

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 1

PSALM 102

THE BACKGROUND

Psalm 102 is one of five psalms that in its heading or superscription is specifically identified as a prayer (see also Pss. 17; 86; 90; 142). The poem is the heartfelt cry of a desperate man reaching out to the God he knew intimately. Because of the subjects it addresses, Old Testament scholars have classified this psalm as both an individual lament and a penitential psalm.

This psalm is also one of 50 anonymous psalms within the book. Though the psalmist's name is not supplied in the introductory note, he is identified as an afflicted person. We do not know when he lived. He may have lived during the time when Jerusalem was destroyed and the inhabitants of Judah were taken into captivity in Babylonia. We do not know who the poet's enemies were, nor do we know the name of the disease or condition from which he suffered. What we do know is that in the midst of his suffering, he believed the Lord would hear and help him.

This musical prayer of a man who has encountered a mountain of physical and mental affliction serves as a model of how to deal with personal affliction, even when that affliction is caused in part by our own sins. In times of suffering we can affirm that God never changes and renew our confidence in Him.

1. LIFE IS EVOLVING (PSALM 102:1-11)

Verse 1: *LORD, hear my prayer; let my cry for help come before You.*

Psalm 102 begins with what is arguably the most important word in the Old Testament, God's personal name. Translated into English as *LORD*, the Hebrew word transliterated into English as *Yahweh*, is the personal name for the living God. The significance of that name was revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai (see Ex. 3:13-15). Because the name is associated with the time God set the Israelites free from their Egyptian slave masters, it is inseparably linked to the concepts of Divine power, mercy, and help.

From the very beginning of this poem, the psalmist established the fact that he related to the Lord intimately—on a first-name basis. This fact is fascinating, especially in light of the Israelite worship system. No ordinary Israelite was per-

mitted to approach God directly to make a sacrifice. Instead, each was required to go to a priest, who would then offer the sacrifice for the individual (see Lev. 1-7). However, through prayer, a person could bypass every human intermediary and speak directly with the God of heaven.

The psalmist's second word uttered in prayer is in the form of a command: *hear*. The term is expressive of the writer's confidence in his relationship with God. This psalmist asked the Lord to hear his prayer, which in this case was a cry for help. Yet God was not offended by the poet's plea any more than a loving parent resents his three-year-old child saying, "Help me, Daddy!"

Verse 2: *Do not hide Your face from me in my day of trouble. Listen closely to me; answer me quickly when I call.*

The psalmist was experiencing profound suffering in a day of trouble. As used here, the word *day* seems to refer to an extended period of time during which he was facing severe difficulties, not merely a 24-hour period. The reference to "days" in verses 3 and 11, as well as the poet's later description of a lengthy illness (Ps. 102:3-5) make that usage clear.

During his time of extreme need, the psalmist needed extreme help. So he turned to his greatest Source of help—the Lord—for the help that only He can give. The biblical writer knew he could not make it through this period of trouble alone; he needed the assurance that God was with him. He needed to know the Lord would not hide His face from him during his time of need. For God to show His face to a person signified He was fully aware of the person's situation and was present to give attention to the one in need.

Verse 3: *For my days vanish like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.*

In this verse and the next eight verses, the psalmist vividly described why he so desperately needed the Lord's help. He was being attacked on every side by problems that were beyond his ability to handle. He mentioned four different sources of his agony: physical affliction (102:3,5,7), mental anguish (102:4,9), persecution from his enemies (102:8), and Divine displeasure (102:10). In verse 3 the biblical writer focused on health issues as he noted that his bones burn like a furnace. Pain emanated from within his body, and he could do nothing to relieve it. He was disabled by constant affliction, and on the sidelines of life it seemed as though his days vanished like smoke. Instead of being healthy and active, he was forced to take a time-out and deal with brokenness in his body.

Verse 4: *My heart is afflicted, withered like grass; I even forget to eat my food.*

In addition to intensely painful physical problems, mental and emotional issues also plagued the psalmist. As he stated it, "My heart is afflicted, withered like grass." More literally, the psalmist stated, "My heart has been struck like the grass, and it has dried up."

In the viewpoint of ancient Israelite society, the heart was the internal organ associated with a person's mental (see Isa. 6:10), emotional (Ps. 4:7), and volitional (Eccl. 8:11) activities, in addition to the physical (Gen. 18:5). Apparently when the psalmist became physically ill, he also became depressed. Sickness of the body and emotional and mental depression are often partners in affliction.

The physical pain along with the depression created a further problem for the poet; he lost his appetite. He noted, "I even forget to eat my food." Of course, by denying his body the physical resources he needed for healing, he stressed his body even further and deepened the trench of depression in which he was situated.

Verse 5: *Because of the sound of my groaning, my flesh sticks to my bones.*

The biblical writer felt himself being tortured day after day by a painful disease. His description of the malady was made more vivid through the use of a special literary device known as synecdoche. Because of illness, the psalmist was not eating properly, and because he was not eating properly, he was losing weight. After he had gone many days without enough food, his body began to waste away noticeably. Perhaps to his horror, he noticed that his flesh was sticking to his bones—that is, the outlines of his bones had become clearly visible because he had lost so much weight. The biblical writer's distress could be both seen and heard by all who were near him.

Verse 6: *I am like a desert owl, like an owl among the ruins.*

As the disease lingered, the writer lost his connection with the daily activities that had been so much a part of his life. He was unable to work and so he lost contact with the people and routines that had given his life meaning. Loneliness and a sense of isolation set in.

In this state of illness and aloneness, the psalmist felt as though he was living in a desert—a circumstance that threatened his very existence. The damage inflicted on his body by the disease made it seem as though he was living among

the ruins—the decaying remnants of a once-robust frame.

The biblical writer's extended illness had affected his self-image as well. In this verse he compared himself to two different ritually unclean animals. The first of these was a desert owl. The Hebrew phrase also may be translated "pelican of the desert" or "vomiter of the desert," but the precise identity of the bird remains unknown. The second term, translated *owl* is actually the word for "cup"; it is an apparent reference to a small species of owl. The fact that both birds are mentioned by name in the Law of Moses as birds the Israelites were to avoid (see Lev. 11:17-18) suggests the psalmist felt like an outcast. In his depression he may have come to the conclusion that godly people would not want to be around him.

Verse 7: *I stay awake; I am like a solitary bird on a roof.*

The writer's words in this verse present further evidence of the physical and emotional struggles he faced during this dark time in his life. Perhaps because of the continuous physical pain and unrelenting emotional depression, the psalmist lamented, "I stay awake." Sleep had fled from him, a fact that only added to the discomfort he was feeling.

As in the previous verse, the biblical writer compared himself in this verse with a bird living apart from others. By using a general term for bird, the writer took the spotlight off the noun and emphasized the words around the word *bird*. He was not just a bird, he was a solitary bird. This term underlined the fact that the psalmist was experiencing an overwhelming sense of emotional and perhaps physical distance from others.

Reinforcing the idea of solitude is the phrase on a roof. The expression *on a roof* perhaps portrayed a feeling of being suspended between heaven and earth—above the level of humanity and below that of God. In other words the poet felt separated from both God and people.

Verse 8: *My enemies taunt me all day long; they ridicule and curse me.*

Yet the psalmist was not so isolated that he was completely ignored. Many were constantly thinking of his ill health—and rejoicing in it! The biblical writer had enemies who used his afflicted condition as an excuse to taunt him all day long. The Hebrew word translated *taunt* has various meanings, including "to mock," "to defame," and "to treat with scorn." Rather than providing sympathy in his hour of need, these opponents made fun of the poet. Perhaps they interpreted his broken health as evidence he was a hypocrite of the

highest order—one who had put on a show of godliness but actually had a closet full of secret sins for which he was being judged.

These enemies took full advantage of the psalmist's troubles to make life even more difficult for him. As he stated, "They ridicule and curse me." In the original language the verb rendered *ridicule* is expressed in a form that indicates ongoing, continuous activity. Each new day brought new verbal attacks against the biblical writer. Some of the attacks took the form of a curse or an oath uttered against him.

Verse 9: *I eat ashes like bread and mingle my drinks with tears*

Following a custom sometimes practiced in the ancient world, the psalmist sat or reclined on ashes during his time of severe affliction. Job also had acted in this manner when boils broke out on his body (Job 2:8). While people in ancient times might have believed the ashes aided in the healing process, they mainly served as a dramatic expression of grief and self-humiliation (see 2 Sam. 13:19; Esth. 4:1; Ezek. 27:30; Jonah 3:6). When the writer confessed, "I eat ashes like bread," he was probably indicating that some of the ashes on which he was sitting had blown onto the food that had been served to him.

Tears of grief and pain were also part of the psalmist's daily experience. The modern, highly effective pain relievers used to help people cope with the discomforts of disease and injury were unavailable to people in the ancient Near East. When they experienced pain, little could be done by family members or doctors to minimize the hurting. It was acceptable for men to cry in ancient Israel as an expression of deep emotion (see Judg. 20:26; 1 Sam. 20:41). The psalmist lamented that the streams of salty tears flowing from his eyes would mingle with his drinks.

Verse 10: *because of Your indignation and wrath; for You have picked me up and thrown me aside.*

Another reason for the psalmist's affliction was the Lord's indignation and wrath. The two Hebrew words underlying this phrase express the concept of intense anger. The biblical writer knew that God takes sin seriously; He cares for us so much that He cannot remain indifferent when we sin. Because our sins trouble Him deeply, He responds in judgment against them. The Law of Moses declared the Lord would sometimes use disease as a means of punishment for sins committed (Lev. 26:14-16); the psalmist understood that a root cause for his affliction was Divine judgment against him.

The price of sin is always greater than the fleeting pleasures gained from it. Although the biblical writer did not provide specific details, he clearly implied he had strayed from God's paths and was paying the price for his disobedience. The pains he felt were not merely physical and emotional; they were also spiritual. To him it seemed as though the Lord had picked him up and thrown him aside. The psalmist's sins had caused him to sit on the sidelines of life. For a while, at least, he was unable to participate actively in service to God.

Verse 11: *My days are like a lengthening shadow, and I wither away like grass.*

In his sickness and depression the psalmist felt his life slipping away. His days were like a lengthening shadow at day's end, and he was overwhelmed with a sense of advancing darkness. Life felt as though it was coming to an end. Events moved forward unstopably toward the midnight of death, and the poet sensed he could do nothing to prevent it.

Under these circumstances the biblical writer was given a clear view of the shortness or transitory nature of human life. Within the land of Israel the lush grasses of springtime typically turn brown and lifeless in a matter of days in the hot, dry days of summer. In the same way the afflicted psalmist felt himself wither away like grass—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. His statement expressed once again the imagery found in verse 4. Together these two references serve as a frame surrounding the writer's description of his miserable condition.

2. GOD IS TIMELESS (PSALM 102:12-14)

Verse 12: *But You, LORD, are enthroned forever; Your fame endures to all generations.*

In verses 3-11 the psalmist described his own miserable condition. He portrayed himself as a weak and frail person whose life was about to be cut off. Verse 12 marks the major turning point in the psalm, for beginning at this point the writer shifted the focus from himself to God and His greatness.

First in the psalmist's list of God's characteristics is the fact that He lives forever. Perhaps the Lord's everlasting existence was most impressive to the poet because he himself was so sickly. The biblical writer felt himself withering away like the grass of the field; but what a comfort it was for him to know that the God whom he knew and loved—the God who watched over his family and friends—this God would never grow old and die. The Lord was eternal.

Second, the Lord was enthroned. Kings were enthroned, and the psalmist viewed God as the ultimate King. As King, God possessed a kingdom and subjects. Indeed, the Lord's kingdom was a vast one—the entire universe. And his subjects included all creation; nothing was outside His ultimate control.

Third, the Lord possessed great fame. His reputation as an all-powerful Sovereign who could defeat Egypt, lead His people to freedom and provide food and water for them 40 years in the desert, give them the land of Canaan, and protect them from their enemies, was well-known. So remarkable were His deeds that those deeds would be made known to all generations.

Verse 13: *You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favor to her—the appointed time has come.*

In this verse the biblical writer added two more characteristics to his list of God's attributes. First, he noted that the Lord is a God who will arise. The famed, eternal King of the universe is not an absent ruler who has abandoned His kingdom; He is the God who acts decisively in the realm of time and space.

Furthermore, when God acts in behalf of His people, He does so with compassion. When God described Himself to Moses at Mount Sinai (see Ex. 34:6-7), the first adjective He used to depict Himself was "compassionate." The Hebrew term is closely connected with the word meaning "womb" and conveys the concepts of pity and mercy. In addition to being the God of compassion, the Lord is also One who shows favor; the Hebrew word translated show favor also can mean "be gracious" or "grant unearned privilege."

As the psalmist focused on God and His goodness, he also gained a wider perspective of God's work in the world. Previously the writer had centered his attention on his own problems and had asked God to help him personally. In this verse he expressed awareness that others around him needed the Lord's help as much as he did. What's more, he saw that God cared deeply about the problems of others. Consequently, he confessed that the Lord would have compassion on Zion, most likely a reference to the city of Jerusalem in this context. The appointed time had come, and God would surely act.

Verse 14: *For Your servants take delight in its stones and favor its dust.*

One reason the Lord would act compassionately toward His servants in need was because they shared His values.

The Lord had selected Jerusalem as the city in which He would cause His name to dwell (1 Kings 14:21), and it was the city of the great King (Ps. 48:2). The servants valued Zion because it was the place where they met with God. Therefore His servants took delight in its stones and favor in its dust.

3. REVEALING YOUR PURPOSE (PSALM 102:24-28)

The first verse in this section represents a return to the topic of verses 1-11, the matter of the psalmist's personal troubles. In verse 23 the biblical writer noted the Lord had "broken" his "strength in midcourse" and "shortened" his "days." Unstated but certainly implied is the fact that these acts of Divine judgment had come about because the psalmist had sinned against the Lord.

Verse 24: *I say: "My God, do not take me in the middle of my life! Your years continue through all generations.*

In this verse the psalmist uttered one last emotion-filled prayer on his own behalf. The heavy burden of affliction was crushing the psalmist's spirit to the point he could stand it no longer. Death seemed imminent. He felt as though he would die before his time, while still in the middle of his life. But the biblical writer knew it did not have to be so; his God was Lord over life and death. So in desperation he asked the Lord not to take him at that time.

Observe the contrast between "my days vanish" (102:3) and Your years continue in verse 24. The psalmist's confidence in God was bolstered by his knowledge of the One to whom he was praying. He knew God would always be there to help him, for the Lord's years continue through all generations.

Verse 25: *Long ago You established the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands.*

Not only would the Lord's living presence continue endlessly into the future, He existed before time began. As the psalmist confessed, the universe had come into existence because long ago the Lord established both the earth and the heavens. All creation bears testimony to God because it is the work of His hands. No doubt the psalmist found comfort during the dark days of his affliction in the many testimonies to God's existence he experienced in his world.

Verse 26: *They will perish, but You will endure; all of them will wear out like clothing. You will change them like a garment, and they will pass away.*

To the afflicted psalmist, his earthly existence seemed as temporary as a blade of grass (Ps. 102:4,11). But he was not

alone in this feeling. When he reflected on the eternity of God's existence, everything in the universe—from the majestic mountains of the earth to the starry host of heaven—was by comparison also temporary. All would wear out . . . like a garment and ultimately pass away.

If the psalmist was to secure a source of hope it would not be found in creation, for everything possessed the same fatal flaw and would someday perish. Any hope for eternity must rest in the Eternal One, and there is but One who will endure forever—the Lord.

Verse 27: *But You are the same, and Your years will never end.*

Not only do God's years never end, He will be forever the same. People, of course, are not that way. As we age, our bodies change; they wrinkle, wear out, and ultimately fail. Often our mental capacities diminish, and our personalities may change. But it is not so with the Lord. He is the ultimate Constant: the miraculous powers He demonstrated in the days of Moses He possesses in full measure today. The wisdom and intelligence He employed to design the universe are still fully at His command now. The values He expressed at Mount Sinai are the values He still holds today. The Lord's unwavering consistency serves as bedrock on which all who rely on Him can build their lives. It is that solid foundation that enables God's people to stand firm in all the trials of life.

Verse 28: *Your servants' children will dwell securely, and their offspring will be established before You.*

Aware of this truth, the afflicted psalmist could end his work on a triumphant note as he confessed, "Your servants' children will dwell securely." The God who had been there to listen to the biblical writer's desperate pleas would also be there as the source of ultimate hope for his children and all the other children brought into the world by his generation. The salvation and security God had been for the older generation, He would be for the younger generation.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 8

PSALM 1

THE BACKGROUND

This week's lesson examines the opening chapter of one of the most beloved books in the Bible. Though only six verses long, Psalm 1 serves as a fitting introduction to the entire Book of Psalms. This psalm concisely lays out some of the most important themes of the larger work and does so with elegant simplicity. Stated briefly, the psalm's central idea can be summarized as follows: delighting in God's Word and obeying it brings about lasting blessings from the Lord while disobeying it leads to destruction.

The psalm, like 33 other psalms, contains no superscription or heading. It does not indicate who wrote it and makes no reference to any historical events. Consequently the reader is to focus on the truths contained in it rather than on the circumstances surrounding it. Because of the guidance it offers for success in life, it is classified as a wisdom psalm. Contrasting two ways of life is also characteristic of wisdom literature. The value of Psalm 1 endures as a succinct guide to the life that pleases God.

1. THE LIFE OF THE HALOED ANGEL (PSALM 1:1-3)

Verse 1: *How happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path of sinners, or join a group of mockers!*

The psalmist began his description of the God-pleasing life by indicating one of its key benefits: living a life of obedience to God makes a person happy. The Hebrew word underlying the opening phrase in this psalm contains a plural noun and the phrase also could be translated, "Oh, the joys of the man." The truth is, living for the Lord produces many joys and gives many reasons to be happy.

The biblical writer then proceeded to describe key characteristics of the godly life. In order to do so he first provided three brief descriptions of what the God-pleasing life is *not*. In these descriptions the writer crafted images that follow a deliberate sequence to teach us something about the life of sin. The pattern can be seen most clearly in the Hebrew verbs he used in his three word pictures. Literally those three verbs are "walk," "stand," and "sit." The psalmist's points are important ones. First, the longer one walks in sin, the more likely it is that he or she will end up sitting in sin—that

is, the longer a person refuses to live for God, the more likely it is that the person will adopt ungodly ways permanently. Second, the longer one walks in ungodly counsel, the more likely it is that one will sit with mockers—in other words, the more a person values the ideas of godless people, the greater the chances that his best friends will be the enemies of God.

According to the biblical writer, the person who experiences lasting happiness in life is one who does not take the path of sinners. God has given us the awesome power of choice. The most basic choice in life is the selection between the path of righteousness and the path of sin. A person cannot walk down both roads at the same time, and only one leads to enduring joy—God's path.

The third practice that people should avoid is that of joining a group of mockers. The Hebrew word translated *mockers* also can be translated, "those who scorn God." A person who makes fun of God and the sacred truths found in the Bible is not the kind of a person with whom a Christian should become close friends. The apostle Paul warned Christians that "bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33b). Of course, the poet of Psalm 1 was not implying that Christians should never associate with non-Christians.

Verse 2: *Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night.*

In this verse the psalmist presented to the readers two keys to living a life that pleases God. Interestingly, the biblical writer suggested that the first key to success in living the godly life is not one that requires great wealth, skill, or sweat. For him, the beginning point of a life that brings lasting happiness, as well as great pleasure to God, is in the heart; it starts with the acquisition of an attitude—an affection. The godly individual possesses a delight . . . in the LORD's instruction. In the original language the phrase the LORD's instruction is "the torah of the Lord." Since the Hebrew word *torah* has several possible meanings, the phrase may refer to the Lord's instruction in general; the law of the Lord, in the sense of the teachings found in the first five books of the Old Testament; or to the written document known as the *torah*, that is, Genesis through Deuteronomy. In any case, a person who pleases God must love both the Lord and His revealed Word.

The second key to success in living a God-pleasing life relates to a discipline of the mind. Unlike the previous key, this one requires effort, but not of the physical sort. It in-

volves the development of mental habits and the proper use of the intellect. The biblical writer taught that the godly person who wants to find lasting happiness not only delights in the Lord's instruction but also meditates on it day and night. The Hebrew word translated *meditates* basically means "makes a low sound" or "mutter." The picture created by this word is that of an individual who is repeating memorized words under his breath throughout the day and evening. It suggests that any person who wants to live a godly life should make the effort to learn what God has said and then think deeply about its implications for daily living. By using the phrase *day and night* the psalmist was suggesting that God's Word should dominate a person's thoughts; it should be the one subject he or she spends more time thinking about than any other.

Verse 3: *He is like a tree planted beside streams of water that bears its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.*

In this verse the psalmist used the power of analogy to describe the God-pleasing life. In this word picture the godly person was compared with a healthy tree. Four different details were provided in the description, each displaying a different positive characteristic of the godly life. First, the righteous man was said to be like a tree planted beside streams of water.

The righteous person is like a tree that bears its fruit in season. Two observations about the life that pleases God can be made from this description. First, a person who serves God properly is one who lives a life that blesses and helps others; poetically speaking, he bears fruit. Second, he does so *in season*—literally, "in his time."

When a tree is planted by a source of abundant water, its leaf does not wither. Similarly, a Christian who stays in close fellowship with the Lord remains spiritually vigorous. The tree cannot keep itself green and healthy; it must receive resources from outside itself in order to thrive. A large apple tree, for example, requires about 50 gallons of water each day during hot weather to stay healthy. Similarly, a productive Christian life is one lived in conscious dependence on God; Christians can no more push God out of the schedule of their daily lives and remain spiritually productive than a tree can remain healthy without staying connected to a reliable source of large amounts of water.

As Christians mature in their relationship with God, they become more and more Christlike. As the believer follows

the Lord's leading, whatever he does prospers. The prosperity to which the psalmist referred is more internal; it is the prosperity of a person made spiritually wealthy with the hope, purpose, forgiveness, and love that can only come to people because of the work of Jesus.

2. THE RED-FACED DEVIL EXPOSED (PSALM 1:4-5)

Verse 4: *The wicked are not like this; instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.*

In verse 3 the psalmist had presented a positive metaphor depicting the life of the godly person; in verse 4 he provided another metaphor, this one negative, characterizing the life of the wicked. However, before he identified the metaphor, the poet noted *the wicked* are not like the righteous. The point is simple but profound; the choice not to live for God sets into motion consequences that negatively affect both a person's life here and hereafter. People's choices determine the values by which they live, the kind of activities in which they engage, and the destiny they will experience throughout eternity. The path you choose in life determines the kind of person you become.

The Hebrew term translated *wicked* refers to people guilty of violating the social rights of others. Such individuals were violent, oppressive, and greedy. They plotted against poor people and were even willing to murder to achieve what they desired. They also demonstrated dishonesty in their business practices and in the courtroom setting. Thus the wicked were a threat to the community. The inner lives of wicked individuals corresponded to their behavior. They expressed attitudes of haughtiness, treachery, viciousness, and instability.

In this verse the biblical writer employed a metaphor comparing the wicked with chaff, the seed coverings and other debris separated from wheat and barley seeds in the threshing process. In so doing he created an image that was easily understood by people in the ancient Near East, but one that is far removed from daily life in America today.

The brief but vivid word picture comes from the heart of agricultural life as it existed several thousand years ago throughout the ancient Near East. In the biblical world bread (not vegetables or meat) was the basic food of the majority of the population (excluding nomads and the wealthy). Wheat and barley were staple grains and provided much of the people's nourishment. These plants were ideal as food sources because they were hardy and produced a generous

number of seeds.

However, getting the seeds from the plants and preparing them so they could be eaten involved considerable work. At the end of the growing season farmers would first have to cut the plants in the field, then bundle them, and carry the bundles to a threshing floor. Threshing floors were work areas where the farmers performed the difficult task of threshing and winnowing the grain—that is, separating the grain seeds from the other plant parts. These workplaces were small areas, circular and perhaps 25 to 40 feet in diameter, that might be surrounded by a low stone wall. The area inside the stones was an unroofed flat surface that had been worn smooth through use over many generations.

Threshing was accomplished by spreading the wheat or barley out on the hard surface of the threshing floor and then either beating the plant materials with sticks, having oxen walk on them repeatedly, or using oxen to pull a threshing sledge—a thick, heavy panel of wood with sharp rocks embedded on the bottom side—over the grain.

Once the seeds were loosened from the rest of the plant materials, the farmers would then winnow the grain. Winnowing was the final step involved in separating the seeds from the rest of the plant, and it was accomplished by tossing the plant materials into the air using large flat implements resembling leaf rakes. The afternoon winds coming in from the Mediterranean Sea would blow away the chaff and straw, leaving the seeds on the threshing floor. When the biblical writer declared the lives of the wicked were as worthless as the chaff the wind blows away, he was saying at least two things. He indicated the wicked created much difficulty for others and also they were without value to others.

Verse 4 makes clear that God takes a person's choices seriously. He rewards good choices with the blessings expressed in verse 3 and He brings judgment on bad choices with highly undesirable consequences.

Verse 5: *Therefore the wicked will not survive the judgment, and sinners will not be in the community of the righteous.*

The psalmist rounded out his discussion of the wicked by moving from a description of their lack of value in the present to the destiny that awaits them in the future. To accomplish this goal he tapped into one of the most important truths about God found in the Bible—the reality that God is the Final Judge of all people (see Gen. 18:25). From Genesis to Revelation the Bible portrays the Lord as the One who

evaluates and makes ultimate judgments that determine the destiny of all creation. The God who separated light from darkness at creation, who spared Noah but destroyed the wicked in a worldwide flood, who destroyed the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah but spared Lot, and who wiped out Canaanite civilization because of the sins of its people—that God will someday judge all the people of the world.

The biblical writer linked his statement regarding the destiny of wicked individuals to the word picture of the previous verse with the important term therefore. In view of the fact that wicked individuals lived lives that were as troublesome and worthless as chaff, they would not survive the coming judgment—literally, they “will not stand in the judgment.”

The psalmist's words may remind us of similar words written in a later time by the apostle Paul. Referring to God's judgment of Christians' lives Paul stated: “If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become obvious, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If anyone's work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, it will be lost, but he will be saved; yet it will be like an escape through fire” (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Paul noted that Christians who choose to live lives as worthless as straw will find themselves in great distress on the day of God's final judgment. However, as dire as the consequences will be for unfruitful Christians, it will be even worse for unbelievers. As Paul stated elsewhere: “Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction” (Phil. 3:18b-19a).

God's day of judgment assures that sinners will not be in the community of the righteous. The psalmist's statements are reflected in Jesus' declaration that “those who have done wicked things” will face “the resurrection of judgment,” but “those who have done good things” will enjoy “the resurrection of life” (John 5:29). Genuine believers will enjoy the eternal blessings of being in a right relationship with the Lord. While the righteous will experience the blessing of God and fellowship with one another, the wicked will be in hell, eternally separated from God and His people (Rev. 21:8; 22:14-15).

3. IT'S YOUR CHOICE (PSALM 1:6)

Verse 6: *For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.*

The words in the final verse of this psalm elegantly tie together the themes presented in the first five verses. The vocabulary used to identify the godly and ungodly in this verse reflects the understanding that a person's relationship with God is closely connected with obedience to Him. Using a pair of words with sharply contrasting meanings, the biblical writer divided the people of the world into two groups: those who are righteous and those who are wicked. The Hebrew word translated *righteous* refers to those whose behavior conforms to God's ethical and moral stand. These people value obedience to God more highly than self-interest. The Hebrew word translated *wicked* denotes the exact opposite of the righteous. It refers to people who possess three different undesirable features: inner unrest and disharmony, enmity toward those whose behavior is godly, and a lifestyle at odds with God's revealed character.

The paths of the righteous and the paths of the wicked stand in strong contrast to one another. Those who devote their lives to knowing God and following His guidance find that the LORD watches over their way. The phrase *watches over* translates a Hebrew term that expresses the concept of intimate knowledge. The use of the word here suggests God is in touch with every detail of the lives of those who follow Him and He is in close fellowship with them.

The hallmark of the righteous person's path through life is close fellowship with the Author of Life. By contrast, the key characteristic of the way of the wicked is its movement away from life. The tragic truth regarding any lifestyle that rejects God and His Word is that it leads to ruin.

In verse 6 the contrast between the two ways is summarized. Understanding that the choice is between a personal, intimate relationship with God and ruin can encourage us to choose to live in close relationship with God. The options are clear and few: choose the path of life in fellowship with God or experience the tragedy of eternal ruin.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 15

PSALM 112

THE BACKGROUND

Psalm 112 is classified by scholars as a wisdom psalm. Its purpose was to teach people how to be truly successful in life, especially when evaluated from God's standpoint. This psalm describes the benefits and blessings of living a life that conforms to the Word of God. It concludes by briefly contrasting the godly person's life with the wicked person's life.

This psalm belongs to a group of 34 that contain no superscription or heading. It is anonymous and supplies us with no information about the historical situation in which it was written. It is also one of the 9 alphabet or acrostic poems in the Book of Psalms; each line of poetry in this psalm begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This alphabetical arrangement of the material made the composition more interesting to those who sang or read it as well as aided in the process of memorization.

1. A DIFFERENT DISPOSITION (PSALM 112:1)

Verse 1: *Hallelujah! Happy is the man who fears the LORD, taking great delight in His commandments.*

Psalm 112 begins exuberantly with Hallelujah!—a word of praise that expresses a profoundly important command. This word translates a two-word Hebrew directive spoken to a group of people. Its literal meaning is, "Praise the LORD!" This bright beginning celebrates the fact that God has created a world filled with blessings for those who live in close fellowship with Him, and it expresses appreciation where appreciation is due.

However, the biblical writer recognized that the God-pleasing life consists of more than just uttering praises to the Lord. Praise is a vital part of the Christian life, but praise alone is not enough to produce a mature, well-rounded Christian. An equally important trait is that one fears the LORD. In the original language the word translated *fears* expresses the concepts of supreme respect and awe, as well as sweaty-palmed, heart-pounding terror. The particular form of this word in Psalm 112:1 expresses ongoing activity. In other words, part of the spiritual DNA of a Christian is supreme respect for God and a dread of doing anything that would displease Him. Praise and fear—the two terms are

not contradictory but rather complementary. As Christians we should be excited about God but at the same time we should also have a profound reverence for Him, as well as an ultimate regard for His power, righteousness, and commitment to justice.

Surprisingly, the psalmist declared in this opening verse that the one who *fears the LORD* is also a happy person. The word *happy* translates a plural Hebrew noun that also could be translated "oh, the happinesses of" or "oh, the blessings of." Lasting joy and fulfillment in life begin with a proper relationship with the Lord, one that makes God the central focus of both praise and respect.

The biblical writer suggested that a second source of special happiness—great delight—for the godly person is to be found in the commandments of the Lord.

2. A HEART FOR OTHERS (PSALM 112:2-5)

Verse 2: *His descendants will be powerful in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed.*

In the opening verse the psalmist referred to the fact that blessings await the person who values God's Word as a treasure and lives a life of praise, reverence, and cheerful obedience to the Lord. In this verse he made the point that a life lived God's way benefits not only the person who lives it but future generations as well. As the poet stated, the godly man's descendants will be powerful in the land. In what ways can a godly life make a person's descendants powerful in the land? The answer is, in many ways: physically, mentally, socially, financially, and spiritually.

Perhaps the greatest legacy that the godly leave behind is a generation of those who will live upright lives after them. By passing along the values, ideals, and habits that produce responsible behavior and build strength of character in the next generation, godly people do indeed create descendants who will be powerful in the land. The generation raised by godly parents is truly blessed. The blessed generation in turn becomes the blessing generation as the power of their influence for the Lord is passed along by their children to succeeding generations.

Verse 3: *Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever.*

The biblical writer boldly declared that wealth and riches are in the house of those who fear the Lord and delight in His commands. Was he referring to actual material wealth when he stated this truth? Partially. It is certainly true that some of

the most outstanding men in the Old Testament were rich in material goods: Abraham (Gen. 13:2), Isaac (26:12-14), David (1 Chron. 29:1-5), Solomon (1 Kings 10:23), and Job (Job 42:12) were quite wealthy in their times. Within the New Testament the believers Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57) and Lydia (Acts 16:14) were probably quite wealthy. While it is true that wealth can be a hindrance to a right relationship with God (Mark 10:23), it is also possible to be wealthy and at the same time to live a life that honors God.

But even a cursory reading of the Bible makes clear that not all godly people become wealthy when measured by worldly goods. Many of the laws in the first five books of the Old Testament were specifically written to protect poor Israelites (see Ex. 23:6,10-11; Lev. 14:21; 19:10; 23:22; 27:8; Deut. 24:12-15). These laws were necessary because the Lord knew there would always be poor people in the land (Deut. 15:11). Jesus Himself lived in poverty (Matt. 8:20; 2 Cor. 8:9), and many of His followers were impoverished as well (Acts 6:1; 2 Cor. 8:1-2; Jas. 2:2).

The second half of Psalm 112:3 makes clear that the psalmist was referring to a second, even more important form of wealth that righteous people possess. This kind of wealth can be owned by the person who lives in a mud hut as much as it can be held by one who lives in a mansion. It is the riches of righteousness. It is the wealth of a life based squarely on the godly values expressed in a lifetime lived for the glory of God. Material assets can evaporate in a matter of months when house prices decline; they can be lost in days when stock markets melt down; they can be lost in minutes when fire destroys assets. However, the wealth of a life lived for the Lord endures forever. The psalmist's words foreshadow Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Collect for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal" (Matt. 6:20). Lives of joyous obedience to God produce rewards that last for eternity.

Verse 4: *Light shines in the darkness for the upright. He is gracious, compassionate, and righteous.*

The biblical writer reached into his bag of poetic images to present another invaluable benefit associated with living a life wholly devoted to the Lord. He noted that light shines in the darkness for the upright. The Hebrew word translated *light* is the same one used in Genesis 1:3 to describe what God created first on the first day of creation. The magnificent opening act of the universe's first day of existence is repeat-

ed on an intensely personal level in the lives of all who submit their lives to God: He brings light into their darkness.

What did the psalmist mean when he referred to light in this verse? One possible answer is the physical light that comes from the sun. At the end of Israel's period of enslavement in Egypt the Lord worked a series of miracles that led to their liberation from slavery. The ninth of these mighty acts of God brought an intense darkness over the land of Egypt that lasted three days (Ex. 10:22). However, the darkness did not afflict everyone who lived there: "all the Israelites had light where they lived" (10:23b). On this one occasion God's light literally shone in the darkness for His people. A supernatural physical light from the Lord also guided the people of Israel through the darkness during their wilderness wanderings (13:21-22).

But for most of us the light to which the psalmist referred is a kind of light that can be experienced only on the inside of our beings. It is the light of hope of which the prophet Isaiah wrote when he prophesied the coming of the Messiah (Isa. 9:2). It is the light of insight into mysteries (Job 12:22) and of guidance in making the difficult moral choices of life (Ps. 119:105).

Verse 5: *Good will come to a man who lends generously and conducts his business fairly.*

As the poet described essential characteristics of the righteous person he moved on to the vital topic of the use of material wealth. In verse 3 he noted that righteous people possess "wealth and riches." To what extent he was referring to material resources is a matter of debate; however, verse 5 makes clear that whether or not godly people are affluent, they are to use what they do have to help other people. Specifically, the psalmist indicated that a godly man is one who lends generously. The Hebrew phrase translated *lends generously* reads literally, "being gracious and lending." The writer left no doubt that the sharing of one's personal resources is a vital component of godly grace. Even as God has acted graciously toward us, we—as beings made in His image—must be gracious in our dealings with others. In the Law of Moses the Lord declared that if the nation of Israel was careful to obey Him, He would bless the nation in so many ways it would be able to "lend to many nations" (Deut. 28:12). Giving of our excess to those who lack what they need is at the heart of godliness. Jesus taught His disciples to sell their possessions and give to poor people. He declared when they did so, they would make for themselves

"an inexhaustible treasure in heaven" (Luke 12:33c). Without being as specific as Jesus, the psalmist declared in this verse that good will come to those who use their wealth compassionately.

3. AN INNER STRENGTH (PSALM 112:6-10)

Verse 6: *He will never be shaken. The righteous will be remembered forever.*

One who lives a life squarely based on the Word of God and His guidance will never be shaken. The same Hebrew verb appears in Isaiah 24:19 in reference to the earth being "violently shaken." Godly people will find an inner resource that enables them to demonstrate stability even during the earthquakes of life.

That inner resource—the Christian's secret, if you want to call it that—lies in the web of supportive relationships that develop within a person's life when he or she follows God's blueprint for living. Jesus taught that the two most important commands are to love God wholeheartedly and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:37-39). When Christians practice such love, they build a sturdy set of relationships with God and others. Of course, they could never practice this kind of love apart from the work of God's grace in their lives (1 John 4:19). This network of two-way connections with God and others in turn provides the sturdy interior support that enables Christians to remain stable in even the worst of times. A life lived in praise of God, one that celebrates and obeys God's Word, and that compassionately and generously assists needy persons generates the inner strength to stabilize a person in the most treacherous storms of life.

What's more, the righteous person who lives a life like the one described by the biblical writer will be remembered forever. Such a life will become an example for godly people of future generations to imitate. Such a person will become the inspiration that generates even greater acts of godliness in the years beyond that person's time on earth.

Verse 7: *He will not fear bad news; his heart is confident, trusting in the LORD.*

The person who fears the Lord (Ps. 112:1), who has anchored life in God and built it around biblical values, need never fear bad news. A life filled with the first kind of fear—the fear of the Lord—has no need for the second. No problem in our personal lives is too big or too complex for God to handle.

The biblical writer was not saying people who love and

serve the Lord will never receive bad news—the fact is, they will. Why? Ultimately, it is because of sin. We live on a planet damaged by the cumulative effects and influences of thousands of years of wickedness. The Bible teaches that human sin has affected every aspect of human civilization and the natural world. Jesus told His followers they would "have suffering in this world" (John 16:33), and throughout history they have experienced suffering and hardships. Bad news is an inevitable part of life on earth.

Verse 8: *His heart is assured; he will not fear. In the end he will look in triumph on his foes.*

Verse 8 continues the psalmist's celebration of the believer's victory over fear. The one who trusts in the Lord will not fear in the rocky times of life because his heart is assured. The Hebrew word translated *heart* can refer to a person's intellect, emotions, and will, the totality of a person's inner nature. The word translated *assured* also means "supported," and the form of the verb is one that indicates ongoing activity. It is as though the biblical writer was saying that God's people will not fear because their thoughts, feelings, and willpower all receive continuous support from the Lord.

Verse 9: *He distributes freely to the poor; his righteousness endures forever. His horn will be exalted in honor.*

In this verse the psalmist brought his description of the righteous person to a magnificent three-pronged conclusion. Each of the three points added a vital element to the central topic of this psalm, namely the characteristics and benefits of the godly life. In the New Testament the apostle Paul used parts of this verse to encourage the Christian community at Corinth in the matter of giving (2 Cor. 9:9).

The biblical writer noted first that the godly person has both a generous spirit and a sensitive social conscience: he distributes freely to the poor. These character traits were idealized for Christians in the New Testament as well. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expected His followers to "give to the poor" regularly (Matt. 6:2). The apostle Paul encouraged Christians to "do honest work" so they could have "something to share with anyone in need" (Eph. 4:28). In God's plan, godliness and generosity are always meant to go together.

A second characteristic of the godly life in Psalm 112:9 is that it exhibits a righteousness that endures forever. The psalmist's phrase can be understood in two ways. First, it may mean the godly person performs acts of righteousness that will benefit people for countless generations into the

future. Second, it can also mean the one who lives a life of righteousness will endure forever in heaven. In any case, it is also true that this aspect of the godly person's life makes that person like the Lord, in whose image that person was made (see Ps. 111:3b).

Finally, the righteous person's horn will be exalted in honor. The *horn* was an image used as a symbol of strength. When the biblical writer made this final observation regarding the righteous man, he was indicating that the godly person would be highly respected for his strength, especially his strength of character and the power of his positive example.

Verse 10: *The wicked man will see it and be angry; he will gnash his teeth in despair. The desire of the wicked will come to nothing.*

The final verse in this wisdom psalm emphasizes the value of living a life for God by contrasting it with the wicked man's life. Unlike the man who experiences joy and blessing from a life of devotion to the Lord, the wicked man is made angry by it. Though the righteous person's heart is filled with confident trust in the Lord, the wicked person will gnash his teeth in despair. The individual who lives a life of obedience to the Lord will enjoy true wealth and a righteousness that will endure forever, but the desire of the wicked will come to nothing.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 22

PSALM 116

THE BACKGROUND

Psalm 116 is anonymous, though clearly the writer was an Israelite and a devout follower of the Lord. The psalmist referred to a difficult experience he had faced in life; however, the absence of clear historical references means this psalm could have been written at almost any period in Israelite history after the temple to the Lord had been built in Jerusalem. That temple was erected during Solomon's reign and completed around 959 B.C. (see 1 Kings 6:37-38)

Scholars typically classify Psalm 116 as an individual thanksgiving psalm. It is one man's poetic expression of gratitude to the Lord for His lifesaving intervention during a time of deep personal crisis. Within Jewish tradition the work is part of the Egyptian Hallel, a series of six psalms (Pss. 113-118) that were chanted during the Passover celebration. Because these songs were sung during Passover, some scholars suggest Psalm 116 and other psalms in the Egyptian Hallel were sung by Jesus at the last supper (see Matt. 26:30).

1. I DON'T WANNA GROW UP (PSALM 116:1-8)

Verse 1: *I love the LORD because He has heard my appeal for mercy.*

The psalmist began this rich thanksgiving hymn with an emotional expression of appreciation to God: I love the LORD. The writer's comment was quite appropriate in view of what the Lord had done for him. The Lord had heard his appeal for mercy. The Hebrew word translated *appeal for mercy* is actually plural. The plural form of the term likely suggests the poet had repeatedly asked the Lord for mercy in times of need. The psalmist loved the Lord because He—the very Creator and King of the universe—had taken the time to listen to a mere human being.

The wonderful truth of verse 1 is that the One who is infinitely greater than the greatest earthly politician takes time to listen to us when we speak with Him. We love God because He always listens to us when we bring our concerns to Him.

Verse 2: *Because He has turned His ear to me, I will call out to Him as long as I live.*

The biblical writer's amazement and gratitude to God con-

tinued in this verse as he noted that the Lord had turned His ear to listen to his concerns. Why was this fact so important to the psalmist? Was it because the writer had friends and family members who would often ignore what he had to say or listen to him only halfheartedly? Was it because the poet knew he himself was prone to listen carelessly to his own wife and children? Whatever the reason, the Lord earned the writer's unending admiration through the simple act of listening.

God also earned the psalmist's confidence because He deliberately chose to listen to the poet. The psalmist knew he could call out to the Lord as long as he lived, and each time he did, the Lord would be there to hear. Translated literally, the Hebrew phrase rendered as long as I live is literally "in my days." The use of the plural noun "days" suggests the biblical writer intended to make his conversation with God a daily experience. It is as though he was saying, "As long as God's listening, I'll be talking to Him!"

Verse 3: *The ropes of death were wrapped around me, and the torments of Sheol overcame me; I encountered trouble and sorrow.*

There is an extremely practical side to daily conversations with God. By making the effort to fellowship with God in small increments many times a week, we find that over time our relationship with Him becomes profoundly deep and strong—strong enough to pull us through even the worst experiences life can throw at us; strong enough to hold us securely when every person has let go.

Perhaps the psalmist had such thoughts in mind when he said, "The ropes of death were wrapped around me, and the torments of Sheol overcame me." The images were poetic, but the trouble was real and threatened to overwhelm the writer. The word picture of ropes that were wrapped around him may evoke an image of a person who has had his hands and feet tightly bound and so has become virtually paralyzed. As the trouble continued in the psalmist's life, sorrow became a dominant part of his experience. Depression set in, and in that darkened state of mind the torments of Sheol—the realm of the dead—filled his thoughts and for a time even overcame him.

Verse 4: *Then I called on the name of the LORD: "LORD, save me!"*

At the very time some might contemplate suicide, the psalmist called on the name of the LORD. The phrase *the name of the LORD*—literally, "the name of Yahweh"—occurs more than 80 times in the Old Testament. Within Israelite so-

ciety in the Old Testament world *the name of the LORD* was a phrase equivalent in meaning to "the LORD Himself." In other words, what the writer was saying in the opening line of this verse was, "I called on the LORD." The biblical writer was not trying to say that the mere utterance of a word—*Yahweh*, the Lord's name—magically delivered him from his troubles. Instead, what the psalmist was saying was that during his time of trouble, he reached out to a living, caring Being—*Yahweh*, the ultimate Savior of the world—for help.

The psalmist's words to the Lord were few and passionate, "LORD, save me!" The writer asked for outside assistance because he knew he could not save himself. The psalmist asked the LORD for help because he knew the Lord was the only One who could deliver him in his hour of need.

Verse 5: *The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is compassionate.*

In this verse the biblical writer provided three reasons he was so sure that God would be there to help. First, the LORD is gracious. The word *gracious* refers to favors extended to someone on the basis of the giver's kindness, not on the basis of the recipient's worthiness.

Not only is the Lord gracious, He is righteous (see Ps. 11:7). The Hebrew concept of righteousness includes moral uprightness and fairness. God always does what is right and rewards those who follow righteousness. Because the psalmist had done what was right, he was confident the Lord was there to provide him with the help he needed.

Third, the psalmist loved and trusted in God because He is compassionate (see Ex. 34:6). The Hebrew word translated *compassionate* is related to the Hebrew term for *womb*. Even as the womb is a place where an unborn child is cared for in every way so that the child may grow and develop, so God is a Being who lovingly provides for the needs of human beings.

Verse 6: *The LORD guards the inexperienced; I was helpless, and He saved me.*

The biblical writer delighted in the fact that the LORD guards the inexperienced. The Hebrew term underlying *guards* was an important one in that culture. It referred to the action of a shepherd in protecting the lives of the sheep (Gen. 30:31, translated "keep") and of the activity of military sentries (Josh. 10:18, translated "guard"). For the psalmist, God was the ultimate Shepherd and Guardian who watched out for the inexperienced. The term rendered *inexperienced* refers especially to those who are ethically

naive and morally immature.

With great humility the psalmist admitted he also had benefited from the Lord's protective actions. As he noted, "I was helpless, and He saved me." The psalmist's willingness to admit he was helpless opened the way for incredible change in his life. By owning up to his own insufficiency, he freed himself to receive the Lord's help. And when God came into the psalmist's life, he experienced genuine salvation. Needy people today who acknowledge their weakness also can receive help from God.

Verse 7: *Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.*

Though the psalmist had experienced God's salvation, he still faced battles in his spiritual life. However, he didn't try to hide this fact; with unusual courage the biblical writer had provided readers with a view of his inner struggles. Sometime before he wrote this psalm, he had been through a harrowing, near-death experience in which he had felt as though "the ropes of death were wrapped around" him and he was confronted with "the torments of Sheol" (Ps. 116:3). However, in the midst of his fear he had found a place of rest—and that refuge was in the Lord.

Verse 8: *For You, LORD, rescued me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.*

In the psalmist's time of trouble he not only remembered to trust in God, but also he remembered to talk to Him as well. In this verse the psalmist spoke directly to the Lord, the one Being who had always been present to help him in times of difficulty. In a prayer filled with happy remembrances, the psalmist recited a list of ways the Lord had helped him. The Lord had rescued him from death, from sorrow and tears, and from trouble—stumbling. The psalmist could find rest in his present circumstances because he was relying on the One who had been there for him in every previous difficulty.

2. IN GOOD TIMES AND IN BAD (PSALM 116:9-11)

Verse 9: *I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living.*

Here the writer made another resolution in the psalm, supplementing the one he had made in verse 2. Whereas earlier he had promised to call upon God as long as he lived, here he pledged to walk before the LORD as long as he was in the land of the living. The verb *walk* employed expresses more than the concept of moving one's legs; it conveys the idea of walking down the path of life—that is, of living. In the Hebrew language the term translated *before* literally means

"to (the) face of." The idea was that to be *before* someone was to be in the proximity of his face. To *walk before the LORD* therefore means to live a life characterized by close, face-to-face fellowship with Him.

Verse 10: *I believed, even when I said, "I am severely afflicted."*

The psalmist's commitment to live a God-pleasing life did not create a magical force field around him that insulated him from any kind of trouble. To the contrary, even when the writer's commitment to God was at its strongest, he was still severely afflicted.

Verse 11: *In my alarm I said, "Everyone is a liar."*

In this verse the writer contrasted his attitude toward God in times of trouble with his attitude toward people under the same circumstances. When he was experiencing alarm—the Hebrew term also could be translated "terror"—he had found the Lord to be totally worthy of trust. The psalmist had deep confidence that God's leadership would guide him through his terrorizing affliction. By contrast, the biblical writer had found suggestions coming from people to be dangerously unreliable. In fact their advice was so misguided he branded everyone who had counseled him a liar. Had they advised him to pray to other gods for help? To trust in himself? To follow a foolish course of action? The psalmist did not relate that information; but however sincere other people's efforts to help the troubled writer of this psalm may have been, they pointed him down a wrong path. When faced with a choice between God's revealed will and human advice, the psalmist would choose God's way.

3. CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE (PSALM 116:12-19)

Verse 12: *How can I repay the LORD all the good He has done for me?*

As the psalmist transitioned into the final portion of this thanksgiving psalm, he asked the question, "How can I repay the LORD all the good He has done for me?" The writer knew he had received incredible blessings from the Lord. He felt compelled to return to the Lord something of equivalent value. But the Lord had saved the psalmist's life; in his helpless state God had rescued him from death. So what could the psalmist possibly give the Lord that would be the equivalent of what the Lord had given him? Clearly the writer knew there was nothing he could give his Maker that would be equivalent in value. If a gift were to be given, it would have to be in the form of something other than gold or silver.

Verse 13: *I will take the cup of salvation and worship the LORD.*

In this verse the psalmist suggested two key means of responding to the Lord for His salvation. First, he could gratefully acknowledge the Lord's saving work in his life. God had saved a needy human being from certain death. It was appropriate, therefore, for the writer to make a sacrifice in honor of the Lord and His saving work. Though the cup of salvation is never mentioned in the Bible as an aspect of Israelite sacrifices, biblical scholars see here a reference to the drink offering. The cups of liquid—wine, blood, or oil—may have been symbolically raised up toward God as an act of worship (see Lev. 14:12; 23:10-14). To *take*—the Hebrew term also means "lift"—*the cup of salvation* would be a form of giving thanks to God for His saving work.

Along with making a sacrifice to the Lord in honor of His salvation, the psalmist would also worship the LORD. The literal rendering of the Hebrew phrase is "call on the name of Yahweh." Yahweh alone, not some pagan god, would be given credit for the Divine intervention in the psalmist's behalf.

Verse 14: *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all His people.*

The biblical writer noted a further step he would take in response to the Lord's acts of mercy. He would fulfill his vows to the LORD. Vows were promises made to the Lord voluntarily. They were usually made during times of personal crisis. A person would solemnly pledge to do something for God if God helped the person resolve the threatening situation in a favorable way (see 1 Sam. 1:11).

With God's help, the psalmist had made it through a harrowing crisis. In the midst of the ordeal he had apparently made a vow to God. The Lord had wonderfully delivered the writer from his troubles; it was time for the writer to fulfill his vows to the LORD. What's more, he would do it in the presence of all His people. It would be done in public for all to see, as an open testimony to the greatness and goodness of the God who acts to save His people.

Verse 15: *The death of His faithful ones is valuable in the LORD's sight.*

The Lord had graciously delivered the psalmist so that he remained alive on earth (Ps. 116:9). But even if he had not lived, that would not mean that God was not good or that He was uncaring. With unfathomable love God cares for all His followers, whether they continue in the land of the living or whether they die. Nothing of godly peoples' lives is wasted;

even their deaths are turned into prized assets in God's kingdom. He often uses the deaths of faithful Christians to inspire others to greater godliness and to lead others to a destiny-changing encounter with God.

Verse 16: *LORD, I am indeed Your servant; I am Your servant, the son of Your female servant. You have loosened my bonds.*

With gratitude the psalmist offered himself as the Lord's servant or "slave"—or lower still, a servant who was the son of a female servant. So the psalmist was content to be the lowest of the Lord's slaves. Yet to be the Lord's slave was to be permanently connected with the most important Being in the universe. Ironically, slavery to the God of salvation remains the only way to experience real freedom. The God who had once set Israel free from Egyptian slavery had also loosened the biblical writer's bonds. In slavery the psalmist found true liberty, and we can do the same today.

Verse 17: *I will offer You a sacrifice of thanksgiving and will worship the LORD.*

Verse 13 seemingly referred to a drink offering made to the Lord; this one referred to a food offering—a sacrifice of thanksgiving. While the specific item being presented before the Lord here was different, the underlying purpose was the same: to worship the LORD.

Verse 18: *I will fulfill my vows to the LORD, in the very presence of all His people,*

As if to underscore his determination to keep the promises he had made to the Lord, the psalmist repeated the commitment he had expressed in verse 14. The servant would glorify his Master.

Verse 19: *in the courts of the LORD's house—within you, Jerusalem. Hallelujah!*

The final verse of the psalm identified the location where the Lord's servant would serve his Master: in the courts of the LORD's house in Jerusalem. Fittingly, the psalm concludes with a joyous invitation for all the readers to join with the servant in service to the Lord. The word hallelujah can be translated "praise Yahweh!" By fulfilling this command the readers, too, can offer a sacrifice of praise to the Lord and Master of all.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR NOV. 29

PSALM 119

THE BACKGROUND

Psalm 119 is one of the most outstanding chapters in the Bible. Classified as a wisdom psalm, it is both the longest chapter in God's Word (176 verses) and the Bible's best-known alphabetic acrostic poem. As an alphabetic acrostic, it is divided into 22 eight-verse units, with the verses in each unit beginning with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The central topic of this remarkable psalm is the Law of God and its tremendous value for living. Accordingly, the unnamed poet used eight different Hebrew words to refer to God's guidelines for living: "law," "decree," "precept," "statute," "command," "judgment," and two different terms rendered "word."

1. A MATTER OF THE HEART (PSALM 119:1-8)

Verse 1: *How happy are those whose way is blameless, who live according to the law of the LORD!*

The opening word of this longest psalm is the same as the opening word of the biblical book in which it is located. Translated *how happy*, the Hebrew word also can be rendered into English "oh, the joys of." The biblical writer's use of a plural noun here is deliberate and significant. By using this term as the first word in this chapter, he created a headline to be read and experienced by the people of God through all generations: a life lived in obedience to God's Word is a life filled with joy! Jesus extended this truth to His followers when He stated, "I have spoken these things to you so that My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

Throughout the ages God's plan has been for His people to experience rich joys; these joys are found by walking the path of obedience to Him. What is the path of obedience? According to the biblical writer, it is living according to the law of the LORD; this path is the way that is blameless. The word *blameless* when used of human beings conveys the concept not of sinless perfection but of being wholehearted in one's commitment to the Person and requirements of the Lord.

Verse 2: *Happy are those who keep His decrees and seek Him with all their heart.*

The psalmist linked this verse to the previous one by beginning verse 2 with the same word he used to initiate verse

1: *happy* or "oh, the joys of." According to this verse, joys come to those who do two things: keep His decrees and seek Him with all their heart. Living only to follow rules leads to dead legalism. People who want to know the joys of true godliness must do more than obey God's written Word; they must seek fellowship with the God of the written Word. To seek Him with all one's heart is to seek to connect with God at every level—with one's emotions, intellect, and will—with one's whole being.

Verse 3: *They do nothing wrong; they follow His ways.*

With this verse the biblical writer added a vital aspect to his portrait of the God-pleasing life. According to the psalmist, the person who receives God's approval is not just one who does good things and is in fellowship with Him; it is the person who is wholeheartedly committed to Him.

Verse 4: *You have commanded that Your precepts be diligently kept.*

The psalmist noted that God had commanded His precepts be diligently kept. Obedience to the Lord's revealed will is not an option for God's people. We who claim to be followers of the Lord must recognize that God, much like a military commander, has issued orders that He expects us to follow. What is more, His words are to be *diligently kept*.

Verse 5: *If only my ways were committed to keeping Your statutes!*

In verse 5 the biblical writer continued the imagery of verses 1 and 3, comparing a person's conduct in life with a way or path. Here the psalmist referred to his choices and actions as ways. He knew his ways could take him in one of only two directions in life—either closer to God or more distant from Him. Wisely, the writer expressed his wholehearted desire to be committed to keeping the Lord's statutes. The Hebrew word rendered *committed* also means "stable" or "unwavering." The psalmist desired to be absolutely steadfast to God's expressed will for him. In verses 4-5 the writer used a form of the same Hebrew word rendered "keep"—"to act as guard." The term describes how he wanted to respond to the Divine guidance found in God's Word.

Verse 6: *Then I would not be ashamed when I think about all Your commands.*

One of the important concerns in the ancient Near East was honor. Honor was highly valued in those societies, and people would willingly die before they would allow themselves to be dishonored or shamed. In this verse the biblical writer knew the most crucial way to avoid being shamed was

by committing himself deeply to keeping the Lord's statutes. And the secret to keeping them was an event that took place inside of a person, namely thinking about all God's commands—literally, "looking to all Your commands."

The biblical writer understood that partial obedience to God's commands would not be enough to avoid bringing shame on himself. Employees today who do only part of what their supervisors ask them to do can expect to be rebuked, not honored. Similarly, to maintain his honor the psalmist would need to follow all God's commands.

Verse 7: *I will praise You with a sincere heart when I learn Your righteous judgments.*

One outcome of a proper knowledge of God's Word is praise directed toward Him. God's marvelous guidance transforms a person's life. It helps a person avoid behavioral pitfalls; it inspires and guides the believer. However, the psalmist did not want to praise the words themselves. Properly, his desire was to praise the One who issued the sacred words.

As the biblical writer praised the Lord, he would do so with a sincere heart, literally, "in straightness (uprightness) of heart." The psalmist would not waffle in his praise for the God who guided, blessed, and transformed his life. His praise might be viewed by some as being overly direct and artless, but he would gladly give it sincerely and straightforwardly.

Verse 8: *I will keep Your statutes; never abandon me.*

The psalmist brought this first stanza of Psalm 119 to a conclusion on a high note as he confessed to the Lord that he would faithfully keep His statutes. Earlier he had said that keeping God's commands brought personal joy (Ps. 119:1-2). He recognized God commanded His commands be kept (119:4). Then the poet had expressed a desire to keep God's commands (119:5). However, it is in verse 8 that he affirmed he would actually do that which produces joy, pleases God, and fulfills his own personal desires.

Again in verse 8 the writer used a form of the Hebrew word translated *keep*. Because he had committed himself to keeping the Lord's commands, he could confidently ask the Lord to keep and never to abandon him. The expression *never abandon me* is literally "do not abandon me unto exceedingly." This word pair often means "extremely." In this verse the biblical writer was saying, "Absolutely do not abandon me!"

2. CONSIDER THE COST (PSALM 119:9-11)

Verse 9: *How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping Your word.*

The biblical writer began the second of the 22 sections of this psalm by posing a question that has been raised by every generation of young men who are serious about living for God: How can a young man keep his way pure? The question is a crucial one, especially when we consider the internal and external pressures that can so easily push a young man away from God.

There is a way to win against the forces that can so easily push a person into slimy pits of sin. In this verse the psalmist gave us the hint that worked for him and still works for us today: by keeping God's word. Here again the writer employed the word *keep*, also translatable as "guard." It is possible for teenagers to remain pure by thinking of themselves as military guards following the orders of a superior, in this case the Lord God Himself.

Verse 10: *I have sought You with all my heart; don't let me wander from Your commands.*

As far as the Bible is concerned, living for God has never been a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. In fact, the only acceptable way to live a life for God is to do it the way the psalmist did. He sought the Lord with all his heart. The heart is the center of the physical, mental, and spiritual life of an individual. From a biblical perspective, the heart represents the intellect, emotions, and will, or the whole person. When you seek the Lord with all your heart, you use the rational powers of your mind to try to know God and understand His Word. When you wholeheartedly seek the Lord, you also get excited about the presence and power of God and His liberating Word. When you pursue God with all your heart you make your will like steel-reinforced concrete, directing it to do what the Lord has instructed you to do—even when it's unpopular.

Even with a determined pursuit of the Lord, the psalmist knew he could not succeed on his own. He needed supernatural help to fulfill his heart's desire to obey the Lord. Therefore he boldly requested help from the only place from which victorious aid could come—the Lord. As the poet strongly expressed it, "Don't let me wander from Your commands."

Verse 11: *I have treasured Your word in my heart so that I may not sin against You.*

How could the psalmist keep from wandering from God's commands? His answer was simple—he would put the Word

of God inside himself—that way he would be less prone to wander from it. As the psalmist noted, "I have treasured Your word in my heart." God's Word, living in his heart and silently instructing him there, would help the psalmist not to sin against Him. The Hebrew word translated *treasured* is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe what Moses' mother did to protect him from the Egyptians, where it is translated "hid" (Ex. 2:2). Even as a mother values and treasures her beloved child enough to take great risks on the child's behalf, so we should value the treasure God's Word is in our lives.

3. FOLLOWING THE LEADER (PSALM 119:12-16)

Verse 12: *LORD, may You be praised; teach me Your statutes.*

The biblical writer continued his expression of lasting appreciation to the One who had provided him with guidance, joy, and purity as he declared, "LORD, may You be praised." This Hebrew phrase also may be rendered, "Blessed are You, LORD." The word *praised* (or "blessed") translates a word closely related to the term for "knee." In the ancient Near East, people were expected to bend the knee and bow down at ground level in the presence of an important person. After expressing praise to the Lord, the psalmist brought a request to Him: "Teach me Your statutes." In this verse the psalmist asked the Author of the truths that had transformed him to come and teach him personally.

Verse 13: *With my lips I proclaim all the judgments from Your mouth.*

As the biblical writer learned timeless truths from the Lord, he shared those truths with others. In his own words, "With my lips I proclaim all the judgments from Your mouth." What the psalmist got from God he gave to others. What we learn from His mouth we proclaim with our lips.

Verse 14: *I rejoice in the way revealed by Your decrees as much as in all riches.*

The psalmist had made a profound discovery: the guidance through life provided by God's decrees was worth as much as . . . all riches. The biblical writer could rejoice in the value of God's revealed Word.

Verse 15: *I will meditate on Your precepts and think about Your ways.*

The psalmist knew that no matter how valuable the Word of God may be, it would help him only if he applied it to his life. However, to do so he first needed to internalize the truths of God; only then could he understand them and know how to apply them to his daily life.

How can a person transfer God's Word from the pages of the Bible into his or her life? A person can do so only by doing what the biblical writer did. In the prayerful meditation of verse 15 he revealed his plan: "I will meditate on Your precepts and think about Your ways." From the treasure house of memorized Scripture stored within him (Ps. 119:11) he was free to call up God's words at any time and meditate on them. The more he reflected on God's Word, the more he came to understand both its meaning and its application to life.

Verse 16: *I will delight in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.*

In this concluding verse of the second section of the psalm, the writer once again expressed his sheer delight in God's statutes: "I will delight in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word." The human brain is an amazing creation. One of the many really useful things it does is prioritize information that is sent to it. Low priority matters, like what you wore three Saturdays ago, it soon forgets. However, it does remember information that is considered really important. The psalmist knew the Lord and cherished His Word. Every syllable was a treasure, and the poet was determined to make sure he would never *forget* any of it.