

James Boice



AMIDST DARKNESS

SUFFERING, SOLACE, AND THE PSALMS



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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Amidst Darkness

Suffering, Solace, and the Psalms

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OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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INTRODUCTION

O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?
Why do you hide your face from me?

You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me;
my companions have become darkness.

—*Psalm 88:14, 18 (ESV)*

The Psalms contain a treasury of praise and thanksgiving, but they also hold some of the Bible's rawest expressions of pain and suffering. In this booklet James Boice examines the latter, highlighting both the legitimacy of sorrow and the ultimate joy we have in Christ. It is our prayer that the message of the Gospel will be a light amidst the darkness for you or someone you know.

The chapters in this booklet are collected from *The Bible Study Hour* program. To hear these and other messages, head to our website at TheBibleStudyHour.org.

HIDING IN THEE

Psalm 57:1-11

Psalm 57 is part of a collection of Psalms which link to an early, desperate period of David's life, a time when he was forced to flee into the wilderness from the murderous King Saul. Psalm 52 began this set, referring to Doeg the Edomite who told Saul that David had gone to Nob and had been helped by Ahimelech the priest. Because of Doeg's self-serving betrayal, Ahimelech and eighty-four of the priestly families were killed. Psalm 54 is another such psalm. It tells of David's betrayal by the Ziphites, who were his countrymen and who should have protected him. Worst of all, Psalm 56 describes David's desperate plight in the Philistine town of Gath which he went to alone, desperate and afraid.

After David left Gath he faded into the wilderness and hid in a large cave known as Adullam, to which the title of Psalm 57 probably refers.¹ David was also alone there, at least at the beginning. But this place was a turning point in his fortune. 1 Samuel 22 tells us that it was while he was at Adullam that his brothers and his father's household and all who were in distress or debt or discontented began to gather around him. In all about four hundred men came to him, and he became their leader. Although there is nothing in Psalm 57 to indicate that this had begun to happen by the time the psalm was written, there is nevertheless a very noticeable change in the tone of the composition. The earlier psalms were mostly uncertain, fearful, even desperate. Psalm 57 is settled, and its prevailing note is praise.

What makes the difference? In the earlier psalms David was hiding from his enemies, in Gath or in the wilderness of the Ziphites. Here he is hiding in God, which is what the cave comes to symbolize. David sings a great song in Psalm 57, of course. But if he had not composed Psalm 57 and if he only had our hymn "Hiding in Thee"

instead, he might have sung,

*O safe to the rock that is higher than I,
My soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly;
So sinful, so weary, thine, thine would I be,
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.*

"Hiding in thee" is what Psalm 57 is about. The psalm's eleven verses could be divided into three parts:

1. A call to God for mercy (vv. 1-3)
2. A description of the problem that caused David to ask for mercy (vv. 4-6)
3. A concluding praise of God (vv. 7-11)

However, in view of the refrain which is repeated in verses 5 and 11, it is best to take the psalm in two main parts, each ending with the refrain. This is the outline suggested by J.J. Stewart Perowne and H.C. Leupold, who says rightly, "The first section, vv. 1-5, is a confident cry for deliverance from cruel enemies; the second section, vv. 6-11, is a resolve to praise God for deliverance."²

Verses 7-11 appear again as the opening verses of Psalm 108 (the second half of Psalm 108 is likewise borrowed from Psalm 60:5-12), and a number of phrases echo words, verses and images found in other places.³

Asking for Mercy

The first of the psalm's two parts begins with David asking for mercy, even as he takes refuge in God. Since the title of the psalm speaks of the cave in which David was hiding, it is natural to think that the cave suggested the idea of a "refuge." But we should notice that David does not call the cave his refuge, though it was a refuge in a certain physical sense. Rather it is God whom he calls his refuge. Indeed, to use the image of the second half of verse 1, although David may have been hidden physically in the dark shadows of the vast cave of Adullam, he knows that it is actually under the shadow of the wings of God that he has found safety.

Here is the point to notice how prominent God is in this psalm and

thus also in the mind of the young fugitive. In this psalm God is referred to twenty-one times either by name or pronoun, and there are other words and phrases like "refuge" and "shadow of your wings" that refer to Him as well. "Shadow of your wings" is a particularly rich image, often interpreted in one of two ways.

The wings of the cherubim. The most frequent Old Testament use of the word "wings" is to refer to the wings of the golden cherubim which were upon the lid of the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place of the temple or tabernacle. They are mentioned first in Exodus 25:17-20:

Make an atonement cover of pure gold—two and a half cubits long and a cubit wide. And make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; make the cherubim of one piece with the cover, at the two ends. The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover.

This description occurs again in Exodus 37:9 and 1 Kings 6:27, and there are additional references to the cherubim's "wings" in 1 Kings 8:6, 7; 1 Chronicles 28:18; 2 Chronicles 3:13 and 5:7, 8. Apparently, Ezekiel in his visions of heaven saw the heavenly beings of which the golden cherubim were but representations, and in that book the word "wings" occurs more than twenty times. There is a similar vision and reference in Revelation 4:8.

The tabernacle and its divinely appointed articles of furniture were so prominent in the religious outlook of the Jewish people that it is easy to suppose that David might have been thinking of the wings of the cherubim here, especially since the wings of the temple cherubim encompassed the space where God was understood to dwell symbolically. If this is what is intended, David would be saying that he is as secure as if he were himself within the Holy of Holies.

The difficulty, of course, is that Psalm 57:1 does not speak of the wings of the cherubim, however significant they may have been, but of "your wings," which means the wings of God. It is much more natural, therefore, to think along the lines of Jesus' use of the image

in Matthew 23, where He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (v. 37; cf. Luke 13:34).

The wings of God. The problem with the first image has led other commentators to explain David's reference as to the wings of God Himself. To the objection that God does not have wings or that the image is unworthy of the Almighty we answer that God speaks along these lines Himself in several places. Indeed, the earliest biblical use of the word "wings" is an example. In Exodus 19:4, God declares, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." This initial use of the image later lends itself to several variations. Thus, in the Song of Moses God is compared to an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions (Deut. 32:11).

The phrase "shadow of your wings," occurring in Psalm 57:1, is also in Psalms 17:8; 36:7; 61:4 and 63:7. In Psalm 91:1 the phrase becomes "shadow of the Almighty," and verse 4 of the same psalm says, in words that are very close to Psalm 57, "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart."

In the second stanza of part one (vv. 2, 3) David refers to God as "God Most High." This name occurs first in the Bible in the story of Abraham and Melchizedek, where Abraham presents offerings to this otherwise unknown king of Salem. Melchizedek blesses Abraham by "God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth...who delivered your enemies into your hand" (Gen. 14:19, 20). Derek Kidner thinks this name is intended to draw attention to Abraham as "another homeless man."⁴ But in David's situation it is more likely that it is chosen for the sake of the accompanying phrase "who delivered your enemies into your hand." This is what David needed (as well as being delivered from his enemies), and it is what God did. First God delivered David. Then He delivered Saul, David's chief enemy, into David's hand. And He did it more than once (cf. 1 Sam. 24 and 26).

In these desperate early days, wherever David went he seemed to be “in the midst of lions” (v. 4). But when he lay down in the cave of Adullam “in the shadow of God’s wings,” he was as safe as Daniel in the lion’s den. Indeed, if Daniel had lived before David and if David had known Daniel’s words, David might well have used them to tell Saul, “My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I done any wrong before you, O king” (Dan. 6:22).

A Heightened Testimony

I want to deal now with part two of this psalm, holding consideration of the chorus or refrain for last. Generally speaking, part two has the same themes as part one, I want to highlight how they are introduced and what happens to them the second time around. Seeing this will help us understand something about Hebrew poetry.

First, look at the general subject matter of the three stanzas in part one. Verse 1 is the first. It is an appeal to God for mercy, coupled with a resolute determination to take refuge in Him. Verses 2 and 3 are the second stanza. They are a testimony to God’s faithfulness to David. Verse 4 is the third stanza, the last of part one, apart from the chorus. It is a description of David’s enemies and of the danger he is in because of them.

Next, in part two, these same general themes occur in inverse order. The first stanza is verse 6. It deals with David’s enemies, which is what the third stanza did in part one. The second stanza is composed of verses 7 and 8. It also deals with faithfulness or steadfastness, only here the steadfastness is David’s. Because God is faithful, David will also be faithful and will sing praises to Him. The third stanza, verses 9 and 10, is like the first in part one in that it is another cry to God.

With this in mind, we can that the structure of the psalm is:

A, B, C
chorus
C, B, A
chorus

But notice this: the second time around, each of the three themes is raised a notch or two higher, and the tone of the psalm becomes gloriously strong and confident, all because the psalmist is focusing on God—primarily he is hiding in God, after all—and not in his problems.

The stanzas that I have identified as “C” deal with David’s enemies, but the description of danger that is found in the first part gives way to the confidence that the pit they have dug for David will trap them. They will fall into it themselves.

The stanzas that I have identified as “B” deal with David’s relationship to God. But the earlier expression of confidence, which is already on a very high note, rises even higher as David moves from confidence in God to actual singing, so wonderful does God seem to him: “...my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music...Awake, harp and lyre I will awaken the dawn.”

The stanzas that I have identified as “A” are direct addresses to God. But the appeal for mercy in part one rises to pure praise in part two: “I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples. For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies.”

This is not the first occurrence of the words “love” and “faithfulness” in this psalm. They are found first in verse 3, at the beginning, and now also here in verse 10, at the end. In between we have David’s believing declaration, “My heart is steadfast,” repeated twice for emphasis (a Hebrew poetic device). Because God is faithful, David will be faithful. This makes verse 7 the emotional focal point of the psalm.

To God Be the Glory

So I apply the psalm here, asking, Are you faithful in this sense? Is your heart steadfast? Alexander Maclaren has a sermon on this verse titled “The Fixed Heart” in which he provides some wise words and asks some searching questions:

For a fixed heart I must have a fixed determination and not a mere

fluctuating and soon broken intention. I must have a steadfast affection, and not merely a fluttering love that, like some butterfly, lights now on this, now on that sweet flower, but which has a flight straight as a carrier pigeon to its cot, which shall bear me direct to God. And I must have a continuous realization of my dependence upon God and of God's sweet sufficiency going with me all through the dusty day...

Ah, brethren! How unlike the broken, interrupted, divergent lines that we draw!...Is our average Christianity fairly represented by such words as these of my text? Do they not rather make us burn with shame when we think that a man who lived in the twilight of God's revelation, and was weighed upon by distresses such as wrung this psalm out of him, should have poured out this resolve, which we who live in the sunlight and are flooded with blessings find it hard to echo with sincerity and truth?

Fixed hearts are rare amongst the Christians of this day.⁵

Maclaren died more than fifty years ago, but who would argue that the situation has improved even a trifle in the last half century?

If you know the Psalms, you will not be surprised to find a chorus calling for God to be exalted: "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth" (vv. 5, 11). God is exalted above the heavens. His glory does fill the earth. The goal of history is that God might be known as God and be honored for it. Nothing will frustrate this worthy purpose of the Almighty.

But this repeated chorus is not a statement that God has or will be exalted. It is a prayer that He might be exalted. And that raises some questions: How so? In what manner? And by whom? The answer to those questions is clearly that David wants God to be exalted in his own personal circumstances, and by the way he trusts and praises Him even in difficulties.

This brings to mind the book of Ephesians. In the third chapter, Paul is writing of the glory of what God is accomplishing in the church in which Jews and Gentiles are being brought together into one body, and in which even their sufferings demonstrate the sufficiency of God in all circumstances. He has already been speaking of this previously, but here he takes it up an octave, as it were, arguing

that even the angels marvel at this manifestation of God's wisdom: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which is your glory" (Eph. 3:10-13).

This is exactly what David is saying in Psalm 57. The world thrills when human beings are exalted. It fawns on kings, rulers and statesmen, the rich and the famous. But those who know God rejoice when God is exalted, and they rejoice that they have the great privilege of exalting Him themselves, especially in circumstances that are disappointing or hard.

THE ROCK THAT IS HIGHER THAN I

Psalm 61:1–8

In the *Trinity Hymnal*, the hymnbook we use in our church, William O. Cushing's hymn "O safe to the rock that is higher than I" is linked to Psalm 94 because verse 22 speaks of God as a rock of refuge. But it is hard to read Psalm 61 without supposing that Cushing rather had this psalm in mind. Psalm 61 says, "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I," and Cushing wrote:

O safe to the rock that is higher than I
My soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly;
So sinful, so weary, thine, thine would I be;
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.
Hiding in thee, hiding in thee—
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in thee.

People who have lived with the Lord for any length of time know the force of that hymn and the image it is based upon. It is because life is filled with sorrows, and there are times in life when there is literally no one else to whom we can turn for understanding, comfort or help. Some people spend most of their lives alone. Others are surrounded by an unsympathizing family, perhaps because these others are not Christians and resent the believer's convictions and lifestyle. Some have an unbelieving husband or wife, or it may be a case of people resenting you at work. Maybe the person we are thinking about is just old, and all the friends and relatives of an earlier day have died. Whatever the cause, many know what it is like to have no one human to whom they can turn for understanding.

Yet if they are Christians and have any experience of the Lord at all, they know that God is a rock to whom they can turn, a rock higher and wiser and stronger than they are themselves.

The title to Psalm 61 identifies it as a psalm of David, but it could be from nearly any period in his career, since we know that David often felt alone, even after he had become king.

There are various ways of outlining this psalm. Some divide it into two parts of four verses each, separated at the *selah* following verse 4.⁶ Leupold divides the psalm into three petitions, the first two ending with a reason for the petition, the third with a vow.⁷ Alexander Maclaren has the most interesting arrangement; he argues that there is an introductory verse, followed by three matched pairs of verses, ending with an additional single verse to match verse 1.⁸

In my opinion, any of these outlines is equally valid, but none more helpful than the others. This is a very simple psalm, and the most helpful way of studying it is merely to look in order at the various points that are made.

The setting for a psalm provides the background for interpreting it, and in this case the setting is found in the fact that the psalmist is far from home. He feels he is very far away indeed, because he is calling to God from what he regards as the very “ends of the earth” (v. 2).

For any Jew the center of the universe was (and is) Jerusalem, where the Ark of God was located. So the phrase “ends of the earth” must mean that David was far from or felt himself to be far from Jerusalem. Is this to be taken literally, as a geographical reference? If so, it could refer to any time David was absent from the capital—when he was fleeing from Saul or Absalom or when he was absent on a military campaign. Verses 6 and 7 make clear that at the time of writing David was already king. So at the very least, the days when he was fleeing from Saul are eliminated. David could be writing during the days of Absalom’s rebellion. Again, the placing of Psalm 61 immediately after Psalm 60 might suggest that the psalm was written at the time of the campaign along the Euphrates River, which is the earlier psalm’s setting. Certainly the words “ends of the earth” would be more appropriate to that location than the Judean wilderness where David fled from Absalom.

But there is another possibility, and that is that the words “ends of

the earth" are metaphorical. This idea appeals to Marvin E. Tate, who concludes his study with a section suggesting that the chief value of the psalm is its metaphorical richness. He believes that "the dominant metaphor in the psalm is that of distance from God... a sense of far-awayness from the divine presence, an at-the-end-of-the-earth experience" and that the psalm was written to overcome this far-away feeling. "Breaking down a perceived distance and the creation of a sense of nearness and presence is a major function of prayer."⁹

This may very well be right, and in any case it is how you and I should apply the words to ourselves, at least in most instances. From time to time, perhaps often, you and I feel far from God. When we do, we should do as David did and pray along the lines of this psalm.

Coming to the Rock

It is important to notice the image David uses for God in verse 2, calling him "the rock that is higher than I." The idea of God being a rock is common in the psalms, appearing twenty times.¹⁰ In fact, it occurs three times in the next psalm, Psalm 62. In Psalm 18, it is used four times in an interesting progressive sequence: "The LORD is my rock (v. 2); "My God is my rock" (v. 2); who the Rock except our God is?" (v. 31); and "Praise be to my Rock" (v. 46)!

The thought of God being a rock is prominent in the Davidic psalms, because David had used the rocks of the Judean wilderness as places of refuge and protection during the years he was forced to hide from King Saul and Absalom. David knew every cranny, crack and hiding place in the vast rocky wilderness. So when he fled to the rocks he knew that he was safe in their protection.

Each of the psalms has its own way of writing about God as a rock, however, and this is no less true of Psalm 61. There are two unique features to David's use of the rock image here.

This rock is "higher" than David. It is natural to think of God being higher or greater than ourselves when we are suffering some severe reversal of fortune, when we are somehow down and out. We know we need God then. But when we are on top, as David seems to have

been at this time—he was the king of all Israel, after all—we forget about God and consider ourselves able to deal with any need that can arise. David never made this mistake. He never forgot that God was infinitely above him and that it was always God he needed. The people of Israel may have looked to David as their rock, but David looked to a rock that was higher than himself.

We must be led to this rock. The other unique feature of David's speaking of God as his rock in Psalm 61 is that he asks to be "led" to it, that is, led to God. It is hard to know exactly what David was thinking of when he wrote this, but Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, was good on this point when he pointed out that, for our part, not only do we need a rock, we also need the Holy Spirit to lead us to Him. Our rock is Christ, but none of us comes to Christ by ourselves. We need the Holy Spirit to quicken our dead souls, awaken us to our spiritual need, renew our wills and bring us to the point of personal commitment to the Savior.

In Spurgeon's day, sailors were often drowned when their ships ran aground off the rocky coast of England. At times they would find themselves struggling at the base of high cliffs, and knew they would be safe if they could only get up the steep slippery face of the rocks. But they could not. At one place, according to Spurgeon, a man who lived at the top of one of these cliffs carved stone steps into the rock face so wrecked mariners could climb up. And when the steps became badly worn and impassible over time, someone else added stanchions and a chain railing to help the struggling survivors.

Observed Spurgeon, "How infinitely higher than we are is the salvation of God. We are low and groveling, but it towers like some tall cliff far above us. This is its glory, and it is our delight when we have once climbed onto the rock and claimed an interest in it; but while we are as yet trembling seekers, the glory and sublimity of salvation appall us, and we feel that we are too unworthy even to be partakers of it; hence we are led to cry for grace upon grace, and to see how dependent we are for everything, not only for the Savior, but for the power to believe on him."¹¹ It is a point well taken, since our salvation from beginning to end is of God and is due entirely to

grace.

Is God your rock? Have you been led to Him? If you have not trusted in Jesus Christ yet, there is nothing wrong with asking God to lead you to Him. It is a case of saying, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). That is a prayer God clearly loves to hear and answer.

Four Great Metaphors

What I want us to notice about Psalm 61 here is that its second stanza adds to the image of God as David's rock by four metaphors that elaborate what God is to his trusting people. God is so great that any number of images might be provided at this point. What is significant about these four images is that they are arranged to become increasingly warm and intimate.

A refuge. This image is closest to that of God being a rock and, in fact, is frequently linked to it: "my rock, in whom I take refuge" (Ps. 18:2); "my rock of refuge" (Ps. 31:2; 71:3); "my mighty rock, my refuge" (Ps. 62:7); and "the rock in whom I take refuge" (Ps. 94:22). It calls to mind a retreat such as David used when fleeing from King Saul.

A strong tower. A tower is a refuge for people in times of attack from enemies, but it differs from a wilderness refuge in that it is part of a walled city. So here the idea is not of a person fleeing from home but of a person defending himself in his home city when threatened by hostile forces. Presumably he is not alone in this condition. Others would be taking refuge in the tower with him and would be helping him defend it.

A tent. A tent conjures up a domestic scene in which a host might welcome strangers, as Abraham welcomed the three heavenly visitors outside his tent near the great trees of Mamre. A visitor in such a situation would be entitled to his host's most solicitous care and protection. Yet there may be more in the image than this, since the word "tent" is also translated as "tabernacle" and in the Old Testament frequently refers to the wilderness tabernacle where the Ark of God was kept. If David is using the word in this sense, as he

probably is, then he is asking to dwell where God himself dwells, an idea he also expresses elsewhere: "One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4).¹²

This means that the images used thus far move us from the wilderness to the fortified city, presumably Jerusalem, and then to the tabernacle area, which means closer and closer to God.

A sheltering mother bird. Thus, we are prepared for the last and most intimate image of all, that of dwelling under the shadow of God's wings. As we saw in Psalm 57, commentators often interpret this image as having to do with the wings of the cherubim on the lid of the Ark of God within the tabernacle, which would make a natural sequence in this stanza, especially if the tent image refers to the tabernacle where the Ark was kept. But strictly speaking, the wings are not called the wings of the cherubim but the wings of God, and that is an even more powerful and intimate image. Some might think it indelicate, but David would not consider it wrong to want to be sheltered beneath the wings and against the very breast of God.

Nor should we. Never fear to be intimate with God. God desires to be intimate with you and is only hurt when you remain at a distance or draw back from His embrace.

Enthroned in God's Presence Forever

In verses 6 and 7 the psalmist apparently ceases to pray for himself and prays instead that God will "increase the days of the king's life, his years for many generations," that he will be "enthroned in God's presence forever" and that God will appoint his "love and faithfulness to protect him." At first glance, it seems that another hand has added these words, perhaps at a later date, and that is the way many commentators have understood them. Yet it can also be argued that David is writing about himself as king, merely switching to the third from the first person for stylistic effect. The last verse seems to imply this since it returns to the first person, promising that

the speaker will praise God if the earlier petition is answered. David could do that if God prolonged his reign for generations.

Yet this must also be said: Whether this prayer was by David or is for David, ultimately it is about and is fulfilled in the Messiah. "Increase the days of the king's life"? That can easily be understood of an earthly king. "His years for many generations"? That too perhaps, by stretching things a little. But not, "May he be enthroned in God's presence forever," at least not if that is literally understood.

And it probably should be. I say that, because this is the way David responded when God sent Nathan to him to promise that a descendant of his would sit upon his throne forever: "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:12, 13). Some of that might be understood to have been fulfilled in Solomon, David's immediate successor. But not the forever part, which David seems to have recognized since he responded, "Is this your usual way of dealing with man, O Sovereign LORD" (v. 19)?

Nothing merely of man lasts forever. So if God was promising a forever kingdom, it must be a kingdom to be established and maintained by a divine Messiah, who is God become man. The promise made to David was about the eternal kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, and if this is what David was thinking about in Psalm 61, the psalm is another of the Messianic psalms.

Praising God Continually

As we look back over Psalm 61, we are reminded that David began the psalm feeling that he was at "the ends of the earth," that is, far from God. But as he thought about God and prayed to Him, he drew closer to God and grew in confidence until he ends actually expecting to be established in Jerusalem, his capital, for many days and many generations. That is something to praise God for. And that, quite naturally, is how the psalm ends: "Then will I ever sing

praise to your name and fulfill my vows day after day."

Shouldn't that be true for you as well? It is not only David who had such a great God, or those who lived with him in this Old Testament period. His God is our God, and it is our privilege to know Him even more intimately than David did, for we know Him in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the rock that is higher than we are, infinitely higher. He is "very God of very God," as the fourth century Nicene Creed says. He is the Rock of Ages. But He is also the rock that has been a cleft for us, crucified, that we might be saved from sin. As one of our great hymns expresses it: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee."

Jesus is our refuge, but not only a refuge from human enemies and foes. He is a refuge from the wrath of God to be poured out at the final judgment. He is our tower that we can run into and be safe. He is our tabernacle. The Apostle John used this very word when he wrote, "The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us" (John 1:14). In the Greek the words "lived for a while" are literally "tabernacled." He is also the one who said of the city of Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt. 23:37). But He has gathered us to Himself.

Sometimes we need to feel we are at "the ends of the earth" before we can discover how wonderful Jesus is. That is what the great Augustine was thinking of when he wrote, "They that are godly are oppressed and vexed in the church or congregation for this purpose: that when they are pressed, they should cry; and when they cry, that they should be heard; and when they are heard, that they should laud and praise God." We will be happy Christians if we learn to do just that.¹³

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Psalm 88:1–18

The powerful, descriptive phrase “dark night of the soul” is not much used today, but it was in the Middle Ages where it is found in the writings of the European mystics. It is a translation of the title of a book by the Spanish monk St. John of the Cross, known in English as *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1578-1580). What is the dark night of the soul? It is a state of intense spiritual anguish in which the struggling, despairing believer feels he is abandoned by God.

This is what Psalm 88 describes. It is not totally unlike other psalms in which the writers complain of their wretched circumstances and lament their misery. But these others all move toward some state of resolution—maturing faith or hope—by the end of the psalm. This is not the case with Psalm 88. It begins with God, but it ends with the words “darkness is my closest friend,” and there seems to be no hope anywhere. Derek Kidner says, “This is the saddest prayer in the Psalter.”¹⁴ H. C. Leupold wrote, “It is the gloomiest psalm found in the Scriptures,” adding, “The psalmist is as deeply in trouble when he has concluded his prayer as he was when he began it.”¹⁵ J. J. Stewart Perowne remarks, “This is the darkest, saddest Psalm in all the Psalter. It is one wail of sorrow from beginning to end.”¹⁶

It is good that we have a psalm like this, though it is also good that we have just one. This psalm reminds us that life is filled with trouble, even to the point of despair, and even for mature believers. Psalm 88 is by an inspired writer, after all; he is identified as Heman the Ezrahite, one of the “sons of Korah.”¹⁷

Once, when discussing Christian contributions to modern literature, a friend and I asked why there is so little outstanding Christian fiction today. The answer is that we are not true enough to life. Christians in our day feel that in order for it to be Christian, a

Christian composition has to work out right in the end, and there has to be a clear lesson or moral. Psalm 88 is a reminder that life is not always like that. There may be a perfectly good moral from God's point of view; I believe that all life does have a divine purpose. But that does not mean that we can see it, or that it will ever become clear in our lifetimes.

Marvin Tate says, "Psalm 88 stands as a witness to the intent of the psalms to speak to all of life, to remind us that life does not always have happy endings."¹⁸ Historian and Christian social critic Martin Marty wrote, "The psalm is a scandal to anyone who isolates it from the biblical canon, a pain to anyone who must hear it apart from more lively words. Whoever devises from the Scriptures a philosophy in which everything turns out right has to begin by tearing out this page of the volume."¹⁹

Commentators on the psalms propose many different outlines for this psalm, which suggests that no one outline is necessarily to be preferred. In fact, not much of an outline is needed because the verses simply move along from one expression of profound misery and despair to another. The best plan is merely to take these ideas in sequence.

A Prayer to the God Who Saves

The only hopeful line in this prayer is the first, which reads, "O LORD, the God who saves me." This is not to be dismissed lightly, for no person who knows that God is his Savior can ever utterly despair. However, the line is used as a mere address, a designation, and the psalm immediately passes to the fact that the writer has been crying to God "day and night," that is, unrelentingly and (as becomes apparent very quickly) without an answer. The writer has also been calling to God for a very long time—he has been afflicted from his youth (v. 15)—but God has not removed the cause of his suffering.

Does this, the next to the last of the Korahite psalms, echo the first, that is, Psalm 42? It may. Psalm 42 is not nearly as sad as this gloomy composition. But verse 3 of that psalm says, "My tears have been my

food, day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"

We cannot fault the psalmist for failing to cling to promises he did not have. But also, we cannot help remembering how Jesus insisted that in spite of God's seeming indifference He actually does hear prayer and will act "quickly." He made this point in the story of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, who concluded that although he did not care for justice he would see that the widow got justice so she would not wear him out with her coming. Jesus said, "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7, 8). The problem is that God's timing differs from our own.

The coloring of this psalm seems to grow darker as it moves along. This obviously happens here; staring the writer in the face is death's dark shadow (vv. 3-5). Notice how the darkness builds. First, the writer's "soul is full of trouble." Next, he is "drawing near the grave," that is, dying. Third, he is "counted among" that dead, "those who go down to the pit," perhaps even by his friends. Fourth, he is "without strength." Finally, he is even "... set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care." (v. 5)

In this last sentence, the psalmist sees himself almost being laid out in the mortuary or charnel house, and his most faith-destroying terror is that in that place God, who lives for the living, will "remember [him] no more." Speaking of verse 5 particularly, Marvin Tate says, "The description of the dead [in v. 5b, c, d] is the central focus of the first part of the psalm" (verses 1-9).²⁰

In his perceptive book *Reflections on the Psalms*, the great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis has a chapter on "Death in the Psalms" in which he faces the apparent Jewish lack of faith in a blessed afterlife for those who are God's. They spoke of the grave as Sheol, the actual word behind the psalmist's word "grave" in verse 3. Lewis wrote

They speak of Sheol (or "hell" or "the pit") very much as a man speaks

of "death" or "the grave" who has no belief in any sort of future state whatever—a man to whom the dead are simply dead, nothing, and there's no more to be said.

In many passages this is quite clear, even in our translation, to every attentive reader. The clearest of all is the cry in [Psalm] 89:46: "O remember how short my time is: why hast thou made all men for nought?" We all come to nothing in the end. Therefore "every man living is altogether vanity" (39:6). Wise and foolish have the same fate (49:10). Once dead, a man worships God no more: "Shall the dust give thanks unto thee?" (30:10); "for in death no man remembereth thee" (6:5). Death is "the land" where, not only worldly things, but all things, "are forgotten" (88:12).²¹

This is exactly how the psalmist is speaking, perhaps more than he might otherwise have done were it not for his depression. We cannot think this way, because we stand on this side of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and know His promises concerning heaven. However, we also remember that Psalm 88 is not the only reflection on death to be found in the Old Testament or even in the book of Psalms. David looked at death's shadow and said, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4). And again, "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (v. 6).

God has never left His people entirely without hope, even though that hope was dimmer in the Old Testament period than it can be today. God tests our faith, but He does not leave it without a sure foundation in His word.

Darkness All Around

I used the word "darkness" to describe the tone of the last stanza, but the word actually occurs for the first time in verse 6, in a stanza that takes us even further into the abyss. What makes this darkness so dark and this stanza so depressing is that here God is thought of as having caused the psalmist's problems. In verse 1 the writer called God the one "who saves me." In verses 3-5 he described his actual, present state. But here, in verses 6-9a, he says, contrary to his

opening statement, that God is the cause of his misery. Notice the repeated complaints about God's actions: "You have put me in the lowest pit" (v. 6). "Your wrath lies heavily upon me" (v. 7). "You have overwhelmed me with all your waves" (v. 7). "You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them" (v. 8).

The psalmist does nearly the same thing later (in v. 16), complaining, "Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me." It is worth noticing the similarities between Psalm 88 and Job. Job was a godly man whom God blessed with a large family and many possessions. Suddenly these were all taken from him. His life became so miserable that he condemned the day he was born, stared death in the face and prepared to perish miserably. This is a close echo of what the psalmist seems to be saying of himself in Psalm 88. Yet the most important similarity is that God had caused Job's suffering, if not directly at least by permitting Satan to afflict him, and Job was unable to imagine why. This is what the psalmist is claiming too. These similarities are so great, including even certain echoes of language, that Delitzsch has suggested that Job and the psalm might even be by the same author, Heman the Ezrahite.²²

We know from the beginning and ending of Job that God had a purpose in Job's suffering. It was to demonstrate before Satan, the demons and the watching angels that a man will serve God for love's sake quite apart from what God may do for him materially. But the point of Job is that this great patriarch did not himself know what was going on. And neither apparently did the psalmist. Both works are present in Scripture to remind us that we do not necessarily know what God is accomplishing by our suffering either.

When the Light Is Fading

This is the stanza (vv. 9b–12) from which C. S. Lewis got one of his quotations showing that the ancient Jews did not reflect very much on life beyond the grave, if indeed they believed in it at all. Rightly so! Verse 10 seems to deny the resurrection, and verses 11 and 12 seem to say that the dead are not even awake or conscious enough to remember God.

This is not true, of course. But it is from the perspective of what we can see on earth unaided by specific revelation about the afterlife, which the psalmist did not have. Kidner says, "From the standpoint of God's congregation and his glory in the world, all that is said here is true. It is among the living that his miracles are performed, his praises sung, his constancy and acts of deliverance exhibited. Death is no exponent of his glory. Its whole character is negative: it is the last word in inactivity,...silence,...the severing of ties, ...corruption,...gloom, ... oblivion. The New Testament concurs, calling it the last enemy."²³ Nothing is to be gained by denying this. It is not the whole truth; we know much more because of the New Testament and its revelation. But it is at least part of the truth and therefore rightly has its niche in Scripture.

Not only are the dead silent, since they are unable to rise up and make God's wonders known. God is also silent toward them, so far as the psalmist knows (vv. 13, 14). One reason why he feels so close to death, "as good as dead," we might say, is that God is not speaking to him now. He tries to speak to God; he is praying. But God rejects him and seems to hide His face. Have you ever felt like that? I am sure you have. Most of us have times when the heavens seem made of brass and the prayers we throw upward fall back upon our heads unanswered. When that happens, it is no wonder that we feel dead or almost dead spiritually. If "man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4; from Deut. 8:3), it is no surprise that we feel nearly dead when God is silent.

This is the point where we have learned to expect that a lament like this should become positive, however dim that positive hope might be. We expect it to say something like, "Nevertheless, I know that you hear me and will answer before very long" or "I will wait to see what wonderful things you will do." However, we are not going to find that here. Instead of optimism, we find the gloomiest and darkest words of all. It is as if the psalmist looks about in every direction he can, and sees nothing but misery, despair, death, terror and loneliness everywhere.

First, he looks back. Sometimes when things are going bad, we are able to look to the past, remember better days and be encouraged by them. But when the psalmist looks back all he can remember is that "from my youth I have been afflicted and close to death" (v. 15). He cannot recall any happy or brighter days to cheer him up.

Second, he looks forward. It is even worse when he does this, for all he can see there is death, made horrible by his present experiences of the terror and wrath of God (vv. 15, 16). He has every reason to suppose they will continue. This has plunged him into the very pit of "despair" (v. 15).

Third, he looks around at the present. These are his last words, and they are no better. In fact, they are the worst description yet. The present leads to blank despair. He sees himself as having been "destroyed" (v. 16) by God; "surrounded" and "engulfed" by God's terror (v. 17); separated from his "companions and loved ones," whom God has taken from him"; and, without God, to be all by himself in the "darkness" (v. 18). In the Hebrew text "darkness" is the psalm's very last word. So it is as if the writer reaches up and with a final, despairing effort of his will snuffs out the already fading light. Thus the psalm ends.

Always Trusting

Well, Heman's last word may be "darkness," but it does not have to be the last word for us. If we do not repent of sin and come to God through faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the darkness of death, hell and judgment is all we can anticipate. However, if we believe the Gospel and receive Jesus as our Savior, not only is the future changed from darkness to brightness and from death to life, the past is changed.

I have quoted Derek Kidner several times in this study. Let me quote him again as he takes a final look at this sad psalm: "With darkness as its final word, what is the role of this psalm in Scripture?"

1. "Its witness to the possibility of unrelieved suffering as a believer's lot. The happy ending of most psalms of this kind is seen to be a bonus, not a due." Even after we become Christians and should

know better, most of us still feel that God owes us a happy or easy life. But we are not owed an easy life. Therefore, the withholding of such a life from God's people is no proof of his displeasure, just as a happy life or the possession of riches is no sure proof of his approval.

2. "The psalm adds its voice to the 'groaning in travail' which forbids us to accept the present order as final." In spite of the kind of suffering described in this psalm, the Bible teaches that there is a moral order to the universe and therefore we look forward to a balancing out of good and evil and to a final redemption at the end.

3. "This author, like Job, does not give up. He completes his prayer, still in the dark and totally unrewarded. The taunt, 'Does Job fear God for naught?' is answered yet again." Like Job, the author has received no satisfactory answer for why his life has turned out as miserably as it has. But also, like Job, he does not "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Rather, he is seen clinging to God.

4. "The author's name allows us, with hindsight, to see that his rejection was only apparent....His existence was no mistake; there was a divine plan bigger than he knew, and a place in it reserved most carefully for him."²⁴

Thus, probably to his surprise, this painful psalm of lament is included, along with all the happier songs, in sacred Scripture.

NOTES

1. There are two caves to which the heading of Psalm 57 could refer: 1) the cave of Adullam (1 Sam. 22:1, 2); and 2) the cave at En-gedi (1 Sam. 24:1–22). However, it is probably the first because of the obvious connection of this with the preceding psalm.
2. H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 431. See also J.J. Stewart Perowne, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 450-451. Original edition 1878-1879. Psalms 56 and 59 also have a repeated refrain and can be outlined similarly.
3. For a good listing see Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, ed. Francis Bolton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), vol. 2, 173.
4. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: an Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms* (Leicester, England, and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 206.
5. Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: The Psalms, Isaiah 1-48*, part 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 48-49.
6. See Delitzsch, vol. 2, 202; Perowne, 478; Kidner, 218-220.
7. Leupold, 458.
8. Alexander Maclaren, *The Psalms*, vol. 2, Psalms 39-89 (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1893), 217, 218.
9. Marvin E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary: Psalms 51-100* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 116.
10. See Psalms 18:2, 21, 46; 19:14; 28:1; 31:2, 3; 40:2; 61:2; 62:2, 6, 7; 71:3; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1.
11. C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 2a, Psalms 58-87 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 40.

12. See also Psalms 15:1; 23:6; 43:3; 84:4. "During the time the tabernacle was still being moved from place to place we hear no such mention of dwelling in God's tabernacle or house. It was David who coined this expression for loving fellowship with the God of revelation, simultaneously with his preparation of a settled dwelling-place for the sacred Ark" (Delitzsch, 203.)

13. Spurgeon, 46.

14. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary on Books III-V of the Psalms* (Leicester, England, and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 316.

15. Leupold, 626, 627.

16. Perowne, 140.

17. For other references to Heman, presumably but not necessarily the same individual, see: 1 Chronicles 2:6; 6:23; 15:17-19; 16:41, 42; 25:1-6; 2 Chronicles 5:12; 29:14; 35:15.

18. Tate, 405.

19. Martin Marty in *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 68; quoted by Tate, 404.

20. Tate, 403.

21. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958), 38.

22. See Delitzsch, 23, 24.

23. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 318.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 319.

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