the Lord's hands or if it were a call in confidence of His deliverance. Your faith can know which to claim but calling on God is the proper reflex regardless. It lets God decide whether He's ready to accept your resignation.

Then David unloads a string of parabolic descriptions of God acting in divine power to save him. How many ways can he say it? When God takes a notion to act, nothing opposes Him because He made all things. It is the same form of symbolic hyperbole when David claims to be a faithful servant of God. While it sounds in our ears like self-justification, it is actually proper protocol when standing before one's feudal master. Declaring oneself faithful and willing to pay any price to please is a standard element in praising one's Lord in that Ancient Near Eastern context. Notice that David isn't suggesting how wonderful he is, so much as indicating that he will stand with his God regardless how others might fail.

This leads right into describing how God supports those who serve Him. Because God is faithful and just, He grants extraordinary authority to those who genuinely love Him. This was the only reason David could offer to explain his stunning string of military victories, some of them major upsets. Thus, David ended up exercising rule over people he never actually wanted to conquer. More than a few simply begged for a chance to enter his feudal service as allies. David insists this was the work of his God. Thus, we can be sure that David began his reign on the right foot.

Psalm 19

Modern Western man surely sees the beauty in nature and could perhaps reason from it to a glimpse of some divine hand in the vista. Ancient Hebrew man, along with men of every nation within a few months' travel, would have seen an additional level within that vista. Those Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) minds would assume a distinct moral significance to all things

visible. This moral significance eclipsed any sensory data in importance. There was a fundamental distrust of sensory data long before any sort of modern cynicism about mirages, smoke and mirrors, and a much deeper level of distrust. It was not simply a matter that ANE minds ever expected to find the physical facts behind delusion but regarded our human existence itself as delusion on some level.

This regard was deeply embedded in the assumptions about reality. Thus, our visible world was at best a mere manifestation of something more real and just beyond the reach of intellect. Could a man bring his mind into subjection to this higher reality, all the things he could see would take on a different meaning and would be ruled by a significance not obvious to human talent alone. This is what's behind this hymn of David.

Because David knows the Creator, he doesn't merely see the sun, moon and stars in the sky, but sees them as symbols of God's divine character. The sound of the wind is more than mere air moving across his auditory organs, but the song of angels glorifying the Lord. Thus, it's not a matter of literal communication, but a significance perceptible only to those who embrace His revelation. All the beauty and sorrow in Creation together testify to the truth of those who recognize the Creator.

So, David unleashes the lyrical imagination of how words can be called upon to serve up a banquet of truth that only a higher awareness can taste. He offers a vision of how, once you allow the revelation of God to touch you, everything you encounter serves merely to confirm it. And how many songs, in how many modern languages today, are taken from this one psalm?

In the process of recognizing how Creation merely confirms the Lord's Word of Truth, David carves out an image of how the written revelation of Scripture brings to us far more than the words themselves can convey. Hebrew language did not convey truth; it posted markers of the path your soul could follow to the Living Truth. Thus, the Scriptures are all the more valuable for what they cannot actually say to us. This is what David had in mind when he praised the Scriptures. There is no conflict here between what the Law of Moses required and what Creation itself confirmed by fulfilling that Law's promises.

And in David's mind, sin wasn't some eternal mark in Heaven's registry against his redemption, but a failure to lay hold of the full depth and richness of those promises. The image of purity wasn't something artificial and objective, but a matter of harmonizing with Creation and God's moral character. The man who can lay hold of that has nothing to fear in this world.

Psalm 20

This is a two-part hymn typically taking place before the altar in the Temple. In the first five verses, the congregation sings over the offering as the priests perform their ritual duties. It's not simply the worshipers singing to someone in particular, but it's a prophetic song to anyone who hears. In the rest of the verses, the priest answers the congregation after the sacrifice has been completed.

First, the people call on God to be present and attentive to this sacrifice. Each verse is an example of parallelism, either an equivalent statement or an extension of the first line. May God

be with you in difficult times and keep track of your life from His royal throne in Zion. May He eagerly welcome your tribute, because to turn it away meant you have lost His divine favor. The business of heart's desire is not the same as just having a wish or sense of need, but a matter of faith calling to the mind what God has already said He would do in His Word. Any such prayer includes an expectation that they will surely rejoice when things turn out well. It's much the same as reminding themselves to pull up the celebration sheet music for the next performance.

Starting in verse 6, either the priest or the king responds with an affirmation. There is no doubt that God, according to His own revealed nature, will support His mission of truth in this world. The whole point of Israel's existence as a nation and people was to demonstrate and manifest the moral truth of God, to be a living revelation. They would hardly be Israel-the-kingdom without Israel-the-mission. And while Israel eventually did use chariots and horses, they never forgot that it was God who gave the victory. That is, when they did forget, they were no longer Israel the People of Jehovah because they were no longer Israel-the-mission of revelation. People who trust in mere military might would eventually fall, but the mission of God never fails. It is God's own nature to promote His revelation through those who obey it.

Psalm 21

If the previous psalm was a prayer for faith in battle, this one is thanksgiving for the victory. And again, we reckon this song is in two parts. The first seems as the voice of the congregation singing about their king. The second part starting in verse 8 is addressed to the king himself.

In our minds we should note this question: If the king did not bow before God, why should anyone call him king? The fundamental purpose in having a king, clan chief or simple head of household is that someone has to shepherd the flock. This flock is both, a grant of joy and severe duty from God's hand, a stewardship from His divine throne. As much as this first section thanks God for His own divine justice, it cites what a king should expect only if he serves faithfully. So much is plainly stated in the last verse of this first half of the psalm. If the king is inclined to glorify God, then the Lord will make him able to serve faithfully.

To the king they note his dominance over threats. If the king goes out as a fireball of fierce battle, it is the Lord who devours them. The king is God's instrument of justice. This is not simply nationalistic zeal. What Israel took from the Canaanites was at the behest of God, and their victory against the odds was sufficient proof. Those who later rose up for whatever imaginary justification to attack Israel where she justly occupied the land threatened an attack that God took personally. Nobody ignores the other half of that: When Israel ignores God, they lose their place on the earth. So, it's a different sense of justice than holds sway in our modern Western world, and there is no moral flaw in what today is called "genocide." People who hate God and His agenda on the earth, as an aspect of His divine revelation, will be very fortunate to leave any progeny at all. Who dares question the decision of Our Creator?

The closing verse returns to the theme of basking in the glory of being used by God.

Psalm 22

Christians have long recognized this as the Crucifixion Psalm. It's not as if David necessarily foresaw precisely that form of torture and execution. Each item is recognized as a form of suffering, and David runs together all the different images he can imagine. Yet this song is loaded with symbolic references that happened to come rather literally true for Christ on the Cross. Our Savior had the presence of mind to quote this famous psalm. The only fight here is overcoming one's own human doubt.

God abandons no one, but there are times when it surely feels like it. It is the human flaw, the curse of the Fall that blinds us to God and His divine nature. During moments of suffering, the flesh can easily overwhelm the consciousness. The cry of anguish represents how the sufferer feels, not the truth of the heart. David notes that God had never failed Israel as a nation, nor anyone else God called to serve Him.

Still, in moments of sorrow we can surely feel less than human. All the more is this so when men so easily hate each other enough to deny their humanity. The mocking was typical of such hatred, an experience many had faced since the Fall. However, it also mocks God as unwilling or incapable of acting in this world. David cannot appreciate that sort of feeling, because his moral discernment was upon him from an early age. His heart was actively engaged from his earliest memories. He knew all along that men are unreliable at best, but God never fails. So, David remarks that he trusts in no one else.

Indeed, the only humans visible are those gathered to watch the entertainment of his fall. The sense of isolation heightens all the senses to physical symptoms of agitation and despair: weakness, dehydration, and a sense of doom. Again, it is easily an apt description of crucifixion. God alone can rescue him.

Then David declares that God has, indeed, come to his rescue. For David it was quite literal in many cases, all the way back to his days as a shepherd. However, for Our Savior, it was symbolic, for His death was His victory. David would have seen his own end that way, too, because Hebrew intellectual culture declared truth manifested differently on different levels of consideration. Both David and Christ returned to their people with triumph and gave thanks directly to God. In both cases, the justice of God rained down on the oppressed and oppressor, with different results.

David bluntly notes that both the living and dead will glorify God and thank Him for His deliverance. Loss of life is not a tragedy if that life was first dedicated to God's revelation. What matters is that those who yet live do so only for the reason of glorifying Jehovah.

Psalm 23

Easily one of the most memorized and thoroughly analyzed passages of Scripture, the Shepherd Psalm is still often misunderstood. It is seldom seen as a simple Hebrew parable. Here is King David near the peak of his dominion, when most of the surrounding nations are in decline and the reach of his power expands yearly. Yet he regards himself fortunate to be in the flock of the Good Shepherd. However, not every line of this song remains neatly inside that image.

If there's anyone who understands what shepherding requires, it's the seventh son of Jesse, the shepherd boy anointed as king fresh from the fields. Please don't imagine that David worked alone; a noble son always had a retinue of servants. He did sleep out in the field with the servants, but they were his family's flocks, and he was overseer for several scattered herds. But David was quite obviously a hands-on manager. It's his voice the sheep were taught to follow, while the other men ran along the edges of the flock to pick up stragglers, ward off threats and keep the sheep from wandering.

He knew that sheep primarily focused on two things: eating and making more sheep. The latter required the former, of course. So, David speaks of how God takes care of all the shepherd's worries, and he can focus on the simple things of following the Lord. Sheep waste less energy chasing food if the pastures are green. Most of us have been told that sheep will not drink from busy, noisy water, but that it requires the shepherd create a quiet pool along the edge of the stream.

Sheep tend to follow their one chief shepherd's voice if he calls to them while hiking to the next pasture. In David's case, the Shepherd of his soul sings and builds an atmosphere of joy and trust. It means the place where a sheep feels on top of the world, because it has no memory of bad times. By definition, the path of the Lord is the way of divine justice. You can't go wrong following His commands. All you have to keep in mind is the very simple necessity of His glory. How hard can that be?

Sheep seldom noticed much of anything when pasturing except that next bite of grass. If the shepherd was really good, the flock would never see the threats he killed or chased off. So, in the proverbial Valley of Death, David was nearly mindless about fear, since God was so completely equipped to handle trouble. Please note that the words for "rod and staff" in Hebrew have no useful distinction in this text and there's no point in getting hung up on the difference. The primary meaning is a symbol of power and authority, not as a weapon. It's rather like saying "staff" in both senses of the word, because the Lord would have a retinue of servants, too.

There's no experience in a sheep's life that calls for a dining table. Thus, David departs from the strict sheep image and refers to serving as a retainer in God's courts. How nice for your opposition to wait tables while you eat! And then he is anointed as their king. It's enough to make a man giddy, almost drunk, with the unspeakable joy of God's favor. The power and richness of that divine favor chases David wherever he goes. David has no doubt that when he passes from this life, it's just entering an even better version of the same, for he will see His Shepherd face to face.

Psalm 24

Commentators have long noted a fortuitous grouping of this and the previous two songs. In their minds, the trio prophesies the ministry of Christ. While the 22nd is obviously prophetic of the crucifixion, the 23rd is more or less the Church Age with Christ as shepherd. This psalm supposedly hearkens to the Kingdom to Come. All well and good, but that would miss the

point from David's perspective. This song reaffirms the previous, in that Jehovah is the true King in Jerusalem.

There is nothing esoteric about the message here. David begins by affirming that, while we could theorize about other parts of Creation, we know for certain God owns this world and every life in it. He designed the entire structure of this world, so nothing is a mystery to Him. How do we approach such a high and holy ruler in His divine courts? (Keep in mind that all David writes is prior to the existence of the Temple, so the imagery is cultural and generic.)

David goes on to describe basic high moral standards as the fundamental requirement for pleasing God. To stand before God as accepted in His sight requires that you reflect back to Him His own character of moral justice. It's not simply the letter of the Law of Moses, but a commitment to making God smile. The definition of holiness has always been a desire to please Him, that simple childlike love for the Father.

That looks like someone who strives to keep their actions morally clean as an expression of pure motives. A fundamental image of that is embracing honesty, with yourself and with others. There is no place for pretense or boasting of things you cannot possibly do. Such are the people welcome in His courts and qualified for membership in the covenant nation. It's not a matter of DNA, but of a personal commitment to God.

David calls for the very gates of Jerusalem to stand tall and proud like mighty warriors welcoming their master into His own palace. Don't let Him see you slouching; His Presence demands your very best without faking. His Presence makes you better than you otherwise might be. And just whom are we talking about, after all? The One who never fails at anything He chooses to do. His very whims are the universe's necessities.

Say it again! Stand tall and proud to be so much as the fixtures of His palace, because the doors and stones themselves sing of His greatness. Let there be no doubt that this is Our Creator.

Psalm 25

In the Hebrew intellectual traditions, what can appear free association to mere intellect is a structure in itself perceived only in the heart. This song is a Hebrew acrostic, though imperfect, perhaps because of subsequent editing. Regardless, the burden is on the reader to absorb the message and find his own soul's pattern. Hebrew was never meant to convey truth, but to stand as a signpost indicating where truth can be found.

This is not a psalm one could write when things are going well. It calls for contemplation, a time of waiting upon God to speak to the heart while letting the mind be patient. The mind of a man can be all over the place, but the heart works on a level far beyond mere sensory awareness or reason. Sometimes the answer is not in action but in remembering just Who is in charge. In these verses David calls to his mind to cease the frantic search for solutions.

The image of what David seeks is not mere political victory, but a sense of peace with God. People who ignore divine justice can still have a lot of things, but not the peace often indicated by the word shalom. The shame that David fears is standing embarrassed before God. The Hebrew concept of noble character is not implacable and demanding but places the highest

value on personnel. Thus, David's request for training and education in God's ways is entirely appropriate protocol. However long it takes for God to make him understand, David is in no hurry for his own relief.

David calls God's attention to the most ancient promises of mercy for those who embraced His justice, stretching back before human memory. How much has God already overlooked in His divine favor? David knows it was a matter of God's glory, nothing less. Those who humble themselves before His glory have every reason to expect His patience. David is not blind to his own sin but realizes that God's glory is the one reason He offers mercy. So, while David celebrates all the fame of God's mercy, he knows he must play his part. He's no better than any other man. What God offers David is hardly different from what any man could have if he simply obeys from the heart.

In the final verses, David recalls what brought him to God's face again. He's not having a good day, to the say the least. So, he calls on the Lord to save His own glory yet again by enforcing His justice on the earth. David would be the first to realize how fallible he is, as all men are. It's not as if the righteous would ever run out of enemies in this world. Without divine mercy and protection, there would be no David, no king, no Israel.

Psalm 26

It's an ancient protocol going back prior to human memory, still visible today in various forms: The man with authority hands the symbol of that authority to his superior, requesting to be examined in response to an accusation. In David's time, it meant handing one's own sword to the ruler, hilt first, with the point near his heart. This is the image behind David's first words here.

David does not fear inspection from God. His conscience is clear, and he appeals to God for a final judgment against his accusers. Whether the accusation is literal or symbolic, or simply the fleeting sense of guilt that often deceives us about our standing with God, David wants to hear what his Sovereign has to say about it.

David knows that living in moral purity is not about pride in his own significance, but of pride on behalf of his God. Nothing in our human existence can compare with the sheer joy of reflecting God's glory onto our world. The means to that glory is righteous living. That in turn is possible only because of the Lord's own power granted to those who embrace His revelation. The beginning point is humility, of walking through the Flaming Sword at the entrance to Eden. Eden itself expels those who don't belong there. So, nothing David says here is smug or proud, but simply good protocol when addressing his Master. An accurate account is not boasting.

Whether God executes any punishment on David is not the point. God's wrath is better than comfortable conformity with the world. In the broadest sense, God executes judgment on our sin so that we might live for His glory. We suffer from it only to the degree we have committed ourselves to things not included in God's revealed will for us. So, if David's life is over, only let God not include David in the same handling as those who boldly reject that will of God. Indeed, God has promised to rescue those who are motivated by His glory. Whatever the fate of those who worship the Lord, such is what David desires.

Psalm 27

Scholars suggest that we have here two psalms concatenated together because it seems the tone changes about halfway through. However, Hebrew literature is known for surprising and dramatic turns.

David begins by joyfully asserting that Jehovah is his light and deliverance. He was not at all a conventional thinker. We know of no other place in the Old Testament where God is called Light in this fashion; some English translations struggle to give it a different meaning. David gave his whole reverence to God. With the moral clarity that such a commitment brought to him, it's no surprise he had little fear and no respect left for his enemies, typically defined as those who cared little for such high moral reverence. If God intended to deliver David over to anyone, it mattered not whether they were few or many, there was nothing David could do about it. He intended to fight as if God had already granted him victory.

Given what we know of David's religious life, we can understand the claim that his main interest was living in God's Presence. It's another way of saying that all he cared about was God's glory. As previously noted, there was no Temple, so David refers here to the image of being a member of God's household and hanging out in His courts. It's a good place for your heart to stand when things get rough. No one can get to you there.

So, what sort of noises would one make in praise to God? First, we acknowledge that God is our only hope. Thus, David suddenly cries out to God, as if in desperation. He's providing a model of how one approaches the Lord. When we listen to our hearts, we cannot avoid the desire to seek divine favor. It's certainly within God's authority to cut us off, but we should not expect it. Either way, there's nowhere else to go. We might as well learn all we can about His character because life can be no better than walking in His ways. When you stick with God's path, it's hard for your enemies to find a place for an ambush. What a dreary life it would be without God's revelation!

So, David ends by asserting once again that nothing works like relying on God. This is all the power you need to face life in this world.

Psalm 28

The greatest threat to David and his people was not some external nation or empire, nor some insidious spy in his court working for some other interest. The greatest threat was departure from the Covenant. More specifically, the greatest danger was that Israel would lose her moral power to live in this world. Obeying Moses harmonized her life with the moral fabric of the universe. Lose that and she can't defeat children throwing spit wads. Keep that and no power on earth can oppose her. Other nations could come and go at random, but the only reason Israel existed in the first place was her mission to reveal God's character in how the people lived.

Thus, David cries out to God with the assurance that if his or the nation's sins have raised a barrier to God's favor, they might as well dig his grave. Chances are the image of a holy temple at this point would be the Tent of Meeting in David's royal courtyard. It was a symbolic gesture

in the first place, raising the hands in supplication to some great power. David recognized only Jehovah as his ruler.

It stands to reason David was facing a rash of crimes by deception. That is, people were playing politics and currying the favor of their neighbors while plotting to destroy the social stability God granted as a covenant blessing. It didn't matter what the plotters thought they might gain; their actions would destroy *shalom*. David was counting on God to read the hearts of deceivers like that and keep His promise to root them out. Often such a cleansing came from a direction the plotters never dreamed. God's sense of poetry and beauty always flavored His justice.

This is a God worthy of all praise. His Law included a generous measure of mercy for human weakness in those who genuinely loved to serve Him. David counted himself fortunate to be included in God's favor. Every time he turned around God was once more fulfilling His promises in ways that left David marveling. It was for the sake of His own divine glory that God protected David and the Nation of Israel. His tenderness for Israel was bigger than the legends could tell.

Psalm 29

In Israel, politics was never just politics. The Covenant was a suzerain-vassal treaty, a very personal covenant, making Israel in effect a tributary to Jehovah Himself. Idolatry was treason, and very often treason arose from idolatry. It has been widely noted that, up until the Exile, common Israelis suffered a very typical superstition that simply could not accommodate the notion that there was but one deity. While Moses flatly declared that there was no God but Jehovah, you can be sure this was considered a political elitist pronouncement in the minds of most Israelis.

In David's time, plenty of powerful folks, even a good number of priests, might harbor the suspicion or superstition that there were many gods and each controlled various aspects of our natural existence here on earth. Thus, in their minds this and other psalms would be viewed with some cynicism. Only with the advent of near universal education under the control of the synagogue system in Babylonian Exile did the broad element of superstition fade from Israeli life.

This psalm is widely recognized as an attack on the worship of Baals. Because the broad undercurrent of superstition and the similarity of rituals, the temptation to include Baal worship in private religious life was quite strong. So, while they didn't mind engaging rituals to appease their national god, it was very popular to cover their bets by also making offerings at ancient or private shrines to Baal. The most popular manifestation of this idolatry credited Baal with controlling storms. Thus, this psalm attempts to correct such a notion.

If David can't get the people to realize it, he can surely get all the hosts of Heaven to declare there was but one God. *They* certainly knew it, so any countering notions were silly. As Creator, it's impossible to imagine that He is not also complete master of all things. So, there is no competition; Jehovah owns, not just the storms, but every droplet of water on the planet. And not just the occasional squall and rain, but God could easily uproot the massive cedars of Lebanon like flowers in a garden. He makes the very ground bounce like a playful calf just by

His voice. With each line David calls on listeners to realize there can be no competing deity taking charge of any part of creation. Don't fear the claims of the many false deities. If there were any other beings in the Spirit Realm like the Baals, they knew that they were no challenge to Jehovah.

Psalm 30

The text offers a dedication line that is to us rather mysterious, mentioning the dedication only of some "house." However, given the dreadful context of the rest of the Psalm, associating it with 1 Chronicles 21 seems a good bet. As the shepherd of Israel under Jehovah's feudal lordship, David would have taken the loss of lives quite personally. His sin of boastful pride and the depth of guilt he felt for it would have been walking through the Valley of Death for him. Given that the proper repentance included the purchase of the threshing floor as the future site for the Temple, the dedication line likely refers to that.

David feels like a bucket of water pulled from the well. Would it not be futile to now spill his life in the dust? In his mind, one of the worst outcomes is that his enemies would celebrate his downfall. Consider: With all the noise David made about being a servant of Jehovah, how would it look if his God were unable to keep him alive and on the throne? It's not a question of whether David was embarrassed, but that God's glory on earth was tied to David's boasting in His name. Thus, instead of dying for that name, David would bring shame on it. How depressing could it get?

David says the Lord heard his cry of repentance. Therefore, he calls on believers to rejoice as if they had been there, too. No doubt, some would have taken their own walk through the Valley of Death, so they could really get into this song. How glorious is God, whose pique is minor and short-lived, but whose mercy and blessings fill up life? So, weep in the time of darkness, but know that the hours are numbered, and the dawn is sure to come.

David freely admits that he stood in his own strength. He allowed his sense of good fortune to make him complacent, to forget just how completely everything depended on God's favor. So, when he lost that favor, it was worse than death. Notice the basis for his cry to God: How can I give you glory from the grave? Who among the living can hear the worship of the dead? It was all about the glory of God; no other consideration mattered. David had no argument with his final destiny and the justice of it, but felt somehow that it was a little premature, given how much he could still do for the name of the Lord.

More so would his sorrow be turned into rejoicing. Having tasted death, life in the Lord's service is the sweeter for it.

Psalm 31

Never be content with a mere translation of words. If this were a modern work of Western song, we would say it was a long string of clichés. However, in good Hebrew verse, this is how it's done. Readers of David's time would have been enthralled at the drama invoked by the common figures of speech. Much of Hebrew writing is figurative and parabolic, so you can't understand Hebrew until you get used to that.

It seems obvious David is not describing the context. Rather, he is reacting to something traumatic; that's all we need to know. He was born for trouble, and it seemed his natural element. His soul thrived and his character was so large and powerful because he handled it and kept moving forward. That does not mean he didn't stress out at times. The biggest war in sight here is internal, the fleshly mind of David fighting with the heart and soul committed to God.

The first half of the psalm is a litany against fear, a loud proclamation that God is his Protector and wholly trustworthy. Then David pours out the pain of his sorrow in a few more verses. In sum, he felt doomed. As was so often the case, whatever this experience entailed, it included efforts by others to destroy David in his role as king. Then he again asserts that God can plainly see all of that, and with far more detail and clarity than David could discern. But God also has the power and promise to protect those who cling to His covenant. It is those who reject God's moral character in life that will suffer the evil they plotted for others.

We get the sense he hardly gets a good lament going when God answers. Go ahead – don the sackcloth and ashes but be ready to turn around and celebrate before you have a chance to change out of them.

Psalm 32

Hebrew theology acknowledged the Spirit Realm but carefully avoiding presuming to say much about it. The primary issue was not whether one's spirit was alive or dead, but whether one was morally alive or dead. One who seemed morally insensitive was typically referred to as a "fool" who would, at best, play sharp with the words of the Covenant. By the same standard, though, a sensitive conscience was as much as one could expect from someone morally alive. It wasn't a question of always doing the right thing, but of always bearing a sense of penitence. If you felt a genuine sense of sorrow over your mistakes, there was always room to repent.

Thus, this psalm celebrates the morally awakened soul. God is not a nag; a festering guilty conscience is a liar. Rather, a genuine sense of accountability to a very personal sovereign Lord is the point here. Thus, how sweet it is to know when your Lord has restored you to Covenant blessings! It's better to learn not to try hiding even little things, but to face the music for your mistakes. David describes the gnawing sense of terror that comes from trying to ignore your conscience. There is simply no place to hide. It's better to learn the habit of seeking God's face early, because the curses of Covenant failure can pile up pretty quickly.

Righteous people have little to fear in this life. They are quick to rejoice and celebrate the goodness of God. Having experienced a good bit of testing, David says rather assertively, "Let

me teach you a thing or two about this Covenant life.” He promised there would be no games; he will maintain bold eye contact. You can learn or you can be a stubborn draft animal who requires a bridle because it cannot be trusted to behave on its own. Better to serve God with a will than be forced by the constraints of the Law. That gets painful quickly. Life is far more pleasant for those who make Jehovah Lord.

Those whom God has granted a moral awareness are truly blessed of all humanity on this earth.

Psalm 33

The glory and greatness of Our Creator is self-manifest. He needs no praise and honor. Worshiping God is simply in our own best interest. His glory simply *is*, but He allows us to enter into that glory as the place where all the good that we can have in this life is found.

We need to keep in mind that David is not mindless about referring to his nation as always good and right. Rather, the people of God are people of good morals, regardless of their national identity. However, the people of Israel have no excuse for being moral fools. David knew that he was surrounded by shysters, manipulators and schemers of every sort. In some of these psalms, he calls to people to just give it a try, give the Lord honest praise. Never mind how you feel, do the right thing. Giving praise and honor to Jehovah is the right thing for its own sake. Shout, sing and play that music. If you aren't happy with the tired hold hymns of the past, do what David does and write a new song to fit the occasion.

You can detect a hint of something with which most of humanity has struggled since the Garden of Eden: There is no standard by which to evaluate God. He exceeds everything because He made it all; He is the standard Himself. How do you dispute with the One who made all things? He reads your heart even if you have no clue what's in it. Give Him a chance and He can renovate it into something worthy beyond words.

Yes, you can see an army and its power. You can ride a horse into battle, feel that massive power under you, and see the enemy run to escape. You cannot see God. But He made the horse, and no army can touch Him. Just because you personally didn't witness His deliverance at the sea crossing in Egypt, or any of the mighty miracles that destroyed nations and armies before Israel since that defining moment, doesn't mean He isn't watching your every move, every thought, and your dreams in the night. He doesn't operate on your scale until you open the door to Him. Don't wait for a crisis. Don't invite trouble; turn to Him and worship Him when things are going well simply *because* they are going well.

Let's stand with David who regards himself but a lowly attendant in the courts of God.

Psalm 34

It can seem at times that David's songs are awfully repetitious. Consider that virtually every one of them represents some adventure David went through or something that left a major impression on him. In this case, we are told that David celebrates delivery from a sticky political situation (1 Samuel 21:10-22:1). Saul was trying to hunt him down and David hardly knew where to run. He ended up carrying the sword of Goliath back to the giant's hometown. Don't

get hung up on the names for the king of Gath. Abimelech seems a hereditary title while Achish is more likely a royal family name. David's escape was to feign madness in accordance with popular imagination of such things. We suspect Achish was hoping for such an excuse since David was a family friend or sorts.

This is an acrostic psalm as with Psalm 9. The first half is clearly a call to worship with him. A significant number of contemporary worship songs echo the words here because more than one English translation is rather exhilarating. Starting in verse 11, David takes on the role of teacher, pointing out that what humans really need and generally want can be found in conforming to God's moral character. He notes that it's not always possible to distinguish between the sinners and the righteous in terms of the risks we all take in our fallen world, but that God delivers His own in the midst of trouble.

We also note that David offers a common figure of speech of not worrying about broken bones. John's Gospel (19:33) quotes it as oddly fulfilled in the literal with Jesus on the Cross. In the context of John's writing, we realize he isn't a silly literalist, but simply notes that Jesus is the real fulfillment of Israeli ideals. We note a great many scholars miss the subtlety.

Psalm 35

This is the first imprecatory psalm we encounter, a form that has no parallel in Western literature. It sounds to us like petty vengeance because we lack the proper moral background in our world.

Paul warns us that all Creation groans under the burden of moral injustice. This is not merely poetic characterization, but in the Hebrew mind a verifiable truth. The stamp of God's moral character is the foundation for all that exists. The very fabric of our dimension in time and space cries out for deliverance from sin. When people sin, God may well be patient and tolerant, but never doubt that it grates on His nerves. This is the background for David's prayer here. All he's asking is that God act according to His own revealed character in defense of the man He made king over the nation that was His living revelation.

There are three sections in this psalm. The first ten verses are set in martial tones. It is in essence a vassal lord calling on his emperor to enforce the imperial law, to exact punishment for insults against His divine Person. David is not willing to take the law into his own hands but pleads with God to bring about His justice. He is careful to frame it in terms of breaking even, in the sense of letting his attackers suffer their own ends. Let them receive what they intended for their victim. David then assures God that he will advertise to all and sundry that there is no one in the same class as God. In a pagan world with competing claims, God has made it clear He tolerates not so much as the allegation that other gods exist.

In the second section of eight verses, David pleads for God to notice that his own hands were clean. He had been just toward his enemies, treating them with due respect and social equity. Divine justice demands we let mercy first do its work. However, the mere fact that David is king is enough to provoke envy from a certain type of immoral soul. Conscious justifications are all over the map, but wherever God raises anyone to serve Him as shepherd, someone else will always insist this is not really God's will. They would make the worst of rulers and cannot help

themselves in opposing the most moral of kings. Again, David promises to give due publication to the glory and justice of God.

The final section emphasizes the threat of conspiracies and plots. No king can reign without facing people in his own court who secretly work against him. If they were strong enough to challenge him alone, they would. To plot secretly is cowardice against a king who isn't particularly harsh. David was known for making allowance to hear those who might have a complaint against his decisions. Thus, he cries for God to see and know things others would hide, and to exact His own justice against those who are bitter and resentful. David then again calls on all who are blessed by God's justice to declare it loudly.

Psalm 36

Hebrew scholars tell us that this psalm is distinctly in two parts. The first few verses are in very rugged Hebrew that grates on the ears, whereas the rest is quite smooth and sweet. This is how David emphasizes the description within those verses respectively. However, there is some dispute about the wording of the first verse, in part because too many Western scholars just don't quite grasp the Hebrew emphasis on perception with the heart as a sensory organ in its own right.

So perhaps it should go something like this: "The rebellion of a wicked man tells my heart that he does not revere God." It's obvious to David because his heart reads the moral context of what he sees with his eyes. Specific sin or general moral failure is a direct insult to God, the maker of all things who wrote His character into Creation. This is indeed an issue with human pride to insist on evaluating things from his own sense of reason rather than embracing the revelation of God. Thus, his actions betray a lack of moral sensitivity. He stays up late looking for ways to prey on others and gain some unjust advantage.

In contrast, God is merciful and keeps looking for ways to bless the creatures He made. His compassion reaches to the clouds, outweighs mountains and has no bottom. There is no better place for a human to live than in the shelter of God's revelation. Life can be no sweeter than in the joy of His holiness.

So, David prays that God continue to differentiate how He treats those who love Him. He asks to be included in that sweet regard of God's favor.

Psalm 37

This is an acrostic psalm loaded with popular proverbs of David's time. It's the age-old question of why it seems the wicked prosper and the righteous are blown by the winds of blind fortune. On the surface, it appears that David merely reaffirms what Job's three friends said, but we happen to know they were literalists, whereas David is a poet full of parables. One must read between the lines to find the real treasure here. That is, living justly by the revelation of God is its own reward. If you read this expecting a literal fulfillment of the promises, you'll miss the point. It's also a subtle slam on activism, particularly political activism.

When you view the world through a proper moral lens of the heart, it's as if you have stepped into an alternative universe. While you still have your feet on this fallen planet, your perception is radically altered. If you live in your head, all you can see are what the five senses and your human reason can tell you. When you live by your heart, committed to God's revelation of the truth, you lose your obsession with material comforts and seek the peace of a clean soul. Human suffering fades into the background as mere transient context.

Thus, David jumps right in asserting that you should not envy the sinners who cannot see what the godly see. When sinners die, the good times are gone. For the righteous, it's just the beginning. Bear the toils of life with grace and embrace the truth of moral purity. That puts you in a position to sense the divine power and presence of God, and you can talk with Him knowing He hears you. Let Him worry about human events. Perhaps the wicked won't see or understand, but God will publicly reward your private devotion to Him. So let the fools chase their broken dreams. Don't let your sense of logic make you burn with some impossible demand for practical justice. Sooner or later, it will come, but God hardly wastes that much effort to correct hearts closed to His truth. Let justice fall on sinners at God's timetable.

David treats nature as a living being, a separate creature. The righteous will live in peace and know that all Creation is on their side – they “will possess the land.” The same land will hardly remember the passage of the wicked. There will always be oppressors and the oppressed. At some point their tools of oppression will be turned against them. Give God room to work. Turn loose your fearful grip on earthly possessions and don't let such things possess you. Let God take care of your needs, because He really knows what's in your best interest. Particularly when He sends His wrath through natural means, you'll be surprised at how nature responds and still feeds the godly, if they simply wait on God and keep their eyes open for His fingerprints.

There is one noteworthy contrast that comes from too far back in the mists of ancient times to trace it down: The wicked don't even pay just debts, but the righteous give freely beyond what they owe to men because of what they owe to God. Creation is fully aware of generosity and greed in humans. Nature itself revolts at immorality and cooperates with the righteous. Even if you fall, God will catch you. David mentions that he has lived a long life and has never seen the genuinely righteous actually starving when they cry out to God. Nature provides one way or another, if you abide where God calls you.

It continues in this vein until the acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet is complete. It's not as if righteous people never suffer empty bellies, but that they don't starve to death unless God is ready to bring them home. He grants a peace that does not rely on mere human senses, so don't seek your fleshly desires, but seek God personally.

Psalm 38

This is one of seven Penitential Psalms, and we do not know the context. We can sense that whatever the occasion, it seems not to have struck David's awareness all at once. Rather, the pressure of conviction grew slowly. The cultural context is that there is no set period, nor any particular course of penitence required. Rather, David must wait out the sense of personal insult he caused his Lord. By no means is there anything resembling an objective standard for such

things, as if fairness would even be an appropriate concept. God forgives sin, but David's sense of discomfort is the issue. Violating God's moral character plays out in this world with very real consequences.

However, there is no need to take every line of this song literally. We aren't supposed to get lost in analyzing the precise meaning of the words beyond an expression of tendencies and David's subjective experience. Some of this is standard Hebrew hyperbole, a sense of dramatic storytelling that was quite common in his day; we should be surprised when it is absent. Pay attention to David's grasp of justice, in which he never disputes the rightness of the punishment he feels. Rather, he pleads for mercy because there is no higher court of appeal.

Thus, David isn't whining, but genuinely worried he could die before God can respond with a restoration of communion with David. Dying itself may well be justified, but he seeks that note of merciful acknowledgment first. So, David depicts himself as one who has been grievously wounded, and the wounds are as yet untreated. Then he talks about the sense of humiliation and depression. And who wants to be around someone in that state? His friends and family keep their distance.

Instead, his enemies draw near, sensing the moment when he will be defenseless. He has no moral standing to defend himself against false accusations. While David hints that this would be a nasty way to end his life, he is confident in God's mercy. He is not hiding anything; he confesses his guilt openly. He ends with a call on the Lord to rescue Him before it's too late.

It is important to understand here that this is not false guilt. At the same time, the focus is not a matter of objective legal transgression, but that David is struggling with an overwhelming sense of conviction and guilt. While the problem is internal, it is more than mere feelings, but a very real moral discernment based on something far bigger and more substantial than mere feelings. David knows there is a barrier between him and God because he is morally powerless and disconnected from the Spirit Realm. His heart tells him that he is not in tune with ultimate reality. God alone can heal this inner wound.

Psalm 39

The tone of this psalm does not come across well in English. It takes turns of logic and makes subtle connections that don't match anything in modern literature. It almost looks like random verses strung together from two or three short pieces.

There is a bit of the Job experience here for David. It's one thing to yell and fuss with God in your private prayers. Wrestling with God should be a private matter as each of us comes to slightly different terms of peace in our souls. God is not some distant ruler, but our closest confidant. In Ancient Near Eastern cultures, a private audience was much freer than we would imagine under Western feudalism. We have no equivalent in our culture where one can speak frankly with his master in private, so long as court protocol is not breached in public. Thus, David is careful not to let schemers in on his private dealings with God, because they would use such knowledge as leverage for evil.

But David is filled to bursting with the need to vent to his Heavenly Father. So eventually he could contain himself no longer and had a frank discussion with God. What he needs most is to embrace his own mortality. It's not something he needed to share with others, but to ensure he fully grasped the implications in his own heart. People who think they've gained much in this life actually have nothing. David implies that the richest treasure of this world is not taking yourself too seriously. Life in this world is all about bringing God glory; all else is just a tool for that end.

On these grounds, David asks that he be able to embrace the choices God makes for him. When you face unexpected turns of life with aplomb, it's hard for fools to heap criticism on you. Facing things with serenity is easily the most powerful way to live. By the same token, he asks that God not put too severe a test upon him. David knows that God is more severe with His own because they have less excuse for transgression, having come to know God and His character much better than the rest of the world.

Still, human life is transient at the best of times. David's highly emotional and piteous cry to God would be out of place among Western royalty, but this is the private David seeking the face of His Lord in a time of trouble. It need not be for a specific sin that David repents here, but his prayer is more general. David is torn between his human identity and his longing to be with the Father. His otherworldly bent makes him feel like an alien among his own people, and God is his only comfort.

Psalm 40

Most of this is a rather didactic psalm. About the only reason we might suggest for finding Psalm 70 tacked on the end (verses 13-17 here) is that it serves as an example of the kind of prayer God answered to justify the first part of this message.

David had nowhere else to turn. It didn't matter what he might have felt compelled to do on the human level; if his God was not behind things, nothing would have saved David. He offers the image of being rescued from quicksand or a mud-pit. The latter was a sort of wet clay trap, quite deep with slimy sloped sides. It was quite impossible to escape, even for substantially larger and stronger animals. David says that God allowed his feet to find a rocky extension so he could climb out.

A refreshing rescue calls for a fresh composition, so David sings a new song. The intent was to catch people's attention with this heartfelt testimony. While it is impossible to overstate God's trustworthiness, David contrasts that with those who boasted in lies even in small ways. Big talk did not compare well with God's deliverance. Where does David begin? How does he narrow down the vast record of God's power?

A difficulty in verse 6 is the noteworthy variation between existing manuscripts. The New Testament (Hebrews 10:5) quotes from the Septuagint version of this verse and that is reason enough to prefer it. This places the emphasis on a form of Hebrew parallelism. David says that ritual offerings were never about the value of the offering but the principle of sacrifice itself. A more meaningful sacrifice would be your own obedient flesh while you live, not some dead

animal you could buy or raise. So, David says, "Here I am, Lord! I embrace Your revelation as binding on me!" David sees Covenant Law as a privilege, not a duty.

Such is the message David preaches in the hearing of the nation at every possible opportunity. David felt that was his highest duty as king. Yet he is a king who suffers little from arrogance, because he quickly transitions to calling on God's mercy as a penitent. For all his royal power, David could not defeat his own sins alone.

In most English translations it is not hard to see how the addition of Psalm 70 fits right in here. With such a feeble moral constitution, David is frantic for God's delivering hand. He pleads with God as he often does, that his enemies are not allowed to win. David has no fear of death but worries that an embarrassing end would darken God's reputation, too. So, he asks that God would simply keep on giving His people every excuse to praise His name. They have nowhere else to turn, either.

Psalm 41

This psalm sounds exactly like David's experience when his son Absalom rose to usurp the throne (2 Samuel 15). The poetry here depicts a rather sharp and painful memory still fresh in his mind.

The term for "poor" here refers to victims of any sort of misfortune. Thus, it is a standard poetic image David draws of godly mercy. It echoes in the Beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5:7) with, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." We have ample evidence that David had been merciful according to the terms of Mosaic Law, so he had every reason to lay claim to God's mercy. There is no arrogance here, as David openly confesses his sin. Contrast this to the opportunistic behavior of his wayward son.

We gather that David suffered a long illness during a time when his son was sowing discord. The king's official absence would have made the political intrigue that much easier. Among David's court advisors was Ahitophel, who served as Absalom's spy and stirred up trouble among the palace staff. While he might have wished for a natural succession by David's death, it was not to be. But before David could recover fully, the trap was sprung. Ahitophel's deceptive behavior is described in the Hebrew idiom of "making his heel great against me." This was also used to describe how Judas betrayed Jesus (John 13:18-19).

David doesn't ask God to punish them but asks only that he be allowed to recover enough strength to execute justice himself. This is entirely appropriate for a king, who bore the burden as chief executive of God's justice in the kingdom. David knew that the primary mark of God's favor was his military prowess and success in battle. Thus it had always been before David was crowned. He knew this was conditioned on his careful obedience to the Law of Moses, not just in the letter, but also in a heartfelt devotion to God.

Thus, he ends with a call for people to glorify God as long as the universe stands. Amen!

Book 2: Psalm 42-72

The theme of this series, ending with Psalm 72, seems contentious among Western scholars. A common remark raises the issue that Book 1 used God's personal name Jehovah more often, while Book 2 emphasizes the title *Elohim*. To some, this suggests a different purpose, but scholars dispute what that purpose might be. This author believes it as to do with ceremonial celebrations of God as royalty, while the previous book were simply more personal in nature.

Psalm 42

Scholars seem to agree that this and the next psalm were written as one, but separated at some point later for reasons unknown. However, it does seem to change the subject a bit, so it makes a kind of sense.

David is in exile. He mentions the vicinity of Mount Hermon, meaning that he would be at the northern reaches of his kingdom, around the City of Dan. We know of no particular event from the biblical record that placed him there. The flight from Absalom's revolt seems to have halted at Mahanaim, a city on the Jabbok River only one-third as far from Jerusalem as Mount Hermon would be. It may have been a bit of Hebrew hyperbole or simply a poetic image to be that far north. The point is that David is about as far as possible from where he prefers to worship in Jerusalem.

More modern songs are taken from this psalm. Picture a deer in the high desert, panting for water. This is how David feels about missing the worship in Jerusalem at the Tent of Meeting over the Ark of Covenant. Whatever else is going wrong in his life to drive him way out here on the edge of his kingdom, it all pales in comparison to his longing for proper worship. He recalls the grand parade that brought the Ark into the city.

He tells himself to pull it together, because this time of trouble will pass. While he is forced to remain way up here in the north, he can still call on God. Nonetheless, it's rather like one wave of depression after another washing over him. It's as if they are calling to each other where to find him. But the difference between sorrow and deep penitence is just a small step in his soul, as David remarks that God grants him His Law of Love in daytime and songs in the night.

Still, his call to God does not hide his misery at the embarrassment of his enemies mocking him. "Where is your God?" Thus, it's more an insult to Jehovah than to David, but he still feels it. Once more, he tells himself to get over it. God will do things on His own schedule, and it always turned out well for David in the past. There is always hope for the future.

Psalm 43

We remind ourselves that scholars suggest this psalm technically continues the previous. The Septuagint Old Testament, favored by New Testament authors, has them as one.

It's sad how much is lost in translation here. David willingly throws himself on the mercy of the divine court. If it is David who needs correction, let God cleanse him of sin. Otherwise, let divine wrath fall on those who persecute him. Perhaps we could translate the second line as

“contend for my contention,” as the Hebrew words are that closely related. His contention is against some unnamed Gentile nation, though it may be merely a figure of speech, as is the next line about deliverance from those who are deceitful. It’s not so much a matter of who the people are as it is the violation of God’s revelation that bothers him.

The point here is that God is pictured as the sovereign ruler with authority to act, and a presumption that nothing about this is a mystery to Him. David has committed his life to conforming to God’s character within Creation. Thus, God is his refuge in all sorrows and at any cost to David. It’s standard courtly protocol to ask why God might push him aside, not as impertinent as it sounds to us. It’s not even really a question of “how long?” Rather, he urges God to take action as soon as possible. In David’s soul, such action would be itself a revelation of truth. This is how David has lived all his life, seeking to understand with his heart what matters to God in all circumstances. If anything will bring David back into God’s Presence, that is it, the one thing God Himself revealed.

And what a celebration it will be! David promises to appear before God with his best offerings – songs of praise and worship. Again, he tells his soul to pull it back together. Don’t get caught in the lies of depression, because God does things in His own sense of timing. That day will come when God decides, when He wants it to happen.

Psalm 44

Western scholars seem to be unsure whether the Sons of Korah wrote this or if it was simply dedicated to them. English translations vary on whether it is “by” or “for” them. Even more disturbing is the insinuation by Western scholars that this psalm accuses God of failing Israel when she was faithful. While they observe no other psalm seems to say this, they are shocked by the apparent sarcasm aimed at God, despite the author having nowhere else to turn.

Here we need to repeat the lesson of Job: Sometimes God does stuff that makes no sense to us, and we have no reason to expect that He is accountable to us. If there is one lesson Israel most needed reminding of, particularly leading up to the Exile, it was that no human entity has God over a barrel. Even God’s Chosen People face suffering and sorrow that seems entirely unconnected with anything they understand, and it has not changed after Christ. Our God portrays Himself as a mysterious and imperious Eastern Potentate, with concerns far beyond our imagination. He is God and we are not. That this seems so foreign to Western sensibilities should serve as a warning that Christians need to pay more attention to the cultural background of Jesus, who was an Eastern man founding a new Eastern religion that was built on top an ancient Eastern religion and culture. Despite the tone here, we have no reason to suspect the psalmist isn’t aware of the bigger picture but is simply telling how it feels.

So, the psalm starts out describing how the nation had a long record of God’s covenant faithfulness. The Conquest of Canaan Land was all about God’s power and glory. The army of Israel was just along for the ride, going through the motions as commanded. Then it gets personal: “You are *my* king!” This is followed by a call for God to repeat in that time what He had done during all those past centuries, showing His power over the enemies of Israel. This is the boast by which Israel taunted their vanquished enemies.

Then comes the anguished cry. What happened, Lord? Now we are being slaughtered in battle. The psalmist feels the nation was sold cheaply. And it is now the enemy who taunts Israel in the name of their heathen gods. The psalmist insists they have been faithful and cannot imagine how they might have transgressed the Covenant in such a way as to bring this upon their heads. Did God fall asleep on them? This is how it feels when the inexplicable things come into our lives, and very much how it felt for Job.

The final verse is a renewed call for God to rescue them on the basis of His own character. They aren't going to get help anywhere else.

Psalm 45

The dedication line says a Temple cantor, one of the Kohathites, wrote this. Some scholars note that this psalm cannot be associated with any historical figure. Rather, it sounds like an idealized image of a royal wedding. Our only clue is that the writer of Hebrews quotes a bit (Hebrews 1:8-9) and says it is messianic. So the Jewish scholars had concluded, as well.

The underlying theme is that God has made all of this possible. The psalmist cites the awesome power of the vision that struck him, so he can't help but write this hymn. He gave it his best artistry because one cannot take lightly the Anointed of God.

He describes a warrior king, wearing his fanciest armor. But make no mistake: This is the real stuff worn in battle. Anyone would be stirred at the sight. Indeed, "Nations fall at your feet." His throne is eternal, and His justice is the definition of justice for the whole universe. He is indeed the Anointed One. Could any palace house such a mighty One? His would be paneled in ivory, filled with music to melt the soul.

Among this king's guests, those who are honored are honorable. To the bride, the psalmist reminds her to forget whence she came. Her real life is about to begin. How could she not submit and honor the groom as her lord? The wealthiest of the world will seek this king's favor. Even the sight of his bride will make them feel humble. Her entourage is truly regal; anyone could see it. People would count themselves blessed beyond words just to catch a glimpse of such sights. The image is breathtaking.

And songs like this would never end so long as mankind lives on the earth, for his glory is eternal.

Psalm 46

A psalm from the Korahites, Martin Luther said this was the basis for his famous "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" hymn, but there are also more recent songs from it. This and the next two seem to form a trilogy on the same impetus. While most scholars guess it was a particular historical event, nothing in the trio offers sufficient specifics to identify.

We are left awe-struck at the soaring praise.

God is our shelter from threats and the reason we boast. He's always between us and trouble. Even if the earth itself should be our trouble, we have nothing to fear. Instead of crashing waves,

we have a sweet stream of clear water in the place where God instructed us to meet with Him. And who could roust Him from where He chooses to be found? He wastes no time, but at first light brings His mighty deliverance.

The psalmist makes a blunt statement that human politics are subject to God's whims. The whole world could assemble together as one, but He still shuffles things around as He sees fit. At His command, the earth itself would dissolve under their feet. Stop and think just Who this God is we are talking about. This is the one who defeated armies by His own miracles when they could otherwise have overwhelmed Israel.

And He can simply stop all wars, too. He could humble the whole human race at His feet; someday He will. Nothing and no one in this Creation resists the power of the Creator. And when you serve this God, when your actions reflect His revealed character and His will, His heavenly army has your back.

Psalm 47

This second song in a trilogy has become the source for quite a number of hymns and praise songs in recent decades. The first half serves to justify the rest.

In these first four verses, this psalm written by the Korahites calls for both Israel and all nations to praise our Creator. Far more than the rowdy exuberance of fans whose sports team has just won a match, this is more deeply thrilling like a nation that has won a hard fought war under the command of their king. However, in this case, it is their God who has demonstrated His mastery of all the earth. Thus, He could have chosen any place on earth for Israel's inheritance, but this Promised Land was the one place He wanted to make His earthly home. It is the homeland He shares with His chosen nation.

So, with all the boundless pride and the matching grateful humility, the second half of the psalm exhorts the nation to extravagant formal worship. If this paints the image of standard protocols demanded by earthly potentates during special celebrations, how much more so the God who made all things. Of course, this is all symbolic imagery, but it's the only way to get a worshiper in the proper frame of mind.

Psalm 48

The third in the praise trilogy, we have now the emphasis on Zion. We've seen God as Protector, as King, and now His earthly capital reflects His glory.

Depending on the particular translation, there is reference to Mount Zaphon or simply the North. Scholars say it is the modern Mount Aqraa, standing near the Mediterranean Sea in far southern Turkey, near the border with Syria. In this context, the reference is not so much a place or a direction, but a symbol of the ancient mythological mountain of the gods. It looms large in Ugaritic legends as the place the gods gathered. In Hebrew thinking, whatever gods might gather there were subject to Jehovah.

We can but guess what ancient Jerusalem looked like when this was written, but we do know the place was expanding quickly under David. It served as a prominent landmark and quickly drew traffic as the royal city of what was then the strongest kingdom in that part of the world. Should we imagine this was published any time after Solomon built the Temple, that structure would have been a striking image from a great distance. There is no literal comparison with the topography of Mount Zaphon, but Zion was a magnet for people passing through, not to mention a proud symbol of the Hebrew people. If you are going to seek out an earthly manifestation of the divine, this is the right place.

Thus, we are treated to Hebrew hyperbole about kings assembling only to be stunned and cowed by what they see. Come and see the mighty fortress and throne of our God whose feats are world-renowned! It was only right that people at the far reaches of known lands would worship Him. You would naturally expect the residents to be proud and happy in the shadow of their God.

So, the psalmist invites everyone to see the sights, to view it from every angle. Then come inside and inspect the protective features. Go and take to the farthest lands stories of this mighty throne of the Lord of all Creation.

Psalm 49

We should not assume that figurative language indicates actual belief. The Ancient Near Eastern civilizations as whole generally avoided discussing the afterlife because they made no pretense of understanding it. Instead, they relied on a range of confused metaphors to discourage hubris. You couldn't talk about it literally because it was beyond human understanding. We note with some sadness that there were plenty of folks in that ancient world who did tend to take such language literally, but we need not join them. It's clear here that the psalmist doesn't fear the grave, but that those trapped by materialism should fear it.

The psalm opens with a declaration that what follows is universal and applies to all humanity. These are wise words of truth. It will be shared in symbolic language and poetic parables because it deals with something beyond mere intellect. It is moral wisdom for the heart. The subject is fear of those with wealth and political power.

Lots of people are deceived by the apparent power of wealth to buy fleshly comforts and convenience. Pity the wealthy for they have nothing else. No amount of material wealth can purchase eternal life in the beyond, nor can it keep you here where it seems most useful. If the morally competent eventually die, how can fools expect to escape the common fate of men? Rich and poor, wise and fool, they all come into possession of the grave. How's that for something that can't be taken from you? Go ahead – use your wealth and power to rename some territory after yourself. You are not your name; you will eventually die like any other beast abiding in that same land. Pity the poor fool who believes in his wealth, since it has no divine power.

For as long as time rolls on, their souls will be in the custody of death. When the Day of Judgment comes, the morally just souls will have full advantage over them. Whatever bodies and property the foolish rich had in this life will be forgotten. Those of us who serve Jehovah

with full commitment have nothing to fear from death, because it takes from us only our suffering and sorrow.

Don't revere the wealthy and powerful of this world. Once this life is over, it means nothing. They might celebrate their wealth here and now, and enjoy the honor of mere men, but they can't take any of that with them. Too many people of wealth and power forget they are but animals with extra stuff.

Psalm 50

If we take Asaph as the name of the man known to lead the Temple musicians, then he must have also been a prophet of some sort, for his psalms typically deal with the judgment of God.

Were Jehovah like any earthly ruler, He could not really know what was in the hearts of men. But He is God and knows each soul better than it knows itself. His Covenant with Israel is a covenant of hearts bound to a deity, not bodies bound to a political throne. When He comes, you cannot hide by departing His jurisdiction. His domain is all Creation, far greater than our entire universe. There is no place His searching does not touch.

We begin with established titles and names: El, Elohim and Jehovah. There's no mistaking who we are talking about here. Some translations are more picturesque about His divine summons – the whole earth from the sunrise to the sunset. From the glorious city of His Temple, He comes forth to reveal His moral character. Revelation is an act that condemns sin, even as it opens the door to repentance, but His stormy wrath will consume sin. No part of Creation is exempt from His judgment, not even Heaven. When God holds court, no living thing is excused from appearing. At some point in this ceremony, He calls out His Covenant People. The Heavens themselves declare His justice, for He defines the meaning of the word.

He comes to judge His own people first, those who should know His justice best. Israel stands condemned, accused by Justice Himself. Obedience to the rituals is not the issue here. Why do His people act as if He had some physical need for sacrificial animals as food? Do they not know that He owns all Creation, not merely whatever they choose to bring Him? Whatever God wants is His without bothering to notify anyone, for to no living being is He accountable, but all are accountable to Him.

And what does He really want from us? Genuine gratitude is the ultimate pleasing sacrifice. Obedience from the heart is His just due. The Covenant is an agreement between two parties; do what you have committed yourself to do. Don't pray to anyone else; call on Jehovah and He will answer. Then we will glorify Him.

He has a belly full of people who profess His Word, even presuming to teach it, but whose hearts are not open to Him. This is hypocrisy defined, because they secretly wish to get in on the thief's plunder. Their best friends are adulterers. With that same mouth they deceive and prey on others. And because God did not roar from the Heavens, as if they were petulant children who obey only when the lash is hanging over their heads, they decided that He was as venal as they.

God's scale of time is not ours; it is we who must conform to His outlook. When the fruit of moral failure is ripe in His mind, then He acts. Contemplate these things while they are mere words of warning in a psalm, not when you are called to account. You cannot imagine what God's wrath is like. Adore Him now sincerely while He considers His actions, for His power to bless is waiting on you.

Psalm 51

A psalm by David, this refers to events narrated in 2 Samuel 11-12. That story has it all: adultery, murder and scandal. We struggle to understand a biblical morality that is so foreign to Western instincts. Because of our longstanding cultural taint of legalism and hypocrisy, we don't see how David escaped the just penalty for adultery and murder in Moses' Law without at least some suspicion of divine corruption. How can God be holy and put up with such hideous crimes against the Laws written by His own fingers on stone? God does not play favorites with people who have mere wealth or power, but He does play favorites with people who are powerful in His service. Our sense of fairness recoils that God is more like an Eastern potentate with often-inexplicable mercy. Having whims and playing favorites is not a sin. Fairness is a Western myth, and Scripture never promoted that idea.

Yet this psalm explains quite well how and why God relents from justified wrath. Not simply because we know that David was a man after His own heart, but because David was the essential and prototypical king of God's Chosen Nation. At least part of His mercy here was mercy on Israel as a whole. And God chose David despite this known weakness, in part because such public mercy is itself a part of His divine revelation.

To doubt David's sincerity here would be blasphemous, since God clearly accepted this very prayer of contrition. We are stunned and silent before this majestic writing. It would be almost mockery to offer a summary, so rich is the tapestry of contrition David weaves with masterful poetry. It's a passion for expression born from a passion for God Himself. A genuine passion for God is how one becomes one of His favorites.

The proper ground for this plea is God's character and revelation, not David's favored place. By no means does the king diminish the damage he has done. He goes to great lengths to confess that there is nothing good in him that God did not put there. He also notes correctly that the substance of the issue is not the loss in human terms, but the insult to God. Before the enemies of God's truth, David held up the Lord for ridicule. It filled the hands of Satan with blasphemy against the Holy One of Israel. You can be sure the demons distributed to everyone who despised Jehovah and His people a fat portion empowering mockery. God was pressing His claims through Israel, a people already notoriously shaky in their faith, and here David throws a huge wrench in the works.

David admits he cannot fix his weakness. He begs, not merely for mercy and forgiveness, but for correction and renewal. He pleads for that sort of wrath that kills the sinful attachments in the soul. This line resounds across the ages: "Create in me a pure heart, O God!" There is no other way a man can have one. David knows that all he possesses or could scrape together

would not be sufficient to purchase this mighty gift. It comes only to those who want it on any terms they can get, because those are the terms. David humbled himself publicly.

In the end, he subtly shifts the discussion to the one reason he lives as king: Someone has to rule Israel in such a way as to give God honor. If he fails his mission as king, that alone earns him death. At whatever price, may the Lord save His honor and save the people.

Psalm 52

This psalm references the narrative in 1 Samuel 21-22. The story is filled with violations against the Covenant. Doeg was an Edomite, a foreigner from a tribe notorious for treachery and shocking immorality at times, though obviously he was a convert under the Law. Saul's reign was more like that of a primitive tribal warlord than an actual king. Doeg was his chief herdsman with heavy responsibilities, but was not treated as a counselor, especially in national politics and warfare. Saul was going insane and Doeg was ambitious to ingratiate himself, so he tattled about David's quiet visit to the priest, Ahimelech. For this, Saul permitted Doeg to slaughter the inhabitants of the priestly village of Nob and keep the plunder. David's song of curse on him was not for telling the truth about what he saw, but for Doeg's self-serving and unjust nature.

It would be typical of treacherous people to enjoy the sorrow and agony of their enemies. Such a man as Doeg would also crow about his rise in status and wealth, all the more so at the cost of lives for which he was contemptuous. David wastes no effort trying to explain why God should protect him and let the entire priestly village be murdered. What he does understand is Jehovah's promise to protect him personally and make him king. He's quite humble about it, but seizes the mission implied by this calling while waiting until God deals with Saul His own way. He curses Doeg based on God's past miracles and upon His revealed character in the Law.

Where Doeg had snickered about his own corrupt prosperity for a short time, the servants of God would live long marveling at divine wrath on Doeg. They would have the last laugh, mocking such an evil man. Thus, David celebrates that God has placed him as an olive tree, the ancient symbol for one of the two primary offices witnessing to His Law and His glory (the other office is High Priest). Rather than trust in his ambition and talent, David always waited on God to deliver him and provide for the mission. God's loyalty is the ultimate contrast to Doeg's treachery.

David's final line is celebration: We who trust in God enough to follow His will have already tasted the goodness of His mercy.

Psalm 53

This is quite similar to Psalm 14. While we can only guess, perhaps its appearance here in Book 2 simply means it was used in a different context, which would give it a different emphasis. We see it has a specific instruction in the header to play it according to a form that seems to indicate a melancholy tone – the actual term means “sickness.” The wording certainly lends itself to a gloomy and cynical outlook, at least until the end.

We remind ourselves that the Hebrew people took seriously the notion that your heart could reason and consider things independently of the mind. Yet they also believed that the heart was supposed to rule over the mind, because the heart alone was capable of savoring the full implications of moral truth. Thus, the meaning of the first verse slips the Western mind entirely. David defines what it means to be a fool; a fool is one whose heart does not acknowledge God's revelation. The heart is the only faculty capable of processing revelation fully, so without a heart committed to God's moral character, the fool is essentially without a heart at all. It won't matter what they have in their heads because they cannot begin to do righteousness without it.

David uses a term with subtle nuance that changes with context: Sons of Men. If he meant the broader emphasis of all humanity, then who was he to write these words? Instead, it is likely he uses it in the sense of those who are worldly, consistent with the meaning of fool and folly, in contrast to Sons of God. By definition, Sons of Men do not seek God. The wording for rejection implies these people might pretend to serve God, but flinch when their simplistic expectations are disappointed by surprises. God is not within reach of the intellect, so it stands to reason that, if your mind is all you have to work with in obeying Moses, you won't do very well. You have to understand His Person to understand His Law.

So, in the Hebrew turn of phrase, David asks the rhetorical question: Do they not comprehend what they see? The work of God in the world is incomprehensible to those without a fully committed heart that is able to translate the moral fabric for the mind. Whatever their intention, these fools are destructive by default among the people of the Covenant, devouring each other. Whatever it is they are doing when they come to the Temple, it is not calling out to God. Instead, they live in superstitious fear of shadows in their own imaginations.

David implies such people are not really part of the Covenant, but more like the enemies of Israel. God will scatter their bones after they die because no one will mourn their death and bury them. There is no divine hedge of protection on them, so Israel rising up in righteousness can humiliate them in the day of battle. In effect, it is a call for Israel to rise up in holiness against those who are enemies within.

The final verse begins with a one last rhetorical question in the Hebrew: Who will grant from Zion deliverance to Israel? Of course, it is Jehovah, and in due time He will restore the pinnacle of blessing they had in times past. Let Israel not fail to rejoice at the prospect.

Psalm 54

David wrote several psalms while fleeing Saul's hand. This refers to the narrative in 1 Samuel 23. In this case, David with his private army was hiding somewhere south of Hebron, in the open country near the village of Ziph (named after a grandson of Caleb of Conquest fame). Aside from the usual limited foraging, David would order his troops to protect his own nation and raid those who were hostile. There was no excuse for harming the people simply because their king was a fool. He also kept basic criminal elements in check. In gratitude, some of shepherds would offer such food as they could. In other words, David actively pursued God's justice despite tough conditions. As such, he was hardly a threat to the locals and an active

protector of the people in ways Saul could not be bothered, so it's hard to understand this sort of betrayal by the town leaders.

David begins with a plea that God keep him free for the sake of His own glory. It's an entirely reasonable request under God's revealed Law, because David is committed to the Law from his heart, so he is quite willing to be measured by God's standards for him. He asks that God put His hand to His ear so as not to miss a thing. David's enemies are described as those who have strayed from the Covenant while holding the power to harm him.

We note that, as usual, David has no desire to use his overwhelming military forces and his prowess to take revenge on the Hebrews living in Ziph. As with Saul, let God be the judge of those He placed at advantage.

But of course, David takes refuge in a God who had yet to fail him. "Behold!" When David reviews the number of folks who have supported him all this time, he finds God among them. We should read this as David finding God in their hearts and God quite literally on his side. How could it be otherwise when David is so determined to please his Lord?

We have no idea how it played out in history, but David calls on God to judge the tribal elders of Ziph by the same standard He uses on David and the rest of Israel. Since they have attempted to trap David, let them fall into their own trap. For His glory alone should God punish them.

Meanwhile, David is planning an appropriate freewill offering. Along with this will be a public profession of gratitude for God's faithful protection. This is always a good thing in its own right, regardless of how God handles this problem. And when has God not given David victory in pursuit of divine justice?

Psalm 55

Echoing similar thoughts to Psalm 41, and regardless of the specific context in David's mind, this psalm best fits the betrayal by Ahitophel, David's trusted adviser, during Absalom's Revolt. Even in this, we should not read Western cultural meaning back into this song. David is not whining about some mere personal misfortune or political upset. He was always willing to surrender his throne at God's command and was fully aware when certain situations were the result of his own sin. Such had no bearing on the nature of this complaint.

Given the broader context of what we know of Ahitophel, we could suggest he was playing David for a sucker the whole time. He pretended to be a man after the king's own heart, but it seems likely he was secretly advising Absalom, too. The moral implication is not that Ahitophel merely hedged his bets, but David makes him out to be the kind of man who preyed on him by deceit, doing his best to get David to spill his guts. Thus, few men could better estimate what strategy David might use.

The opening is a grandly eloquent protocol of calling upon one's feudal lord. While it was common enough for hucksters in the Ancient Near East to pour it on thick for trifles, they were typically obvious to anyone. There is nothing fake or routine here. Under the Lord's jurisdiction, one is besieging another unjustly, and only the sovereign can understand the heart of the matter well enough to act.

David asks if the Lord would rather get him out of the way for a while. He's quite willing to leave behind everything and go back to his simple life on the run as during the reign of Saul. When he asks God to frustrate the evil plot against him, this was consistent with what is recorded in David's prayer regarding Ahitophel's betrayal in 2 Samuel 15:31. He notes the violence in Jerusalem that followed, a vengeful and senseless slaughter that no man could justify before a living God.

Then he describes the alleged violator. God was a witness; all of this took place in the Presence of God Almighty, David reminds his Lord. Do not such people belong to Hell in the first place? So, David requests that God render them to the domain of Satan, the Eternal Jailer. But David insists that he will trust in God, not human talents or political maneuvering. God had never failed him in all his life. David lies prostrate before God, but men like Ahitophel never revered Him in the first place.

Then David lays out the details of his case against the traitor. Ahitophel enticed him to vulnerability, acting as a friend David willingly embraced and trusted. What a contrast to Jehovah! Don't trust in men but save your heart for God. He alone knows what is just and how to discern the hearts of men.

Psalm 56

This psalm refers to events in 1 Samuel 21:10-15, and precedes the moment celebrated in Psalm 34. This is very much a Covenant song. The Law of God promises divine protection among other blessings to those who obey. On the one hand, David is willing to give his life as the price of God's favor. He knows that God has called him, and the Prophet Samuel had anointed him the next king of Israel. But the Law says David must wait until God deals with the reigning King Saul. So, David flees to the Philistines and would have lived quietly among them. The Philistines surely knew of court politics in Israel and why David was among them. Still, some insisted he could not take refuge among them. It was easy to seize David, since he had nowhere else to go. This was his prayer during that time of custody.

We note in passing the header refers to some long-lost tune more commonly known than as "The Silent Dove in Distant Lands" (quietly mournful).

David calls first for God's mercy, since there is precious little mercy from the people around him. He pictures them crowing at the chance to take revenge on someone who had been obedient to Jehovah in all things. It is very obviously a reference to armed military men, and David is hounded at home and abroad. His fears David can handle, but he must trust in God to handle his enemies, as they are God's enemies, too. As such, they are mere men who cannot defy God.

David is in dire straits. It's not just one or two, but a whole herd of folks investing significant effort and resources in capturing him like a trophy. He prays God to keep track of all this sorrow as evidence against them. Every tear should be saved up in a water skin as evidence for the divine court. Every detail is already noted in Heaven's record of events.

Indeed, if they knew just Who was supporting and protecting David, they would immediately flee when David cried out His name. David suffers no doubt in the favor of his Lord. God has committed Himself with a solemn vow to those who trust Him, and that includes David. Again, what human can oppose Almighty God? Without His permission, they can do nothing to David. For his part, David is committed to God's glory and intends to uphold his end of the Covenant. Nothing could be sweeter in this life.

Psalm 57

In the header we learn this was written during the time David hid out in the Cave of Adullam, referring to events in 1 Samuel 22. At least one cave in that area offers a very large inner chamber after passing through a smaller vestibule at the entrance, and other caves have surely served as fortified keeps at various times. David was seldom actually alone, virtually always having at least a few friends and supporters in his entourage. We should not imagine that he wrote this song only of his own personal need. The courtly language always assumed the man plus all those for whom he was responsible.

The reference to the type of song as *al-taschit* refers most likely to the title of a popular tune that translates as "you must not destroy."

The initial cry for mercy uses words that imply someone great bending down to notice a supplicant prostrate on the ground before him. As far as David is concerned, it is not so much a cave where he hides, but his heart is focused on taking refuge in God's divine justice. Someone is surely breathing down his neck with a lust for murder. So, the sovereign God of Creation alone can finish what men may have started.

David knows his problems aren't imaginary. Oddly enough, instead of typical Hebrew hyperbole, this poetic description of Saul's pursuit is rather accurate. The still reigning king is no slouch in battle and his troops outnumber anything David could gather. Yet the man was driven by demons of madness, so David knows the Lord of Heaven is not in this. Rather, Jehovah is there to cover him until this blows over.

What to do when your pursuit of God's glory gets you in hot water? Don't stop now! David calls on God to exalt Himself in plain sight of all humanity. From the human standpoint, there is no escape for David. Yet God can make David's enemies fall into their own trap. So, David refuses to panic or surrender his commitment to God's justice.

How does God's man face his apparent end? By keeping the focus on God. Several modern songs were taken from these final verses. David's message here is timeless. In dramatic imagery, David calls to his heart where God's glory registers on his awareness and asks for his musical skills to attend this moment of praise. Well before dawn David plans to awaken and the first order of business is singing God's praises. Let the whole world know David owes it all to his God. Could we float up into the sky itself, we would still see but the trailing end of His glory behind Him, the power of His divine character. Let God take His rightful place before the adoring eyes of all people!

Psalm 58

As with the previous psalm, this one uses the tune of “Do Not Destroy.” And like many other psalms, the Hebrew poetic grammar is quite difficult.

We dare not forget that apparent real-world outcomes are not the priority among the ancient Hebrew people. If all you have are your senses and intellect, you’ll never really understand anything that matters. David’s lyric expressions echo so very much of what we find in other Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, in that the desired result of a good life is the assurance in your heart of moral certainty that comes only from Heaven. It may not look successful to mere human perception, but when you have genuine peace in your soul, that is what counts most of all.

We also need to remember that context is everything and David presumes here living in the covenant society of Israel, not as a stranger among Gentiles. Thus, in the latter case we would be careful what we speak about a heart-led drive for divine justice without first establishing the credibility to speak. In our secular society, without the presumption of a covenant faith, we would give far greater emphasis to “mind your own business” among sinners. However, in Israel, the Covenant demands that you speak the moral discernment of your heart to a nation required to care about revelation.

Thus, David’s first lines use typical Hebrew parallelism to berate those who act like mere men of flesh with no heart because of their silence in the face of sin. Whatever happened to righteous moral indignation? It lies silent when human reasoning has corrupted the heart. In the second verse David castigates these silent ones who are too focused on their own desires to care about justice. If you don’t serve Jehovah with a fully committed heart, then you serve the Devil and his violence.

In the next three verses David characterizes the sinful hearts. Men are born into sin, but these folks have no consciousness of it. Their earliest cries do not reflect any genuine human need, just a desire to make others miserable. It’s like trying to charm a deaf snake. The best serpent charmer’s skills mean nothing if the snake cannot hear the music and other sounds used to keep them calm. Just so, the sweetest words of truth seem to pass right over these folks’ heads.

Three more verses follow in which David calls on God to pour out His wrath on such people. Defang them; let them run down to the sea like a stream channel that rushes without encountering any flat spots or turns. Let their weapons of harm be too fragile for use. David uses a common image of his people – it’s not as if they actually believed a snail was dissolving in leaving the slime trail, but it looked for all the world like that. So let it be with the wicked who closed their hearts to the truth. Like someone who never saw the light of day, take away what little savvy they might possess to harm others. These are things God promised to do when His people were faithful to the Law.

In the final three verses, David declares that God is not idle. All the more so in a society where the people care what God wants, they give Him room to act against sin. It was common to use dried thorn branches as kindling for a cooking fire, so before they even start to crackle, God is preparing His wrath like a whirlwind strong enough to blow out the flames and carry the pot away. Westerners tend to balk at the image of rejoicing in God’s vengeance, but it’s a common

expression in the Old Testament. Its wider implication is celebrating the death of your own sin nature, too. Who wouldn't delight in that? But these are things visible only from an awakened heart of moral perception. Mere intellect cannot measure the genuine truth of God's character revealed in His Word. But people who are committed to a heart-led life in His truth will rejoice at how He manifests Himself in these ways.

Psalm 59

The third in a row resting on the tune of "Do Not Destroy," this psalm reflects events described in 1 Samuel 19. David went home after one of Saul's outbursts that began a more concerted effort to eliminate him. Saul sent soldiers to wait overnight outside the gate of David's house. This is David's cry to God for deliverance.

Saul's court had descended into criminal corruption, filled with men eager and willing to ingratiate themselves to a madman. Saul's consistently wicked choices opened the door for demonic torment. The depth of depravity and petty self-interest was simply not possible with people who were morally upright, whose hearts were actively engaged with God's moral character. This explains how Jonathan was excluded from his own father's counsel as things spiraled out of control for David. Every righteous man was the enemy of Saul, and Saul was the enemy of everyone who clung to the Covenant. If anything, David tends to understate just how bad it was, calling the ambush troops "workers of iniquity" and "bloodthirsty." These were Saul's best professional soldiers.

David correctly notes his clear conscience; the sin lies with Saul and his men. Thus, as God arises on behalf of Israel to punish other nations when she is just, so he calls on the Lord to defend him on the same terms. We remind ourselves that there were no friendly dogs in that ancient land; such dogs as hung around Jerusalem were feral, repulsive and quite dangerous. In common chatter, Israelis referred to hostile Gentiles as dogs for their foul religious sexual practices. Even if this was hyperbole, the soldiers lying in wait were no friends of God.

David celebrates his confidence in God, having seen that firm hand of deliverance so often before. The only reason David warranted such a heavy ambush was because God had made him a mighty warrior, and God would not fail him now. Still, David pleads with God not to simply kill them, but to rout them from the field of battle, make them flee in shame so the nation would know and fear God. He wanted them humiliated in the one thing for which they were most arrogant. Let their lives fritter away in sorrow.

The imagery of dogs serves as a refrain. Let them howl in frustration! But the only noise David will make is singing the praises of God. When the morning dawns, the ambush will come up empty-handed. So, the song ends with David's celebration that he belongs to Jehovah. He was nothing without God.

Psalm 60

The header references a tune David called "Lily of Testimony" and events narrated in 2 Samuel 8. We catch only some vague hint that David's source of trouble is likely something to do with

Edom. We might reasonably guess that Israel's cousins southeast of the Dead Sea pulled off some sort of coup that should not have been possible, harming Israel in some way. Many scholars speculate that Edom attacked from the south when David and his army were occupied battling the Syrians up north. This would be typical of Edom's spiteful actions until they were finally crushed and absorbed.

Whatever David's mistakes, we see nothing to indicate that he ever disputed the justice of God's wrath. Rather, he begins by crying out to God in proper protocol, confessing that the burden is on him to make amends on behalf of the nation. His words draw a picture of Israel in shock, bearing a sense that the world itself is irritated by their violation of God's character.

But God prepared for this. He made sure that His people always knew where to turn for help. David personally found Jehovah the mightiest of protections from those who rejected the divine revelation. David and his people have nowhere else to go.

David makes note that God had often indicated He was the ultimate sovereign in all things. Perhaps it is hard for us to imagine, but God announces that He could hop up and dance for joy when it pleased Him. The small and very ancient city of Shechem nestled between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim could be handed to anyone, or any number of heirs God chose. It was important as one of the few east-west passes through the central hill country and was occupied when Abraham first arrived. Somehow it became one of the only cities in Canaan hosting a remnant of Abraham's descendants when Israel migrated to Egypt.

Succoth ("tents") probably refers to the spot in the Jordan Valley where Jacob pitched shelters for his cattle against the sweltering heat. It became the town that Gideon had to discipline with thorns for hindering his pursuit of the Midianites during the Period of Judges. Both Shechem and Succoth represent images of God turning things on their heads when it suited Him.

Then God mentions the three largest tribal homes in Israel – Ephraim, Manasseh (western half) and Gilead (Manasseh east) – politically aligned and powerful. They were often a source of some trouble in national affairs. They would later lead the Northern Tribes away from the reign of David's grandson. Meanwhile, God said He could turn them into a useful battle helmet (major military asset) when it suited Him. God had appointed Judah the royal tribe, in part because his elder brothers had so completely sinned as to lose their status in turns. Meanwhile, whatever Moab might have been, God could use it as his footbath, while Edom would be the rug where He tossed His sandals. Grammar suggests that He includes Philistia in this offhand dismissal. Having troubled Israel at least as much as any other, despite the Philistines having been there for such a short time, God would allow Israel to celebrate their descent into insignificance.

Knowing all this, David has to ask: "Who will lead us to defeat Edom now?" David notes God didn't support them the last time they had trouble there. Without that divine support, no amount of human support is enough. Whatever it takes to regain His favor, David is eager to get on with it so they can put a lid on this boiling kettle of trouble. He wants to make Israel the source of God's glory, not a divine embarrassment. Otherwise, there is no hope for the nation's survival.

Psalm 61

Sometimes we have to shake our heads at how Western Bible scholars read so much literal meaning into poetic statements, and completely miss the grand mystical depth. So, it is many commentators suggest that David was off on a campaign far from home or maybe even in flight from Absalom's revolt. There's no reason to read that sort of thing into this, in which David instructs the Temple Music Director to use stringed instruments on this song.

The psalm begins with the standard protocol of one who cries out to his sovereign for relief. David notes that it won't matter where on earth he might be, since time and space do not limit God's court. Rather, he could call on God from any place humans might be found, and God would hear. And anytime is the right time, but all the more so when he feels his heart-mind is in shock from overwhelming moral catastrophe. It's hard to discern the path to a safe place, and David feels unable to scale the heights on his own power.

The higher ground that warriors know is more easily defended against attack is God's own Presence. David has borne a commission from God, and a divine Presence that protected him from everything so far. In every success and victory, it was his adherence to God's moral character that made all the difference. In this sense, any place where David sensed the divine Presence was as good as the Tent of Meeting, because God alone set the limits of His own reach.

God knew David's commitment and trust because David never offered it to any other power or authority. Everything that God ever promised has come true in David's life, making him feel like he was truly the king of all God's people everywhere. Every day was another day in the paradise of God's rich provision. David sensed this would never end, because it was empowered and fed by something far beyond human ken. David had tapped into Eternity, so years of human existence simply couldn't measure it. This was God-sized portions of divine favor and faithfulness.

David intended to make his entire life, day after day, one long service of worship to ensure God's glory was the mark of his passage on this earth.

Psalm 62

David dedicates this song to Jeduthun, a man who served him as leader of a choir of musical priests with prophetic gifts. This psalm is built on the image of faithful retainer, a warlord serving some mighty sovereign. Whatever David might have been in the eyes of men, he was just a servant of Jehovah.

He stands quietly in the courts of his Lord, waiting until his master should take a notion to call him. David asserts that no one else is worthy of that level of devotion. But instead of the Lord needing his battle-hardened experience, it is the Lord who protects David. For this reason, David does not tremble at even the most shocking threats in this world.

And there are threats aplenty against David. Will they never learn, these fools who plot ceaselessly against God's anointed? He would outlive them all. Their petty maneuvering reminds David of a stone wall that has begun to sag; it's just a matter of time before it collapses

under its own weight. In David's court he never lacked for yes-men who gave mere lip service while seeking any opportunity to betray him.

So, David repeats his first refrain with but slight modification in the wording. David serves at God's whim, and God is the only One able to guard him against human foes. It's like standing on a high rocky cliff looking down on his enemies. David calls out to all that hear his voice: Trust in God alone! Place no trust in human power and authority.

From the lowest to the highest in social status, they are all still mere humans. Pile them on a scale against God and a brief morning vapor outweighs them. Could a man assert violent power over others and confiscate everything they own, piling up all the things men value, he would still have nothing. It could all be gone with the dawn, like that vapor.

Turn your heart to trust in the revelation of God. All power comes from Him, and He decides anything and everything that matters. But the Almighty is also merciful. He sees and knows the hearts of men and their moral commitments. So, He responds to them, for they can hide nothing.

Psalm 63

Written during a time away from home and in the wilderness area west of the Dead Sea, this is another psalm that has found its way into many contemporary songs. Even in translation, the words are powerful and moving. This is a mixture of lyrical images and profound, simple confession.

Jehovah is my only deity, says David. As soon as his eyes open, his heart cries out to renew the awareness of God's Presence. The figure of speech for starting early implies an earnestness that runs throughout his waking hours. It is not possible to sate this burning desire; one would think God was water to a man lost in the desert. Keep in mind that this was well before any Temple was built, so David longs to present himself formally in the Tent of Meeting where the Ark of Covenant rests. If only he could simply stay there all day, as a mere retainer in the divine courts! God's glory alone is all the reward he seeks.

God's merciful favor in allowing David to enter His Presence is worth more than staying alive on this earth, for it comes from an ineffable heavenly level of existence. David could hardly restrain himself from offering up his voice in praise to the Lord for so long as his soul remains in his body. Assignment to God's praise choir is far richer than the choicest things David could offer to God in return.

In the middle of the night, whatever it is that awakens him, his consciousness first turns to God. So precious are these quiet moments that David eagerly stays awake while the world sleeps just to enjoy this undistracted time of celebration. Every good thing in David's life bears the fingerprints of God's blessing. This is what it feels like to be a child of royalty who fears nothing because his royal Father is so powerful. Human boredom is a million miles away, even when God seems to pay him no mind as David shadows Him about His business.

With such an otherworldly orientation, it's no surprise that David has worldly enemies. It's also no surprise they must be replaced so often, because God sees to it that they cannot long oppose

him. Fortunate are the ones who have a proper burial, for many are those left for the carrion eaters. Yet we should not imagine that David wastes much time crowing over their demise. He's too busy expressing his joy in Jehovah's divine favor. David would much rather find folks interested in sharing this worship, instead of watching so many of them silenced for opposing God's revelation.

Psalm 64

This is very much a royal psalm, in the sense that it reflects the experience of someone in a high position of power. At the same time, people of lower social standing would recognize parts of this prayer of complaint to God. If all our enemies were bold and forthright, there would be far more peace in our lives. Instead, we are wired to connect with each other, and it never fails that some will prey on us using craft and deception, pretending to be our friends.

So, David's initial call to his Sovereign is for relief from fear. This is not what it sounds like to Western ears. He chooses the Hebrew word for "alarm" as someone easily unsettled. A man who walks in full consciousness of God's calling, whose mind serves a heart conscious of the moral sphere, is a man who has already committed himself to God's moral character. That character is woven into all Creation, the very essence of reality itself. David seeks God's face to recognize His features in everything he faces as the Lord's servant so that his life is never unsettled by all the events that are surely in His hand.

In particular, David asks God to wrap His cloak around him as protection against conspiracies. One does not hold the reins of human power without attracting intrigue, so David is not complaining that conspiracies exist, asking only that God make them fail. There are always rebellions brewing, but God can make them impotent. David describes their weapons as sword-tongues and arrow-words. Only a coward preying on the innocent would use such weapons. They have no reverence for the Creator.

Such men congregate and congratulate each other on their cleverness. They exhibit the arrogance that comes when men silence their hearts to hear only their cerebral logic in response to lustful desires. Notice the Hebrew paralleling that equates the "inward part" and "heart" in a context suggesting the men themselves really don't even know their own souls. It's a mocking choice of words that these men imagine themselves so deep and intelligent, but the most capable faculty – the heart – is buried out of reach of the conscious mind. Relying on mere intellect will guarantee failure against men of heart consciousness, because the heart-mind belongs to God.

So, these plotters will be caught off guard completely when God pours His just wrath upon them. David describes poetic justice, the tables turned on these evil men. Their own arrow-words will be shot back at them, and their sword-tongues will fall on them instead of the intended victim. Suddenly their friends will desert them. Such people are incapable of genuine loyalty. And bystanders will see and know that there is a God of the Covenant who watches over His Word to make sure His truth stands. People will stop and consider the spectacle and gain true wisdom such as these sly predators claimed they had.

In the end, those whose hearts were sincere in seeking God's ways would rejoice to see His hand of justice. The Lord Himself always stands ready to justify our trust in Him. This is how we share in His glory.

Psalm 65

The header says David wrote this for use in the Temple worship. Scholars tell us this psalm was used in various thanksgiving services.

English translations are all over the place on the first line, and it is difficult to bring the nuance across the vast distance of time and culture. Perhaps we should see it as: "For You, waiting as a servant silent in the shadows, is glorious enough, Elohim." David returns often to the theme that he is ecstatic just to be a mere attendant in the Court of God. He continues noting that he has vowed to offer his very life for this. And who among humans, when fully aware of it, would hesitate to pray to Him? David is the first to confess that his fallen nature gets the best of him at times, but Our Lord is a God of mercy and forgiveness. Not just looking past our failures, He reduces the power of sin over us.

Words cannot bear the load of joy at being chosen by God to hear His call and to serve Him. Mankind could not pile up enough wealth to buy off someone who has experienced this divine appointment. Even the lowest of servants in God's Courts is better off than the wealthiest of human kings.

God's eminence in any nation is marked by earthshaking miracles that reflect His holy character. In this Israel is not alone, because God could do this for all people throughout the earth. This is the Creator of the whole universe, and it is simply consistent with His moral character to offer this to all humanity. His power alone made whole mountain ranges, and He could still every raging sea on the earth at His whim. Just the same, He could bring peace to the people who live on the other side of those mountains and seas. His divine character is present in all of Creation, so that all people everywhere could touch it if they just open their hearts to the revelation of truth. At the very least they can sense His power in all kinds of omens and signs. The very sunrise itself sings His praise, and the stars of evening twinkle merrily of His peace.

David uses the lyrical image of watering and fertilizing the earth to portray the way God works with people who so much as desire His truth. Just as He makes food available to all people on the earth, so He puts His revelation in reach of their hearts. He mentions the River of God's Spirit at work in the world. Everyone could know Him and His justice, should they want it.

The final verses of this hymn show how Creation itself rejoices in God's character. Let anyone anywhere turn to Him and the ground under his feet will sing. Along with this is the very literal promise that He would clothe their land with the blessings of plenty. The pastures would be clothed with the living wool of sheep herds, the valleys shrouded in grain, as if all dressed up in their finest livery for meeting in the Temple.

Psalm 66

In Hebrew, the word translated “song” means words for singing, whereas “psalm” means specifically that instruments should be played with it.

David calls for praise from all the earth, meaning both the planet itself and all the people living on it. Get the whole orchestra involved in support of the choir and glorify His divine title as Lord of all. Because of His awe-inspiring actions even His enemies will fall at His feet, even if only in pretense to avoid His wrath. But every living thing will eventually worship Him, one way or another; they have no choice.

Why? Because the entire universe is just a toy in His hands. David mentions the demonstrations of that power in favor of Israel at her birth in the Exodus. Whenever she is faithful to Him, Israel faces no meaningful resistance from those who do not serve her Lord. You can either humble yourself before Him or be humbled by His power.

When people praise Him in joyful worship, He sees to it that their lives are firmly established in this world as His witnesses. That doesn't mean we face no trials, but that we come through them like refined precious metals. He notes how Israel had passed through fiery trials, walked on by other nations at times, but God never abandoned His witness. Israel always emerged to abundant provisions.

As for himself personally, David would not fail to enter the place of worship with whatever he had vowed to offer. It didn't matter how frivolous or extravagant he might have been in times of trouble; it was worth that and more simply to be God's chosen. David stands ready to regale them with tales of God's generous blessings in his life. It's not as if David pretends that he was always just and innocent; surely, he has faced the damage sin caused in his life. However, upon repentance God always restored David to His favor.

God is merciful to those who call on Him.

Psalm 67

David specifies that this psalm is best with stringed instruments. It's easy to miss the profound thoughts carried in so few words. We should examine the contextual meaning of the phrases here.

Even if Israel failed often as a nation to understand that God's favor was dependent on their adherence to their mission, David will not let it be easily forgotten. What the nation needed most was not whatever it was the people imagined would make them happy, but that they cultivate God's favor as the light of the morning sun. The image here in the first verse is a cry first for His mercy, because without Him extending the opportunity, no one can approach Him to learn what pleases Him. These things David craves for Israel that she may live her mission of reflecting that bright glorious revelation onto the rest of the world. Israel-the-Nation had primacy only so long she made Israel-the-Mission primary in her heart.

David uses the term for praise that depicts the hands raised in celebration. He calls for the rest of humanity to join this worship with loud voices. What could possibly be better for any human than to know what God desires for us in this realm of existence? His Word is a revelation of

cosmic reality itself. His revelation is the basis for His judicial declarations upon all human activity. He defines what it means to be righteous. And whether anyone else is pleased makes no difference, for God has full power and authority over all human activity. We can find our place in His plans or suffer in darkness without the slightest comprehension of what to expect.

Again, David calls for that raucous celebration of God's glory. The Hebrews had a doctrine that obeying God's revelation was cooperating with Creation itself. Thus, nature would generously produce however much was possible as a joyful participant in the worship of God. Israel has no reason to seek other deities, for her God is the Creator of all things. If she clings to His truth, He will bless her and raise her up to reflect His glory throughout the earth. His obedience was the key to humanity's reverence of God.

Psalm 68

David uses here a collection of images and figures of speech that we don't see anywhere else. While we have no doubt that the bulk of his writing is consistently symbolic and loaded with parables, it serves well to tread carefully to deduce the meaning from the context here. This is in essence a marching song. David celebrates the unspeakable greatness of Israel's true King of Heaven. Survival in battle as leader was the mark of divine favor for the rulers across the whole Ancient Near East (ANE), but the Creator of all things was Israel's warlord and king.

We associate the phrase "let God arise" with the initial lifting of the Ark of Covenant in preparation for movement during the Exodus. It's also the image of any ruler rising to his feet in preparation for action against his enemies, domestic and foreign. Wherever Israel moved under the command of God, no force on earth, nor even all the forces on earth combined, could hinder His people from their ancestral inheritance. Therefore, while marching it only makes sense to sing His praises. He rides not just any white horse, but the billowing white clouds in the sky. Shout His name to bring fear to all those who oppose this march!

Some of His virtues include being the very Father to those with no father, and He welcomes widows into His domestic care. No one is alone in His domain. He sets prisoners and debtors free, loading them with prosperity. Meanwhile, those who reject His reign will be driven out into the desert wastes.

David lavishly praises God as the One who made the earth shake under their feet, a reference to Jericho at the least. When the people needed rain, it came in good supply. He describes how Mount Sinai convulsed at the divine Presence meeting with Moses on the heights. When the people were hungry it rained bread or water or whatever they needed. No one lacked who embraced His authority.

Indeed, on that sacred mountain, God gave to Moses His revelation, the greatest treasure any nation could receive. It was a massive army of people who published it by living its power. Thus, a whole range of powerful nations fled away before them. Back in the camp, the women divided the plunder of those nations. How do you describe such a great God? Had He laid Himself among the stinking herd animals at night to sleep, He would arise with the light of the dawn itself fluttering around His being, twinkling like flakes of precious metals on white wings.

By the time the battles of conquest in Canaan Land were over, it looked like snow fresh fallen on Mount Zalmon (AKA Mount Ebal).

Speaking of mountains, God could have chosen any of the greatest peaks in the land for His Temple. Bashan with lofty Mount Hermon? It was His personal property. Don't be envious, you mountains of Bashan that He chose Zion instead. The thundering chariots of God are innumerable, rumbling like those days when Moses was up on Sinai – the clouds of smoke and quaking ground were frightening. The Hebrew verbiage is a little ambiguous here, but the image of some mighty warrior king riding His chariots off into the heavens is obvious. What most people mistake is that such a mighty One would both receive tribute and then distribute it to those He favors for whatever reason. In Ephesians 4:8, Paul quotes this in the sense of the distribution of gifts (in the form of divine callings). But the image of both collecting treasures from the wealthy and mighty (grateful or otherwise), then tossing out trinkets from this tribute out to the crowds cheering along the side of the road as He passes through, is common from ANE times and cultures.

But David notes Jehovah does this *every day* (verse 19). The God of Israel is one who saves, and David offers two different words that both translate as “salvation” in English. First is the idea of becoming a part of God's plunder from His enemies; the second denotes being rescued from bondage. He is the God who rescues from death in both literal and figurative senses.

The image of wounding the enemy's head is drawn from the arrogance of one who tosses his pampered hair and sticks his nose in the air. Thus, the image of blatant defiance will be turned on its head, as God brings back every dead soldier of Israel, from the Golan Heights (Bashan) to the depths of the two seas (Gulf of Aqaba and Mediterranean Sea) that touched land under David's dominion, to bathe their feet in the blood of the high and mighty. Then when everyone has left, the feral dogs of the land will finish what's left. Birds of the field ate soldiers' bodies, but traitors were thrown to the dogs. It's hard to imagine a more ignoble end on their remains.

David then describes a holy procession into the place of worship (a tent of meeting during David's reign). It's glorious beyond words, including just about everyone capable of joining in – choirs, orchestras, lovely young women in the flower of their beauty with something like tambourines, the small warrior tribe of Benjamin, the royal tribe of Judah, Zebulun as the tribe famous for marshaling the hosts, and Naphthali symbolized as the most effective border defense tribe having the most difficult journey to join the throng.

Then David discusses the future Temple that his son will erect in Jerusalem. This would help to unify the nation and become a shrine to which kings would make pilgrimage. David characterizes those who might resist such an invitation as wild beasts, such as water buffaloes, wandering herds of cattle and skipping calves. It's not a bad image for the bulk of humanity having no clue about God's character and the moral fabric of Creation. They'll be herded by events they hardly comprehend. So let it be, says David, until they are ready to bring God a just tribute, symbolized by silver. Meanwhile, make it hard for marauding nations to engage in raiding on Israel. From as far away as North Africa, let foreign kings come with their tribute to God, not to David and his heirs. So let all the nations of the earth celebrate their Maker.

The final verses are one long benediction of dedication to a king so great as to ride the clouds like horses. Let Israel be sure the whole world knows what a mighty God she serves.

Psalm 69

Should you take the time to actually absorb the imagery here, it's hard to imagine you would not be moved to tears at some of it. It's quoted in the other parts of the Bible, verbally and in thought. David suffers nothing of self-righteous anger, but a deep sorrow of someone who knows beyond all doubt that his fallen nature is part of the problem. Could his penitence answer the burden of his soul, he stands ready for that. However, this is clearly the injustice of suffering for the sins of others. Even through the lyrical hyperbole of Hebrew poetry, we see the truth of genuine sorrow.

How often does a man in Palestine experience the need to swim? Even if he could, his feet are stuck in a mucky bottom. Like a flash flood washing down the wadi, he has no escape. His very eyes gush forth with tears, adding to the flood. Meanwhile, with all this water around, his throat is dry and painful from the depth of emotion. His vision fades to black while he waits for God to answer his cry.

How does it feel to have more enemies than you can count? Where are his allies? These aren't just angry old grandmothers, but real enemies capable of taking his life and his kingdom, too. He knows for certain that he did nothing to provoke them, yet they are intent on torturing him.

No innocent little lamb is David before his God. This is not a question of whether David has standing to demand justice; God knows his fallen nature better than David does. This is a question of God's revelation through His people. Everyone must come to God seeking mercy just to call on Him, and David as king wants to be first in line for that so God will be more inclined to hear their cry. Nothing God puts on him is too much to ask; David is a shameless servant of God. Let his family, his tribe, his nation and all his friends reject him if they think he serves God too lustily. However much infamy attaches to God's reputation among men, let David have his share. The most outrageous penitent acts are too little a price to pay for God's favor.

This is no one special, just the king God raised up over this nation. David pleads for the opportunity to finish the job, and not fall into the hands of those who hate him and his God. Let God save him only because it is natural for God to do so. The national worship literature affirms that God's mercy endures beyond the lifespan of the universe; so let Him demonstrate that truth in this situation. God is not blind; He knows what's going on in David's life. There's no need to present a list of their transgressions – as if David could be so bold as to judge on that level. Whatever it is, David knows it's more than he can handle.

Instead, David speaks of them in contrast to the character of God. Let them know the wrath of God for rejecting His justice! David would rather have God's justice any day, so bring it on and let him be cleansed from sins those others refuse to confess. David simply wants to see enough daylight to lift up the name of God. All of revelation says this is more precious to God than whole burnt offerings. Think of all the people who would see His glory! Let them see how embracing His Lordship brings sweet blessings or moral truth and praise Him, as well.

Indeed, let all of Creation join in this joyous occasion. This is not really about David, but about God's witness on this earth. Restore the cities of Your chosen people in their Promised Land. Leave an inheritance on this earth of Your great glory in how You provide for those who serve You.

Psalm 70

We have seen these lines before, at the end of Psalm 40. Standing alone, the context is subtly different. As a simple and short call for God's help, it speaks of someone who has little opportunity to compose a more eloquent message to God. The words are close to formulaic but carry a tension that indicates desperation.

The initial "make haste" in most English translations is not in the literal rendering but implied by the context. The tone is there because David begins by calling out to God Almighty to come and snatch him from the jaws of his enemy. The line is echoed in a call for speedy aid, using the proper name Jehovah.

The second verse is quite colorful, in that David asks God to make his enemies first pale as they are shocked by the outcome, then blush with embarrassment. They came expecting to take his life; let them recoil, bolt upright as the scene unfolds to taunt them for relishing David's misfortune. Let it be like someone caught in degrading ritual devotion to some secret deity, as if to gain magical power to catch David in a vulnerable moment. Whatever it is going on with those folks, it could not possibly include a sincere devotion to Jehovah.

But there are folks of unwavering faith and trust in the God of Israel. Never mind what happens to David, let these people find cause to celebrate and rejoice in how God rescues them according to their faith. Let them glorify His name continuously.

But David feels crushed at this moment. Don't be slow, O Lord, to make it painfully obvious to everyone that God is his only hope, and by implication, theirs.

Psalm 71

It seems rather obvious from David's choice of words that he wrote this rather late in his reign. On the other hand, he hardly offers any clues to the experience that provoked this soulful song.

Ever the proper feudal servant of God, David observes protocol in first declaring that he has always taken refuge in God. This is the God who is entirely able to see to it David has no reason to regret that trust. Let the Lord continue acting according to His own character in redeeming those who call on His name. God is like a mighty fortress and His revealed Word has the power to save. David can't remember a time when he did not trust God. This is the same God who breathed David's first breath of life into his body.

David's life was legendary before he even got old, and he was aware of the adulation that often came with just being a man who walked in the power of the Lord. So, David makes a point of passing the glory to the One who made his life possible. Let them praise the God of David more than David, as David himself intends to do.

And as his flesh begins to fail him due to aging, God is all the strength he needs. Even now David cannot simply grow old and die in peace, because the same plotting and scheming that followed him his whole life has not given up on taking him down. Let them know that God has not deserted David. May He shame them for His own name's sake.

For David has never been disappointed with God's plans for him. So, David commits his last few remaining days and the breath yet in him to praising and glorifying God. From his youth to his current gray-headed age, David always felt the task of praise and thanks was as-yet unfinished. He goes off on a lilted time of worship, declaring how God has always covered him from harm and carried him through every sorrow. David urges his stiffening hands to play the harp in praise yet one more time. He urges his voice to bear the load of divine glory again. The days are not long enough to complete his sense of duty to God's praise.

Psalm 72

It would seem quite reasonable to imagine that Solomon's psalm here celebrates his coronation, perhaps writing these lines as a reminder to himself of his duty. Had you never read Solomon's writing in the context of the broader Hebrew Wisdom Literature, you might mistake this for a smug self-congratulation. Rather, this is typical of the way Solomon writes, not in some description of real events, but a characterization of things as they ought to be. If anything, Solomon hopes his reign starts to resemble some of this, because his wise heart knows just how sweet it could be if he lays claim to the full measure of what God can do.

The English translation is a little ambiguous in the first few lines. Solomon asks for the greatest miracle he can imagine: that God would grant to him a full grasp of divine justice. By extension, he prays that his sons would receive hearts committed to righteousness. The first naturally leads to the second. And what great joys would proceed from such a divine grant?

What a blessing it would be to pass that divine justice down to the people, all the way to the bottom of society! That alone would provoke Creation to respond, so that the mountains and hills themselves would manifest the peace only God can give. Doesn't any king hope that he could lift up the lowest and crush oppression? Doesn't this cultivate an atmosphere where folks tend to be conscious of what pleases God? The sweet favor of God distills in the dew and rain, the luminaries shine with His glory, and genuine peace will make the moon seem like a dim lamp far away at night.

It all points back to God. Such a royal reign would actually be the reign of God Himself. No one would dare to question Jehovah's claim over the whole territory held by Solomon at the peak of his power. Can you imagine such divine peace and justice? Other rulers from the farthest reaches of Hebrew awareness would come just to get a taste of what the Creator could do in their domains. They would readily submit to Jehovah. Yes, the same God could easily set things right anywhere the humans place themselves under His authority.

At this point, Solomon's lyrical words foreshadow the Messiah, writing of God as a human ruler. Rulers from far-flung kingdoms would lay their finest treasures at His feet. They would seek God's face in heartfelt intercession for the Messiah's welfare, along with praise and singing for His name. How could the earth fail to respond, pouring forth abundance? Lebanon was

famous in those days for a phenomenal agricultural output in such a small space, but any land could be like that when God truly reigns in divine justice over the people.

Think of it! There would never be a moment of silence in His Temple, but people would line up just to take a turn at singing and worshipping His name. Israel, such is your God! He does these things by reflex, He alone. Don't blow this off as some silly dream. Start now in worship of His glory and don't let any part of the world ignore your message.

The psalm ends with what should be an editorial comment between this, the Second Book of Psalms, and the beginning of the Third. It's not the last we see of David's writing, and even Solomon gives us one more, but that the editorial hand of David ends here, and passes to someone else.

Book 3: Psalms 73-89

This is a shorter collection led by Asaph, one of David's chief musicians, plus a few others from the Sons of Korah (Levitical musicians) without individual attribution, and a handful of others. A general theme tying them together seems to be the power of worship in the sanctuary.

Psalm 73

Asaph points out how worship can bring you peace over perplexing questions. Taking us back to the basic question addressed in Job, this is not simply a rehash of the question and ultimate answer, but how clarifying your heart's commitment to God can help you see things in this world differently.

He begins by celebrating how God cares for His people but is particularly mindful of those who seek Him for a pure heart. The image evokes the simplicity of commitment to God's revelation. Then follows a stirring story of how easy it is to lose that faith. Asaph denies that he is better than anyone else. For example, he was caught in the vicious circle of common reasoning about the wealthy who were wicked.

For several verses he goes on about those who are worldly and successful. They serve the god of their own comfort and advantage. Why does walking in God's Law not consistently pay off that well? Why do those who seek righteousness always catch hell? Asaph was at a loss for words; he couldn't bring himself to confess against the Scripture, but he struggled with the misery and apparent failure of the promises.

That is, until he spent time with God in ritual worship – and then it all made sense. We are supposed to pick up on the subtle point that worship brings your consciousness above the mere physical realm of sense and logic. It pulls you up out of yourself and into a higher realm of moral awareness.

While it may seem the wicked wealthy are comfortable, they are morally blind. They don't see where their lives are headed. When they die, they face the terror of God's eternal wrath. Once he recovered this higher moral awareness, Asaph felt ashamed of himself. Please notice what a

contrast that is between Asaph, and by implication anyone else who is morally aware, versus those with no moral awareness at all. We who walk in moral enlightenment see ourselves for what we really are as fallen creatures. We live in the land of penitence.

By this we know that God has chosen to accept us, because He keeps His holiness and mercy alive in us simultaneously. We know that our sense of unworthiness is a mark of His favor. So, Asaph rejoices that his eternal destiny is with the Creator. No one else can do it for you. It matters not who we have known that might go to Heaven if we don't individually know the God who made it all and revealed His divine justice.

Meanwhile, those who lack a sense of torment over their sinful nature are dead to eternity. This life is all they have, and they really don't even have that. They are dead already and don't know it. Asaph celebrates his trust in God and willingly speaks of His glory.

Psalms 74

Attributed to Asaph, it could as easily be simply someone from his clan who wrote this. We do well to remind ourselves that the Hebrew culture saw no reason to be quite so precise about such things. Nor should we forget that there is an honored place for hyperbole in Hebrew poetry. It had long been acceptable in courtly protocols as a form of artistic expression, carrying none of the moral stain it holds in Western culture.

Even if we choose to read into this psalm a literal historical context that matches the imagery, we will still miss the point. This could have been a prophetic word long before any actual event matching the descriptions, but it's more important to recognize the symbolism of how it feels when God allows things to happen in life that we don't understand, or that we didn't expect. We have ample record that God still responds favorably if only some tiny few among His people cry out for deliverance, so even if the sorrow is justified, God commands us to call on His name.

In the first line, the word typically translated "forever" carries the connotation of some far distant point or the idea of something constant or perpetual. Thus, it could as easily be "to the uttermost." The second line is even more picturesque, with anger smoldering against helpless sheep. The psalmist calls to mind God's heavy investment in choosing Israel. Then he describes a scene of shocking devastation and defilement in the Temple. Does not God Himself feel fouled by this gross insult to His reputation? Was it truly His plan that every shrine to His name be removed from the Land?

Worse, it seems God is silent, offering no explanation through the normal means of prophets and other recognizable signs. How can God be silent in face of such blasphemy? The writer renews his call on God to act, for there is no doubt who holds the real authority here. This is Jehovah, God of the Exodus. He fed His people on the carcass of Egypt (symbolized by beasts). With one hand He flooded the land and with the other divided the flood. He is the Creator who made all things.

No one denies that His people have failed Him, but are they truly now His enemy? The psalmist paints Israel as helpless and precious to Him. While His people do fall into sin, who else can bear His name to the nations? Restore Your honor, O Lord!

Psalm 75

Asaph offers us a brief invocation followed by an oracle message from God. The underlying theme is fundamental to the Ancient Near Eastern understanding of how God operates within His Creation. As the feudal Sovereign Lord, He comes to visit, and His approach means different things to different people. He comes to wipe away sin; those who cling to their sin will be wiped away with it. The cleansing will come as a relief to those longing for His holiness. That His visit likely brings suffering to all, in one form or another, is taken for granted.

Thus, the invocation notes that God's approach, the nearness of His authority ("name"), is a rich blessing worthy of thanks. A sudden rush of mighty miracles is the herald of His approach. The rest of the psalm quotes God.

God alone decides when His visit is appropriate; He calls the assembly according to the ineffable wisdom of His whims. In rather literal terms, His Presence dissolves the fallen realm of existence and exposes the original image of what God intended. However, we understand this in the parabolic sense that He brings His power to bear against sin and to make His moral character plainer to our human eyes.

He comes against human boasting, and shatters human pretense. In the Hebrew world, the sharp horns of any large ruminant represented its power and authority. Thus, objects made from horns or artistic representations of horns (such as the raised corners of an altar) represented at least a pretense to divine authority. God says it is for Him to pass judgment on any such claim to authority; let none raise a horn in His Presence for fear of being treated as arrogant against His authority.

There is a break in the oracle here as the psalmist puts into proper perspective God's authority. No place that any fallen human could go – symbolized by mention of the four cardinal compass directions – nor the whole world together, offers sufficient power for a human to secure his place in history. God alone decides who will be elevated or struck down. Human political affairs that matter to God are entirely in His control. In the end, all human authority that ignores God's Laws will drain the cup of His wrath. For his part, Asaph will celebrate that this same God has chosen Israel.

One final quote from God: He will break down the authority of the wicked and confirm His support for those who cling to His revelation.

Psalm 76

Many scholars are convinced this psalm celebrates the miraculous deliverance of the that last border defense city during the reign of Hezekiah by slaughtering the besieging Assyrian troops. But regardless of any particular historical reference, this psalm has almost surely been rewritten from its original form into something suitable for regular Temple worship rituals.

The psalmist opens with the only possible reason we need to understand for such a powerful deliverance: God's own glory. Few understand the unspoken logic that God seeking His own glory is, by definition, in our best interest. His glory always brings us closer to Him, and with

that a host of manifested *shalom* blessings. Thus, the salvation of the people and the city is God's honor. God Himself blunts any attack for His own name's sake.

So, when the citizens came out to plunder the abandoned camps of the enemy and collected huge mounds of loot, none of it was anything more than a mere symbol of the rich treasure of God's own glory. The countless thousands of warriors seemed terminally asleep, unable to raise a finger against God's deliverance. Even the weapons themselves fell asleep awaiting God's pleasure.

Great as Jerusalem and the Temple might be, who does not fear the God who reigns from His real throne in Heaven? There is no higher court of appeal once He passes judgment. He is not confined to this earth; He made it and keeps it alive on His own whim. He delivers those unjustly threatened and none can stay His hand. So even the active wrath of man owes Him allegiance, or He will not let it act. Whatever other wrath might remain frustrated He simply wraps around Himself like a decorative belt.

If you come before Jehovah seeking His deliverance, go ahead and make those vows. Then perform them with joy, knowing that whatever it costs you is nothing compared to His divine favor. You'll get more in return, one way or another. All property on this earth is too little for His just tribute as Master of all Creation. With a mere thought the collected powers of humanity simple cease to be. There is none above Him.

Psalm 77

We remind ourselves that, for all their piety and scholarship, translators remain captive to their own biases. We should never pretend that we have none, but be conscious of them and strive to make them serve our individual callings. It is wholly unfair to build a doctrine or theology from any English translation without at least being aware of the mystical character of Hebrew poetry. As much as any other Hebrew text, this one seeks to bring us vividly into that moment whence this psalm was inspired, to discover that precious moment when we come face to face with God during inner turmoil.

It matters not whether the sorrow was personal or national, or anything in between. Sorrow is a pervasive human experience. The only proper starting point is offered immediately, in that the psalmist cries out to his Creator. Surely He hears, as the writer notes. He goes on to paint the full image of calling on God because everything else was as good as dust in his life.

Don't get hung up on the word "spirit" here as a doctrinal label. In Hebrew literature it takes a more organic meaning, an expression for the human sense of awareness. Nothing more than human, yet this is far more than mere animal, aspiring to things far beyond our sorrowful existence. Thus, the psalmist's spirit was overwhelmed – the literal image is something shrouded or covered up and unable to find a way out.

But what words can indicate the depth of sorrow here? The inner conflict keeps him awake, bewildered and unable to reconcile things. He is fortunate to find some anchor, some solid awareness of God's record of protection. He even sings of it, recalling old songs of God's mighty acts. Where could the solution be to this imponderable inner conflict?

Against that deep and heavy history of God's power and mercy is the apparent situation that finds the psalmist outside the boundaries of that protection. It's a figure of speech that blames the sinner for being locked out of God's Presence. In English translations it could be mistaken for whining that God is capricious; it was acknowledging that the one excluded simply could not comprehend because it was ineffable in the first place. So instead of blasphemy in accusing God, the psalmist recites the typical subjective human response. It was a common form of expression from ancient times.

Suddenly he confirms this by confessing that this is merely his human anguish speaking out of turn. Contrast that with the unquestionable history of God's dealings with His people. It's rather like that popular song, "Count Your Blessings." When you hurt the worst, it's not a mere distraction to recite the blessings of God from times past. Rather, it provides a far more substantial context for thinking about things than the mere shallowness of current discomfort.

If nothing else, who could forget the Exodus and the sea crossing? We are talking about the God who made water stand aside for His nation to escape slavery, then drowned the slavers behind them. These were the people who just moments before whined about the Egyptian army and wondered aloud if there weren't enough gravesites back in the Nile Delta that they had to be moved here to die. You can stand with Moses and Aaron, or you can wait to be herded through blessings you'll never understand. God's purpose never fails, despite whether you can grasp what He's doing.

Psalm 78

For anyone who operates on the moral level of the heart, it is thoroughly frustrating to see people walk away from that beguiling faculty of the Spirit. It is inherent in the most ancient roots of Hebrew culture to take seriously the ability of the heart to sense directly the moral fabric of Creation, to taste the very essence of God's character. This higher level of understanding was the norm, but apparently not typical, particularly with the people of Israel. You can sense the deep sorrow in Asaph's soul as he contemplates the record of his nation's refusal to rise above the flesh and mere intellect.

But what can he do? So, he opens this majestic psalm with the blunt warning that what follows cannot be understood without that higher faculty of the heart-mind, which Westerners tend to marginalize by referring to it simply as our convictions. Parabolic language and symbolic logic were the legacy of Hebrew language itself; Jesus later said this was the only way we could properly discuss divine truth. You cannot discuss God and His character any other way, so this psalm begins with a plain notice that what follows is parabolic in nature, using the Hebrew word most often translated as "parable," telling us that it will seem to mere intellect as "dark sayings" – mysterious stuff.

The only way to understand God is to maintain the focus of awareness in your heart. Do you want to understand how God works? You might well see His mighty miracles with eyes of mere flesh, but you will never grasp what these events could tell you of God, and consequently you will never understand what His Laws mean, nor your place in this world, nor much of anything that really matters. So, teach the history of the nation, but teach also the mastery of the heart-

mind. Otherwise, generations to come will have no idea what it all means and there will cease to be any meaning to the name "Israel."

See the mighty Tribe of Ephraim? You would think they should rule the nation, but God had other ideas because Ephraim didn't follow Him with a fully committed heart. The early tribal elders during the time of Moses saw the acts of God in providing for the nation during the Exodus. Yet they chose to lead in rebellion against God's man by whining about the provisions. Their leadership brought suffering to the whole nation, even as they were still chewing on the food of angels. Sure, they got their meat; more than they could eat. Right at the climax of their feast, God showed His wrath against their sin. Did Ephraim lead them into repentance? On the contrary, it only got worse. The nation was more harmed by Ephraim's fleshly leadership than all the other threats they encountered along the way.

So, when everyone began to cry out in repentance, God relented. Asaph notes that Jehovah was more generous than a doting father to his only child. They kept breaking His heart, but you would think He was far too soft on them. The Plagues on Egypt alone should have indicated something of God's moral nature, but the nation as a whole was too much like a bratty child, crowing about someone else's misfortune. So, when God put on them some lesser measure of the same kind of wrath He poured out on Egypt, they dared accuse Him of being unjust. Was Egypt this arrogant? We hardly expect Egypt to comprehend that Jehovah could have been their God, too, but Israel kept wandering off from an unprecedented clear revelation from her Lord.

They thought they had Him over a barrel, so God allowed Israel's enemies to take the Ark of Covenant and destroy the Tabernacle at Shiloh, priests and all. So complete was the slaughter that there was no one left in that area to mourn the dead. You would think God had wandered off from His own sanctuary and took a long nap. Suddenly He seemed to have awakened and that was the last time He allowed Ephraim any kind of leadership. Instead, He moved His chosen site for worship to another place under the rule of David, some nobody from the Tribe of Judah.

Thus, Asaph explains that it's not as if God hated Ephraim. They were still one of the most powerful tribes in terms of sheer size, wealth and influence. He didn't take that from them, but He showed it was in their own best interest to let someone else call the shots. They prospered under David's reign like never before. It's not about politics, but a reflection of the deep moral character of God.

Psalm 79

Like Psalm 74, this is a threnody for Israel-the-Mission. Something brought the wrath of God on His people, His city, and His Temple. Asaph's cry is not for mere vengeance, but for God's glory and a restoration of the mission to reflect that glory in His blessings.

It would be a mistake to read back into this passage the racism common in Jesus' day. Asaph clearly understands that being God's Chosen is a high privilege, not some divine right. The problem here is that the nations who don't know God and don't take His name or reputation seriously have defiled His holy place. Worse, they have ravaged the structures and plundered some of the dedicated articles. If they knew God and were mindful of His holiness, this would

be totally different. Still worse, these invaders have defiled the Temple grounds with unjust blood, and treated victim's bodies with contempt. Finally, all those nearby who long have hated Jehovah and His mission of revelation are now emboldened to blasphemy.

More than merely a common question, it is proper protocol to ask in this fashion, "How long, O Lord?" Hebrew culture viewed time differently, and things of this nature were seldom measured in standard increments. Rather, the question calls for a sign, something to indicate when this thing has ripened and is ready for harvest. The question is a figure of speech aimed more at, "What fruit do You seek? Is this the end for us?" The wrath of God is meant for those who don't know Him and His ways, and obviously Israel has slipped into that territory. When the Psalmist sees that wrath falling outside of Israel over the defiling His name, he will know that God has heard his cry.

Only a fool denies that Israel has sinned, surely in the past if not in the present. She has never been worthy of divine favor. The issue hangs on God's mercy, not human worthiness. Thus, rescue is all a matter of His glory, not anything due the people. Has God invested so much of His reputation in Israel to let her die to the sound of blasphemy? At least show Your hand of power on the enemies of Israel, as well, O Lord. And if we can find favor in Your sight, rescue us through their demise.

Rightly has Israel been taken into punitive custody. And rightly does she bemoan her fate. So let the crying touch Your heart, Lord. May the curses heaped on us by our envious neighbors be paid back upon them "in sevens" (a figure of speech for something sacred). The final scenario is that the redeemed will celebrate the greatness of their God.

Psalm 80

Again, we note that "psalm of Asaph" is colloquial for the man and all his descendants, all who held his office following him. It matters here because this is almost surely a psalm from the Assyrian conquest of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom. The psalmist names Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh as shorthand for most of what was left when Assyria invaded and took them away (typically dated in 722 BC).

Nowhere else does the phrase "Shepherd of Israel" appear, but here it reaffirms that Jehovah is the ultimate Pastor of the whole nation, though by this time "Israel" typically refers to the northern tribes only. Asaph calls on God to come and save them. Sadly, He did not, for reasons adequately explained by various prophets. But while it remained a possibility, the psalmist performs his divine duty calling out to God on behalf of the Covenant People, regardless how they may have strayed.

Verse 3 is rather like an irregular refrain repeated in 7 and 19. We can see what a deep and passionate plea this is that the author forgoes the niceties of symmetry. This is a tragedy that affects the whole nation. All they know is tears, and it was embarrassing how the north and south often were at war. Again, the refrain calls for restoration.

Then he launches into an extended parable of Israel as a vine, a common image used in other Old Testament books. This vine was transplanted from Egypt. The land was cleared of whatever

was there and the vine prospered in its place, spreading far and wide. Now the protecting hedge of God's favor was gone; everyone and everything ate their fill down to the very roots. Without rescue, there would be nothing left to regrow.

What was all this vast investment God made only to let it go to waste? But when God's face turns away, there can be no hope. Is there nothing left worthy of saving? If God returns His favor once more, it can recover and be that strong servant of God that it once was. One more chance, Lord!

The psalmist closes with the final refrain calling on God to save what is left.

Psalm 81

While this sounds somewhat like the call to the Feast of Tabernacles, the whole seventh month (*Tishri*) is consumed in various celebrations following the olive harvest: Trumpets (1st), the Day of Atonement (10th) and then Tabernacles (15th). The psalmist mentions both the New Moon and Full Moon rituals, as well. Then he takes on a prophetic note in this celebration: Can we just this once remember to celebrate the Lord by obeying Him? In doing so, he focuses on commemorating the Exodus.

The psalm begins with a lyrical call to observe a ritual of celebratory music. He goes on to note that there are other observances commanded in the ritual law to stir up the natural joy of gratitude we owe to our Creator and Lord for all His blessings. He notes the first deliverance was before Israel was a nation, when Joseph became viceroy in Egypt where people speak a totally different language. God placed Joseph there to protect Israel from His wrath falling on the various nations in Canaan Land.

And when the time came, Israel was rescued from slavery. When God saw the fruit of things was ripe, He answered their prayers and put them through the necessary testing any sheikh used to prepare his servants. They were so used to life in Egypt that they weren't yet ready to bear His revelation to the world.

Asaph focuses on the signal element of loyalty in the divine call at Mount Sinai. The first of the Ten Commandments is entirely normal. A covenant of adoption as the family of any great sheikh required that they swear blood loyalty to him, the same as he would require of natural born kin. In return for that loyalty, He will supply more than they could take in, so open wide!

But they refused to keep faith in Him. His revelation was the ultimate reality of all things, but they preferred their own imaginations. So, He let them have what they really wanted, and with it all the suffering of human moral blindness.

When will they ever wake up? If only they could render a genuine commitment to Him, no enemy could come against them. Even those with a rabid spite for Jehovah would be forced to kneel before His authority. Not that it would do those enemies any good eternally, but God has always been ready to humble outsiders who threaten His servants. Israel could not imagine just how great a harvest they could have, both from their work and from random wild provision.

Psalm 82

Always: Context is everything in Hebrew. People have made much of God (*Elohim*) referring to other figures in this psalm as gods (*elohim*). But it takes only a quick review of the Books of Moses to see that the term applies to human judges under the Covenant. Many come to the question from the wrong angle. It's not that men have misused the name for God, but that God simply chose to answer to common forms of address. For all the centuries prior to Moses, the most common title of address for the Hebrew God was *El* ("Mighty One") or *Elohim* (in context meaning "The Almighty of Mighty Ones"). Granted the latter is plural, but Hebrew isn't quite so precise as that, often using plural nouns with singular verbs to indicate a singular subject or object that is larger than life.

Thus, the context here is God calling on the carpet every human that elevates himself to the position of rule. There's a sense of mockery where the Creator says that He is Lord of lords, an ancient protocol that pointedly subjects any presumed authority under His. Whatever it is these mere men – rulers, princes, kings and demigods – imagine themselves to be, they are summoned before the One who holds ultimate authority.

Further, the context presumes the reader operates from the heart, not from the intellect. The Fall arose in part because mankind chose to assert his human intellect over the authority of divine revelation, which is discerned only in the heart. When the heart rules properly, it is the one faculty able to perceive the ultimate truth of our fallen existence; it can sense directly the moral fabric of reality as the character of Our Creator. The path to redemption becomes painfully obvious as the sense of moral imperative overlays everything the eyes behold, projecting brilliant hues of right and wrong on all our human existence on-the-fly as the context morphs. Because revelation calls mankind back to the supremacy of the heart, there is no excuse for humans to rely on their own understanding to direct their own affairs, never mind shepherding others with any moral justice. God pointedly declares that mankind has failed in this duty.

The result is that they show partiality to the wicked and allow predators to manipulate them into exposing their subjects to abuse. This psalm assumes the moral principle that all rulers would have adopted their subjects as their own family, for they have no moral standing to rule otherwise. So how could you allow outsiders to prey on your own kinfolks? Doing justice for orphans and widows has always meant ensuring their means of support are not taken. If they don't have a father figure with at least a presumption of military capability to defend their property, then their next nearest kin are responsible for them, required to adopt them as members of his household. This keeps rolling upward through feudal extended family ties until the local king is *de jure* the Big Daddy of everyone under his reign. There is no room in this psalm for any other state of affairs; no other form of human government is legitimate in God's eyes. This is the implication of the fifth verse: Do these people not grasp the nature of reality? Are they not acquainted with the natural order of things? Such ignorance is earth shattering.

Jehovah was quite willing to adopt and name as His own kinfolks the rulers of humanity, if only they had been willing to bow before His authority and embrace His terms. But no – they have chosen to pass like every other human authority that has been forgotten in human history. Finally, Asaph calls on God to arise and rule directly. It's the ancient longing to see the Day

when God reunites the Spirit Realm and the Fallen Realm through redemption of the latter. That would be the Final Day of Judgment, including the sum total of God's wrath against sin.

Psalm 83

There are numerous historical and geographical references, but this Psalm does not refer to a literal historical event. Rather, it's similar in purpose to John's Armageddon: a parable indicating a moral condition that never changes.

In a series of Hebrew parallelisms, the psalmist throws at us contrasts and comparisons drawn from the well-known lore of Israel's troubles. He begins by throwing at us three different images of God taking His time. Keep in mind that speaking is often a symbol for action. Thus, he depicts Jehovah as quiet, as holding back when people are begging for Him to act, and as taking a rest. Contrast this with the rowdy and raucous behavior of those who have always been quick to blaspheme the God of Israel. Does He not hear their insults?

Nations have fought each other since human memory, but it seems there is one thing they can all agree on: Israel and her God had to go. The author lists all the neighbors on every side, including Israel's cousins: Ammon, Moab and Edom. Some of these nicknames are unfamiliar to most readers: Hagrites are the descendants of Hagar AKA Ishmaelites. Gebal refers to a Phoenician city north of Tyre and Sidon on the modern Lebanese coast (Byblos, Lebanon today). And we can't leave out Assyria, of course, the brutal empire that was centered in today's northern Iraq. At any given time in Israel's history up to the time this psalm was published, one or more of those nations was agitating to humble her. The psalmist insists this is driven by a hatred for Jehovah, and hints at the envy for His rich provision to His people.

But for all these threats, there is an equal number of historical incidents where God's rich provision included crushing some of them. The psalm cites some of the more famous victories under Joshua and Gideon and others during the period of Judges when Israel's possession of the land was none too certain. So, the psalmist calls on God to reduce them to dust or chaff in the rather stiff and constant winds blowing across Israel. Burn them until there is nothing left! Turn their own nature deities against them, as it were. We are given an image of great armies and their leaders standing defeated, disarmed, naked and ashamed.

Why? The only valid cause is the reputation of Jehovah, the One who claims to be Creator of all things.

Psalm 84

This is a Pilgrim Psalm, a celebration of marching to Zion for any number of annual feasts and festivals. The imagery is rich with symbolism.

The psalmist begins with a common figure of speech heard among pilgrims meeting to share the journey. They refer to the House of Jehovah as if it were a long lost dear relative. Just the sight of it in the distance makes the heart sing! Never mind the tired body as the long journey is near the end; the soul itself grows weary and faint being away too long from the symbolic

imperial courts of the Sovereign Ruler. Oh, to be in His vicinity again! The hearts are aflame with anticipation.

The pilgrim envies the very birds that reside in the Temple precincts. Stop and consider the context a moment: Asaph and his descendants mostly lived in or near Jerusalem. It was their duty as Temple singers to be there year-round. It's not as if they were unaware of the paradox that those who live closest to the Holy Place are often cynical, whose ritual observances are empty habit. There is a hidden joke here. Speaking through the pilgrim, the lyrical priest senses in his heart that surely the very birds are taking full advantage of the blessings of flocking to a structure that would offer lots of nesting opportunities well out of reach of anything without feathers. But the birds are not fallen and know their Creator instinctively, needing no such tangible reminder of Him as temples and rituals. The psalmist wants to capture the joy and wonder of someone who counts it a privilege to worship. Thus, he is among those blessed to hang around and worship formally on a daily basis. It's a big deal to him.

Then he explains why it matters so much: He lives here, but his heart is always on pilgrimage. We can't be sure, but if the Valley of Baca was a literal geographic location, it would have been dominated by a weeping shrub, most likely the Arabian balsam, which is drought tolerant. Obviously, the psalmist uses this as a symbol of a rather long and difficult passage in life. People whose heart remains hungry for more of the Lord's Presence and power can turn the desert valleys into places filled with springs of living water, whose lives are filled with the downpour of blessings. Never mind the bad times, they just keep getting stronger in faith.

So, standing before the Lord, he first observes the ritual of calling on God simply because He is God. Then observing the second protocol, he prays for his king, gesturing to the palace that stood next to the Temple.

Then he launches into a final celebration of the high privilege of standing in a place long recognized as holy ground, even before Abraham wandered the area. If he died here, it would be better than he deserved. When on duty, a doorkeeper slept in the vestibule behind the door and lived a very Spartan existence. In more lyrical terms, it was his duty to open the door for the Master of the place, able to recognize Him in whatever guise He traveled, ready at any hour. That would be better than a solid and comfortable residence with any number of folks whose hearts were effectively dead to moral truth. Think of the immense privileges of serving God! He is the very sun in the sky, the armor of His warriors. Whatever it is we can imagine as "good" is in His hands offered to us daily. Just walk in His character.

In the final verse, the word for "trust" in Hebrew refers to committing oneself to a feudal lord, without any reservation and expectation, for whatever service He decides.

Psalm 85

Another of the Korahite works, Western scholars are all over the place on this psalm. We would miss the point if we tried to shove this down into some particular historical reference. As with most prophetic Hebrew writing, the message here is not so much what happened, but how God does things; it's about His character.

What kind of God is Jehovah? He has shown favor to the very land itself on which Israel lived. Whenever something took some of them away, God always seemed to make sure they were allowed to come home eventually. It's obvious to anyone God has been rather patient with this nation, overlooking their moral weaknesses.

How often has He withheld justified wrath? While it may not have been the timing of human wishes, God always seemed to restore the people to His favor sooner or later.

And now would be a good time to ask for that mercy again. Using a standard Ancient Near Eastern formal debate protocol, the psalmist asks the reverse question. Whoever hears is naturally expected to negate what he suggests in these questions. No, it would be uncharacteristic of God to be angry long term with Israel. Continuing in this vein, should the psalmist ask a negative question, the hearers affirm the positive answer. God will surely revive His people again from their sorrows. Indeed, Lord, show us Your mercy!

Our duty is to prepare ourselves and pay attention to what God has to say. He never fails to send a prophetic word. All His revelation is the *shalom* of mankind, so surely His own servants will turn away from folly. His glory shining through us is the salvation we seek.

What does that look like? The psalmist waxes lyrical. Mercy and truth become close buddies, righteousness and peace will kiss warmly and moral certainty will sprout like spring flowers in the fresh grass. Moral purity will shine like the sun. And if you don't quite grasp all that, then we can surely assert that God's favor will bring forth a harvest, of both domestic crops and wild provision. Can't you see how a strong moral consciousness runs through His people like a herald as He approaches? He leaves footprints in our hearts for us to find the true path.

Psalm 86

Don't go looking for the precise spot David occupied when he composed this sweet hymn. We have no idea what human historical context goes with this impassioned plea, and precious few humans can even begin to share the moral place he stood. That's what makes all the difference in the world, because it's not enough to translate the words if we can't transport our souls over into that moral sphere of the heart where Heaven calls us to rise from our natural fallen state.

Nor could we guess why the Temple music director pulled this psalm of David into the midst of their collection of songs, but we do understand how this fits into a penitent call that robes every soul sincerely seeking God's favor. Without the moral tenor carried in these words, it won't matter where you stand in the entire universe, you won't stand in God's Presence.

David begins by depicting a young child begging his father to bend down and hear his tiny voice. The Hebrew figure of speech often translated "poor and needy" is not merely an economic condition, but a sense of total dependence. While most English translations have David referring to himself as "holy" it might better be rendered as "godly" in the sense of morally consistent with God's character. It's the image of someone who manages to gaze upon this messy reality from an eternal viewpoint and then acting accordingly. The context is a claim to feudal loyalty. And it's not so much that David cries all day long like a whiner, but that he cannot imagine going anywhere else with concerns that are far bigger than he.

A mighty lord in David's time would surely rescue even his own domestic herds if they fell into a tight spot, so there's nothing wrong with a human servant asking for a rescue from trouble. "Give me another reason to shout to the world what a mighty and good God you are!" So, David refreshes his request for an honest hearing of his plea. This day and any day when things are difficult, David will call on no one else.

He goes on to contrast how Jehovah is not like any other deity. Whose gods could claim dividing the waters and making the seabed dry? Whose idols could speak with fire, smoke and earthquakes? Which of the gods dropped food from the sky daily for years on end? Which of the deities drove out entire nations of giants and massive armies with better technology? No god had such a record, and so David notes he can't imagine thinking of any of them as actual gods. David paints the image of a mighty warrior king leading a vast army that includes all of Creation itself.

Verse 11 rings across the ages and appears in many modern worship songs. Reshape me, David says, and make me like You. Ancient Near Eastern law was conceived not as mere writ, but as the character of the ruler Himself, and David asks for insight into what God intends in His realm. "What would I do if it were You at work here?" In giving fresh life to a ruler's moral character, David hopes to warm himself in the glow of divine truth as a living force in Creation. "I wanna make You look good, Lord!" After all God has done by bringing David into His empire, how could David not bring God fame? It was as if God had breathed life into David's dead corpse.

And what did it bring him? David faced relentless opposition from those who were hostile to God's revelation, those who rejected His call. David simply could not fathom how people might walk away from God's mercy. In the final lines, he admits he's just a nobody, wholly undeserving of any good thing. But he does make himself fully available, so if for no other reason, let God reshape David into an ensign of divine authority just to shake folks up. Show them You are Boss, O Lord!

Psalm 87

This is a terse prophetic song. The Hebrew is difficult to grasp if you read it literally, and you would be in good company. Toward the end before Babylon laid siege to the city, a great many shallow minds and closed hearts mistook such prophetic material as some kind of cheap guarantee that they had God over a barrel. They could do what they pleased, but as long as they hid in the City, God could not allow His House to be destroyed. How wrong they were, having forgotten the lesson of the Tabernacle at Shiloh. They forgot what God said to David, that He did not actually dwell in structures built by human hands. Rather, Solomon would build a house for God's *name*, His earthly representation. This is not a song of Jerusalem the geographic spot on this earth; it is a song of Zion the heart of God.

So far as the record of Scripture shows, God first spoke personally to Abraham. On this Mount Moriah where Abraham was prepared to offer his only natural born heir, it is here that one can make some physical contact with the foundation of divine revelation and redemption. This act of Abraham was the symbolic foreshadowing of Christ, the final revelation of the Creator's

character. For the Sons of Korah, this is the place where God had been willing to found His personal reputation in the midst of fallen humanity.

He could have chosen any part of the Promised Land, but this is the spot to where He called David to build his capitol. It was honored by His choice, not by its own virtue. God could visit any Israeli in his home, but He called them in His role as Sovereign to appear before Him in a place they could learn to treasure for what it meant. While it would mean nothing but a burdensome ritual to some, to those whose heart was awake and focused on Jehovah, it was a sacred duty. They would come and be moved deeply at the sight of those symbols of imperial majesty.

And it was in this place where those with committed hearts could not remain silent but would burst with praise and grateful thanksgiving for the high privilege of being God's chosen voice to the world.

Someday, you would look around at all the foreigners who came to celebrate their Creator in this place. People from as far away as Egypt in one direction and Babylon in the other; Philistia, once their implacable foe; Tyre who depended on them for food even as she controlled so much of the commerce coming into Israel; all colors of men, including those from Ethiopia – you will point to them and say that they were born here in Zion. This is where humanity's redemption was born, and it will give everyone it touches a new identity. The Lord will count them as born in Zion. They will all be Children of Israel in the sense of God's divine mission of revelation.

And the Sons of Korah singing and playing worship instruments will rejoice in this global redemption, welcoming everyone who seeks the Lord, proclaiming loudly that Jehovah is the source of their very existence.

Psalm 88

The psalm is addressed to the Sons of Korah, but attributed to Heman, son of Zerah, son of Judah by Tamar his daughter-in-law (1 Chronicles 2:3-6). That's a mouthful and it requires you remember the sad stories of Judah's sin regarding Tamar (Genesis 38). As such, this represents truly ancient wisdom, as Solomon is compared against the legendary wisdom of this psalmist (1 Kings 4:31) among others.

The Ancient Near Eastern wise men were not witch doctors, but their brand of deep wisdom is surely different from anything commonly found in Western society. Genuine Hebrew mystical awareness recognizes multiple levels of moral consideration in our human existence. This psalm is a contemplation; it is not meant to assert answers but to ask wise questions. It serves to indicate territory for exploration. What you find is between you and God. The contemplation covers only one of the many levels for moral consideration. If you take the language literally, you will conclude that these are ignorant savages who don't really know God. You would also miss the point completely, because from such is the source of our knowledge of God. To these Hebrew wise men, He revealed Himself most clearly, so we best guard against the folly of literalism when reading Hebrew mystical poetry.

If we are to conquer our human frailties by faith, we must first explore those weaknesses. There are plenty of songs that celebrate the victory of faith; this one delves into the human experience of depression, the place you have to visit before you can meet God face to face. It is Job without the errors. It is the deepest, darkest sorrow and shows that our Creator understands how it feels and offers no condemnation for those who confront their valleys of death. If you need an answer, it's hidden in the call on God. That in itself is victory, but this psalm has no happy ending because it addresses itself to human nature, not divine redemption.

Heman begins in the right place, calling out to God. If there is any bright spot in this vale of sorrow, it is the shining light of God's revelation of redemption. So, he calls on God to hear this outpouring of sorrow over his own weakness. Instead of bluntly confessing his sin, he is more artful in simply acknowledging that he is as good as dead. Nothing here pretends that he deserves any better, only that it's something he could never survive on his own.

Indeed, he emphasizes what it's like to see death as a near neighbor. This is the death of someone who has not yet found the assurance of salvation. This is a very common dramatic figure of speech based on a whole range of literary symbols that arose far back in ancient Mesopotamia. And while those far ancient folks might have actually believed some of this more literally, it takes its place in Hebrew poetry as a familiar expression, a mere image of death while still in sin. Heman echoes more than once the image of having no friends, because in genuine depression you are unable to see beyond your own sorrow and imagine that anyone else knows what it's like. Instead, death is closer than any human friend, and this kind of death is no friend.

Thus, he makes it sound as if death is not welcome at all. If someone dies in their sin, they have lost that one last chance to engage even the mere ritual of praise and worship. Once into the shadows of death, the miracles of God mean nothing to those who failed to find mercy. The soul's doom is sealed. Again, nothing here is intended as literal, but as imagery of the sorrow of dying without a vivid connection of the heart to God.

So Heman continues his weeping, crying and calling out for redemption from God. He expresses lavishly how it seems to a man under conviction for his sinful fallen nature. This is the moment of walking into that Flaming Sword to the East of Eden. Will it carve off his sin, or will he be consumed fully? The psalm ends without a resolution for the simple reason that, unless the Lord redeem you in His mercy, there's nothing left to say.

Psalm 89

This is the final psalm in Book 3; the last verse is more likely a benediction to the collection than for this psalm. The author here is Ethan, brother of Heman who gave us the previous hymn, and equally famous during David's reign for his wisdom and as a Temple musician.

At least a couple of modern English songs take their words from the first few lines here. No other starting place would make sense than to praise the name of the Lord. Whatever else may follow, these declarations are true. Never mind what it looks like or what it feels like, Our God never fails. This is followed by a recitation of the divine call and promise to David as King of Israel.

Unless you are foolish enough to reject the Lord's anointed ruler, this is very good news to anyone who resides in the Land of Israel. Thus, the next few verses celebrate what a marvel this promise represents in terms of revealing God's character. Given how He has been so incredibly faithful before making such a promise, including smashing Egypt to set His people free, how could this grand promise go wrong? Who is like Our God? No one compares favorably with Jehovah.

Then Ethan lavishes rich praise on God for demonstrating unquestionable mastery over the whole earth. He rattles off the names of landmarks visible for many miles around, as if God had simply pinched them up with His fingers. It's hard to summarize all the symbolism. People who serve God can walk with confidence and pride that the world itself is their ally. If God favors you, nothing else matters in this world. So, God's promised favor on David is very good news for the rest of the kingdom.

Indeed, Ethan paints a glowing image of God's choice and ritual anointing of David. It was virtually the same as adopting David as His own Son. For a moment he says things scholars have long insisted were Messianic prophecies, if for no other reason than that they could not be literally true of David the man. Even while his memory lives fresh in the psalmist's mind, David has become the symbol of a promised deliverer. While David eventually dies, the promise he symbolized will eventually walk the earth again.

As part of this commitment to mercy, God declares that He will show exceptional restraint in correcting the people over whom David rules. They won't get away with murder, but He will punish them with an eye to driving them back to His throne. God has no intention of tossing this covenant aside out of mere impatience with them. Again, the symbolic meaning is hard to miss.

So how sad it is that Israel must surely have driven hard against God's patience, because things aren't that happy right now. To all appearances there is no longer any covenant at all. Nothing protects them and *shalom* has departed utterly – no prosperity, no safety from human or natural enemies, no protection from plagues. If anything, the enemies around them have more favor from God than He grants to Israel.

In accordance with the courtly protocols of his day, Ethan asks rhetorically how long God will hide His face from them. Should the current generation who remember His divine mercy die before it returns, who would be left to teach His ways? Ethan wonders if he'll die before God relents. So, he cries out for the Lord to remember that not everyone in Israel has turned away from Him. How much longer must he hide in shame as God's enemies parade and celebrate while insulting His people? Don't forget us forever, O Lord!

Book 4: Psalms 90-106

Thus we begin the Fourth Book of Psalms. The psalms that follow are generally liturgical in nature, as are those of the Fifth Book. Perhaps it's divided between 106 and 107 only for convenience in terms of size, because the nature and style of the songs do not change. However,

there is an established popular sentiment that this collection seems to fit neatly into the experiences of Israel in the Book of Numbers.

Psalm 90

This song is ascribed to Moses who led the Exodus. When we read of all the carping, whining and resistance he faced from Israel, we hardly wonder at the subject matter here. At the same time we notice how it resembles much of Ecclesiastes. For Solomon, this style of writing emulates the very best of classical Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature. It's easy to forget how Moses was educated in Pharaoh's courts, and then at the hand of his father-in-law who was also hardly a country bumpkin. Thus, the message here is more subtle than might seem obvious from the words alone. This is dramatic oratory meant to draw us along a path of ancient Eastern logic, and we are obliged to read between the lines if we expect to see where it goes.

Moses first establishes that the One he addresses stands outside our time-space bubble. Jehovah isn't just an immortal being who lives without dying. This is the great God Almighty, Creator of all things whose existence is rooted in an entirely separate realm. Existence itself is rooted in Him. It goes without saying that all things bear the stamp of His divine moral character; whatever He says *is*. If there is any hope for understanding this world, we first must seek His revelation.

Some of this translates poorly into English because it relies on an orientation of mind that simply is not quite possible from the same context as our tongue arises. It requires entering into a radically different set of assumptions that are exceedingly difficult to explain in any human language. Thus, Moses alludes to things in terms of characterization, not description. Most English translations miss the point here. God made us of the same stuff as earth, but we chose sin in the Garden, wandering from His revealed purpose. Thus, our human constitution includes a healthy dose of the Curse of the Fall, a measure of destruction. A primary element of that curse is our mortality. We weren't supposed to die like this. Still, God calls us to return to Him. He is the Eternal One, and we are of such short duration in our lives that there are no words to compare.

Moses compares us to the passing of a single night and day in God's lifetime. Our longest possible span of life is little more than a single passage of the sun over the earth to God, as if we were some ephemeral herbs. Tomorrow we are but fertilizer for the next generation that lasts but a day, too.

Then Moses launches into an explanation that we have moved away from God and into His wrath. He cannot forget our rejection. Our darkest secret thoughts shine brightly before Him. Noting that we are fortunate to see some eighty years of life, our best prospect is to spend those years in labor and sorrow. When we die, we will have gained nothing that we can take with us. Like smoke on a strong wind – poof – we are gone and soon forgotten. No one can live long enough to measure the extent of God's wrath against sin. Moses asks that we be reminded of our mortality often.

God calls us to return to Him, and Moses responds by calling on God to return His mercy to us so that we can regain our reverence for Him. Like a man who cannot work without a good

breakfast, he asks that God fill us up with divine mercy so we can do His work and bring Him glory. There is precious little happiness in this world, but the joy of walking in God's truth is unshakable. Give us a chance to teach our children a better way to see life. Let your glory sparkle in our dark existence so that the world will know there is such a thing as redemption.

Psalm 91

This is easily one of the best-loved psalms in almost any translation. We are told the Hebrew is quite lyrical in its own right. (Hint: Ephesians 6 echoes some of the thinking here.) So popular was this song that Satan threw it at Jesus, attempting to sucker the Lord into a legalistic literal application. Jesus wasn't drawn into a petty dispute but pointed out how the suggested miracle would violate the fundamental nature of faith itself. Instead, Jesus performed better, sometimes more spectacular miracles that served His Father's divine purpose. This is not about a stack of miracles, but a genuine trust in God to do whatever it takes to make the mission of His glory happen.

This entire psalm rests on the image of Ancient Near Eastern feudalism. It matters not what service the servant renders, only that he remains utterly faithful in the business of his lord.

It's not a question of where you belong, but to whom. In Ancient Hebrew culture, entering the service of some noble or king meant hanging out in his court until given a mission. However, when the mission is complete, to this court the servant returns as his home base. It's hard to imagine a safer place, because to attack the servant requires attacking the ruler and his entire bodyguard.

And once upon a mission, who would dare to interfere? Your master's reputation makes a huge difference. This is Jehovah, so we should hardly be surprised when Satan attempts to sucker us and draw us off the mission into any number of diversions that bring us into his slavery. That's his job. It's not so much the enslavement as the tempting diversion from which we are delivered if we are faithful at heart. Our Lord provides whatever it takes to remain healthy and covers us with His warmth against harsh weather. He is utterly trustworthy, so our confidence is better than any battle shield.

Night terrors and arrows are both threats that you don't see coming. But night or day matters not, for God never sleeps. Death and destruction could come up next to you, but never touch you, sparing you rather like the Passover in the Exodus. It's not that you won't see mass destruction, but that it won't have your name on it. So long as you are faithful in your Master's business, it won't matter where you go or what you do, He will insure that your *shalom* is undisturbed.

A part of that *shalom* is God keeping natural threats at bay. His Creation is no danger to those who serve the divine moral character that is woven into that Creation. Your feet will be shod with His sense of peace about things the other people fear.

God Himself offers the most extravagant promises. While this is written much like the standard protocol promises of any master taking on a new servant, we know that God can actually perform as Maker of all things. How long does it take for you to bring Him glory? Your life here

won't expire until He is finished, at which time you'll be quite happy to go to your well-earned rest.

Psalm 92

This is the quintessential psalm of praise. For a day of Sabbath rest, what could bring more peace to the soul than a proper celebration?

So, we begin with a declaration of how pleasant it is to lose yourself in God's glory. Whether in daylight or in darkness, it is always the right time to worship Him. Pick an instrument because anything can be used for His glory. Just consider for a moment all the great things He has done on this earth for those He favors, and you'll think of blessings worthy of your praise.

Something is lost in translation when we see mention here of His works and thoughts. It's more like his handiwork in Creation as a whole, and the manifestation of His plans. We marvel at how it all fits together as an expression of His divine character. The image of someone who has use only of his flesh and poor benighted intellect is appropriate for people who lack the awareness of their heart-minds, equivalent to lacking faith-as-faculty for perception. So perhaps these fools do seem to flourish for a season, but it's only so they can be mowed down like hay for straw or fertilizer. The idea here is that they get to rise up just long enough to be noticed before removal. They think they know what's going on but have no clue how God's Creation works.

God is totally the opposite, exalted beyond this universe entirely. How could anyone possibly resist Him? There is a double expression that emphasizes just how amazing and emphatic it is: Those who reject Jehovah as God are dust in His hands. The phrase typically translated "workers of iniquity" paints the image of someone who strives without rest, but to no effective purpose. They have no power to accomplish anything; it's all in vain.

Contrast that with we how celebrate His reputation. The horn here symbolizes a purposeful effort, something that everyone can see and recognize for what it is. Thus, like the horns of an ox, a threat to anything that stands in the way, God empowers us to push through everything He calls us to do. No power on earth can resist the will of God manifested in His obedient people.

And contrasted with the grass and flowers in previous verses, so easily mowed or trampled, we who serve Him are solid trees like the cedars of Lebanon, so massive and so very useful. The image is someone whom God takes into His imperial service as a talented and honorable figure elevated to noble status. He nurtures our lives so that by the time we should be too old for adventure, we'll bear some other kind of fruit that blesses everyone around us. At the very least, we will join the chorus who praise His name as the most trustworthy of all.

Psalm 93

In just a few lines we are given a profound vision of the King of Glory.

In this vision we find Jehovah in His regal majesty, like a robe. Underneath we catch a glimpse of divine battle armor because He is a king of action. Indeed, He has put this on Himself. It's not a status or power conferred from some other source, but an authority inherent in His Person. He has made all things and the world is subject to His will alone; no one else can interfere with His reign.

Go ahead and make some attempt to trace the genesis of His reign. You won't find it because it started before anything else that existed.

Imagine the most powerful force in this world. Many would say it's the oceans, with their unknown murky depths housing things men never see and able to pound the shores of the world, pulverizing all it touches. When an ocean gets stirred up, nothing man can do withstands that mighty power. The noise alone is more than most human ears can tolerate. Combine all the stormy seas into one vast power, if you can imagine it. Yet the Lord in His majesty is unmoved because He made the sea with the hollow of His hand. The waves obey His commands.

And when He testifies of His moral character, when He reveals His personal law for Creation, there is no authority in any position to challenge Him. When He speaks, it is the end of every matter. His divine courts define holiness, and they have no terminus.

Psalm 94

It stood as a basic assumption in Hebrew minds that God's sense of timing was not like theirs. In the ancient protocol of the Divine Sheikh's court, asking "how long" did not mean for them what it means to us. It was rather like asking if God intended to put up with something; was there an endpoint? Did God intend to act eventually, or should they get used to it?

It was also assumed He would act on the grounds that this was His domain, and He wouldn't let someone else abuse His people. Ancient Near Eastern feudalism was about people, generally a sense of familial kinship between the ruler and his real treasure, his household. A final paramount issue was God's divine reputation. Was He going to let them insult Him this way?

It seems almost certain the psalmist refers to domestic troubles arising from bad leadership, and not some foreign oppressor. He opens with a reference to Jehovah as the God of vengeance; saying it twice adds dramatic emphasis. If there is to be revenge, it must come from the throne of God. It is His prerogative alone. Let the God who avenges shine like the morning sun! He, who is the final moral authority of all Creation, let Him blast with withering glory to expose the arrogant who dare to usurp His authority.

Here's the main question, again repeated for emphasis: Do you have a plan to deal with this evil situation? These folks in power don't bear much resemblance to Your servants. Their actions aren't helping to build up your domain. It looks like they are wasting Your resources on their personal comfort instead of developing and making Your provision do more work. When was it ever just to kill those who are defenseless?

These people have the gall to suggest You aren't paying attention, Lord.

Listen, you lowlife thugs: Do you need to be thumped with a divine clue? The God who gave us ears isn't likely to be deaf Himself; the designer of the eye is not blind. Our first awareness of God was through His power to punish and destroy heathen nations. Do you imagine He won't keep His own people in line?

God can read any man's thoughts, all of them at once. To Him it surely seems petty and small. The only folks with any sense at all are those who pursued His revelation. Lord, Your demands of us are a blessing in themselves! If we can just obey You, no one can harm us. You consistently deliver on the promise to give us respite from human predation. Meanwhile, the predators will fall into their own trap.

No, we are Your treasure, O Lord. Sooner or later Your justice will deliver from sorrow those who honestly seek Your favor. We will march in glorious array in the train of Your divine justice. And if God lets things slide for a while, there is nothing I can do but wait. But the moment I am in real danger, He's there to deliver me. So, I'm going to count my blessings to pass the time until He acts. There's no way I could ever see God making alliance with these evil rulers, not as long as they violate His Word right in front of Him.

A whole kingdom of evil rulers is not enough to frustrate God's promises to me.

Psalm 95

This is another very popular psalm, the basis for several contemporary songs and quotations in the New Testament. It's also the first of a half-dozen poems celebrating divine sovereignty. They fit into the general type of processional hymns.

We can almost picture a ranking member of some household calling his family and guests to join him in celebration. How can we remain silent when such a noteworthy Sheikh rules over us? He's so powerful that no one can threaten His domain. It won't matter what you have to bring in your hands, because the most appropriate tribute to bring into His courts is your grateful praise and singing. No king or deity is in His class.

Consider: He made the hidden corners of the earth with His hands. The hills and mountains are described using the word for a wealth gained from toil, and as a standing monument to accomplishment. He owns the seas by right of having made them, too. He formed the dry land like a sculptor. The full impact of just Who this is will drive you to your knees.

We have no other God; this is the One who owns us. But He is tender toward us like a shepherd to His sheep. His compassion knows no bounds. How could anyone resist His sweet care? What kind of total fool does it take to quarrel with Him?

The voice changes to that of God. Yet this very same folly is in your blood, God warns Israel. Don't forget that your own ancestors provoked Me endlessly. With such mighty miracles they had the gall to demand petty comforts and refused to walk in faith. If their every wish wasn't waiting for them in plain sight well before they arrived, every stop in the Wilderness was another excuse for carping. Forty long years God endured this constant insult in His face.

Finally, He could take no more. He judged them as terminally unfit to receive His promised blessings. It's not that they failed to understand what God required but refused to consider Him as worthy of their devotion. So, He promised them they would never see the full measure of His wrath on the sins of others because they kept provoking it on themselves. He let them die in his wrath.

We are left hanging with the implied warning that there is a limit, and you should be fearful of testing the boundaries, lest you lose all that God has granted by His mighty power.

Psalm 96

This is a Restoration hymn. It's very hard to argue against the Septuagint's comment that this was written on the occasion of the rebuilding of the Temple after the Exile. It reflects very much the rather unique viewpoint of the prophetic tag-team Haggai and Zechariah serving during the Second Temple construction. Zechariah in particular offered a fresh emphasis on the global scope of Israel's mission, and made more of the coming Day of Judgment than any previous prophet.

The flavoring is somewhat less of the ancient eastern nomad sheikhs and more of the experience they had with Babylonian and Persian rulers. From our perspective, the difference is subtle, but it works best to think of a Mesopotamian ruler in his palace. From what we can tell, there is a far broader exposure to different music styles and instruments than before the Exile.

Thus, this psalm hammers home the call to sing and rejoice. Forget the exaggerated myths of Solomon's Temple; we have obeyed God's command and He is pleased with the results. We have a proper imperial court for His divine Presence among us, so let's observe the proper protocols and present our tribute and ourselves.

Much of this psalm quotes older psalms with a renewed emphasis. All of it is rather familiar and we need not review line by line the language. Rather, it's critical to see the familiar imagery in this new context. Thus, along with traditional calls to worship and celebrate His majesty as one might the greatest of earthly rulers, the emphasis is on doing so particularly because the whole world needs to know. We see no particular martial call to conquest, but to impress the nations with their devotion to Him.

The whole human race is His domain, so we need to make sure they see our example, along with the miraculous blessings we reap from our devotion. Overwhelm the heathen resistance with the sheer weight of His glory. They claim their gods are in the heavens, a figure of speech for the higher realm of existence commonly understood across the Ancient Near East. However, Jehovah made that heavenly domain, along with all the earth, so it's His home, not theirs.

All of Creation will join in with us when we render due honor to God. Nature is alive; this is no mere figure of speech. We need to be about this mission of His glory because all too soon He will come in wrath to judge all the earth.

Psalm 97

This is a coronation hymn for Jehovah as sovereign God over all Creation. It sounds exactly like what you might hear when a parade makes a ceremonial march before the ruler from the gate of the capital to the doors of the palace. In this case, the ritual would be marching the Ark of Covenant as the symbolic throne of God up to the Temple.

Because He rules all Creation, let all the earth rejoice at the celebration of His coronation, all the way to very ends of human occupation.

What should you look for? Not some fancy carriage or curtained sedan chair. No, this Lord is hidden by mystery, as symbolized by the mention of clouds and darkness. Only those devoted to Him fully could hope to recognize Him; no one else can begin to comprehend Him. His throne – His power and authority – began with the revelation of righteousness and moral justice. The power of His justice provides no opportunity for anyone to resist. His revelation shines like flashes of lightening, always in the company of earth-shattering thunder. Were He to but show His face, Creation itself would dissolve. So, all of Heaven, the ineffable realm above us, celebrates Him as the very definition of moral goodness, and there is no excuse for anyone on earth to avoid knowing Him.

There is no doubt that mankind seeks all kinds of ways to find peace, imagining deities that answer their human thoughts. When God asserts His authority, these people tremble in shame at His revelation. All those gods, if they existed, would fall down before Him, too. But the people He called to the mission of His revelation rejoice at the mere thought of Him finally showing Himself so that no one could argue against His name.

If you claim to revere Him, then learn to hate what He hates. Trust Him to keep you out of the power of moral darkness. His reign is like planting a crop of enlightenment, with a harvest of gladness and joy in moral purity. This is our Sovereign, so rejoice!

Psalm 98

This is another coronation song. The wording suggests a rather impromptu celebration of Jehovah's reign based on some recent miraculous deliverance. In the Ancient Near East, a ruler asserted his dominion in the form of giving laws. However, it was nothing like modern Western legislation. Rather, the ruler would declare what kinds of things would get his attention. He would then promptly pass judgment on any pending cases, not least charges of disloyalty against those who refused to declare allegiance upon his taking the throne. A king's law presumed a personal loyalty to him and a desire to please him. This image is necessary to understand the expressions in this psalm.

The first verse emphasizes the celebration of some mighty deliverance of Jehovah's people. He did it by His own hand, not by hiding behind some army of men. This was no mere announcement, but an assertion by power itself. The next two verses loudly proclaim that He demonstrated the power to defend His domain; there is no way anyone anywhere on this earth can dispute it. In particular, He showed His intention to defend Israel and His divine grant to her. Let none dare challenge them in their place.

The next triplet of verses encourages everyone to make a joyful noise with whatever musical talents they might possess. There is mention of ancient instruments and we might surmise this was composed before the Exile.

Indeed, it does seem to echo the sentiments of Isaiah's latter chapters in the final trio of verses. In typical Hebrew fashion, Creation itself is personified in various elements. How easily Westerners forget that ancient people believed Creation was a living thing, and God Himself used such language. The oceans, rivers and mountains thunder with His praise; do we listen? How could we not join in this celebration? Behold, He comes to assert His dominion over all Creation – mercy to the loyal, but wrath on those who oppose Him.

Psalm 99

While this is another coronation song, it's not something you read and then meditate. You should jump up, shout and sing, run around in circles and do cartwheels. We poorly grasp the kind of genuine enthusiasm that saw people do things just like that during coronation celebrations. The refrain sounds thrice here: "He is holy!"

The words for "tremble" and "quake" are intentionally ambiguous: You can shiver in fear or tremble with joy. It really depends on your sense of faith and commitment. He is described as the true sovereign over Israel, so trouble her at your own peril. Let everyone tremble for His name is holy!

His limitless power is wedded to boundless compassion. The image of divine justice is hardly limited to what is implied by the English translation. His divine justice is entirely consistent with His design for Creation; it brings people to a sense of peace. It is in their best interest; nothing could possibly be sweeter, so learn to love it. And so, dance around His throne, for He is holy!

While Moses and Aaron were not technically from the priestly clan, they did serve as appointed priests unto the Lord. God's Law reflects His character; a written expression of His Law cannot restrain His choices. The Law of Moses binds the people, not God; it tells them what to expect from Him. You'll notice that no one argued against their priestly service and lived. And of course, none doubts the priesthood of Samuel, much less his prophetic calling. People truly committed to pleasing God will find themselves in august company. You, too, can call on His name and get the same level of response they saw. It's not about the men, but about the God they served and their devotion.

However, God is not some noisy and doting ruler. Those who fail His expectations will surely suffer His wrath, but it always comes packaged with forgiveness. Don't hesitate to come into His Presence wherever it is He calls to you. Our God is holy!

Psalm 100

This processional hymn has long been the source of a great many Christian songs of worship. For something so brief, the imagery carries a lasting message that resounds in faithful hearts across the ages.

Picture in your mind some periodic festival wherein the worshipers begin outside the city walls, marching and singing in holy procession. Someone calls out, "Let's have a song of praise!" Let all the earth praise Him, as is merely His due as Creator. If your heart is truly committed to Him, it's hard to imagine anyone could restrain the excitement at this celebration.

The psalmist asserts that there really is no other God. It's not a theological assertion, but a call to forget the question in favor of devotion to the One God who calls this His people. Had He not made them, they would not be. No human holds such creative power in his hands.

Pass through the Eastern Gates of the City with thanksgiving. Throng the Temple courts with praise for His name. Make His name glorious. He is the definition of goodness. His mercy runs out beyond the threshold of human awareness. He is trustworthy from one generation to the next.

Psalm 101

A psalm of David, you might imagine he wrote this as a vow upon ascending to the throne of Israel. However, it is rooted much farther back in David's life when he was just a shepherd boy. The shepherd is the quintessential biblical image of moral manhood, and all the more so for one who actually cares for a flock of people. Anyone with social leverage is morally bound to this manner of leadership.

We dare not forget that the image of holiness is striving to maintain social order on God's terms. The Law of Moses detailed what social stability meant in Israel, offering a clear path. David's primary image of wickedness is someone who wanders from that path of moral truth. Do they want something not provided in the Law? Let them keep going and not come back; they don't belong in the flock of Israel.

David begins by vowing to celebrate the mercy and justice of God. This is how he will worship his God. He declares his sincere intention to walk in purity by the Lord's wisdom in his heart. What kind of man is eager for his Master's inspection of his work? This is quite the opposite of Adam and Eve hiding from God in the Garden. Lesser men are always looking for ways to avoid such close attention, but David craves it because it also means he will grow closer and have a better image of his Lord. Thus, from such close communion, he will be able to walk in full integrity.

He uses a colloquial Hebrew expression – setting something before one's eyes – to indicate he would dismiss quickly anything that doesn't actively promote his commission from God. He would shortly brush off anyone that fails to show a similar commitment to the Law. Because David lives by his heart, he is ready to sense the hearts of others. He has no time for hearts that don't resonate with similar convictions.

Let them sneak around and stir up trouble for others, seeking an advantage in diminishing someone else. David trusts that God will reveal such evil to him so he can take action. In the presence of a penitent king, there is no room for arrogant and ambitious courtiers.

Instead, David will keep his heart's radar attuned to others with a commitment to the Lord. These are the people he will promote into his royal service. The first time he senses deception,

that person is put out on the street. Indeed, he'll start the day bright and early looking out for troublemakers. While he would hardly claim to be the perfect judge, he knows that laziness about it will ensure God's wrath. So, by investing some energy in sifting out false hearts, David hopes to keep the windows of Heaven open to rain blessings on his reign.

Psalm 102

This is a siege prayer. Whether the occasion is a literal siege matters not; there are many contexts that feel just the same – there is nowhere to turn for escape from the sorrow, and nothing to occupy the long hours to take your mind off things. It begins very much like a time of personal trial, but the psalmist notes that Zion is also in need of deliverance. Thus, the heading that notes this is a prayer of the afflicted is almost understated.

As is often the case, we are humbled by the soaring imagery, even in mere English translations. The first two verses cry out for God to hear, at one point using a figure of speech that asks God to lean down close to hear because the cry is so feeble.

What does it feel like to sit as Job in sickness and deep sorrow? Surely the psalmist knew his tale. The imagery includes mention of a pair of birds we cannot easily identify, but both are repugnant as unclean fowl, including one distinguished by the habit of vomiting. As always, if all you see is the literal meaning, you miss the whole point. There really are no words to describe such a deeply disturbing sorrow, so utterly cut off from the comfort of another.

Indeed, the only company he has is hostile. There are symbols of bitterness in ashes for bread and drink mixed with tears. But this is no pity party, because the psalmist knows that deep inside, he can blame only his own sin that has raised a barrier between him and God. He is deeply aware of his mortality.

He waits on the God, waiting for the wrath to run its course. In due time, the eternal God will return to His former mercies and save the city that hosts His Name. The symbolism of loving the stones and dust is roughly equivalent to the ritual of kissing the ground in modern times. This is holy ground, in the sense that if one is going to find God's mercy, this is where it will happen. And once God restores Zion, every nation will again quail in fear of what comes next. When His glory returns, nothing can stop His nation from carrying that glory to the ends of the earth.

Scholars agree that what follows is distinctly messianic. It's not just Israel-the-Nation, but what takes center stage here is Israel-the-Mission. God's glory and His revelation are the whole purpose the nation exists. Some day that mission will raise up a nation unlike any other, unlike any ever seen before. Through that future nation of revelation, God will hear the groaning of folks in dire straits, such as the psalmist himself, but throughout the entire world. He will draw the world into His redemption and service.

The psalmist then hints that he would love to see those days, begging God not to end his life too soon. He confesses that God has been around since the beginning and will be still around when it's all done. Surely, He can spare a few more days for His penitent servant? Then again, the

entire universe will perish when the time comes. And God's purpose in Creation shall not fail, for He will surely have children of His glory among men.

Psalm 103

A source of countless contemporary songs, this is one of the most popular psalms, and for good reason. Some doubting scholars question whether David could have written this. There is no doubt this psalmist was way ahead of his peers in moral discernment. You would almost think it was penned after Christ, but we know it's actually quite ancient. Instead, it scolds us for imagining that ancient beliefs were too primitive for such soaring spiritual awareness.

It's clear David must have been looking back from late in his life when things were going well. He gives glory where it is due – to the God who carried him like a child through all the sorrows of his life. The sweetness of life is the mercy of God forgiving his sins and healing his suffering. This is no mere theory or doctrine, but a personal experience both long and vividly remembered.

But not only for me, says David, His mercy falls on anyone who calls on His name. He is the same God to all Creation. He revealed Himself most famously through Moses (up to that point in history). And if there is any proof of God's mercy, it's in His dealings with rebellious Israel. David notes most forcefully that Israel never received the full measure of wrath she deserved. God's patience and forbearance is off the charts. The space between heaven and earth cannot contain His mercy. The distance between east and west hardly match His power to separate us from our sins. He treated Israel as His own child, and never forgot that humans are just so much wet dirt.

Have you ever noticed how those desert flowers pop up during the brief rains? Yet when their time is past and the dry season returns, you would think the ground had never seen a single blossom. Just so, the Lord forgets our sins, because His mercy is more durable than the rocks in that same wilderness. He keeps His covenant promises long after men have forgotten His name. How much more so for those who seek His favor!

The eternal Jehovah established His throne outside this realm of existence. Not only we creatures, along with all of Creation, but the angels also owe Him praise and glory. His authority reaches from the heavens to our very lives here. Let no one fail to praise and glorify Him.

Psalm 104

This is another of those soaring lyrical songs that is impossible to summarize. What may not be obvious is that we have ample examples from other cultures across the whole region and in different millennia of the Ancient Near East (ANE) with similar songs of praise to various named deities. Any of them would have recognized this instantly; it's very typical of what defines the ANE as a whole.

More, those other cultures would have recognized most of the symbolism, the imagery meant to portray things beyond human expression. There are details we recognize in factual terms but

noting them would miss the point most of the time. From the broadest categories down to the smallest elements of life, our Creator pays close attention to everything, and sets it all in order to please Himself. We could not possibly grasp the full range of what this means. Humanity striving to know all facts this many centuries later still can't begin to scratch the surface of what God has designed and implemented.

Much of it is also reminiscent of the Genesis creation narrative. The recurring theme of the waters above and the waters below is easy to spot. It is God who decides the boundaries of the seas. For Him, it must be easier than stretching a line with His finger. The heavens are a mere curtain He hangs, the waters as a garment.

And it all works together in an incomprehensible grand symphony. Some of that water is left to stand precisely so animals can drink, and to grow them food. What is also very easy to miss is the utter importance of how mankind could fit into this harmonious pattern if he listens to God and takes His divinely appointed place. The same forests supply homes for birds and humans alike, despite how each uses those trees differently. It's all there for our use, so we must honor our Provider. Everything has a place in God's plan, regardless of whether it pleases you to have those things around. We cannot fathom the wealth of God's provision.

Notice that in ANE thinking there are three basic domains: earth, sea and sky. And we note in passing that the word translated "Leviathan" generally means anything in the water big enough to eat you. God manages to feed the most massive sea creatures and still grant us opportunity to avoid them. Yes, the Creator breathes life and takes it away as He sees fit and has plans to manage the whole universe without the least struggle.

So, when we see ourselves so utterly insignificant against all of these things, how can we not shout and sing in awe at His greatness? Don't be a fool and ignore His gifts.

Psalm 105

This is the first of two historical songs. This one celebrates what God has done to establish Israel as a nation. These are the defining miracles that provide the core of Israel's identity as God's own people. This psalm offers parallels to David's psalm recorded in 1 Chronicles 16.

Most Westerners misread the point of celebrating in conjunction with so much death and destruction on other nations. There's nothing here about Israel going out of her way to look for trouble. Again, the focus is on God and His limitless power. It was God who stirred up enemies against them simply for the purpose of demonstrating His authority over all Creation. The deities of these other nations could not protect them from the God of Israel.

So, this song opens with a call to praise and worship. Indeed, the words stir up the image of losing oneself in worship with unrestrained enthusiasm. In the Hebrew mind, such extravagant devotion simply is not possible without the divine Presence. One does not simply enter an ecstatic state but is drawn to a higher moral plane of awareness. It's the same Holy Spirit that makes genuine faith possible in war or peace, with actions appropriate to each. And in these celebrations, the worshiper is encouraged to describe what great things He has done on their behalf.

The story for Israel begins with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-Israel. God never failed to honor the covenant He offered the other Patriarchs in the name of Abraham. People might lose track of things, but God does not forget His covenant and law because they arise from His own divine character. This is the very nature of Creation itself. So, the promise of possessing Canaan Land was by faith, not by physical occupation for several generations yet, but He delivered on His promised blessings.

So, they prospered but remained only a small extended family household. They wandered in lands held by other nations, all the way down to Egypt. God never permitted anyone to oppress them until it was a necessary part of His plan. We note in passing that the warning against oppressing His anointed and His prophets (v. 15) both refer to Israel, which presumes her identity is tied up in the calling and mission to manifest His character as a living message.

Came the famine in Palestine and God prepared the salvation of His people through Joseph. Again and again, the message is that God does some things that aren't pleasant to the flesh, but in the long run are truly in Israel's best interest because that interest is wrapped up in the interests of His glory. Thus, Joseph went from slave to viceroy of Egypt. Pharaoh could just about retire and let Joseph run things for him, so wise and effective he proved to be.

And it was Joseph's advancement that spared his kin in Egypt from the famine ravaging all that region of the world. But eventually things turned sour when the Hyksos invaded and cared nothing for the memory of Joseph. The Lord chose this new ruling class to harden for His glory, and they oppressed Israel. But at the right time, He then sent Moses to deliver them with such power and waves of destruction on Egypt that she went into a serious decline for a long time after.

Israel plundered Egypt, and the people were glad to see them go at any price. And Israel was a rich nation throughout that long journey, with manna, quail and water aplenty when they bothered to ask God according to His promises.

And so it went, plundering other nations to enrich His own. Why? He did it so that this nation could glorify His name as the One True God of Creation. Who could be silent at such a long history of glory?

Psalm 106

This is the second of two historical psalms together; it is also the last psalm in the Fourth Book. This second of the pair recounts the history of Israel's rebellions against God, contrasted against His mercy.

As in the previous psalm, we see a heavy emphasis on the miracle of crossing the Reed Sea. More than once some writer has marveled at the very thought of something so unprecedented, and we are called to wonder how anyone who walked through on that dry seabed could forget and then doubt God. But we are also told repeatedly that Israel was a demonstration of God's holiness precisely because they were the most difficult nation He could have chosen. Yet again, in humility we have to wonder if we aren't sometimes just as difficult for other reasons now that He has included all nations in His covenant in Christ.

The psalmist begins with an eloquent call to worship, including his thesis on the mercy of God. Notice how he opens wide the door to anyone who senses a call to join this celebration. Do you want to be a part of His people? It starts with humbling yourself before the God of Creation and accepting His invitation to join His household of faith. The focus is not on the particulars of the Law, but on a sincere desire to bless the Lord.

Contrast that with how Israel actually behaved and the obvious need for repentance. Right there on the shore of the sea, after seeing all the incredible miracles humbling Egypt, he wonders how they doubted God and His chosen leaders. Yet despite their ungrateful whining, He showed them an even more astonishing miracle by drying the seabed into a highway for their escape. Yet not a single Egyptian survived the sudden return of the water. They had no trouble celebrating it at that moment.

But they hurried to forget His power during the march to Sinai. Regardless of how God supplied, they were never satisfied, always seeking some new to excuse to complain. How many died by the earthquake and the fire when they rejected God's vestment of Moses and Aaron as His appointed leaders? And let's not forget that Golden Calf! Moses stood for them, or there wouldn't be an Israel. Later, it was Phinehas. So many times, they came close to success in provoking God's wrath and total destruction.

The business of conquest was actually not so much piling up the bodies of the Canaanites, but their eager lust for deserting God for Canaanite idols. They didn't cleanse the land of heathen shrines, much less the defiling presence of those who burned their own children in the fires of Molech. The very earth cried out in sorrow and defilement, but Israel turned a deaf ear and refused to cleanse the land. Where was that joyous witness of the power of their God aimed at showing His glory to the Gentiles? They refused to let their hearts lead. How could the land continue offering all the abundant richness of God's provision if they couldn't hear the cry for taking care of it on God's behalf? No, they joined in the defilement of Molech, and more. Their moral authority was depleted and the same Gentiles they should have driven out came back and conquered them.

How many times did God hear their cry? How many times did He relent and deliver them despite their constant hostility to Him? So how can you not give Him due honor and glory?

Book 5: Psalms 107-150

This is a catchall collection of several smaller collections of public worship songs, including the Songs of Ascents and Hallelujah Psalms. In other ways it seems to celebrate specifically covenant promises and how to claim them.

Psalm 107

This is called "The Song of the Redeemed." While the specific focus is how God has kept His covenant promises, we do well to remember there is more than one covenant with humanity. The promises under Moses are specific examples of how God acts in all times and places. If you

cling to a heart-mind awareness of His divine moral character in Creation, then Creation will respond of itself, but He will amplify those natural blessings to those who love Him.

We are treated to five examples, but the last is more of a summary. All are in dire straits, as is the norm for fallen humanity. In some cases, the trouble is because of a failure to keep faith with God, but some are simply the result of seemingly random circumstance. God does what He does, and humans often stumble into His works without full knowledge and run the risk of perishing. In all cases, calling on His name is the key to deliverance, while giving thanks and praise is the key to staying out of more trouble. Does anyone have to explain that the symbolic or parabolic meaning is more important than the specific imagery?

It's not hard to pick out the pattern of musical stanzas in the first four examples. Someone comes into difficulty, cries out to God and He delivers. The psalmist encourages all to glorify God for His greatness, as demonstrated by the repeated phrase, "His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the sons of man!"

First are the travelers. For Israel, the standard symbol is wandering in the semi-desert wilderness. There is no particular sin at work; this is simply how the world is. By default, we are blind to God's promises of provision. We cannot with our own human abilities find the basic needs of life and create a stable society. The symbol of *shalom* is summed up as stable and prosperous life in an Eastern feudal community. But if mankind calls on God, He will provide their needs, in this case by guiding them into His divine provision. He shows them the place He made for them, and it provides all they need. When you respond to God's call on your life, He provides all you need to glorify His name.

Second are the captives; there is little difference between slavery and prison in the ancient Hebrew world. In this case, it is the result of disobeying God, hinting at idolatry. This is a parable for those who reject whatever revelation God offers and are forced to serve the Enemy of our souls. Calling on God is the only deliverance.

The third group is portrayed as ill, but the primary cause is moral illness – insensitive to the moral fabric of Creation. There is no pleasure in this dissolute life, and they approach death rapidly. But calling on God brings healing and restoration.

Fourth are sailors, a job that is high risk with a high payoff if you succeed. Ancient mariners were uniformly religious and quite superstitious because they were so powerless. They were fully aware of the power of God's mighty works in Creation, because they saw it up close. When by His inscrutable will He sends storms into their lives, they experience the radical ups and downs of high waves, hardly able to keep their feet under them. But if they cry out to God, He can deliver them and guide them to their destination.

Finally, the psalmist summarizes God's faithful to Israel. Had he called her to occupy the most desolate land of all, it would not have mattered. Were she faithful to the covenant mission, God could have easily made the desert like a garden, with streams and pools aplenty. It would become fertile and produce abundant food. Life would explode, including their own population. And if they stray from that mission, it could all be reversed, and they would be oppressed and humiliated by their enemies. Don't get too fat and sassy, because God favors the humble who depend entirely on Him.

The psalm closes with a final warning to heed the moral character of God as indicated by these examples.

Psalm 108

Echoes of Psalms 57 and 60, this combines praise and a lament. Likely David used common worship phrases to lift up a battle song, not so much preparing for a literal fight, but to stir both confidence and humility before God.

David proclaims that his heart is standing tall and on the firm footing of God's glory. From before the dawn, his heart awakens him in worship, so that his hands will awaken the musical instruments. It hardly matters where David finds himself at any moment, for there is a proper place to sing the glory of Jehovah, Creator of all things. The greatness of His mercy and truth stands above the brightness of the sun. So should all of Creation see His glory.

David's call on God is not merely for Himself, nor so much for any particular people, but for the glory of His mission given to Israel. It is His own revelation living within the nation that He loves most. This is the only justification for calling on His limitless power.

And what does God say? He will exult in the triumph of His truth revealed among men. He knows the intimate details of such landmarks as Shechem between the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim, or the Valley of Succoth. He owns the vast grasslands of Gilead and the Tribe of Manasseh that resides there. He keeps the Tribe of Ephraim powerful and safe in the fortress of His mind, and the power of His Law is exercised through the Tribe of Judah. Moab is just a place to wash His feet, while He drops His sandals on Edom. Philistia will tremble with the echo of His triumph.

David asks who could possibly give him the military prowess to invade Edom. Perhaps this was one of those times when Edom was a problem for Israel. David asks rhetorically if God has not tossed Israel aside already, a standard protocol of prayer and supplication to one's sovereign. It's best to wait on God for dealing with such trouble, because mere man cannot solve anything that matters. Indeed, it is with the hand of God that all human trouble is put down.

Psalm 109

We are hard put to understand an individual imprecatory psalm in this final book of public worship songs but must trust the wisdom of those who acted within that ancient culture. It's for sure that all of us have experienced the underlying core of this prayer – a betrayal by someone we trusted, and for whom we cared. At least in that sense, we understand using this as a common ritual, since it is such a common experience, and the solution modeled here is clearly seeking a pure heart.

It is this business of heart-led faith that remains so foreign to our Western sensibilities. It is so very central that there is no need to speak of it directly here. Yet without it, we would miss the meaning of the curse David prays on his enemies. It seems a little extreme. On the one hand, we cannot forget that hyperbole is rather normal in dramatic poetry like this. On the other hand, if this symbolic enemy has truly closed off his mind to the moral leadership of his heart, then the

curse simply lays bare the awful things this man has done to himself and to those who depend on him for life. Thus, the attitude of the psalm is, “Lord, let him have the fullness of the evil he has chosen!” David prays this for the very reason that it reveals the moral character of God most clearly.

The format presumes at least some political authority. The office of king is merely the chief elder of the nation. It is his duty to take some risks in parceling out the vast moral duties of shepherding to feudal servants. With all the care he could take, David still finds himself suffering the presence of fakes who seek unjust personal gain. Sadly, he doesn’t always find out until rather far down the line of trust. Thus, David begins by setting the scene of betrayal of a trusted subordinate, someone he elevated to high trust and some power. This person used their position to bring David down for personal gain. In particular, he had falsely accused David in a very public manner. We presume David would hardly balk at a justified accusation, as we know from the record of Scripture, but this was something done all completely wrong, and it was false in the first place.

David responds with a detailed curse. We note that it is a long string of common images and standard idioms from those times. It starts with asking God to make his life hard, and then to make it short. And to ensure that no one learns from his evil ways and takes up his selfish thinking, David prays that his family suffer as well. We forget how dangerous it is to the whole nation if people who close up their hearts and commit themselves to mere human comfort are allowed to prosper and multiply. It is a common presumption of the Ancient Near East that the bad morals of a head of household corrupt everything he rules over – people, property and all. David goes further in asking God to withhold mercy and not forget the moral evil that brought forth such a traitor.

Such a man is presumed to curse vainly at others, since it was so common. Without a heart-led moral awareness, all that’s left is the lusts of the fallen soul. David prays that God return all those vain curses back on the man who uttered them. Let them wrap themselves around his soul, and soak into his very being – like excessive water a man drinks that overflows his stomach and is absorbed through his bowels, like oil wastefully lavished on everything until it soaks through his clothes and skin into his bones.

By contrast to this, David looks to his Master to save him from such accursed people. Better to face the wrath of God on his genuine sin than the “help” from people like that. David pours out the depth of sorrow and pain from this awful betrayal. There is also that common note, “O Lord, how long shall I endure this sorrow?” Then David asks that God deliver Him in such a way as to let people see he stands in God’s favor. Let them be ashamed of all their unjustified cursing and plotting secretly against him; expose them as liars. But as for David, his focus is on reflecting back the glory of God before a watching world.

Now we understand how this psalm was quoted as a prophecy for Judas betraying Christ, for it is a prophetic word over every traitor.

Psalm 110

This prophetic psalm is quoted extensively in the New Testament – Matthew 22:44; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34-35; Hebrews 1:13, 5:6 and 10:12-13. Well before Jesus' birth, rabbis had recognized this as a wholly Messianic prophecy. Jesus claimed this as His own. However, we know from more ancient Hebrew culture that this kind of thing bore echoes throughout the history of Israel until that final moment on the Cross when the New Covenant was instituted. Several major figures between David and Christ manifested elements of what is promised here, as God's way of showing He had not forgotten the core of the promise.

That core promise is cast in terms of Ancient Near Eastern feudal terms, that God the Father would pour out His wrath against sin until no one was left to resist when His Son inherits the domain of Creation. It is the image of an imperial declaration upon the Son's completion of a grand quest that earned His vestment as heir to the throne.

As you might expect, the Hebrew language in this psalm has been parsed to death, yet often poorly translated. In the first line, David declares that the Lord Jehovah spoke an oracle to His Son, whom David calls his Lord. The oracle was that the Son could take His rightful place of honor until the final completion of the Father's plans in preparing a worthy inheritance. The standard protocol is to insist that the realm would be pacified first. In the ears of Israelis hearing this psalm, that signifies breaking down even the smallest flicker of resistance to their divine mission of revealing Jehovah. It also carries the subtle warning that if any in the nation resists that mission and calling, they will perish, as well.

That's because the mission is the Flaming Sword of Eden. A part of the ancient image of that Sword is that the one who wields it must first fall on its blade himself. He must purge himself with the same fire of truth before he can turn it against the darkness of this world. So, the mission and calling of revelation on Israel is also the mission to go out in battle formation with that truth and revelation into all Creation. Jehovah will use His Covenant Army to complete this pacification for His Son's inheritance.

So, David declares that God's people will most certainly be eager to carry out this pacification. David uses such beautiful language to describe an army of holy warriors assembled in the wee hours of the morning, ready to march at the Lord's command.

In the meantime, Jehovah declares His Son a priest according to the Order of Melchizedek. The writer of Hebrews expounds on this, imbuing the title with meaning that is not obvious. Jesus would serve as High Priest according to something more ancient than the Covenant of Moses, a timeless primordial covenant that rests on the foundation of Creation itself, a priesthood that stood before Moses and would stand after Moses is closed out.

No human agency has sufficient power or authority to resist this divine commission. No ruler or combination of rulers, or even all the combined political power of the entire human race could resist His sovereign majesty. Who resists will die, plain and simple. And God will not cease this mission. He'll camp out in the field and drink from His own provision of wild streams in the wilderness as He pursues His enemies. He will "lift up His head" – the image is someone who is altogether content with harsh conditions in the field so long as there is a single soul unconquered. His resolve will never waver.

Psalm 111

This and the next psalm are short acrostics in Hebrew. This would make them easier to memorize. Reading this in most English translations, it seems little more than a collection of stock ritual phrases, perhaps just a little contrived or formulaic. But the language is not poetically forced; it's very simple. Precisely for this reason, in Hebrew it would be one of those grand old favorites that no one forgets. It fits any occasion because it hits all the high points and provides a comfortable setting for awakening the mind to hear the song of the heart.

The first word is *hallelujah* – praise Jehovah. It's meant to be shouted. Following that is a declaration that we will throw up our hands at the name of the Lord, but doing so from the heart, and shamelessly in front of all God's people.

The imagery is condensed, and merely translating the words weakens the effects. The products of God's hands are extravagant and anyone with good sense strives to stand in His favor to receive them. We are greeted by a parallelism declaring that God's actions are unforgettable, and those actions mark Him as the ideal sovereign. His household never lacks because He always walks by His own covenant; it's His nature to do so.

Indeed, under that covenant He demonstrates to His tribe the power to carve out their inheritance from the riches of other nations. He plays favorites for those who cling to Him. What He does defines truth and justice. His revelation changes everything; it's more trustworthy than all human wisdom and knowledge put together. What He promises will surely come true. He elevates His own family above all the rest of humanity and stands behind His promises. His very name is awesome beyond words.

The first fruit of wisdom is learning to take Him seriously. People who walk in His revelation are the very image of prudence. The ultimate wisdom is to acknowledge Him as Creator.

Psalm 112

What would you expect to see if someone was a sincere fan of a famous figure? Not the obsessive wacko, but someone genuinely taken by the obvious greatness they saw? True fans would attempt to emulate the character of the one whom they idolize. This is what we expect when someone becomes truly smitten by the Creator. This is an adult son who proudly and consciously emulates his father, as if that father were the ultimate model of manhood.

So, this psalm celebrates the quintessential Child of the Covenant. No one needs tell such a devoted follower how to act. His heart commandeers his instincts, and moral wisdom overwhelms everything he thinks, says and does. Utterly missing is the slavish rote obedience; this is genuine love and devotion to the One whose very character shines brightly through the darkness of this world. Such a man has hitched his awareness to the moral sphere, a parallel universe invisible to those whose convictions do not rule their decisions.

Hallelujah! O, how blessed is the one who genuinely reveres Jehovah. So starts this psalm. We know how to translate the word "commandments," but we hardly grasp the concept from within our Western culture. It refers to the broad investment of interest in some domain, and the full range of efforts to express a divine compassion and urgent care for everyone involved. A

better term might be self-disclosure, in the sense of moral character. What kind of fool spurns such guidance?

The terms of this celebration are parabolic. Yes, you stand to gain materially, but that's hardly the point. If that were all you cared for, you would not be revering Jehovah, but some other deity. So, we see the image of his progeny representing the whole product of his conduct in life. What a reverent man produces is worthy of pride, just like a family that becomes famous through the achievements of their children. Such a household never wanders in moral darkness, but like the sun shining, their world is bright and clear.

The Hebrew word for "lending" comes from the image of intertwining two lives together. It is a demonstration of commitment to someone else's welfare as if it were your own. It's not a loss, but a wise investment that reaps rewards. Creation itself favors those who are generous with what they have to share.

Such a person becomes an integral part of Creation, taking their rightful place and restoring some measure of the original task of mankind: managing God's Creation by His divine will. It's not as if they depend on Creation, but that Creation takes a cue from their moral wisdom. Thus, nothing in this world can shake them. Fear is just a tingly feeling, not a genuine experience. Someone who walks by moral convictions instinctively knows they can face anything.

So it is when people who are less wise come to him for relief, he is able to share more than just a few bites of bread, but the full meaning of *shalom* comes with every morsel he gives. His very presence in the community is a calming and strengthening influence that restores cosmic moral balance. Those who have yet to sense God through their own hearts can look to this Child of the Covenant as a clue how to find Him.

Best of all, the wicked whose hearts are darkened will find him truly stressful. They don't want to face people like that.

Psalm 113

For historical reference, this begins a series of psalms traditionally used to celebrate Passover. This one and the next were sung before the meal. As with other songs of this type, the format is rather simple and easy to memorize. Moreover, it follows a standard protocol for celebrating any powerful figure within the Ancient Near Eastern feudal customs. The essence of this short hymn declares how fortunate one is to live in the domain of the ruler. It is entirely appropriate for the annual commemoration of the nation's founding event, Exodus.

All the psalms in this collection begin with "hallelujah," and they are called the "Hallel Songs" for this reason. In light of His glorious Presence, who could remain silent? Just saying His name should elicit a thrill and a sense of peace. It should be like that all day long until the day we die.

Nothing compares to His glory. Nothing in this earth, among all the nations of mankind, nor anything in the Heavens above, even comes close. Yet, from such a high place, His kindness and mercy are equally great, for He bends down to notice our lives here.

By His power and kindness, He rescues the lowest outcast from digging in the garbage. He seats this one among His own nobles. And the poor shame-ridden childless woman is treated as precious as the mother with many children. She has a place in His personal palace.

How can you not burst out in praise for His name?

Psalm 114

This is the second of the “Hallel Psalms” sung before the Passover meal. In Hebrew, this is the lyrical equivalent of a powerful appetizer – it is very small and simple, yet dense in satisfying flavor. These few brief words conjure up a savory memory of major events.

It’s obvious this is about the Exodus, the founding miracle that defined just who Israel was, but more importantly, who God intended she be. The psalmist draws a strong connection here to explain how it works. Ancient Near Eastern feudalism was not about land, as with Western feudalism, but about the people. A ruler’s domain was his people. During that journey out of Egypt, a wholly alien people, Jehovah is depicted as personally present at the head of the march. He was Lord and Creator of all things, as He has just proved with the plagues that discredited all the claims of the Egyptian pantheon.

One thing Israel did have in common with Egypt was the fundamental assumption that Creation was alive. This is no mere figure of speech that sees the waters as pulling back to make room for the two crossings (Reed Sea and Jordan River). The water knew its Master and cooperated with His purpose.

Indeed, all of Creation wherever they passed was delighted to see the revelation of the Creator in His mighty acts. The mountains pranced like proud rams and playful sheep. Gladly did stone dissolve into water, for nothing was too great to ask in supporting and promoting this essential mission of God. He was raising up a nation to bear His message. Not merely the written record, but the living record of people precious in His sight who would claim the rich heritage of His blessings.

Psalm 115

This and the next three psalms were traditionally sung after the Passover meal. However, we also know such usage came somewhat later in the life of the nation. This hymn in particular was originally composed for general worship. It’s laid out in responsive style: The leader would chant one line; the congregation would respond with the second. This back and forth went for the entire song.

The first verse establishes the principle that we exist for our Creator’s glory, and it is always in our best interest to seek His glory alone. Instead of glory, we want for ourselves His mercy and to know Him better. The heathens who don’t know Him might well ask where He is, because they see only with the eyes in their heads, not with the eyes of their hearts. A real God would not be restricted to a material form but resides in the Spirit Realm. Nothing on this earth can resist His hand because He made everything.

Sure, the heathens can see their gods, because they are but mere idols. The Covenant forbade portraying God as having a physical form, even in visual symbols, because you dare not confine God to any particular notion of His Person or character. But their idols aren't mere symbols; that's all the god they have, formed by their own hands from precious materials. They seem to have all the same features as any man, except none of their parts work. It would appear those deities match all the features of the dead. The dedication to these gods consumes wealth, but the gods return nothing because they are imaginary, inanimate and dead. In some ways, so are the heathens who worship such gods.

Don't do what the heathen do, Israel. Place your faith in Jehovah. Again and again, the echoing refrain: He is our aid and protection. Have we not seen it over and over again? He's a real God. Can you see around you all the things He has done for us? Marvel at it! He resides in the Spirit Realm and has given this whole universe into our hands if we simply embrace His truth.

Don't stand in the graveyard and beg your dead ancestors to praise Him and intercede on your behalf. Worship is not for the dead, but for the living. When was the last time you heard the graves singing? But while we live, we will seek ways to make Him smile and to bring Him joy. Hallelujah!

Psalm 116

Still reviewing the "Hallel Psalms" used with Passover, this one is unique in the collection – it was originally composed as an intensely personal individual experience. However, it's not hard to see how it calls on the nation to enter into that experience as a reflection of all the trials of the Exodus.

Who could be unmoved by the devotion of others to our welfare? Well, Our God is a Person, as well, and He defines the quality of faithfulness we love in others. He is the source and ultimate symbol of what makes every child warmly embrace his or her own parents. When I cry, God hears. Why should I go to anyone else?

We might struggle to recount the sorrows we've seen, but God was there in the midst of them. He stands ready to deliver. We say these words often, but far too many people have their minds closed off to the deep moral awareness of their hearts. When your heart becomes the seat of your awareness, you cannot avoid sensing the full weight of His divine Presence. You *know* He's there and will deliver you; there is no doubt that He cares beyond all comprehension.

And even if someone lacked the broad sense of worldly wisdom, when their hearts rule their minds, the pure simplicity of moral focus will carry them through. God watches over them as if they were the greatest men on this earth. There are times when all the erudition in the world won't help you, but a pure heart that rules can carry you through Hell.

So, the psalmist calls for his soul to stop panicking and just return to that place of peace, because the Lord's redemption is so overwhelmingly generous and sure. Every flaw of our human existence is more than matched by His power and mercy. Death has to wait until God is ready for us; meanwhile, He wipes our tears and gives us traction to march on His mission. With such gracious provision, we are eager to carry His banner before the whole world.

In verse 10 the word for “I believed” is better translated as moral certainty. It comes from the image of nurturing something with constant long-term care; it’s a faith that is unshakable because God is the one who is faithful. With that kind of commitment binding us to the Lord, we would be eager to relate at length to anyone who will listen, how God carried us through our own personal exodus from slavery. By comparison, we are quick to confess our cynicism about human nature, even our own nature.

How could we possibly repay His kindness? What could we give that God did not give to us first? So, in His divine Presence, we worship and share with Him the sweet wine of deliverance. Not merely for show, but we will humbly and publicly render to Him whatever offering and service is mentioned in the Covenant by which we have vowed to serve Him. And typical of any real shepherd sheikh, God counts as His most precious resource the people of His living domain. When any of them perish, it’s a big loss.

How fortunate we are to count ourselves slaves born in His household, yet He adopted us as His own children. So, the full accounting of what He demands is our minimum return to Him. We will gladly set the example for others, to encourage and provoke them to the same ardor in serving Him. Let us all keep each other honest in upholding the covenant.

Psalm 117

Some people find significance in the observation that this is the middle chapter in the entire Protestant canon, and also the shortest chapter. In a few manuscripts it is considered part of either the previous or succeeding psalms, but there seems no justification for that.

It is still used as part of the “Hallel Psalms” at Passover. Some English translations probably capture the more recent Talmudic Jewish attitude with a tinge of nationalism, perhaps even racism. However, it’s hardly any challenge to see beyond that when you consider the more consistent prophetic attitude from both ends of the Bible. That prophetic word says the only reason for the advantages of the Covenant was so that the light of truth could be shined on those who did not have the Covenant, and the blessings could be shed abroad to those who didn’t belong under it. The whole idea is a welcoming invitation, not exclusion.

So perhaps we would benefit from an alternative translation that captures more of the original Hebrew flavor:

“Let every human living celebrate Jehovah; cheer loudly His name everyone! For His kind mercy prevails over all our needs, and the certitude of His Lordship remains stable into infinity. O celebrate Jehovah!”

Psalm 118

This is the final “Hallel Psalm”, and we are altogether certain this is the one Jesus sang with His disciples on His way to the Garden of Gethsemane. It was originally composed as a processional and is plainly designed for antiphonal worship, with the congregation echoing in response to the leading lines of a solo cantor. It is loaded with phrases and declarations meant to easily memorize, and we see them echoed throughout the Bible.

The imagery here is highly expressive; the word for “thanks” depicts throwing the hands in the air and shaking them in ecstatic gratitude for uncountable blessings. There is a standard progression repeated: the people of Israel, the Levites leading the procession, and anyone else who feels drawn to honor the Lord. Each is encouraged to declare that God’s mercy outlasts Creation itself.

Then we come to a long section that may well have been composed originally as a separate work, but gains currency in corporate worship by virtue of including everyone individually. Each person is called upon to celebrate and assert that they personally have experienced Jehovah’s divine favor.

The word for “distress” is a tight, narrow corner; the deliverance was God opening up space to maneuver or escape. If the place you stand is next to God, how can any force in Creation harm you? He made all things. In the long run, nothing can harm. Our cynicism about humanity is fully justified because no power on earth can match what God does for those who revere Him. So, when humans buzz around us like a swarm of bees, we know that busy sound is also like thorns on fire, consumed quickly and gone. Whatever you might do to harm me must first be approved by my God. Maybe you don’t see His hand, but what it does is bigger than all of us.

This business of His powerful right hand becomes the focus of yet another fruitful branch of celebration. It was from ancient times the symbol of a man’s authority, power and his track record of accomplishments. If that hand belongs to God and chastens me, regardless how rough it gets, it will always be in my best interest. The celebrant declares his intent to live in whatever place God’s righteous glory shines. Show me the gate, Lord! And Jesus made a point that He was the stone the builders rejected, a reference to how humans cannot judge things with God’s wisdom. He was judged worthy of execution, but His rejection became the single biggest block on which the whole Kingdom of Heaven is founded. God does not operate as men do; they should strive to operate as He does.

The ancient phrase, “this is the day that the Lord has made,” is often misunderstood when translated. We would deceive ourselves longing for some golden time past, or some fantasy day to come. Right now is the appointed time to call on His name and seize the calling for what is in your hands already. The time is ripe – Ancient Near Eastern people always viewed time not as something to measure and schedule, but contemplated time as a matter of ripeness. So, give us this day what is just due for Your divine calling on us, Lord. How blessed is the one who operates in this world as an ambassador of Jehovah.

The final verses call on the Levites to prepare the festal sacrifice unto the God who has enlightened us. It matters not what others may say or do, but we declare Him *our* God. The last words repeat the refrain of the first words in this psalm: His mercy outlasts Creation itself.

Psalm 119

Westerners get the impression that the Hebrews weren’t too good at math, but that has more to do with a different attitude about when and where math matters. At 176 verses, this is the longest chapter in the Bible, and with few exceptions, each verse mentions the revelation of God directly. In English we see: law, testimony, statutes, ordinances, teaching, instructions,

commandments, precepts, promises, ways and word, among others. It's also an acrostic psalm in alphabetical order, 22 stanzas of 8 lines each, one for each letter, and each line in a stanza beginning with the same Hebrew letter of the alphabet.

Obviously, the psalmist strives to get across his personal experience in devotion to God in terms of what we can know of God, what He allows us to see of Him through His self-disclosure. This is culturally challenging for us because Western Christians suffer the powerful influence of Hellenized Pharisaism and the resulting legalism. This is not a question of learning the Law as legislation, but as the manifestation of God's personal character. The Law of God is not a mere record of statements and associated events, but the indicator of moral personality. The reason for the record is the Person behind it, so any obsessive legalistic focus on the record will never come up with the right answer. God's revelation is also the very fundamental nature of reality itself. So, we note that this psalm is an elongated celebration of Scripture as the tangible expression of God Himself.

We will examine this psalm one stanza at a time.

119: Aleph 1-8

The psalmist begins with a bold declaration: O, how blessed are those who are possessed of moral integrity! The image is a heart ruling over the entire being, directing all things in concert to conform to God's divine moral character. This assertion is restated in different terms with twin Hebrew parallel statements. This is not legalism, since our notions of precision are not binding on God, but a celebration of how much power there is for living with a sincere commitment to pleasing God.

It's the desire that matters, so God does not register their every miscalculation, but sees the heart of love and devotion. Thus, they are said to perform no evil, regardless of mistakes. These are people who do their best to walk in God's footsteps. In the fourth verse, the word often translated "precept" actually has no English equivalent. It's a reference to the substance of reality, arising from the concept that all of Creation reflects the moral nature of God. Clinging to whatever perception we have of that character makes our lives consistent with the very design of the universe.

The next verse (5) follows up by wishing mightily that his habits were built from God's revelation. With that kind of character, reading the Scripture is a warming joy, not some kind of guilt-inducing embarrassment. Verse 7 looks forward to a life of worship that bubbles up irrepressibly from a heart that has an unalloyed commitment to God as personal Lord. Can you not see how our very existence takes on a blessed clarity when we order our commitments consistently? So, the final verse is the psalmist's resolve to build a thorny hedge of protection internally so that his habits of life create a moral hedge externally in his actions.

Finally, in accordance with courtly protocol, he asks that God keep a tight grip on his life and reserve His wrath for someone else.

119: Beth 9-16

This is the Path of Purity. The Hebrew word translated "cleanse" approaches the concept of moral transparency. How does a younger fellow allow others to see God through his life? In

every generation, the young seldom give it much thought, and it requires developing strong habits – hedging his ways – with a heart-led awareness of God’s revelation. The psalmist claims that he is driven by a conviction, a personal commitment to please God.

To insure he reduces the opportunities for temptation, he hoards divine revelation in his heart. He finds Jehovah worthy of adoration and waits for Him to goad him into obedience. How hard it is for the young!

With his own mouth he makes it a habit to affirm the moral judgments of God, talking often to himself about accountability. The Lord backs up His words; the psalmist delights in the moral wealth it brings him.

So, he finds himself pondering the message of revelation and how it makes so much sense of this crazy world. God keeps His own Word like a well-trodden path and the young man finds his own heart will not let him wander too far afield.

119: Gimel 17-24

The psalmist rejoices in his past experiences that confirmed the revelation of God. As one who has experienced it aplenty in the past, he calls on God to deal with him in such a way that he can thrive and devote himself to establishing the truth of God’s Word. He wants to continue in the divine enlightenment that allows him to discern the immense value and power of what lies behind the words of the Covenant.

He admits that he is little more than a visitor, a sojourner in God’s domain, begging the merciful handling God had commanded in His Laws for strangers passing through. But instead of mere life support on his journey, he wants to find the moral sustenance of revelation. He confesses that his soul is crushed by longing for a word from Jehovah that would disclose His divine moral character.

Surely God has rebuked the arrogant souls who felt competent to judge right and wrong from their own reasoning. He begs that the Lord not let him fall into their contemptible errors. He has done his level best to give the Word precedence in his thinking.

People who gain political power tend to talk a lot, but the psalmist would rather keep his mouth shut and devote his attention to what God revealed as the way to live. Human wisdom is hardly on a par with the delight of examining what God says is true.

119: Daleth 25-32

In this octet is the Way of Strength, as the word for “road” is used repeatedly. The psalmist complains of a human frailty he finds all too obvious. The first line refers not to some kind of desire, but that he cannot avoid wallowing in the dust from which he is made. Without the breath of God in His soul, there is no life. He confesses that his fallen existence is loaded with false desires, and he knows the Lord has received his confession and repentance, and now he eagerly awaits instruction.

He is altogether certain that, once his fallen mind begins to grasp the logic of conviction, it will settle into his soul like the most brilliant answer to every question. With such power and conviction, who could remain silent? Not just his eyes with tears, but his very core of awareness

weeps like melting ice in the fire of grief over his sin nature. Only God by His revelation can build him up to a useful life.

All too well does he know the road of deception; he pleads with God for deliverance from it. He knows he cannot obey God's Laws without the mighty grip of grace. Divine truth is his choice. It's the only level ground on which we can stand in this world.

He clings to the revelation desperately and pleads that he not stand before God ashamed. He is driven like a whirlwind, ready to jump and run at God's behest. He longs to live in the grand tabernacle spread wide in his own heart.

119: He 33-40

Here we have a prayer for conviction. The psalmist cries out for God to build a desire and sense of divine necessity. The initial mention here of teaching uses a Hebrew word that paints a picture of pouring out something, to make an obvious splash that changes the color of the ground. The psalmist asks that God make things more obvious to him. For his part, the writer promises that the last thing anyone will see of him will be walking that path. Indeed, he commits himself to investing his whole being in making certain that at least this one person shall consistently demonstrate what God says He wants for us.

Indeed, the heart-led life is such a delight that the psalmist asks he never get lost and wander from it. He prays that his inclinations are bent toward the divine revelation of what life is supposed to be like on this earth, and not to get lost in any desire for plundering from others.

How much better is life when we find it painful to look on things that drain the moral fullness of the heart! Let us fully experience the joy of walking God's path for us. We should long for that living truth to grow up and consume our being so that we lack nothing in our commitment to serving Him.

If there is one thing the psalmist rightly fears, it is moral disgrace. He begs for the Lord to evaluate his commitment and reveal the weaknesses, because correction from God is better than reward from any other source. Indeed, he longs passionately for a clear grasp on reality as God defines it. The breath of life is the revelation of the moral character of God.

119: Vav 41-48

The psalmist shows us a Life without Shame. The emphasis is on what the New Testament refers to as our witness before the world.

We start off with a picture of a servant's petition for God to permit His Covenant loyalty – mercy and kindness to His vassals – to come and rescue him from human spite. He notes this is what God promised in the Covenant. This will help him answer those who pick at him according to human wisdom. He can offer calm words of assurance that his path, though seemingly fruitless and silly to some, will bring him the rich provision of his God. The psalmist pledges to demonstrate to all his trust in God's promises.

Indeed, he prays that God not allow His Word of Truth to escape from his mouth, but to keep it locked in his heart. Then he reverses the image: In the grip of this Truth, the psalmist has stood ever ready for some command to carry out God's whims, just hoping to be a part of His glory.

He wants a part in making the Law of God persist in this world as a constant challenge to others.

In this way he can walk with princely self-assurance, as if nothing could stand in his path as he goes about seeking opportunities to act as God's emissary. With such a commission, it's entirely natural to promote God's interests from the lowest to the highest of human authorities. Are they not all subject to the will of God?

He holds the Word of God as his dearest friend, a companion so delightful he can't get enough of it, gazing with rapt attention and deep affection. He refers to a ritual act of lifting his hands, roughly equivalent to demonstrating some total dependence and devotion to someone, for the revelation of God is as much of His real Presence as we can bear. This ritual is performed with glowing pride, utterly shameless. He feels like there's never really enough time in his days to give due consideration to the implications of what God has commanded.

119: Zayin 49-56

This is the Rock of My Identity, says the psalmist. Without the living revelation of God in our hearts, we don't know who we are, or whose we are. So, he cries out immediately that the Lord not allow him to forget that revelation, because that's how he handles things. When facing trials and sorrows, this is the anchor of our existence. Without it, we don't live; we only exist.

People who wallow in self-pride will waste no time in scoffing at our faith, but they cannot push us off something they cannot comprehend. The ancient record of God's judgment reveals His character, and it breathes a sigh of relief in our souls.

When you walk by the convictions of your heart, you are shocked at how easily people abandon such a powerful focus of life. Who can bear to walk away from the sweet taste of moral truth and the enlightenment of the heart-mind? It's like a grand symphony throbbing in our souls, a chorus of joy following us wherever we may wander on this earth.

The Lord's fame and reputation is burned into the core of our being. It's like a blazing fire in the coldest dark night of trial. How can you not huddle up close to it? We dare not let mere human sorrows attempt to smother the flames.

119: Cheth 57-64

This octet of verses is the Song of Loyalty. The psalmist is fully committed, wholly owned by his Sovereign, a loyal servant who shares in the inheritance as a son. That's the meaning of the first line, and he has offered the ritual of covenant binding, giving his word to live by the Law of his Lord. He held back nothing in secret, but cast his whole being on the favor of Jehovah. He knows there is no master among men who would be so merciful because the Lord for His part gave His word on it.

Upon this commitment, he gave long consideration to his own ways and determined to bend his path to following the ancient markers of God's eternal road of truth. There was no hesitation at all.

The wicked pay no attention to revelation as they devise a system that favors their comfort, and they have tried to hold the psalmist accountable to their man-made laws. But he simply cannot absorb their false ways as the truth of God echoes down from Heaven into his heart.

It was considered normal in ancient times for adults to awaken at least once in the night and stay up for a while, often doing contemplative things that are difficult to do in daytime. It's a quiet time of private matters, and our psalmist finds his first impulse is to give thanks to God. This is not something you can fake. He finds his mind drawn back to all the amazing things God has revealed in His judgments of what is morally good and bad.

His loyalty is overwhelming, so wherever he encounters someone who lives by a heart-led commitment to Jehovah, the psalmist is that person's friend and ally without question. When he witnesses someone acting consistent with God's Laws, he wants to share in their burden of work. Everywhere he turns, there is a vision or song marking God's mercy; the earth itself trembles and hums to the divine glory. He asks that God use those echoes of mercy to goad him into a life that God outlined long ago.

119: Teth 65-72

We celebrate here the Path of Discipline. The key line in this octet refers to going astray and receiving correction.

However, observing proper feudal protocol, the psalmist begins by affirming that God has treated him quite well, and consistent with revelation. This is a strong statement that God's purpose and intentions are inherently in his own best interest. Further, it was always consistent with God's promises. The second verse starts literally: "Goad me into having good taste and clear perception." He sees how God has fostered a sense of trust and dependence in him.

Without some sense of sorrow and the experience of God's wrath, it's hard to drag our fallen nature into faithfulness. As a master, God defines what it means to be good, so keep goading us, Lord.

The wicked are always trying to stick some nasty label on us because we reject their imaginary morals. But it won't stick because we serve God from the heart, not some human reason. By comparison, their hearts are loaded up with moral junk that only looks good, but their conscience is insensitive. By contrast, we gorge our hearts on the Law of God.

So, it's all good to walk through some affliction, because that's how we discipline the flesh to obey the spirit. Even in His most challenging demands of us, the demands of God are more precious than all the wealth in the world.

119: Yod 73-80

The psalmist shows us the Path of Justice. It could also be seen as retribution if we understand the justice of being rescued from those who deny God's revelation. We learn to be patient as God corrects us and makes us stronger through the evils other people commit, but in due time, His wrath falls on the unjust while His servants harvest blessings because God's truth is how this world actually works.

God has made each of us; our place in this world is wholly His doing. If there is any source of wisdom about how we should live here, it is the One who made us and all things. This is the kind of life that cheers others seeking His truth. They rejoice in the confirmation of God's promises coming true by example.

The psalmist claims to know – using a Hebrew word that covers awareness in all aspects – without any doubt that God's justice is the very definition of righteousness. He presses upon us His discipline according to His promises to keep us in His mercy. It's a genuine blessing He does not lightly allow us to escape His love. So, he prays to be driven out of sin into the place where God's *shalom* stands waiting and he can breathe a sigh of relief.

And when he is too weak, the psalmist prays that God will permit His compassion to come and find him wherever he has wandered. The God who bears the shepherd's rod is a delightful sight to a lost lamb, even when the rod corrects, for the same rod defends us as well. All the more so when we came into that sorrow because of arrogant men who deny God's Word. God's Presence shames them but brings the psalmist to peaceful meditation on that Word.

So, if any others have lost their way and cannot see God clearly, let them turn to the freshly resolved psalmist who now has a clear vision. They'll recognize him because they already know at least something about God's revelation. And while the fleshly mind will surely fail him at times, he knows that God will speak consistently through his heart. He knows that giving heed to his conscience will never leave him ashamed.

119: Kaph 81-88

This octet offers us Hope in the Darkness. The Hebrew culture viewed time altogether differently than Westerners do today. The psalmist is fully aware that a part of the Curse of the Fall was locking our human awareness into a time-space constraint that blinds us to God's perspective on things. So, for the Hebrew folks, a part of redemption is learning that the key to understanding the passage of time was in the image of ripeness: Things in Creation come when they are ripe. It's a struggle to learn that, and it's a lesson the bears repeating often. Western thinking never bothers struggling toward redemption but assumes that time-space constraints are universal and builds a culture based on measuring time in precise increments, as if reality ran along some ineluctable track. Meanwhile, we treat as genius someone able to think in the long term, and as saintly those who can joyfully wait on the hand of God. Hebrew people thought of this as the norm.

So, the first couplet begins with the psalmist lamenting his moral weakness, and how quickly his fleshly awareness obsesses over how slow some things move. His words are more dramatic than most English translations indicate for his state of mind: "Lord, I'm dying here waiting for Your rescue!" Yet the state of his heart is not so frantic as the mind, for his faith remains fixed on the promise of justice in God's Word. Still, his mind does not learn easily, for his brain searches with desperation for some clue, some lever or trick he can use to move God at his own convenience. We are all in good company.

Like a skin bladder for liquids, the psalmist complains he's been too close to the fire for too long and now he feels brittle and leaky. But that's just the fleshly part of him; his heart knows that the

promises of God endure beyond his life. Indeed, his mortality is never far from his consciousness, so will he die before God judges those who hound him?

Everywhere he turns there are pitfalls. Yet these traps presume a reality different from what God says. He subtly hints that his commitment to God's justice has kept his eyes open to these temptations seeking to take advantage of character flaws. No, despite their relentless persecution, God's promises are faithful, and he knows his cry for help does not fall on deaf ears.

While he very nearly fell into at least one trap that would have destroyed his life, his convictions would not let him forsake God's revelation. As he considers this, his faith rises again to ask for God to restore his sense of peace by letting him see clearly divine mercy for what it is. In the end, he knows this will give him the sense of confidence to promote what God has said.

119: Lamed 89-96

We celebrate God's faithfulness; you can't go wrong trusting His revelation. The psalmist declares that the Lord's self-disclosure stands eternally in the Spirit Realm. Destroy this world, but His word will remain trustworthy. Every generation of humanity since Creation has seen His loyalty to His covenant promises. Creation itself still stands as a testimony of His patience with us; its existence hangs entirely on His expressed will.

Indeed, His loyalty and His promises both remain by His decree. It would cease to exist should He remove His active attention. It all serves to glorify Him. So, it stands to reason that the psalmist would revere God's revelation as God Himself and it has never failed him, always carrying him through the deepest sorrows.

What God has taught is burned into his heart; he can't walk away from it. That calling from God is his very life. He'd be dead without it. He regards his life as the minimum just return, a personal possession of Jehovah. He is fully committed to pursuing God's provision for living in this world.

So, while the wicked are always plotting to capture him away from Jehovah, he cannot possibly take his mind off the prophetic revelations. Having watched a great many things run their course, particularly the accomplishments of human talent, he finds those things eventually collapse into the dust and forgotten. But the Law of God has no limits.

119: Mem 97-104

Here is the Path of Enlightenment, and what a joyous path it is! The psalmist waxes rhapsodic in celebration of the power of revelation to enlighten.

He leads off with a genuine declaration of fondness for the Law. It's not just some static record of requirements, but a living person throbbing in his heart. The closest we as humans can come to God's Person without leaving this world is through knowing His heart as He chose to reveal it in the covenants. While the writer notes with some amusement that the enlightenment available in the Law has kept him always one step ahead of his enemies, there is some ambiguity in the final phrase of the couplet. It may well be intentional, for we note sagely that when standing for God's truth we never lack for enemies. Then again, we never lack for victory

when the laws are burned into our very hearts, as well, because they stand ever ready to make us understand what really matters.

In the next couplet he continues this theme. The power of revelation can grant more wisdom than any mere human can teach us, if we but invest the time and energy to meditate on it. The discernment he gains from consistently walking by the law justifies his position of authority over the elders.

So, he has no trouble recognizing paths that lead to destruction; the siren song to his feet is but a whisper. Instead of testing new ways to appease his fallen appetites, he stays alert to the business of maintaining the moral defenses provided by God's Word. He pays close attention to what God's wrath on past sins teaches him. It's like staying close to a fresh stream while wandering through the desert; shortcuts only get you in trouble.

Is there any human experience of pleasure that matches the sweetness of God's truth? The wisdom of God is like honey; anything less will taste rather flat and unappetizing. It makes it easier to recognize lies and liars as threats to your soul.

119: Nun 105-112

Our psalmist celebrates the Path of Conscious Commitment. The first line in English translations is quite popular as a memory verse and in the lyrics of songs. This octet is a subtle extension of the previous, in that enlightenment calls for eager commitment.

Thus, the revelation of God shines down so that we can see our feet, symbolic of knowing where we stand, the foundation of all we do. It's like sunlight shining on the path we take in carrying out the mission of our Master. The psalmist has made a solemn vow and will rise to it, keeping alive the witness of God on His created earth.

This world tries to squash us flat if we refuse to run with it, but he calls on God to revive him according to His own promises. Let's communicate, Lord: Accept my praise offering in exchange for instruction in Your ways.

The phrase "to take one's life in hand" refers to fearless combat, when life is so easily lost. Only a firm grip and commitment carries you through. Here the psalmist makes a pun, with the image that his life is in one hand, but he's going to keep the Law in his other hand, with a promise to not set it casually aside and forget it. In this way he avoids the snares of the wicked, for it's through deviations from the path that we are caught outside the safety of God's Word.

The record of revelation is our one true inheritance; we gladly lose our worldly possessions in favor of holding to the truth. Nothing else can bring such sense of power to the heart as an undiluted loyalty to God. We are born bent and disfigured, but if we bend ourselves in the direction of the moral character of God woven into Creation, it really won't matter what earthly end comes upon us or when it comes. We can walk through the end to far better life on the other side.

119: Samek 113-120

Here we have a Dominion Worthy of Service. Even today we recognize the pride that comes with belonging to the winning side, so it offers no difficulty to understand the psalmist's frank boasting in His Master. The entire octet is cast in terms of feudal military service.

He starts with a common adjective meaning "divided," but in this context refers to someone lacking a clarity of commitment, a fraudulent enlistment. It indicates someone whose heart lacks a decisive loyalty, making the mind too confused to act with moral consistency. Such people are the psalmist's enemy, but the Law is his battle buddy. He then refers to the Lord's authority as a tactical advantage, offering both, concealment from being spotted too soon, and a shield of protection in battle. It keeps him going when it seems everything is going against him.

A great many ancient armies were conscripted from prisons and social outcasts. Our psalmist wants no part of that; he would rather march alone than accept support from that sort of greedy predator. God's army marches the high road. So, he asks that the Lord keep him strong within the just power of His Word, for anything less is death. It's better to wait until God divides the spoil and honors His loyal servants at the very end than to slip away early with a lion's share that might see him hiding from his Master.

God's provision for His servants is always the best within a given context, even if it seems austere by human standards. It's better to be free from distracting cares of excess baggage and comfort. He intends to keep his focus on what God says really matters to Him. When the camp of God moves out, He leads off by treading down those who slept late from hangover. They could have known it was coming. The psalmist employs a clever pun, using a Hebrew word for arming oneself with weapons of deceit that aren't much of a threat.

Our Lord scrapes off the wicked like the dross that floats atop molten silver or gold, implying that He tosses them aside as unworthy of attention. What's left is a purified treasure – His true servants. He purges His army to keep an illustrious record of moral victory that is endearing to those who seek His favor. The psalmist ends with an image of one who sees no place to hide from the intense scrutiny of his Lord, the One who sees clearly every motive of his heart.

119: Ayin 121-128

This is the Way of Wrath. We work from the image of a sheik come to inspect an outpost of his domain. There is a high probability that he will find something unpleasing and will correct the deficiencies. Those of who are truly loyal will be glad to have even harsh corrections from him, while those who have been serving their own interests will resent his wrath. Our psalmist places himself among the loyal looking forward to having his Lord come and restore things to good order, because he has long endured the minority position of putting his Master's interests first.

Thus, he trembles with delight at the thought of his Lord arriving. All this time he has sincerely obeyed the Lord with a clear conscience. As far as he is concerned, the Master's will is the definition of good and right. He prays that this visit will not see him subjected again to the command of those who don't have a clue about moral justice. Having bound his fate to the

expressed will of God, he has every reason to expect that God will bail him out of this bad situation. He humbly waits the crushing of those who arrogantly ignore divine revelation.

How long has he gazed at the horizon, waiting for sight of the ensign that signifies his Lord's approach? While others rightly dread His arrival, the psalmist can't wait for a fresh expression and explanation of what the Lord desires. He has reason to expect God's mercy because that's the promise. He's ready to learn what he could do better to please the Lord.

Indeed, the first words from his mouth will be a humble request to be corrected. He begs for discernment to understand the message implicit in the record of God's decisions. Again, he celebrates in anticipation that the promised Day of Wrath will fall on those who have flouted His Law.

It is God's faithfulness that makes the psalmist treasure the Word of God; it's better than the best of refined gold. "Keep your money," he tells the corrupt, for he has a treasure in his heart and will not be bribed. He struggles to find words for the fire of anticipation for having everything put right, and he wonders how he endured the deceptions of the wicked for this long.

119: Pe 129-136

We are treated to the Wonder of Moral Vision. It is as if someone came into his soul and turned on the light for the first time. Suddenly, everything was vivid and bright, and the world made sense.

The psalmist marvels at the power of God's testimonies. How could he not surrender his entire being to keep them? He recalls how it was when he first approached them, standing in the doorway and rubbing his eyes at the brilliance and color. Once upon that threshold, it mattered not a whit what a man brought to them, they made the man. He was a peer to the wisest on earth.

Perhaps the third verse would be better translated with the image of a man who sucks it all up like someone who stumbled upon a spring after crossing a dry desert. This wasn't a restriction in his fun; it was life itself. He begs to be counted among those who are known as God's cheering section; it would be the sweetest mercy itself.

He never knew what it meant to walk until his feet were set upon the path of God's Word. Anything less is a wasted life pursuing nothing. Walking by human wisdom is the worst predation, like a ball and chain dragging behind him. He begs to be set free from mere human concerns to keep his heart on God's precepts.

The attention of God shines brighter than the sun, even when it requires the goading discipline of God's ways. His heart breaks and his eyes melt into tears at the mere thought of people avoiding God's Law.

119: Tzaddi 137-144

This octet delivers the Charge of Righteousness. The image is a feudal servant vested with a special trust, a mission that the servant must faithfully keep over a long period of time and through a long series of trials. He's like an ensign who must follow his lord through endless turmoil, yet always holding the standard high for all to see.

Our Lord defines justice in His Person; His judgments are self-consistent. More than a mere record of His actions on this earth, it is the testimony of their meaning that He has charged us to keep, and they are more solid than the roots of great mountains.

Our psalmist finds himself burning with zeal, a fire all the hotter against the hassle of dealing with people who can't be bothered to pay attention to God's revelation. The Word of God has been tested and purified in the trials of His servants, so it's a legacy more precious than any earthly treasure to us.

Most people aren't impressed with the human talents of the psalmist; all the more reason he must distinguish himself by faithfulness to God's revelation. This divine justice to which he clings is like a path that vanishes into eternity, to the very face of God Himself. What God decrees is the very substance of existence itself.

Whether it's natural or man-made trouble that afflicts him, he can always find peace and contentment in God's Law. The essential rightness of His testimonies will outlive life itself. He begs that God would write them on his soul to enable him discernment that makes life worth living.

119: Qoph 145-152

Here we have the Song of Assurance. Prayer works.

As the psalmist notes, genuine effective prayer requires a fully committed heart first, but the heart knows what to ask because the heart knows what God wants to do. And it is from the heart that we are loyal to the revelation of what God has appointed in Creation. So, he cries out, ever renewing his personal covenant of loyalty, not calling on any other power. He knows that Jehovah is his salvation and the power to obey.

Even before dawn, his heart awakens him to spend time in the divine Presence. He cries out for the freedom that comes only from enslavement to God. He knows the precious promises of God's Word. When something keeps him awake at night, when his soul is churning without sleep, he knows this is the call to ponder the revelation of Jehovah.

His experience thus far trusting in God has taught him that God is merciful when we call on Him, and that it is the nature of His justice to restore a vivid life. Such is the moral character of Jehovah. He makes a play on words: The wicked are too close to him and too far from God's truth at the same time.

Yet God is also near at hand, in his own soul. With His divine Presence comes all His truth burned into our souls. As he takes a fresh look at the record of God's revelation, he recognizes that same ancient power that spoke to his heart long ago. So ancient and yet forever fresh is the Word of God.

119: Resh 153-160

This is the path of Divine Dependence. While an English translation of this octet sounds a little repetitious with the rest of the psalm, the emphasis and tone are quite different. The psalmist tells God he has no place else to go.

He calls for the Lord to notice how pressed down he is, but what he seeks is not mere rescue, for the word also implies pulling up from helplessness and arming someone against future attacks. It's the image of a man who may have lost his armor, but not the Law of His God. The second verse here begins with the verb form followed by the noun form of the same word: "Contend my contention!" It's a call for God to show Himself as his Father, to fill the role of kinsman redeemer, as He promised in His revelation.

The wicked could search their life long, but genuine moral safety is far from them. That's because they aren't searching the one place where safety stands, on the foundation God has established. It's like a massive fortress standing in plain sight, filled with the mercies of God. The judgments of Jehovah are the source of life.

Everywhere the psalmist goes in this world, they are either nipping at his heels or blocking his path of service, but they cannot force him off the ancient way of God. He could see plainly the fools who thought they were being clever and sneaky. He detested them, trying to sneak past the boundaries of truth instead of guarding those boundaries.

Using the same word for seeing plainly, the psalmist asks that the Lord examine his own heart. Did he not long for more of the divine teachings? God's divine favor brings a vivid life of glory. Search back as far as the deepest human memories, and anyone can see that God's truth has stood from before Creation. The long string of Jehovah's judgments against sin and in favor of righteousness runs off into eternity in every direction.

119: Shin 161-168

This octet celebrates the Serenity of the Law, for obedience to God is its own reward.

This isn't just ordinary folks, but powerful nobles have brought pressure to bear on the psalmist. Worse, it's for no good reason, but they keep playing games for political advantage. Yet he is able to brush aside the intimidation because he doesn't revere mere men, but his heart stands in awe of God's revelation. It's as if God has plundered some enemy and placed a huge bundle of treasure in his hands.

Loving God's Law changes your entire value system, making you detest deception. The psalmist blurts out a week's worth of ritual praise every day when he realizes the sheer wisdom and justice of God's dealings with mankind.

The sense of peace that comes from personal loyalty to Jehovah's Law is impossible to measure; there's nothing like it in human experience. Believers aren't tripped up and caught off guard by the plots of evil minds. There is an overwhelming sense of anticipation that makes obedience so much fun!

The psalmist piles it on: As he commits himself more fully to what is revealed in the long record of God's works, the ecstasy of joy builds beyond words. It's not enough to read the record of God's Word, but it draws on all your personal resources. You realize there is nothing to hide, and you are able to breathe freely in the Divine Presence.

119: Tau 169-176

The final octet shows us the Path to God's Favor. We note that the psalmist is wholly confident in his requests because the promise is written into the revelation. Unlike many human rulers, Jehovah doesn't create hurdles to His attention, but commands that we call upon Him for help obeying His Word.

The first couplet is a parallelism. We cry and supplicate; we long for our petitions to be heard. But notice that this equates moral discernment with rescue from adversity, because one leads to the other.

The second couplet in like manner is also lyrical repetition. Our mouths testify in glowing terms of God and the revelation of His divine moral character. The resounding theme is that His discipline and guidance is the definition of righteousness.

Again, the third couplet bears a parallel construction. We can anticipate joyfully God's consistent response to our call to protect and deliver us from sin, because we are wholly committed to His revelation as the greatest possible good in this world.

If the Lord should prolong our days on the earth, it is just and right that we make a lot of noise so others will know whom we credit. We want everyone to know that the legacy of His judgment is the highest treasure. The psalmist confesses openly he is no more than a sheep that keeps wandering off into trouble. The Lord is our Good Shepherd who always comes looking for us. We might forget where we are or how to get back where we belong, but His Law is written on our hearts.

Psalm 120

We begin here a collection of 15 psalms, each referred to as a Song of Ascents. That term refers to any pilgrimage to the one and only high place for Israel, Zion. This brings the image of purging oneself, refreshing one's faith in the Covenant, so as to present a purified life to God in the Temple. These psalms were a hymnbook of those traveling to the Holy City for various ritual celebrations.

Our psalmist first establishes that Jehovah is always paying attention to those who love Him. He does not ignore their distress call. In this particular case, he cries out for deliverance from liars.

Some people are such notorious deceivers that it justifies characterizing them as one big snaking tongue. The psalmist asks what the proper recompense for people like that would be. The answer of course is that the fiery darts of deception always come home to roost in literal arrows and torches, the image of destruction.

With so many liars around him, the psalmist feels like he lives in Meschech, a notoriously obnoxious people that lived in the mountainous terrain in the eastern half of modern Turkey. Then again, it's like living among the raiders of Kedar, Bedouins living in the Arabian deserts south of Damascus. These were barbaric nations that produced almost nothing of value but spent most of their energy fighting with their neighbors. Such people had no concept of God's blessings under the Covenant *shalom* of divine provision.

Psalm 121

No petition here, this is a responsive hymn celebrating the protection of Jehovah. Palestine is a hilly land, and any route toward Zion meant looking at ridges and mountains until you saw the Temple itself, visible from quite a distance in most directions. But the symbol of the first line is someone who is clearly in a valley of trouble. Looking for help meant scanning the high horizon. From which direction is rescue coming? It comes from the Lord who made heaven above and all the earth below. Indeed, it's a hard to escape Him.

Our Lord gives us a solid, firm path to follow. There's no slipping on the road to Zion because God wants to see us. And He's never asleep; He is truly God who does not rest. How else could He protect Israel all these centuries? He never takes a break.

Have you ever been exposed to a merciless sun in dry terrain? Then you'll understand what a relief it is to come under a cool shade. That's our God; He makes life worth living. Not just the sun, but He prevents us being moonstruck as well. Because He never closes His eyes, we can handle whatever comes our way.

And He is a shield against all afflictions, showing His clear intent to keep us alive and healthy for His glory. The business of "going out and coming in" is a Hebrew phrase that covers just about everything we do as humans. It doesn't matter what life demands of us; He's there making it happen. He stands watch over us beyond the end of this life, too.

Psalm 122

Though written by David whose palace sits in Jerusalem, he assumes the perspective of a pilgrim who has come from the farthest distance.

We have arrived! We are here in Jerusalem and the first thing we want to do is pay our respects to God. This first verse is very popular, though seldom properly understood in context. Instead of seeking rest and recovery from the journey, the pilgrims hurry to seek God's favor. The anticipation that energized them on the journey brings a demand that cannot be denied. Meanwhile, they pause just a moment to celebrate the fact their feet are now inside the gates of the city. You can almost see them bowing down to kiss the stone pavement. This becomes a song to Jerusalem as the capital of the nation and the symbolic home of God's Presence among His people.

It's not just any city; Jerusalem is a most winsome place. The word typically translated as "compact" carries the connotation of communion, a place where the whole nation returns to their spiritual home. It signifies the sense of moral fitness, that everything is in its place, and that the whole universe is in proper balance under God's favor. It's a primary meaning behind *shalom*. The sense of unity in the vast nation is a testimony to God's greatness. Surely, we can all share our gratitude to Jehovah. How proper it is that the City is also the seat of government, the City David won for himself from the Jebusites.

So, while we are in the House of God, let us pray for the continued *shalom* of this lovely place. Given what it represents, let the Lord's favor rest on those who love to be here. Let there be that powerful sense of peace and rest and vivid life that demonstrates God's promised blessings.

And even if David has to write it himself, there is a standing command from God to pray for the welfare of the king.

Meanwhile, lest we imagine that David is tooting his own horn, he explains his true motives here: David is still the shepherd boy serving his Lord. All of this is for the sake of his flock, his tribe, his nation, his Covenant brothers and sisters. If there is peace in the City, it's a whole lot easier to insure that peace rests on the whole kingdom. So, it is for the sake of God's great name on the earth that David seeks the well-being of his whole nation.

Note: Keep in mind that when David wrote this, there was as yet no Temple. The "House of the Lord" would have been the Tent of Meeting standing in the courtyard outside his fortress-palace.

Psalm 123

While very short, this Psalm of Ascents is far more intense than any English translation can convey. It echoes of someone in deep distress from oppression, implying a persecution for one's faith in Jehovah.

The first word in the Hebrew here points to God as the obvious focus; there is no other. We are bowed down under the pressure of a world that dehumanizes and tries to own us, but we recognize no Sovereign but Jehovah. He is the One who dwells in the Heavens as His natural home, built by His hand.

In a related figure of speech, the psalmist cites a protocol whereby the servant watches the right hand of his master, or her mistress. Many Ancient Near Eastern potentates would establish subtle hand signals, training their servants to respond immediately. Just the slightest twitch from Your finger, O Lord, and we are ready to jump. We are watchful and eager. What is not easily translated to our culture today is how such a servant was utterly convinced that the whims of their lord were always in their own best interest. In this case, it's all the more so true when we seek His mercy and favor for deliverance.

And what favor do we seek? The psalmist includes everyone, emphasizing it by repeating it. We are burdened by the hideous moral distress of contempt we face from those bearing worldly authority over us. The obvious implication is that God is not like that; we are His family and His treasure. Who compares to the greatness of God? Yet men with piddling authority over a few others so quickly forget humility before God and oppress His people.

This prayer doesn't seek revenge, only deliverance.

Psalm 124

This is ascribed specifically to David. We should take notice how very much this is like a responsive song, heavy with Hebrew parallelism.

We have this basic confession: Were it not for Jehovah's favor, there would be no Israel. Think just a moment about her history. How many times did the Patriarchs stand threatened by circumstances? And didn't Israel face a very well-armed force while trying to escape unarmed

from several generations of slavery? And that generation that died in the wilderness? Remember those biting serpents, the droughts and lack of food? How many times should Israel as a nation have died by normal human reckoning? This sentiment is restated twice.

It is expressed in two ways. First, is the image of larger and better-armed nations rising against them, described twice. Then the metaphor of an overwhelming flood is expressed three times. Make no mistake – this echoes the crossing of the Reed Sea and Jordan during flood stage.

The song then jumps into praise. God didn't let them eat us alive. David compares this to a bird caught in a snare that escapes because the trap broke. It's not that Israel was smart enough to stay out the traps, but that God kept breaking them free. Their salvation was in the "name of the Lord." That's a Hebrew turn of phrase that reminds us God operates as an eastern suzerain, and we are His vassals. This is all about His glory, His reputation. Let us remind everyone that this is our Creator.

Psalm 125

A song of security, scholars suggest this was not originally meant as a pilgrimage psalm. However, it fits the theme well enough referring to the geography around the City of Jerusalem. One can hardly approach the city without climbing over at least a few mountains along the way because it sits in the midst of them.

Despite a few earthquakes now and then, the shape of Zion had never changed in the human memory. Those who trust in God are just as stable and solid. Like the mountains ringing the city, you have to get past God who watches over it.

For this reason, the psalmist is confident that no foreign invaders could permanently conquer the land. If something like that happened, there was no hope for keeping the people righteous. It would have to mean Jehovah had abandoned them.

So, the psalmist prays that God would continue to protect and prosper the righteous. And if anyone in the land forsook the Covenant, let them be led away as prisoners to some other land. Thus, would the nation remain in God's *shalom*.

Psalm 126

This Song of Ascents refers to the Exile and Restoration but looks back upon it from a later date. Yet still fresh in memory was the giddy joy of the imperial announcement that the Judeans could go home and rebuild their city and temple. The terminology in the first verse refers to a restoration of something that was confiscated. But restoring the freedom to live in the place God granted their Father Abraham, and the ridge line where David built his royal capital, seemed almost too good to be true.

So even as they were preparing to depart, they were singing with irrepressible joy. The other nations crowded into the Babylonian ghettos around them were echoing the celebration in recognizing that Jehovah had finally called His people back home. Wasn't it a wonderful thing

to watch? Yes, say the Judeans, what a wonderful thing He has done for us, and we can't keep it to ourselves.

But everyone knows that when they did come home, it was nothing like the dreams they had treasured for so long. There was trouble from every side, and it seemed to take forever before they started rebuilding the city, and yet longer still to build the Second Temple. Frankly, there was precious little of the giddy joy left as the Returnees clustered around the city and the vast majority stayed behind in Babylon, never to return. Some Restoration!

Lord, can we go back and finish it? Can we even today, return to the purity of devotion that drove us back here, but keep our faith intact this time? It would be like that brief rainy season in the southern wastes of Judea. For most of the year the wadis were dry, but for just a week or so those watercourses were roaring torrents. We need a heavy rain of Your Spirit, O Lord.

Imagine the farmer who lives in troubled times. He faces great anxiety and serious hunger, but he must sow his grain on the ground when planting time comes. Once that harvest comes, though, the bad times are forgotten in the abundance of blessings.

Psalm 127

Translations vary on whether Solomon wrote this himself or took it into his collection of wisdom literature. Either way, it reflects the kind of broad moral insight he had. We can be sure this wasn't written for the annual pilgrimage. However, it was included later because, without such moral wisdom, there would be no city and temple to which they should return every year. This psalm is loaded with Ancient Near Eastern symbolism; don't get lost in the apparent literal meaning.

God is the foundation and the blueprint of a life worth living, for both individuals and the nation as a whole. Don't start any projects without first ensuring that God is involved. And once you have built, you cannot keep it without God's continued favor. You must choose a course that God has laid out in His revelation, or everything you do is wasted effort.

Cease striving on your own power; work smarter, not harder. Internal peace is a gift from God. Good responsible stewardship means taking care of your own sanity and health as part of the shared resources of your covenant community. There is nothing noble about a pointless sacrifice to petty things.

But if you hear and obey the Word of God, then it would be just like a man who fathers many children while he is still young. Now that's a job worth some extra effort, worth a little struggle early on in your life. The spawn of obedience will go far, stopping threats from a distance like archery in battle. You can never have too many arrows of that sort. They will become men before you are old, established and well known in the community. Then when you do grow old, these worthy sons can present a strong argument in your favor when opponents try to bring judgment against you.

The implication is that you'll die in peace because you lived in *shalom*.

Psalm 128

This is another Psalm of Ascension that wasn't composed specifically for pilgrimage. Rather, it is didactic in nature and presents the pilgrim's goal of Jerusalem as the capstone of blessings. God's favor on Jerusalem was the foundation of national welfare, and people of faith were the king's true treasure.

There is no distinction in Hebrew; the same word is translated "blessed" and "happy." God's favor is the ultimate reward. Everything implied by that image becomes a reward in itself, not least of which is communion with Creation itself, and a life consistent with God's revelation. This is how we claim the fullness of whatever it is God offers to humans. Thus, reverence for God is just words unless we walk in His ways.

In the Ancient Near East, eating your own harvest is contrasted with crop failures and theft from raiders and invaders. In short, everything will go well for you. The image of the wife as a fruitful grape vine is an ancient symbol for a whole lot more.

Consider that her life is rooted at home, not wandering. She's fruitful and it all contributes to the family's welfare. His children grow up like olive trees already at the table, supplying a generous diet and the means to light the house. Both are symbols of God's Spirit resting on the household, which is more to the point. This is what a reverent and faithful servant of God can expect; it's what God has promised.

In the best of times, the City is busy and wealthy. In the worst of times, Jerusalem is the one place that must be defended. But the symbolism is that God must be the center of every believer's universe. If you don't make Him first in your life, don't bother with the rituals of pilgrimage. With genuine faith in God, there will be a Zion and a Temple to visit every year, and you will lead your children and your grandchildren there to worship.

This is the *shalom* of God.

Psalm 129

This is the quintessential song of oppression and persistence. Genuine faith rises to meet every challenge; against such faith persecution starves and withers. Given the context here, it would seem the threat is not some neighboring enemy, but internal enemies.

The first verse is dramatic repetition. Starting with the Exodus, Israel suffered from people seeking personal gain at the cost of the community. Israel has never been without internal opposition to God's way; and such opposition has never prospered when their victims turn to God. We have the image of plowing with oxen to represent stripes of persecution. It's the idea of trying to prosper from the suffering of others. Next comes the image of God cutting the reins used to pull the plow. Sooner or later the faithful will see God's deliverance. The wicked will not harvest much.

Zion here is the symbol of God's righteous rule and His blessings. There will always be predators seeking their own, but those who seek God will see the traitors thrown back. They'll tuck their tails and run. These are people who are like the wild grass that infests patches of dirt blown into the corners of your roof. There's not enough soil there. They sprout, but long before

they can bear seed, they dehydrate. Nobody bothers to pick it for animal feed or bundle it into grass mats. You don't even give these people a ritual greeting; they are gone by the time you notice them.

Psalm 130

Our greatest difficulty in reading the Psalms is that we struggle to enter the Hebrew mind. This short piece sounds so much like David for its depth of passion, but there were others who caught the same fire for the Lord. In this short piece, we can catch a glimpse of that same path of devotion.

This song begins with recognition of our fallen nature. We live in the depths of delusion and sin; it is our natural state. But we were not made for this, and we know it instinctively, so we seek redemption, some small measure of restoration. From the depths of our cursed existence, we cry out to Jehovah. His court alone has jurisdiction for this sorrow. There is no other help, so we call to Him alone.

Should it be that God preserves the record of our failures, there would be no hope. No one but God is holy by nature. Yet in His holiness, forgiveness is also His nature. He blots out the record of our sins. The logic here is simple: If none are pardoned, then there is no one to give Him glory on the earth. For His divine justice to be apparent, for His fame and repute to live on the earth, there must be those who have been delivered by His justice and live to sing His praises.

The concept of "wait" in Hebrew here is binding together, of me wrapping my whole existence and welfare in His desires for me. What He reveals to me is life itself; His divine moral character is the fabric of existence. What He reveals *is* reality. Thus, there is no higher priority. Standing watch at night can be long and lonely, cold and exhausting, but a guard's investment in relief at the dawn cannot compare to my depth of desire to know what God wants for me next.

And this passionate personal experience is not mine alone; it is the nature of our calling and covenant as the people of Jehovah. So, the psalmist calls on his nation to join him in trusting Jehovah alone as the sole source of mercy. The Lord has more than enough redemption to cover every soul that calls on His name. Regardless how great our failures, He's there to redeem it all.

Psalm 131

This is specifically attributed to King David. It's a beautiful portrait of someone who has learned the hard way to dismiss ambition and pride.

David begins confessing what a mighty work God has done in his heart. He does not bristle at the idea of having to deal with ordinary people and mundane tasks. There is no one beneath his dignity to offer standard human courtesies. His head is not lost in great and burdensome cares of his throne. He remembers being just a shepherd boy.

Let's not get lost on the question of weaning. For all we can tell, Hebrew children were given much latitude to wean themselves when they felt ready. It has as much to do with a sense of security as physical health. The point here is that David no longer feels pulled by the insecurity

of a man seeking to feed his ego. He's ready to face the real world and doesn't take himself too seriously.

This is what's behind the very common message: Put your trust in God. Here is the king warning people not to put him on a pedestal. He would still be a shepherd boy were it not for God. And it was a shepherd boy the Lord wanted, so something in that role carries over to his reign as king. It was a shepherd boy's faith that made ruling possible.

Psalm 132

The primary purpose of including this psalm in the Ascents collection is to serve as a reminder as to why there is an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The main point is that it is the symbolic earthly throne of Jehovah and the literal throne of David. It's the city of promises; God put His stamp of approval on this city as the place to meet Him. This psalm quotes part of Solomon's prayer in the Temple and echoes strongly of sections of 1 Samuel.

The word translated here as "affliction" refers to the full breadth of David's humility before the Lord, and how much he was willing to sacrifice in his zeal for the Lord's reputation. Thus, David couldn't sleep in his newly captured fortress until he had settled the business of where the Ark of Covenant should rest.

Keep in mind that the most recent location of the Tabernacle was just outside Jerusalem in Nob. During some of King Saul's warfare with the Philistines, the Ark was captured and taken to their territory. The Lord humbled the Philistines, and they sent the Ark away on a cart, not daring to accompany it. The Ark ended up in Beth Shemesh, which was supposed to be a city of the Priests, but they weren't ready to handle the Ark. So, they called for a noble family in Kiriath-jearim to come and take custody of it. The Ark was properly handled and kept there for twenty years. David brought it up from there to a tent in his palace courtyard. The passage here refers to that previous resting place as one of the fields cut into a forest covering the hill there, and the city was named after that forest (*jaar*). Thus, we have a poetic rendering of how David was quite diligent in searching for the Ark as the symbolic throne of God.

We see the picture of Israel inviting God to accept Jerusalem as His new resting place on the earth. It was a giddy day of celebration and David humbled himself once more. So, the priests and the people put on their festive garments, but their true adornment was praise and joy. It was very much like a coronation celebration for a very good reason, as Jehovah was the true Ruler of Israel, the suzerain for whom the whole kingdom was vassal. "Dwell here, O Lord!"

The response to this supplication was first the reminder that God had most emphatically chosen David as His shepherd over the nation. It was an extravagant promise that David found overwhelming. Then the psalm notes that this is part of a package deal in which God chose also to make Zion His earthly home. As part of His glory shining from this place, it would be one of the wealthiest cities on earth, wherein even the poorest would have enough to eat and find safe shelter. And if the people are faithful, they would indeed be adorned in the garments of praise and worship. They could rest assured that God would never leave them without a wise king.

Psalm 133

Here we have a gem that most Westerners miss, not because they don't read it, but because they don't get the full depth of meaning. The quintessence of all the biblical covenants together is fellowship and communion on a very personal level. It's actually rather foreign to Western instincts; we may imagine we get it, but we have nothing like it in the West. It's hard to overstate that. It's not just a different custom, in which, for example, Ancient Near Eastern men express more tenderness for each other than Westerners do, but a depth of commitment to the welfare of another that simply has no parallel in the West. Westerners are wholly unable to draw that close to other humans, either physically or otherwise, without some silly fear of sexual overtones. In this, Satan has blinded us to the full meaning of revelation.

The underlying image in the first verse pulls us into a simpler time in human history, long ago and far away, where brothers would marry and raise their children within the same household as they were born. They would simply add a room or two onto the structure, whether a tent or stone walls. The culture itself raised the demand of learning how to get along, invoking a depth of fondness and forgiveness that looked past daily spats and even rather serious differences. Everyone knew that alienation was simply untenable. There might be some time and effort to clean up some relational mess, but permanent emotional withdrawal was a scandal. These people knew how to live in each other's armpits and make it a joyful existence.

This is what God made us for; this is the nature of our wiring. We are not genuinely human without it. Indeed, Creation itself is so wired and demands it of us. That's the nature of the Covenant, and it's the greatest of tragedies how latter-day legalism killed it. It was the very essence of God's character woven into the fabric of Creation that all creatures commune in commitment to Him and in a deep personal affinity for Him. It all comes from Him.

So, this communion is rather dramatically compared to that high and holy ritual of anointing the High Priest. Indeed, it goes all the way back to the very first High Priest, Aaron. This is the foundation of the Covenant. See how the highly scented oil runs down his hair, his beard and in rivulets down to the hem of his robe. We might consider that messy, but God required it to symbolize the totality of our singular commitment to His ways. It gets all over everything. It's a heavenly scent that must be allowed to soak into you and all you do. Don't you dare wash it out!

Mount Hermon was on the far northeastern corner of God's land grant to Israel during the Conquest. It's actually a range of three or more peaks, and none of them is particularly forbidding to climb, offering relatively long and gentle sloping sides. But it's still a very high altitude, so it's a very wide mountain that catches enough precipitation to remain somewhat snow covered in the summer. It's one of the wettest places in the whole land of Palestine-Syria.

For that matter, Zion itself is a dew catcher. Without peaks rising high enough to capture some of the moisture in the region, it would all be a desert indeed. But part of God's provision was the proper mix of dryness that inhibits plagues, with a livable degree of precipitation to provide wild food and domesticated crops and offer grazing for herd animals.

Both that heavy fragrant anointing and that just-right precipitation represent the utter necessity of humans learning to commune with others. Do you want God's anointing power? Love others.

Do you want the provision of life? Love others. The core of Covenant Law is social stability, and that begins with a due commitment in love. This is echoed in what Jesus taught as the two primary commandments on which all covenants stood: Love God with your full commitment and love your neighbor as yourself.

Psalm 134

Here is the last Song of Ascents. This psalm refers to priests who stood the night watch in the Temple. Their mission was not to guard the precincts; that was for the Levites assigned as Temple guards. Rather, the priestly duties were to keep alive praise and worship. We should assume they did this in some form of rotation, as the Hebrew people divided the hours of darkness into three watches.

In public worship, this would be rather like a benediction the worshipers would give to the night shift coming on duty at the end of the evening offering service. The actual time of day was more likely the afternoon prior to the common time of the evening meal. The worshipers would call for the priests on night shift with this little song and encourage them to take their job seriously.

We note in passing that the world translated here “bless” is a word that draws the image of humbling yourself before the Lord. It is the same word often used to indicate God’s response to that act of kneeling, His blessing to those who humble themselves from the heart. Thus, this psalm ends with a benediction upon those night watch priests and everyone whose heart remains behind in the Temple with them. Who would not so revere the maker of heaven and earth?

Psalm 135

This song is verbal clip-art; it is a collection of quotations from other psalms and songs from the historical books of the Old Testament. Artfully woven together in this new format, it was probably a responsive psalm, but there is no solid consensus among scholars on the voices and parts. Still, it clearly offers a rousing thanksgiving celebration.

The first line is an imperative: Praise Jehovah! The root meaning of the verb “praise” is to draw a sharp contrast, to make something stand out. We exist for His glory. It is our power to live, and nothing can answer the deep need of the human soul like rendering praise to our Maker. You need a reason? He has chosen us as His special treasure on the earth.

Keep in mind that this all stands in the frame of reference where Jehovah is the imperial ruler, a feudal sheik. The psalmist forcefully claims to know this Lord personally. Is there any other sheik like Him? Who else could have his whims from Creation itself? Who else could devise the cycle of precipitation with the added glory of lightening? Who can hold or release the winds upon the earth at His whims?

For all the deep, ancient and mystical powers of Egypt and her vast pantheon of deities, Jehovah was able to put them all to shame. He ravaged Egypt like a weak young girl and none her deities could do a thing about it. Nor could any of the other gods along the Exodus stay His

hand from taking what He wanted; kings died with their whole armies. Then He distributed the plundered land as an inheritance to His own tribe.

The earth could fade away into mist, but the reputation of God as Master of all Creation will stand eternally. Nobody can challenge His jurisdiction, and He ensures that His household gets special treatment in His justice.

Look at how the Gentile nations bow to things they have made with their own hands. God made those materials, and the hands to shape them. Those deities only look like people, but they are blind, deaf and silent. They don't even breathe, and you have to wonder about what kind of people would fall down and worship dead gods like that.

So, the psalmist calls for the whole nation to confess their allegiance to Jehovah, and they echo back to the priests and Levites to do the same. If His eminence burns in your heart, how can you do any less? Is this not the God who has gathered us around His Temple here in Zion? Is there any other deity claiming to come and live with us this way? There is no room for loyalty to any other.

Psalm 136

This is the Great Hallel psalm, famously used during Passover and quite popular with the people. Typically sung immediately following the previous psalm, it is painfully obvious how this was used as a responsive song. The worship leader would sing the first line, with the crowd repeating the refrain on each verse.

Several translation notes demand our attention. Most people are aware that *hallel* ("praise") is included in *hallelujah* with the "jah" an abbreviated form of *Yahweh* (Jehovah). His name is typically rendered as "THE LORD" in all caps in many English translations. That refrain actually doesn't include the word "endures," though some contend it is implied. What we have here is more literally: "for eternal is His kindness!" Note the Hebrew word order. The whole point is that the worship leader's declarations are all discrete proofs of His mercy. He has done these things because of His mercy, a mercy that outlives us as a characteristic of His Person.

So it is that the first three versus celebrate that Person by three different titles: Jehovah, Elohim and Adonai – the One above all others. The fourth verse notes that He *alone* does great wonders.

Then we launch into a celebration of Him as Creator. A primary characteristic is "wisdom" arising from the Hebrew root for discernment, as distinguishing things. It's the quintessential statement of God as the One who defines good and evil. He made the skies, immeasurable in their vastness. We are offered the image of He who hammered out the land as plating over the subterranean waters. He spun off into the sky the lights upon which we all depend for guidance in when it is day or night, and the seasons.

Next is a few high points on history of God's mighty power against the enemies of Israel. He beat down Egypt and rescued His people from slavery. The psalmist recounts that deliverance as God doing this mighty work with His own bare hands. He sliced the sea in half, then led His people through the dry gap, yet brushed off Pharaoh's fearsome army when they tried to follow. He walked at the head of Israel's column through the wilderness, slapping down every king

that tried to hinder them. Those kings did not rise again: Sihon of the Amorites, Og of Bashan, and others. Then Jehovah plundered the whole kingdoms, land and all, giving it to His own people.

When things really go against us, we can be sure He will deliver in due time. We have this odd Hebraic image of God snapping something off in order to deliver it, elevating it by making it something He wanted to use for His glory. That's how He rescues us from our enemies. And everyone and everything that eats at all can thank Him alone for providing.

Again, the psalmist calls us to give thanks to God (*El*) in Heaven, for eternal is His kindness.

Psalm 137

Western Christianity, with its odd mixture of pagan and secular moral values, struggles to understand the moral content of this psalm. This psalm is a good test of whether one can grasp the Ancient Hebrew outlook that is at the core of Christ's teachings. This psalm is very much like a brief skit or play.

The Judean exiles would have gathered along the riverbanks as part of their normal grieving rituals. It would include baptism, a symbolic washing away of sins. They were there because of God's wrath and they understood all too clearly that they had sinned against Jehovah. It's not that any particular patch of dirt on this planet is so much better than another, but that God had removed their status as a sovereign nation. They were now dependent on the tolerance of their hosts. They could grow fine crops and keep large herds, do business and even engage in banking, but it wasn't their homeland where God had allowed them to build the Temple to bear His name proudly.

So as a symbol of their sorrows, they hung their musical instruments on the willow trees growing there along the river's edge. It's hard to be certain of the exact symbolism, but from where we stand today, it's obvious they had no intention of using those instruments to celebrate anything. Mourning and lament was properly *a capella* in their culture.

When the local rulers came to visit, seeing the instruments in the trees, they would have naturally asked for some of the worship songs for which Judeans were famous. We cannot ignore the likelihood that those local masters knew it would have been sacrilege; Babylonians had cataloged the world's religions and knew plenty about the worship of Jehovah. So, there was a bit of mocking here, along with genuine curiosity to hear an authentic rendition of such music, since such music was always passed on by tradition, never in any written notation.

The depth of lament is moving even for us today. There is only one purpose for such music, and without the Temple, it was simply impossible to perform. It's not a mere matter of nostalgia for the homeland, but the symbol of Zion as the Holy City of God. Thus, this was a sense of sorrow and loss writ across the land and sky for the Hebrews. They would rather cease knowing who they were and die where they stood, than to make a game out of working through their repentance at this point. They knew God was merciful; they knew the captivity had a time limit

They also knew that God promised He would not treat them the same as He did the rest of the world. It was already well established in Hebrew theology that the Devil was a figure for the

demonic adversary that served as God's punishing hand. There were some people in this world who were fully the property of Satan; if one is going to hate Satan, one must hate his children. If the Nation of Israel was going to be a political entity on this earth, then there had to be political outcomes to their moral battles. Real politics meant real bloodshed. Israel was the literal reality expressing a very deeply mystical truth.

Israel had a mission to give life to the revelation of God. For reasons Israel well understood, He had unleashed the Adversary on Israel until recompense was made, and it was time to restore His witness on the earth. His witness included His wrath against sin. Wrath on His witnesses – His own adopted family – was one thing. Wrath on those who rejected His witness was another thing.

So, the psalmist makes mention of their cousins, the Edomites, children of Esau. He understates the case; Edom did more than just celebrate the destruction of Jerusalem. They actively supported the Babylonian siege, helped plunder Judah, and generally did everything possible to offend Jehovah personally by attacking His people. Even when Babylon later turned on Edom and plundered them, as well, the Edomites were still crowing about the removal of Judah. They were a living manifestation of deep and ceaseless violence against God's moral character written into Creation itself, and they were very proud of it.

The psalmist also prays a blessing on whomever God was preparing to raise up against Babylon. Judeans had no doubt an enemy of Babylon was out there, that God was at work on that future day of conquest. His prophets made clear that His favor on Babylon was rather like a man for any good tool that would someday wear out. He had never planned on making them family. Given that the Babylonian troops dashed Judean children against stones and sliced open pregnant women, it was mere justice that something similar would happen to them when the day of recompense came.

Psalm 138

A psalm of David, this one makes more sense if we keep in mind the image of a God who reveals Himself through His character in Creation. Anyone born anywhere has the capacity and means to grasp something of God's personality and moral nature through the voice of reality, even if they never learn of His covenants or His name. This psalm celebrates answered prayers.

David declares that his heart is fully committed to Jehovah. He refers to celebrating Jehovah in the face of *elohim*, often used as a figure of speech referring to human VIPs as well as angels or pagan deities. It hardly matters, since there is none on the level of his Lord. So, it makes no difference who regards his physical form; David is going to elevate his Master in the face of everyone and make it clear that no one has any greater authority.

No matter where he finds himself, David will symbolically face toward the place God has marked with His name on the earth, Jerusalem. A noteworthy thing it is that God prefers to be known first and foremost by the power of His moral truth rather than a name or title that men might repeat. Either way, those who call upon Him by any name at all will find He answers and gives His servants boldness from within their own souls.

How can anyone of power, upon hearing the Word of His commandments, not marvel at the wisdom and rightness of it? Nothing in this world could make as much sense to seeking hearts as the revelation of our Creator. It shines with blinding brilliance. For here is one who resides in the very heavens, and yet is able to crawl down on the level of those oppressed and driven to the ground. Yet those who think highly of themselves will be lucky if He even allows them to come into His Presence.

So, David is assured that even during distress, God will reach out to him. Everyone who seeks to persecute David will have to face the wrath of Jehovah. In the midst of noise and confusion, God knows that really matters. He is fully aware of our commitments, and His mercy will meet us there to fulfill our real needs. He has made us along with everything around us; He has no intention of winding things up to let them run out on their own. He pays close attention to His own Creation.

Psalm 139

Another psalm of David, this one should knock you on your face, and yet lift you up squirming with joy and shouting. It translates quite well into English because it adheres most firmly to the fundamental nature of Hebrew language: a vivid narrative that transports the hearer/reader personally into the experience itself. Put aside the fancy theological terms and abstract meanings; take a journey to the time and place of David and find yourself in his God's hands.

David is quite certain Jehovah knows him better than he knows himself. That's because the Lord has always been personally involved in David's life. Indeed, David has clearly seen how God has called him and steered him from birth. This is something David finds utterly incomprehensible, yet there is no other way to make sense of how things have turned out.

Indeed, it is impossible to escape God's personal Presence. To the extremities of Creation itself, could David travel there, he would bump into God again and again. He would look to find the leading hand of God no matter what David has gone through. Divine fingerprints are everywhere. No darkness is too deep to hide from God, for there is nothing that can limit the perception of His Spirit, for His eyes bring their own light.

From the moment of conception, Jehovah shaped every molecule of David's physical form. And has not God done such a marvelous job of it? David found himself always made just right for the mission God gave him. The Lord knew what He had in mind for David before he was born to experience any of it. Never mind what we might speculate about God's wisdom and knowledge; that David has experienced just this much of it is all the proof he needs that God is far beyond any other being.

Knowing just this much about God, it is unimaginable that He would tolerate moral wickedness, so David has to embrace that holy anger. God is holy and nothing unclean can long stand in His Presence. David has had his fill of men blaspheming God's name. How can he avoid feeling the same kind of anger at sin? Let God show Himself pure and holy and wise and powerful against all sin! David will cheer Him on.

Even if the wrath of God falls upon himself, David is eager for holiness to reign. God knows him all too well, and David falls on his face begging for cleansing. He cries out for God to reveal his sin to him so that he can repent. For only then can David set his feet on the path of divine truth.

Psalm 140

We have here the first of four psalms of David crying out to God in times of distress. This one refers to the political and military plots against him as God's anointed. Keep in mind that, regardless of the actual meaning of *selah*, its purpose is to provoke a moment of contemplation to allow the image to take shape in the mind.

There are four stanzas of varying types of threat. First is the image of bitter opposition, someone with a burning resentment. This is not someone with a wise plot to oust David from power so much as the kind of person who seeks any opportunity for spite.

Second is the picture of traitors, people who draw close to him only so they can pick out some weakness to exploit. While physical harm from this angle is less likely, it's still a form of violence.

Third is any number of people who are morally wicked. This is like a plague against which David prays quite often. David uses the image of God providing a head covering against a strike that would confuse him and render him powerless in battle. He pleads with God to ensure this kind of people don't succeed lest they hinder God's glory in seeking their own.

Fourth is what would easily be David's most serious problem of all: Those who seek to hem David in, to corner him and humiliate him. We should all recognize the utter frustration of facing bullies. Thus, David's imprecation is quite severe on these, begging that God not let them escape their just punishment.

In the final two verses, David celebrates his confidence in Jehovah as the ultimate source of justice for the oppressed and afflicted. This frees the righteous to stand and praise the Lord.

Psalm 141

The second in a short series of four psalms of David crying out to God from a bad situation, this one is rather unusual. It follows its own unique form with the psalmist seeking strength from temptation.

You would normally be caught off guard by the initial urgent pleading, as if it were a dire emergency. It's an eloquent request that Jehovah accept this impromptu prayer the same as formal routine offerings with all the ritual trappings.

What demands such haste? David asks that the Lord help him keep his mouth shut. Specifically, he requests that his conscience be tender toward righteousness and guard him from falling short of God's glory. We might hesitate to do evil on our own, but the friendly invitation and flattery of folks with ill intent is much harder to resist. Don't let a good thing, like a rich dessert, slowly suck you into evil.

If we are going to hang out with friends, let them be the kind of righteous people who won't hesitate to correct you when you're wrong. A sharp warning from good people shouldn't cause resentment. Isn't this what we pray for ourselves and others? He hopes to offer sweet words of encouragement to those with good judgment who face trouble from standing up for truth. (Note that translations vary widely at this point.)

David intends to be a part of those who obey the Lord, even when it gets so bad their bones aren't left in peace in the graves. Silly social trends can leave you feeling like someone has run a plow through your life. He intends to keep his eyes on the Lord despite such things. Upon this commitment, he pleads with God to keep His promises. Prosperity means nothing if your soul is destitute.

So, David asks that God help him keep a sharp eye out for traps. It's amazing how many people have nothing better to do than strive to make the upright fall. Let the Lord be just and the wicked fall into their own traps, while David walks free in obedience to the Covenant.

Psalm 142

In this third Psalm of Distress, the text itself tells us David composed the words while hiding in a cave. Most scholars agree this was at En Gedi while on the run from Saul. David chose to emphasize the instructive example, as this follows standard protocols for personal supplication. Were he to come before an earthly sovereign, he would have used much the same wording.

First is the courtly invocation, implying there is no other refuge and no higher authority. David won't waste time whining to anyone else; if Jehovah shows no interest, he is doomed.

However, he is confident that he will be heard. At the worst of times, God knows David and his situation better than David does. The Lord can see the plots of those who pursue him. If he had any effective support, it would be "at his right hand," but that place is vacant. There is no one else to whom David could turn for help.

Has David not often said so quite publicly that Jehovah is his only hope? Had his family left him nothing but his personal faith in God, it would be a worthy inheritance. Nothing else matters. If God listens, now is the time David most needs help. His enemies are greater and stronger than he.

And there is only one reason God might have for bailing him out: His own glory. Ever dutiful, David's first act would be giving due credit to God for deliverance. Despite feeling all alone right now, David knows for sure that the Lord always has other people who love and serve Him. Few who worship God will worship alone very long, as the His greatest treasure is His people. To be a part of that is wealth, indeed.

Psalm 143

The last of the four Songs of Distress, this one is also considered a penitent psalm. David has no quarrel with dying here; it's not a question of what he deserves, but his faith demands he not simply give up.

He calls for God's attention, then immediately confesses he is unworthy. The issue is God's divine moral character. On the one hand, God alone is holy, and no human is worthy in His sight. On the other hand, this implies that God is also merciful for His own reasons, having chosen to use people to participate in His revelation of glory. If we know this, surely it is because the Lord has spoken through His people before.

David confesses his dire straits; one more nudge and he falls over the edge into death. He has come to the end of all his resources and there's nothing left.

However, so long as he lives, David can remember all the things God has done. Not just ancient records, but what David himself has experienced at the hand of Jehovah from his birth. In this quiet moment, in the long night of the soul, he recalls all the marvelous things God has done in revealing His glory. This is the mighty God to whom David spreads out his hands in supplication.

If the Lord isn't ready to move, then David's life is ended. But he is confident in God's power and mercy. Jehovah sees and knows and can ensure David lives to serve Him again. Now is the time, he cries out. There's no one else who can save him, yet his Master can do anything. Indeed, let the Lord turn the tables on David's enemies. Let them not take mastery over him as if to steal from God.

Psalms 144

This is one of David's battle hymns with quotations from several other psalms. It draws the image of someone fully confident in a God who has already shown His great power against enemies of the Covenant. David never forgets that the only value of Israel as a nation is how their Covenant life reveals Jehovah.

David begins with lavish praise for Jehovah from a warrior's point of view. Indeed, the only reason David goes to war is because it is his divine calling. Were it not for the Lord's anointing, David would have no competence at all in battle. But He is much more than a mere war deity, for He teaches David compassion and protection, how to be a refuge and deliverer, a shield and fortress. God has been these things to David first. Without God, David would hardly be king of anything; no one would follow him.

Indeed, there is nothing in mankind the merits any notice from God, much less the vast measureless blessings He offers under the Covenant. The whole thing rests firmly in God's own character and purpose to reveal Himself.

So, David boldly requests that Jehovah Himself come and lead them into battle. Where God is, the earth is afire with His glory. David notes how God's Presence has the effect of long-range weapons used to whittle the enemy forces down before the actual melee begins. But His arrows are more like lightning strikes. And should things still get difficult, David asks that the Lord deliver him personally. Even should the enemy come on like a flood, David is confident he will prevail under God's command. These enemies fail because they do not know Jehovah, and thus their whole existence is one big lie against Him.

And after the victory is won, David's first act is not gathering plunder, but sitting down to compose a new worship song to the Lord. This is the One who decides which kings and nations survive human warfare. David's trust is fully warranted.

Indeed, it is God's revealed nature to bring down those who ignore His revelation and attack Israel. He does this as part of His Covenant promises. It's the same promises that protect and prosper each new generation: sons who grow stout like trees and daughters who are as solid and supportive as cornerstones of palaces. This is the God who pours out prosperity and plenty, with abundant food and trade goods. This is Jehovah who protects from plundering raiders, whose nation will never be refugees in flight. Their streets are peaceful. This is why David is willing to go to war.

This is the picture of the nation that serves Jehovah.

Psalm 145

This is one of those acrostic Hebrew poems of David, each verse beginning with a different Hebrew letter in alphabetic order. It is also likely a victory song, fitting neatly behind the previous psalm, which is a battle hymn. Not merely in the sense of dutiful to protocol, but this is genuine heart-felt gratitude.

David easily could be God's greatest cheerleader. Everything that made life worthwhile was his simply because he was pledged as Jehovah's vassal. He was utterly shameless in lauding what a great and mighty God he served. There was simply no way to quantify it.

It was entirely natural that the Hebrew people would recount the mighty miracles and wonders God performed as Covenant promises. It was more than anyone could ponder. So, in the company of others who gave God due praise, David wanted to be there in the midst of that worship.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Jehovah was His boundless patience. Like a doting father, He put up with a lot of nonsense. And this was not confined to the covenant people, but all of humanity was permitted to seek His favor.

Indeed, it was astonishing the way He worked through His chosen people, as if each of them were walking miracles, never mind whether they ever spoke a single word. Their survival against the odds and prosperity under the most stressful circumstances was a living testimony to His greatness. Just living under His dominion was beyond words. His authority never suffered from time and space boundaries.

This is the Creator of all things, able to catch anyone falling and to lift up the humble. The entire world looks to Him for their very survival. More than that, His Word promises abundant blessings beyond what any would dare to ask.

There is no model, no higher standard against which one might compare Jehovah. He is the definition of good and right. Yet He stands ready to respond to all who call on His name. It's not a question of whether you can meet His standards; He will meet His own standards through us.

He will empower us to serve Him. By the same token He's hard on folks who reject Him. He wants our hearts.

For David, the primary purpose in having a mouth was to praise the Lord. Sooner or later, everyone will glorify Him in one way or another.

Psalm 146

These last five songs are called the Hallelujah Psalms, each marked with the Hebrew word *hallelujah* at the beginning and end. They were composed for daily worship in synagogues, which of course tells us they were written after the Return from Exile. Scholars tell us the language is distinctly post-Exile.

Notice that the Covenant name "Jehovah" is repeated frequently here, though you'll find that most English translations render it "the Lord." This psalm celebrates the Covenant promises, speaking in particular to the context of the first few generations of Returnees. Despite the generous offerings they brought back, they faced harsh resistance, political intrigue at Medo-Persian imperial court, and genuine military threat at times. Later they were hit with famines and other trials, so that the folks struggled to eke out a life in the rubble and ruin that was Jerusalem for quite some years.

Through it all, this psalm serves as a reminder that God has forgotten neither His people nor His promises. So, the psalm begins with a hearty praise to His name. As long as there is breath to praise Him, so shall we give Him the first and last fruit of the lips. He is wholly unlike mere human nobles; they will eventually die. Jehovah is utterly trustworthy because He is the source of life itself.

How blessed are those who belong to the Covenant of Israel! He is the Creator of all things and remains as the ultimate truth when it's all gone. He delivers final justice for those who have been violated. He feeds the hungry and frees slaves. He heals those who suffer. Surely His heart goes out to those unjustly oppressed.

He particularly loves those who seek to live by His revelation. Even wanderers and aliens in the land receive His care. He's there with the orphans and widows. You can be sure He will not allow the wicked to escape.

So, to those huddled in the City of Jerusalem, the psalmist reminds them that, while the city may have been destroyed, the God who made it His capitol on the earth never vacates His throne. He'll still be ruling there when all things come to an end. Praise the Lord!

Psalm 147

This is the second of the Hallelujah Psalms. It is obvious that we have three stanzas woven together here; in some ancient manuscripts the third is a separate psalm. We note in passing that at least one contemporary worship song comes from this.

But first, the psalmist extols praise itself. The reason we praise is because it pulls us up out of our fallen nature and into the very Presence of God. There is no higher experience in this life than to earnestly praise the Lord.

In the first stanza, it is obvious this is a song of the Restoration. The Lord Himself oversees the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Not just the physical buildings, but the people. Like the Good Shepherd, He gathers the scattered sheep and binds up their wounds, both in heart and flesh. This is Your God, Israel: He knows the stars in the night sky like a shepherd knows His sheep. He counts them and calls each one by name, yet no one can in turn number and name the depths of His wisdom. If you want His attention, stay humble before Him or suffer exclusion from His favor like the wicked.

So, strike up the music and sing His praises. It's only right that we celebrate His glory because He paints the sky with clouds and orders up rain in due season. Do you see the grasses waving on the hillsides? He made that to feed your cattle, same as He makes food for the ravens. He's not really impressed with the strength of horses any more than with the muscles of mere men. But if you revere Him and court His mercy, you'll surely find it.

So let the City and Mount Zion itself lift up praise to His name. With Him guarding the gates, no siege engine can break its bars. With His favor, your children will be even stronger than those gates. He keeps the raiders away from your borders and provokes the fields to grow the best grain for your food. Everything works as it should; He commands Creation itself to bless you. At His behest, snow covers the hillsides like woolly sheep, frost coats the ground like ashes blown from a kiln, and hail scatters like chicken feed. And when He's ready for cold weather, who can tell Him "No"? Yet by the same authority He can stir up the warm winds and melt it all to water the ground.

The final two verses are an epilogue. This same God who commands the weather and keeps order in nature is the Lord who keeps moral order through His Covenant with Israel. No other nation on earth has been permitted to know God so personally. Can you praise Him for that?

Psalm 148

This third of five Hallelujah Hymns stands out as a unique call for praise from the whole of Creation. Its structure is rather like a responsive song, a long verse with a short response, then another such pair.

This is one of the few psalms where the meaning is painfully obvious with any decent English translation. It would be embarrassing to attempt tracing this out in terms of commentary. About the only thing not so plain to English readers is just how serious the psalmist takes a rather literal rendering. Some may have seen, or perhaps remember from the 1970s and 1980s the rather cartoonish drawings produced by the Jesus Movement, showing natural objects with smiling faces singing praises to God. Don't be fooled; those who observe the Hebrew belief that the heart is a far wiser "mind" than the brain would have no trouble hearing the songs of Creation.

Thus, the psalmist openly encourages Creation, starting from the highest realms of the Spirit, along with the heavenly bodies in the sky, along with the clouds. Next follows a brief responsive chorus. The chorus firmly establishes the authority for such a call to praise: Jehovah is the Creator of all things.

And then follows another longer verse listing various creatures and features of nature that we all encounter. Finally, as the last in order of Creation, comes humanity. We start with the highest-ranking human authorities down to the children. Again, the chorus establishes the very reason for all of this celebration, and it is distinctly a Restoration theme: The Lord has raised Israel's "horn" – the Ancient Near Eastern symbol of divine moral authority. Not just the collective might of the people, but the holiness and purity that justifies joining in as a part of Creation in praising the Creator.

When Jehovah lifts your horn, the only just response is worship and celebration.

Psalm 149

The fourth of the final Hallelujah Hymns in Psalms, this one draws the image of a distinct historical event, though we cannot pin it down which one. We do know that during the Period of Restoration after Exile, the returnees faced persecution and military conflict. We also know they won several battles, and this psalm was composed to celebrate such a victory.

After the initial hallelujah, the psalmist proclaims that here is something worthy of a new song to mark the celebration for future generations. It shall be an unrestrained and uninhibited outburst of praise and worship to the God of Israel, employing every imaginable means of giving Him glory. This is Jehovah, who clearly dotes on His own family when they humble themselves before Him.

The psalmist goes on and on about the extravagances of jubilation due the Lord for His favor. It's as if everyone in the nation has in their hands the finest weapon of divine authority. Clearly, by their adherence to the Covenant alone were they granted such a resounding victory over their oppressors. This is not so much about revenge, but justice according to the promises of God. The author here equates the revelation of God with the power and authority to correct wrongs on the earth, symbolized by the sword.

In the Ancient Near East, it is the royalty and nobility of enemy people who are most to blame for unjust aggression, so they bear the shame when they fail. They are painted as arrogant in contrast to the humility of penitent Israel who cries out to Jehovah for relief. When He delivers, it is because of His Word alone.

Psalm 150

This is the end of the Hallelujah Hymns and the end of the whole book. It serves honorably to hold that place as the capstone of worship.

Hallelujah! At the very least we should come to the Temple and praise Him. However, there is no place in His whole Creation where praise is out of place. Indeed, let all Creation praise Him

together at once. Do you need a reason? Think of the powerful actions He has taken. Contemplate His greatness; you cannot fathom it.

Like a conductor, the psalmist calls first for the brass section to catch our attention with sharp notes. Then he brings up the stringed harps and lyres. He motions for dancers to begin their moves while the timbrels pop and jingle in their hands. Next, he signals to the woodwinds and other strings to raise their voices. Finally comes the crashing crescendo of various cymbals and grand gongs.

Were that not enough, let all breathing creatures raise their voice in earth-shattering praise. Yes, praise the Lord, indeed.