

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 4

PSALM 23

THE BACKGROUND

This short psalm is one of over 70 compositions attributed to David in the Book of Psalms. It is classified in its superscription or heading as a “psalm,” probably indicating a song meant to be sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument, such as a lyre or handheld harp, an ancient counterpart to the modern guitar. Only 57 words long in the original Hebrew language in which it was written, this psalm ranks as one of the most-quoted Old Testament passages and one of the most well-known sections of the entire Bible.

This beloved psalm makes no reference to specific events in Israelite history or in David’s personal life. Instead it is a poetic art gallery hung with two pictures: one of the Lord as David’s Shepherd, the other of Him as David’s Host.

1. HE GIVES PEACE (PSALM 23:1-2)

Verse 1: *The LORD is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack.*

The opening verse of this short psalm is probably the most familiar verse in the Book of Psalms. No wonder the psalm is so popular because the four Hebrew words that make up this verse contain some of the most comforting truths in all the Word of God. They also provide one of the clearest insights into the heart of David’s faith.

Appropriately, the first word in this verse—translated here as *the LORD*—may be considered the single most important word in the Old Testament. It is the personal name of God often written in English as *Yahweh* [YAH weh]. The significance of this name was revealed to Moses at Mount Horeb, another designation for Mount Sinai (see Ex. 3:13-15). The name was considered so sacred in Jewish as well as in early Christian religious life that no ordinary pious person would dare to pronounce it.

In spite of the fact that Jews of later generations were fearful to speak this sacred name, David was not hesitant to use it. He boldly addressed the Lord by His revealed name, the name the Israelites associated with the God who gave Israel the great Sinai covenant. It was Yahweh—the Lord—who led the people of Israel to freedom from Egypt; it was He who guided them safely through the desert and supplied them with food and water. The psalmist felt so close to the Lord that he was comfortable speaking to Yahweh by name regu-

larly in his prayers and songs. By referring to God using His personal name, David made clear that he was claiming the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses as his own God.

The second word in the Hebrew text of this verse, rendered in English as *my shepherd* defines David’s relationship to the Lord. For David, the Lord was his *shepherd*, not his peer, equal, or “pal,” not his Divine genie or slave, and not his cruel master. As *shepherd*, the Lord was David’s Guide and Caretaker and the Supplier of all that David needed. The Hebrew word translated *my shepherd* is actually a participle, a verbal adjective that indicates a continued state or activity. David was confident that the Lord was continuously, consistently involved in the task of shepherding him.

David knew about shepherds; after all, he was one before becoming king (see 1 Sam. 16:11-13; 17:15,34-35). He also knew there were good shepherds and bad ones. Good shepherds knew the needs of their sheep and had the skill and commitment to meet those needs. For David, the Lord was the ultimate Good Shepherd; therefore, as one under His protection, he could confidently say, “There is nothing I lack.”

Verse 2: *He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.*

As the psalmist continued his analogy of shepherd and sheep, he declared that the great Heavenly Shepherd let him lie down in green pastures. The Hebrew verb translated *lets . . . lie down* carries with it the idea of causation. This concept is expressed in various modern English versions as “He makes me lie down.” Because the Lord is the Good Shepherd, He brings about good in the lives of His sheep.

In David’s short (three Hebrew words) statement regarding the Lord and green pastures, he encapsulated an amazing array of claims about the Lord’s care for His people. The Lord protects, calms, unifies, and provides for them. Who wouldn’t want the Lord as their Shepherd, when He makes it possible for His children to lie down in green pastures?

David also declared that the Lord led him beside quiet waters. During Old Testament times shepherds had to work hard to provide water for their animals. Since streams and rivers were scarce in much of the biblical world, shepherds often had to draw water by hand from wells and pour it into troughs for the animals to drink (see Ex. 2:16-17). This work was hard and sweaty; but the shepherd had to do it to keep each of the animals healthy and strong.

In the Book of Philippians Paul declared, “God will sup-

ply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). It is surely true that as we “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” all the things we need “will be provided for” us (Matt. 6:33).

Psalm 23, written in first person, is David’s personal affirmation of faith. Using the imagery of a shepherd with his sheep, he described his relationship with the Lord. Everything we truly need the Lord can provide, and we acknowledge this reality by trusting Him to provide for our needs.

2. HE PROVIDES DIRECTION (PSALM 23:3-4)

Verse 3: *He renews my life; He leads me along the right paths for His name’s sake.*

Because the Lord met every need in both the seen and unseen parts of the psalmist’s life, he could confidently say, “He renews my life”—or as the literal Hebrew colorfully expresses it, “He brings back my soul.” David had experienced many needs during his lifetime, but he had also found that the Lord took care of every one of them. There were times when David was in physical danger and death seemed certain, but the Lord engineered circumstances to save his life (see 1 Sam. 23:24b-28; 2 Sam. 21:15b-17). There was a time when David experienced deep heartache because of the fatal sickness of an infant son, but the Lord brought him peace in his hour of loss (see 2 Sam. 12:15b-23). There was a time when David experienced agony because of dark sins he had committed, but the Lord forgave him and allowed him to make a new start in life (Ps. 51:1-17).

It is not the responsibility of sheep under the care of a shepherd to find their own way to new pastures; that task is the shepherd’s job. Left to themselves, sheep will return to the same grazing area time and time again. When they do so, too much of the vegetation in the field is eaten, and the field can become damaged to the point where it is of no value for the sheep.

A wise shepherd makes sure his sheep are frequently led to different pastures to protect both the land and the animals. Because the Lord was David’s Shepherd, He was David’s leader who led him along the right paths, paths that were right both for David’s best interests and the larger interests of the Heavenly Shepherd. The Hebrew expression underlying the English phrase *along the right paths* also can be translated “in paths of righteousness.” Understood in this way, it becomes clear that David was using the shepherd/sheep image primarily in the spiritual sense. The Lord was

guiding David to live a life of obedience to His teachings—one of integrity marked by high moral standards, love, and humility before God.

According to David, the Lord guided him in the right paths for His name's sake. In the ancient world, one's name represented one's character or reputation. A shepherd's reputation was established on the basis of how well he took care of his sheep and looked after his pastures. The healthier and more flourishing the flock and pastures were, the greater the shepherd's reputation. The Lord took good care of David for reasons beyond His love for the psalmist; He also did it to demonstrate to the world His power and love.

Verse 4: *Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.*

As shepherds lead their sheep to the grazing areas best for their flocks and the environment, sometimes it is necessary to pass through the darkest valley to get to the proper destination. Sheep can find themselves in dark valleys, not necessarily because they have wandered away from their shepherd but because that is where their shepherd has led them. Walking in “the right paths” (Ps. 23:3) does not always keep us out of the dark valleys.

The Hebrew word translated *darkest* has sometimes been brought into English as “the shadow of death.” The Hebrew word occurs 18 times in the Old Testament, and in more than half of these occurrences it is used as a parallel to “darkness” or “shadow.” It can refer to any distressing experience.

The shepherd needed to be watchful when he led his sheep into the dark valleys because predators often were found in them. The good shepherd defended the flock from any lions, bears, wild dogs, or other predators that might be lurking there. Sheep cannot defend themselves well against their attackers. Similarly, David knew he did not have the resources to defeat all the foes that might come against him in life, but he did not trust in his own strength to save him. He was so sure of the Lord's protection that he could confidently say, “I fear no danger.” The Hebrew word that means *danger* also means “evil.” The alternate translation, “I will fear no evil,” emphasizes the Lord's spiritual oversight in the psalmist's life.

The reason for David's peace was simple; he was sure of God's abiding presence with him. As he stated it: “You are with me.” God was more than a “silent partner” in David's life; He actively expressed His sovereignty in various ways.

The psalmist noted two of those ways.

First, David stated that the Lord's rod comforted him. A shepherd's rod was a long hand-carved stick that could be used for many purposes in connection with the shepherd, predatory animals, and with the sheep themselves. The rod supported and stabilized the shepherd in his journey on the unpaved paths. Against any would-be predators the shepherd's rod could be used as a weapon that was either thrown or employed as a club. In connection with the sheep it could be used in several ways. When sheep began to stray, the rod could be used to nudge them back to the flock. When used to part the thick coat of the sheep, the rod enabled the shepherd to look for parasites and check the condition of the skin and the health of the animal. David knew the Lord was there to guide him through difficult moments in his life (see 1 Sam. 23:4; 2 Sam. 5:19,23). At the same time, Israel's king also had experienced God's care in the matter of his spiritual health, dealing with his well-hidden sins (see 2 Sam. 12:1-14).

Not only did the Lord's rod comfort the psalmist, so did His staff. The staff, also known as a shepherd's crook, was a longer wooden implement, something like a rod but often with a hook or crook on one end. Both ends of the staff were used in working with the animals in a shepherd's flock. The long straight end was used to gently prod the animals back into line, while the curved portion could be used to restrain the sheep, help lift a lamb, or rescue one who had fallen into a body of water.

God worked through various people and circumstances as tools to shape David's life. Interestingly, some of the people through whom God worked were difficult people with whom David had to deal—for example, Goliath, Saul, and Absalom. Likewise, some of the significant events in David's experience were not pleasant—King Saul throwing spears at him (1 Sam. 18:10-11; 19:9-10), his own son Absalom trying to destroy him (2 Sam. 15:14), and one of his trusted advisors turning against him (2 Sam. 15:31). Nevertheless, in the midst of these difficult people and events David experienced God's comforting presence and help.

3. HE BESTOWS PROTECTION (PSALM 23:5-6)

Verse 5: *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

In the final two verses of the psalm David moved to a new analogy. Whereas the first four verses compared his

relationship with God with that of a sheep and shepherd, the concluding verses compare it with a guest and host. The gracious-host/need-guest analogy is a fitting one to describe God's relationship with His people for it correctly characterizes the nature and actions of God, as well as the human condition.

David understood the host/guest relationship well, for he had been both a host and a guest many times during his life (see 1 Sam. 25:1-35; 30:11-12; 2 Sam. 17:27-29). Treating a guest well was one of the most important responsibilities within the Old Testament world. Fulfilling the responsibility well increased one's respect in the community, while treating a guest badly was essentially a criminal act (see 1 Sam. 25:1-17).

The first point David made in his description of his Divine Host was that the Lord prepared a table before him and supplied him with a cup that overflowed. One of the most important duties of a host toward his guests was—and still is—that of providing them with food and drink. In the ancient world the more generous a host was in giving these vital resources, the more honorable he was considered. While David was on a military mission, he played host to a famished and thirsty Egyptian he met in the desert. Rather than feeding him only sparse military rations, David gave the guest water, bread, pressed figs, and two clusters of raisins (1 Sam. 30:11-12).

David noted the Lord prepared a meal for him in the presence of his enemies. A second major duty of a host toward his guests was that of providing protection. If one agreed to serve as host to others, he was obligated to keep his guests safe at all costs. David knew what it was like to be a guest who received meals in the presence of enemies. During the revolt against him staged by his son Absalom, the king and his followers were forced to abandon Jerusalem. They found refuge under the protective care of three wealthy hosts in a camp at Mahanaim (see 2 Sam. 17:27-29). In spite of the threat from Absalom and his army, David and his group were safe and well cared for by these heaven-sent helpers. Perhaps it was their generous provision of wheat, barley, flour, roasted grain, beans, lentils, honey, curds, sheep, and cheese that inspired David to pen the words of this verse.

A good host also would supply his guests with refreshing amenities. David bragged on God's generosity by noting that the Lord anointed his head with oil. When a guest arrived for a visit, a thoughtful host would wash the guest's feet (see Gen. 43:24). But he also might provide the guest with olive

oil, perhaps lightly scented. Like a rich lotion, it would revitalize skin that had been parched by the harsh winds and sunlight of the desert.

Verse 6: *Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.*

A host's character is expressed through his actions. David knew the character of his Divine Host well, and thus he could say with confidence, "Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life." The psalmist was not expressing empty hopes when he wrote these words. He was stating what he had learned deeply, both from the Lord's revelation to Moses and from his own personal experience. At Mount Sinai the Lord had described Himself to Moses as being "rich in faithful love" and One "maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations" (Ex. 34:6-7).

The Hebrew word translated *goodness* can refer to anything desirable, whether in the material, spiritual, moral, or emotional domain. God had been with David throughout his lifetime (see 1 Sam. 16:18; 18:12-14,28; 2 Sam. 7:3). The psalmist had drunk deeply of God's goodness in the past, and he knew that the God who never changes would continue to supply him with every good thing he needed all the days of his life (see Matt. 7:11; Phil. 4:19; Rom. 8:28).

What's more, David knew that God's goodness and faithful love would not just "stumble their way" into his life—they would pursue him. The Hebrew word translated *pursue* expresses the idea of actively searching for someone with the intent of overtaking that person. As David actively pursued God, God's blessings would actively pursue—and ultimately overtake—him.

In completing the Divine Host/earthly guest analogy, David made one last point of comparison: the duration of the visit. David stated that he would dwell in the house of the LORD as long as he lived. In the biblical world a good host commonly invited a guest to stay for an extended period of time (see Judg. 19:3-10). David allowed Jonathan's son Mephibosheth to stay at the royal palace for the duration of his life (see 2 Sam. 9:5-13). As the ultimate good Host, David knew that the Lord would graciously let him stay as a personal guest in the Lord's house as long as he lived. Like all true followers of the Lord, the psalmist relished the prospect of unending fellowship with God.

Using the imagery of a host and guest, David expressed the security of living in a close relationship with God. Real-

izing the security and satisfaction that a close relationship with God provides can motivate us to seek a closer relationship with God.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 11

PSALM 51

THE BACKGROUND

Psalm 51 is one of the most well-known psalms in the Bible, primarily because it provides an interior view of a notoriously weak moment in King David's life. According to the historical note in the superscription or heading of this psalm, this composition is associated with the time the prophet Nathan came to David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. King David had taken advantage of the wife of one of his most elite soldiers (see 2 Sam. 23:39) and then had the man murdered in an attempt to cover his sin. Because the king had acted cunningly in this situation, he thought he had escaped any detection and consequences of his wrongdoing. What he discovered, however, is that no one—not even a king—can commit sin without paying a price for it. It is literally impossible for anyone to hide sinful activity from the Lord God (see 2 Sam. 11:1–12:23).

Psalm 51 is one of seven psalms classified as penitential (see also Pss. 6; 32; 38; 102; 130; 143). In the 19 verses of Psalm 51 David provided people of faith with a model for dealing with personal sins. His forthright admission of personal guilt as well as his emotional appeal for mercy from a gracious God has set an example for all time of how to experience renewal in a relationship with God that has been fractured by sin.

1. FORGIVE ME (PSALM 51:1-5)

Verse 1: *Be gracious to me, God, according to Your faithful love; according to Your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion.*

David began this intense plea for forgiveness with a boldness born out of desperation and faith as he humbly issued two commands. Though the first two verbs he employed are imperatives directed toward God, this seemingly brash beginning to his prayer is not inappropriate; on the contrary, it is best understood as an expression of David's great faith in the Lord's revelation of His nature. In Exodus 34:6-7 the Lord described Himself as One who is "gracious," "rich in faithful love," "compassionate," and ready to forgive "wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin." David needed a God characterized by these qualities, and the king knew the Lord possessed them all. Thus in desperation David cried out to Him.

But David did not need a God who was gracious, loving, compassionate, and forgiving only in a general sense; he needed a God who would demonstrate these traits in the most personal of ways. David needed God to touch him personally, and so he pleaded with God, "Be gracious to me." The Hebrew verb translated *be gracious* carries with it the idea of receiving better treatment than one deserves (see 2 Kings 13:22-23).

David asked God to act in accordance with His faithful love. The Hebrew term translated *faithful love* identifies a highly prized virtue in ancient Hebrew society. It contains the concept of committing oneself and one's resources to care for the needs of someone else, no matter what costs may be involved. The Lord had stated that He was "rich in faithful love" (Ex. 34:6); thus, when David asked God to be as gracious as He was loving, he was asking God to give him better treatment than he deserved. God's faithful love is the basis of forgiveness.

A similarly bold command was uttered when David called on God to blot out his rebellion. Indeed, David had acted with rebellion in his heart when he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for the murder of her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11:3-4,14-17). As king and therefore Israel's chief judge, David knew both of these sins carried with them the death penalty (Gen. 9:6; Lev. 20:10). However, he also knew that God could forgive these sins according to His abundant compassion. The first term the Lord used to describe Himself to Moses in their personal encounter on Mount Sinai was "compassionate" (Ex. 34:6). That quality was the headliner, and no wonder. The Hebrew word translated *compassionate* is closely related to the word meaning "womb." What a mother's womb does to nurture and sustain an unborn child, the Lord does for people when He acts with compassion. Consequently, David knew God possessed the ability and the inclination to *blot out*—that is, to eliminate his sins (see Gen. 7:4, where the same Hebrew verb is translated "wipe out").

Verse 2: *Wash away my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin.*

Though David was not trained in the technical details of the ancient Israelite priesthood, he understood the importance of being clean in God's presence. Before God came down to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, the Lord ordered His people to wash their clothes (Ex. 19:10). Before a person who had been cured of a skin disease was allowed to live again among God's people, that person had to cleanse his body

(Lev. 14:9). Garments that had been contaminated by certain bodily fluids were to be washed (Lev. 15:17). Outer cleanliness was an important part of proper worship of God.

But David recognized that inner cleanliness was even more important than outward cleanliness, and he knew it was much harder to maintain. David knew how to wash his body, but how could he wash his inner being? In reality, only God could do it. Accordingly, David asked God to wash away his guilt. The Hebrew text expresses the urgency and desperation that David felt in this matter: "Cause to multiply—wash away my iniquity!" The phrasing points to the sinful king's desire for a thorough cleansing.

The psalmist reinforced his sense of personal desperation by repeating his plea using different words: "Cleanse me from my sin." In order for true cleansing to occur it is necessary for sinners to admit their wrongdoing. David did just that when he identified his wrongdoing as *my guilt* and *my sin*. It was not the sins of society in general that had polluted David's being and robbed him of peace; instead, it was his own sins—his personal choices and actions that had brought him to this inner crisis. Even though David was responsible for his inner filth, he could not get rid of it by his own power. All he could do was to confess its reality and ask God to remove it.

Verse 3: *For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.*

One of the most painful aspects of sin is having to live with the memory of the wrong we have done. Sinful deeds that may have felt so "right" at one moment in time produce consequences that transform happy memories into haunting recollections that crowd our minds by day, steal our sleep at night, and then return again to plague us in the morning. David dealt with this reality after he had sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, as his words in this verse reveal.

"I am conscious of my rebellion," David stated. This sentence in the original Hebrew language expresses a measure of the depth of David's feelings that is not easily communicated in English. A literal rendering is: "For my rebellions I, on my part, I know experientially." Israel's king realized he had not committed a solitary indiscretion; rather, he had deliberately perpetrated a series of sins. Furthermore, his sins were more than just momentary shortcomings in an intimate relationship with the Lord; they were calculated acts of war or rebellion against the sovereign God.

Verse 4: *Against You—You alone—I have sinned and done*

this evil in Your sight. So You are right when You pass sentence; You are blameless when You judge.

As David pondered his acts of rebellion, it seems he experienced an aha moment when he understood the true root of his problem was not that he had disobeyed commands, even though those commands had come from God. At the deepest level David had revolted against the Lord God Himself; and his rebellious thoughts had led him to disobey the Lord's commands. The man after God's heart (Acts 13:22) had revolted against the God of his heart. In David's own words, "Against You—You alone—I have sinned."

Of course it is true that Bathsheba and Uriah had been victims of David's sins. In a very real but secondary sense David had sinned against them, too; but David's first and primary offense was his rebellion against God's leadership in his life. If David had not first mounted an inner revolt against the Lord, he never would have committed outward acts of adultery and murder against Bathsheba and Uriah.

David's words in this verse serve as a model of biblical repentance. He first confessed he had sinned and done evil. But he also went a step further by expressing his agreement with the Lord's verdict against him: "You are right when You pass sentence; You are blameless when You judge." God's judgment against David was delivered by the prophet Nathan. In it the Lord declared He would "bring disaster" on David and his family and give his wives to one who would "sleep with them publicly" (2 Sam. 12:11). Harsh as it was, the sentence was justified in light of David's wrongdoing: "the Judge of all the earth" had done "what is just" (Gen. 18:25). David realized this fact, and he accepted it.

Verse 5: *Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.*

Because David had admitted the sinfulness of his acts against Bathsheba and Uriah, the way was opened for him to see a deeper truth regarding human sin: people are sinners because of what they do—and because of who they are. Stated another way, people are sinners by choice and by nature (see also Eph. 2:3). David had chosen to act wickedly, but by virtue of his humanity he was also inclined to do it. As he stated, "I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me."

David took responsibility for his sins, confessed them to God, and asked for forgiveness. When we confess our sins and turn to God for forgiveness, we can be confident He is willing to forgive us. David's experience reveals that God for-

gives all sins when we humbly confess them and seek His forgiveness. It also demonstrates that God is willing to use repentant people in spite of their past sins and failures.

2. CLEANSE ME (PSALM 51:6-9)

Verse 6: *Surely You desire integrity in the inner self, and You teach me wisdom deep within.*

David knew that one of the secrets of living a God-pleasing life was knowing what God wants from people. And he rightly understood that high on God's list is integrity in the inner self. The word *integrity* also can be translated "truth"; the Hebrew word employed here also was used by God to describe Himself; He is "rich in . . . truth" (Ex. 34:6).

David also noted that the Lord taught him wisdom deep within. In the New Testament Paul prayed that the Lord would fill Christians with wisdom (Eph. 1:17; Col. 1:9). The Hebrew concept of *wisdom* as seen in the Old Testament was practical. It was based on the Lord's revealed principles of right and wrong that were to be demonstrated in daily living.

Verse 7: *Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*

Throughout this psalm David had made many requests of God—to be gracious (Ps. 51:1), to blot out his rebellion (51:1), to wash away his guilt (51:2), and to cleanse him from sin (51:2). In verse 7 the psalmist returned to the theme of being cleansed of his sin, but he did so in a new way. Here David asked the Lord to purify him with hyssop and wash him. The Hebrew word translated *purify* literally means "de-sin." Thus David asked God to remove any taint of sin. Hyssop, probably the plant popularly known today as Syrian oregano, produced many stems filled with leaves and small flowers. When dipped in a liquid, the leaves and flowers would pick up large numbers of droplets. This fact made the hyssop stems ideal for use in religious rituals that involved sprinkling or smearing (Ex. 12:22). Hyssop was used to sprinkle God's people in ancient Israel with water (Num. 19:18) or to sprinkle blood from a sacrificial animal on people or objects (Lev. 14:4-7, 51-52; Heb. 9:19). When they were sprinkled, the people and objects were considered ritually pure and acceptable to God.

Moving to the analogy of an ancient Israelite washer, David asked God to wash him. To obtain the whitest possible clothes, those who washed clothes in the Old Testament period used "natron" (probably sodium bicarbonate or baking soda) or "bor" or vegetable lye (likely potassium

carbonate or potash). But even with these chemicals, they could not make clothes whiter than snow. David knew he needed God's cleansing from the polluting effects of sin. God's cleansing is far better than the best human efforts. God could—and would—make David's inner being cleaner than clean.

Verse 8: *Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice.*

One of the areas where personal sin does great damage is in a place that can't be observed directly—in the unseen part of a person. When people sin and become guilty of wrongdoing before God, they predictably will experience feelings of guilt. These guilty feelings create stress. Over time that stress can affect a person's outlook on life and even one's physical health. For many months—from the time he committed adultery with Bathsheba until after the resulting child had been born—David had tried to hide his sins. But his unforgiven sins were like a heavy backpack that weighed him down and stressed his body. As David continued his rebellion against God, he undoubtedly experienced depression. His sins impacted his mental, emotional, and physical well-being. He was on the losing end of a fight he could not win.

There was only one way for David to recover; he had to go to God for cleansing. That he did so is evident in this verse: "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice." The righteous God had actively judged David for his sins, and the result was crushing.

Verse 9: *Turn Your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt.*

In his quest for relief from the burden of his sins David appealed to the Lord with a new request. Though he surely knew the Lord is aware of all things (see Ps. 147:5), he asked God to turn His face away—literally, to "hide" His face—from the psalmist's sins. In another psalm David confessed that God is able to remove sins "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12). The king was not asking God to erase all knowledge of his sins from Divine memory. Instead, he was asking the Lord not to hold his sins against him when dealing with him—in other words, to act mercifully.

The second part of this verse expresses still further David's intense desire for a right relationship with God. He pleaded, "Blot out all my guilt." The word translated *blot out* is a colorful one in the Old Testament. Besides describing how God wiped out all creatures living on dry land in the days of Noah (Gen. 7:23), it depicted the work of a priest washing ink let-

ters off a leather scroll (Num. 5:23). It is as though David was asking God to strike all references to his guilt from the Divine judgment scroll. Only God could perform this task, and only an amazingly gracious Lord would. Although the Lord mercifully forgave David's sins, his life illustrates the reality that the temporal consequences of sin are not always erased (see 2 Sam. 12).

3. RENEW ME (PSALM 51:10-13)

Verse 10: *God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

David continued his fervent prayer for inner cleansing and personal holiness in this verse. He asked God to create a clean heart and renew a steadfast spirit within him. The Hebrew word translated *create* is a special one; it is first found in Genesis 1:1 and identifies a creative act that only God can accomplish. Here David begged the Lord to use His unique creative power to bring into existence that which did not and could not exist apart from the will and work of God.

The psalmist asked God for a clean heart. The Hebrew word translated *heart* refers to more than the physical blood pump within the chest cavity; it is a general term that can refer to the mental, emotional, and volitional processes of the human mind. Likewise, the term *spirit* denotes all the immaterial consciousness of man. David needed total inner renewal—a new way of thinking, renewed emotions, and a redirected will. Only God could supply him with these needs.

David wanted God to give him a clean heart. The Hebrew term translated *clean* had great significance in the context of Israelite worship. Only persons who were clean could enter into fellowship with God and His people (Lev. 7:21). Places, animals, foods, and objects were classified as clean or unclean; nothing unclean could be used in the worship of God. By his request for a clean heart David was asking God to make his life acceptable and usable to Him. A *steadfast spirit* referred to one that was firm and right.

Verse 11: *Do not banish me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me.*

As one familiar with the Law of Moses, David undoubtedly knew the account of Cain. After Cain murdered his brother and the Lord judged him for it, "Cain went out from the LORD's presence" (Gen. 4:16). Perhaps David feared the Lord would no longer permit David to come before Him. Accordingly, he prayed, "Do not banish me from Your presence."

When as a youth David had been anointed king over Israel, the Holy Spirit took control of him (1 Sam. 16:13) and had been with him throughout his public career (1 Sam. 18:14,28; 2 Sam. 5:10). But it was also well known that "the Spirit of the LORD had left" Israel's first king, Saul (1 Sam. 16:14), and the results were tragic for both Saul and the nation of Israel. In an earlier generation God also had abandoned Samson at a time when that powerful judge had been living in sin (Judg. 16:20). Fearing that God might also leave him, David pleaded with God not to take His Holy Spirit from him.

Verse 12: *Restore the joy of Your salvation to me, and give me a willing spirit.*

In his time of rebellion against God, David had lost the deep satisfaction that comes from an intimate relationship with the Lord. In a moment of spiritual insanity he had waded into the cesspool of sin. His unconfessed sins also had affected his mental, emotional, and physical well-being (Ps. 51:8). In his returning to the Lord, he desperately desired God to restore the joy of . . . salvation. David longed once again to experience warm fellowship with God and have a spirit that was willing to follow the Lord's way of holiness. Observe that David asked for the restoration of the *joy* of salvation, not the restoration of salvation.

Verse 13: *Then I will teach the rebellious Your ways, and sinners will return to You.*

In David's quest for renewal he had found a renewed purpose for living. Life was no longer about seeking personal pleasure at all costs. A higher calling beckoned him; he would teach the rebellious God's ways. The hard lessons he had learned he would share with others.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 18

PSALM 56

THE BACKGROUND

Old Testament scholars typically classify Psalm 56 as an individual lament. In individual laments the psalmist talked to God about problems he was facing in life and asked Him for help. These psalms are helpful to us today because they provide firsthand, personal examples of people bringing God into the hardships and difficulties of life. In the process they give us a pattern we can use when we face trouble in our lives.

Psalm 56 is one of around a dozen psalms written by David that supplied some note related to the poem's historical context in its introduction. By providing this information these introductions sharpen our understanding of the time, place, and personalities with which the poet was dealing when he composed these songs. According to Psalm 56's introduction, this composition is connected with David's first visit to the Philistine city of Gath (see 1 Sam. 21:10-15). That means this psalm was written while David was a young man, sometime after he had killed Goliath and before he became king over Israel (see 2 Sam. 5:4). During this phase of his life, David was hiding from his father-in-law King Saul, who had ordered David killed in an attempt to prevent him from becoming Israel's next king.

According to the introductory note or superscription, Psalm 56 is "according to 'A Silent Dove Far Away.'" This note likely means the words were to be sung to an otherwise unknown tune by that name. Some other psalms may also provide information about the tune to which the psalm was to be sung (see the introductory notes to Pss. 22; 45; 59; 60; 69; 80).

The term *Miktam* occurs six times in the Bible and only in the introductions to various psalms. Its meaning is uncertain, though it clearly is intended to identify a type of psalm. Because the word seems to be related to a verb meaning "to cover," some have suggested it means "a song of covering" or "a song of atonement." Others have connected its meaning with engraving—a song engraved on a stone slab.

1. FEARFUL FEELINGS (PSALM 56:1-7)

Verse 1: *Be gracious to me, God, for man tramples me; he fights and oppresses me all day long.*

Psalm 56 opens with tension in the air. David was in trouble way over his head. As he expressed it, "Man tramples me; he fights and oppresses me all day long." How did the psalmist get into this predicament? It all started years earlier, when as a youth David had slain Goliath. The Israelite public loved their young hero, and almost overnight David became exceedingly popular with the people. David's popularity, however, troubled his master, King Saul; Saul feared David might someday become king in his place. As a result of his jealousy, Saul tried to kill David. When Saul couldn't accomplish this goal on his own, he tried to enlist the help of his servants and his son Jonathan to carry out the task (see 1 Sam. 19:1). As a result David was forced to leave his home and live as a fugitive.

This opening verse refers to David's opponent as if he were just one man. Based on the corresponding biblical account, therefore, it is possible that in this verse the psalmist was referring to King Saul, who had unrelentingly—*all day long*, as it were—tried to take David's life.

But the psalmist knew there was and would always be One who was mightier than any earthly oppressor—the Lord God. It was to Him that David issued the prayerful plea, "Be gracious to me." In his desperation David actually expressed his earnest entreaty using an imperative or command form of the verb: *Be gracious!*

Verse 2: *My adversaries trample me all day, for many arrogantly fight against me.*

As David reflected on his troubles, those difficulties only seemed to increase. Whereas in the opening verse David seemed to refer to his opponent as being a single individual, in this verse the verbs have become plural. David's enemies seem to have increased in number. This observation, too, reflects the facts of biblical history.

In his attempts to find safety from the Israelite king who was trying to kill him, David decided to seek asylum among the Philistines. He had hoped these longtime enemies of Israel would view him as an ally, since Saul was treating him as a dangerous enemy. Interestingly, he chose to go to the Philistine city of Gath, Goliath's hometown (1 Sam. 17:4), to try to find that much-needed protection. Perhaps he believed he would be safest here, since Saul probably would not expect David to hide out in the city from which Goliath had come.

Unfortunately, David did not find the gracious welcome for which he was hoping. Instead, he found himself in dan-

ger from the ones he had counted on to help him (1 Sam. 21:10-12). As the psalmist declared in his prayer to God, "My adversaries trample me all day, for many arrogantly fight against me."

David had killed Gath's well-known citizen Goliath with a sling and a stone. He had beheaded the giant with Goliath's own sword (1 Sam. 17:49-54). However, David knew these weapons could not help him in his current crisis. No Israelite army was going to break through Gath's walls to rescue him, either. David could not look to some weapon in his hand for help and he could not look to others for deliverance. What would he do?

Verse 3: *When I am afraid, I will trust in You.*

In these circumstances David, Israel's unshakable hero—the giant killer, experienced genuine fear. However, because of the vitality of his personal relationship with God, this human emotion propelled him into the exact spot he needed to be all the time—into the sanctuary of his faith in the Lord. As David expressed it, "When I am afraid, I will trust in You."

David's skillful use of the Hebrew language shows up in this verse. Through careful use of the vocabulary choices available to him, the psalmist made every Hebrew word in the sentence, except the word translated "day," begin with the same letter. This unusual feature would have made the content stand out in the minds of the reader as much as if it had been written in red ink: "When I am afraid, I will trust in You." David's use of word artistry at this point in the psalm is striking, and it changes the entire focus of his message. Suddenly the emphasis is shifted from David's bad relationships with human beings to his trusting relationship with the living God. Through David's word alchemy a song about fear has been transformed into a psalm about faith.

Verse 4: *In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*

There is a tension between fear and faith in this psalm. However, David chose faith over fear. David's faith had a specific focus, and that focus was not an object, an animal, or a human being. In a tight situation such as that in which he found himself, the psalmist looked beyond the earthly realm to place his trust in God.

David knew he could trust God because he knew he could trust God's word. Years earlier the prophet Samuel had anointed David as Israel's future king in obedience to God's message that the outwardly unimpressive youth from the tribe of Judah was the Lord's anointed (1 Sam. 16:12-13) and

Israel's future king. That astounding word from God concerning David lit up another word from God spoken centuries earlier by the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 49:10)—one promising that Israel's kings would someday come from the tribe of Judah and ultimately the Messiah would come from that line. David believed those amazing prophecies and praised God's trustworthy word.

Verse 5: *They twist my words all day long; all their thoughts are against me for evil.*

One of the more painful experiences in life is to be misunderstood. However misunderstandings are quite common in a couple of different situations: first when people of two different cultural backgrounds are trying to communicate with each other and second when enemies talk together in times of conflict. David had to deal with both kinds of situations when he fled to Gath in an effort to escape Saul's wrath. While he was seeking refuge among the Philistines, he found himself misunderstood and in danger.

In his prayer to God, David complained that the Philistines twisted his words all day long. Cultural differences were likely responsible for some of the problems David faced in Gath. For one thing, David worshiped a different God than did the Philistines. He worshiped only God—the Lord, also known as Yahweh; the Philistines worshiped various gods, one of which was Dagon (1 Sam. 5:1-2). The Philistines probably feared and hated David's God, just as David had no respect for their idols (1 Sam. 5:6-12; 2 Sam. 5:21). As part of his faith, the psalmist had been circumcised; the Philistines did not practice circumcision (Judg. 14:3) and likely looked down on those who did. These differences alone were enough to create problems between David and the Philistines, much as Christians living in cultures where other gods are worshiped face tensions today.

The Philistines spoke a different language than did David and had different customs that could have easily led to misunderstandings. In addition, the Philistines didn't dare trust David because the Israelites were their enemies, and David was the Israelite king's son-in-law as well as the killer of their hero Goliath. So deep was their mistrust of David that all their thoughts were against him for evil. Without an unshakable faith in the Lord, this situation surely would have made David afraid.

Verse 6: *They stir up strife, they lurk; they watch my steps while they wait to take my life.*

David could find no allies among the Philistines. They dis-

trusted this Israelite hero deeply and no one took his side or tried to remove the concerns of those who wanted to harm him when he entered their city. Instead, as David declared, "They stir up strife." The account of David's visit to Gath recorded in 1 Samuel 21 indicates the servants of the Philistine king Achish were responsible for stirring up the trouble David experienced as he crossed into their territory seeking protection from Saul. These influential Philistines spread the false report that David already was "king of the land" of Israel (1 Sam. 21:11). These servants also reminded their fellow citizens that David was reputed to have killed "tens of thousands" of Philistines.

As a result of what Achish's servants said, David lost any chance of finding a safe haven in Gath. Instead, as David stated, "They lurk" and "watch my steps while they wait to take my life."

Verse 7: *Will they escape in spite of such sin? God, bring down the nations in wrath.*

With so many opponents lined up against him in Gath, David knew he could not possibly deliver himself. However, he also knew the nature and power of the Lord God. He knew the Lord is a God of faithful love and covenant loyalty (Ex. 34:6-7) who would not abandon him in his hour of need. David also understood that the Lord is a God of justice; He who had once brought judgment crashing down on the Egyptians for their mistreatment of the Israelites could act against the Philistines for their mistreatment of the psalmist. Accordingly, David asked the Lord a basic question: "Will the Philistines escape in spite of such sin?"

The psalmist then followed up his question with a bold request: "God, bring down the nations in wrath." David expanded his request beyond asking God to judge only the Philistines. It became a request for God to act against any group that would harm innocent people. David's request revealed his big view of God; the psalmist's words reflect his assurance that the Lord is sovereign over all peoples on earth, not just the Israelites.

2. GOD IS FOR ME (PSALM 56:8-9)

Verse 8: *You Yourself have recorded my wanderings. Put my tears in Your bottle. Are they not in Your records?*

In this second section of the psalm David focused on God and the amazingly detailed and loving attention He gives to His people during times of difficulty. David found comfort in the fact that God was intimately aware of every hardship he

experienced and every injury inflicted on him.

Because of King Saul's almost maniacal hatred of David, Israel's young hero was forced to leave his wife Michal, his role as a commander in Israel's army (see 1 Sam. 18:5), and his best friend Jonathan. He lived as a vagabond, first staying temporarily with Samuel (1 Sam. 19:18), then in a field near Gibeah (1 Sam. 20:5), after that in Nob (1 Sam. 21:1), and then on to Gath (1 Sam. 21:10). His family, friends, and coworkers would have quickly lost track of where he was, but the Lord God never did. As David noted, "You Yourself have recorded my wanderings."

The Lord was aware of each outwardly observable movement that David made in his efforts to flee from Saul, but was He also aware of what was happening inside the psalmist—the pain and distress he felt? Yes, God was just as in touch with David's emotions as He was his actions; David's tears were also in the Lord's records. The God who had numbered all of David's hairs (Matt. 10:30) also kept an accounting of the full number of his tears.

By telling the Lord, "Put my tears in Your bottle," the psalmist was requesting that He continue doing what He had always done—share fully in David's inner reality.

Verse 9: *Then my enemies will retreat on the day when I call. This I know: God is for me.*

David had confidence that a God who would care enough to keep track of his every footstep and count every tear would be there to hear every word on the day when he would call for help. Therefore he could say with utmost confidence, "This I know; God is for me." The Hebrew word translated *I know* expresses the concept of knowledge based on personal experience; David knew God was for him because he had experienced God at work on his behalf in the past. The Lord had selected him over his brothers to become Israel's next king, helped him face and defeat the giant Goliath, enabled him to avoid Saul's spear on more than one occasion when the king had tried to kill him, protected David on the battlefield against the Philistines, and had repeatedly delivered David from soldiers sent by Saul to seize him (1 Sam. 16:10-13; 17:39-47; 18:10-11,27; 19:10-21). David had confidence in God because he had never known God not to come through.

David knew God's track record in his life. Thus he knew even before the crisis at Gath had been resolved that his enemies would not carry the day; they would retreat. And, of course, the facts of history validate David's confidence (see

1 Sam. 22:1).

David knew God was aware of the situation that caused him to fear and would come to his rescue. His experience can become our experience today. When we face hard times in our world, we need to understand that God knows our fears and wants the best for us. And as we, like David, catch a glimpse of the depth of God's loving concern for us, we are led to put our faith in Him when we are afraid.

3. COMMITTED DETERMINATION (PSALM 56:10-13)

As David moved into the final section of this psalm, he tied together key themes found in the earlier portions and then declared how these truths would affect his personal conduct. The tone has shifted noticeably here; previously he had moved from fear to faith; here faith has produced praise, thanksgiving, and an affirmation of the psalmist's commitment to God.

Verse 10: *In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise,*

David began this final section by expressing once again his praise for God's word (see Ps. 56:4). Within the biblical record the word of God first came to David through Samuel when as a youth David was designated as Israel's next king (1 Sam. 16:11-12). That prophetic word must have surely given David hope and confidence during these difficult days; if God had promised that David would become king, then Saul could not kill him! If God had declared that David would rule over Israel, then the Philistines of Gath could not take his life! God's word created hope that in turn resulted in praise.

Verse 11: *in God I trust; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*

David revisited and underlined the main ideas of the psalm in this verse. For the third time in ten verses (see also Ps. 56:3-4) he expressed the central fact of his faith: "In God I trust." He also again expressed the result of his faith: "I will not fear" (see 56:4). Circumstances and enemies would change over the years in David's life, but one thing would not change—his confidence in a God who was bigger than any problem he could ever encounter. As a result the psalmist could ask the question once again, "What can man do to me?" and expect the same answer (see 56:4)—nothing that God did not permit. The biblical account affirms that David's faith was justified.

Verse 12: *I am obligated by vows to You, God; I will make my thank offerings to You.*

David had made vows to God. In ancient Israel vows were promises made to God. A person might take a vow during a time of trouble; in exchange for Divine help, a person would promise to give something to God or to do something for Him. Also an individual making a serious commitment to another person might demonstrate sincerity by making a commitment to God at the same time in the form of a vow.

Thank offerings were material gifts given to God as an expression of gratitude for divine help. As required by the Law of Moses (see Lev. 7:12), they consisted of meat from a ritually clean animal, baked goods, flour, and oil. They were appropriate as an expression of appreciation for God's deliverance from threatening circumstances.

Verse 13: *For You delivered me from death, even my feet from stumbling, to walk before God in the light of life.*

The psalmist had much for which to be thankful. The Lord had delivered him from an extremely dangerous situation and had done so in a most unexpected way. David came up with a brilliant idea when the Philistines seized him in Gath. That idea undoubtedly was inspired by God; in this life-threatening situation, David determined to act as an out-of-control madman in the presence of those who viewed him as a threat. When he did so, his bizarre behavior was reported to Achish, the highest governmental official in the city of Gath. When Achish learned of it, he ordered David out of the city, thus setting David free (see 1 Sam. 21:12–22:1). Truly the Lord had delivered David from death! In a situation where even one misstep, one miscalculation, could have ended his life, the Lord kept his feet from stumbling. As a result, Israel's future king was able to continue to walk before God in the light of life.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR OCT. 25

PSALM 73

THE BACKGROUND

Psalm 73 is perhaps the most philosophical psalm in the Bible. Sometimes classified as a wisdom psalm, this composition takes its place alongside the Book of Job in its frank treatment of some of the more perplexing issues of life. Timeless questions raised in the Book of Job are also dealt with in this psalm: Why do wicked people prosper? Why do good things happen to bad people, especially when godly people suffer? Although Asaph's approach to these issues reflects his own experience and perspective, the answers found in this psalm are similar to those suggested in the Book of Job. Bad things do happen to good people, but God is still good to His people, particularly the pure in heart (Ps. 73:1). Good things do happen to bad people, but in the end God's millstones of justice crush all unrighteousness.

This psalm is one of 12 written by Asaph, a Levite who served in the time of King David. Asaph was both a gifted musician and a capable leader. As a prominent member of the tribe set apart by God to lead Israel in worship, he was selected by David to lead the nation in giving thanks to God through music during the earliest period of Israelite worship in Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:4-5,7).

1. WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? (PSALM 73:1-5,12)

Verse 1: *God is indeed good to Israel, to the pure in heart.*

Verse 1 plays a key role in Psalm 73. It provides readers with two strong truths that can stabilize them during their journeys through the complicated mix of doubt and faith that is depicted in the following verses. Asaph's first observation reflects one of the most important and most basic truths of the Old Testament: God is indeed good to Israel. Since the days of Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation, the Lord had been *good* to His people.

Not only is God good to His covenant people, He is also a rewarder of the pure in heart, that is, people of any nation who have a pure, single-minded devotion to Him and to following His will. Ever since the Lord told Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17), He made it clear that He cares about the choices people make in life and ultimately rewards those choices accordingly. These two truths—that God graciously has poured out His

blessings on Israel and that He blesses all those who pursue obedience to Him—are core truths in the Old Testament. No doubt the psalmist Asaph knew firsthand the goodness of God in his life on both accounts.

Verse 2: *But as for me, my feet almost slipped; my steps nearly went astray.*

As a leader of the Levites and one handpicked by David to lead worship in the nation of Israel, Asaph was undoubtedly a pure-hearted man who had experienced many good things from God. But he also was a keen observer of life, and this godly man had seen something that proved extremely troubling to him. In fact, what he had observed had almost shattered his faith in God and in his God-centered view of the world. His observation disturbed him so much that, poetically speaking, his feet almost slipped off the path of faith in God; his steps nearly went astray from the straight and narrow way. Asaph experienced a profound crisis in his relationship with God.

Verse 3: *For I envied the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

The Lord was understandably good to His covenant people and also to those who were careful to love and obey Him. The logic underlying those observations seemed patently clear. But how could the God who brought death into the world because of Adam's sin, who because of wickedness in Noah's day destroyed all humanity with the exception of one family, who wiped out the people of Sodom and Gomorrah for their vile acts and the Canaanites for their sins—how could a God who brought all that judgment permit the prosperity of the wicked in Asaph's time? If wicked people prospered as much as or more than righteous people did, then why go to all the trouble to live a life of devotion to God? The Hebrew term translated *prosperity* is *shalom*, a word also meaning "peace" or "well-being."

What the psalmist saw planted seeds—weeds, really—of doubt in his soul. They soon took root and flourished. Asaph—the icon of religious orthodoxy—was filling his mind with thoughts and desires that no godly person should ever cherish; his emotions were pushing him down dark paths and he seemed powerless to stop them. As he later confessed, "I envied the arrogant." The Hebrew word translated *envied* expresses powerful emotion. Asaph no longer viewed God as his Hero or Deliverer; the poet had permitted power-hungry, self-worshipping egotists to dethrone Him in his life.

Verse 4: *They have an easy time until they die, and their*

bodies are well-fed.

Living a life of holiness and service to the Lord requires discipline and hard work. It means living to display the greatness of God, not the greatness of ourselves. It requires fighting relentless inner battles—repeatedly saying no to desires and fantasies that focus on wrongly-directed passions. It means insisting on loving others as much as we love ourselves and then translating that love into daily gifts of time, money, and energy given joyously in service to others.

Asaph knew the high price of holiness, and he knew the wicked were not paying it. Because they make no effort to build up God's kingdom or to provide service in behalf of others, they have an easy time until they die. Because they spend money only on themselves, their bodies are well-fed—literally, "their belly (is) fat."

The psalmist had seen the morally filthy lives of those who never came to worship God and observed their lives of ease. He had seen the fat bellies of godless individuals in contrast to the under-fed bodies of those who came to the worship services he led. Asaph had looked beyond the fences of his daily existence, seen the greener pastures of godless people, and desired those pastures for himself.

Verse 5: *They are not in trouble like others; they are not afflicted like most people.*

From Asaph's perspective ungodly people appeared to escape the trouble that others experienced. Unrighteous individuals had a short list of priorities in their lives. Their motto was, "It's all about me."

Because wicked individuals focused only on themselves, their lives were comparatively free of trouble and toil. The psalmist observed the lifestyle of the wicked and envied it. The fact that he commented on it suggests he actually considered abandoning his own commitments to God and family to try the apparently carefree way of wicked living.

The word translated *trouble* also means "toil" or "labor." Because they were tending only to their own needs, these wicked individuals needed fewer resources to prosper and therefore did not have to work as hard as others did.

Verse 12: *Look at them—the wicked! They are always at ease, and they increase their wealth.*

Asaph concluded this portion of the psalm by summarizing the observations he previously had made about the wicked. The ungodly individuals increase their wealth (see also 73:3). The Hebrew term translated *wealth* also can convey the concepts of social power and physical strength. In

essence the psalmist was stating that men who deserved God's wrathful judgment avoided it; instead, they just seemed to get richer, more influential, and more powerful than others around them. What's more, these same individuals appeared to experience less stressful lives than their neighbors; they were always at ease.

After affirming the goodness of God, the psalmist confessed he was troubled by the prosperity of the wicked and he envied their prosperity. Though he was angry, bewildered and envious, he never actually lost his spiritual grip on God. As Asaph noted at the beginning of the psalm, God is good to His people Israel, and especially to individuals who lived in purity before Him.

2. JESUS LOVES YOU (PSALM 73:13-20)

Verse 13: *Did I purify my heart and wash my hands in innocence for nothing?*

In this verse the floodwaters of doubt reach their crest in the writer's inner being. In the previous section of the psalm Asaph had observed in detail the prosperity, power, ease, and arrogance of the wicked. His findings contradicted everything he had expected to find in a world controlled by a moral, justice-minded God. As a result, disturbing questions arose. If living in defiance of God's law produced such apparently good results, then why go to all the trouble of living a life of piety and godliness? In the words of the psalmist's soul-searching question, "Did I purify my heart and wash my hands in innocence for nothing?" Clearly Asaph felt dismay and discouragement as his faith reached its lowest ebb.

Verse 14: *For I am afflicted all day long, and punished every morning.*

As his confidence in God waned, the psalmist's dissatisfaction with the godly lifestyle grew. As it did, he began to engage in self-pity. Following the guidelines for living found in God's Word and taught to him by his parents, Asaph had become one of the great religious leaders in the history of Israel. He was a gifted prophet and musician in his generation (1 Chron. 25:6-7; 2 Chron. 29:30). Hundreds of Levites looked to him for religious leadership (1 Chron. 25:6-7), and all Israel sang his musical compositions as part of worship. Outwardly Asaph was a tremendous spiritual success.

But inwardly something terrible was happening. By focusing his attention on the God-defiers and not on God Himself, Asaph's once-joyous life of purity and faith soured into one of uncertainty and regret. As a result the psalmist came

to view the disciplines related to the way of godliness as a waste of time—nothing more than self-inflicted torture. From his point of view, he was afflicted all day long and punished every morning because of his faith. Doubt and envy had dried up the wellspring of joy and purpose in his life.

Verse 15: *If I had decided to say these things aloud, I would have betrayed Your people.*

However, this tortuous world located within Asaph must remain hidden. He could share its existence with no one. For the sake of God's people, he would live in it alone without hinting of its agonizing reality to anyone. After all, to others he was a religious hero—a spiritual superstar. If word ever got out that Asaph had profound doubts about the truth of the very faith in which he had been raised and then served, it would mean not only the downfall of his career but also the damaging of uncounted thousands of Israelites' faith in the Lord. As Asaph expressed it in his secret prayer to God, "If I had decided to say these things aloud, I would have betrayed Your people."

Verse 16: *When I tried to understand all this, it seemed hopeless*

Though the psalmist tried hard to understand all this, the task seemed hopeless. The logic of evil has always seemed to contradict the logic of biblical righteousness. One centers on self; the other centers on God. One focuses on what can be gained in the short run and how much it will benefit the present; the other considers long-term outcomes and focuses on eternal gains.

In a way, Asaph's confusion was a positive testimony to his life. As a well-trained Levite, he had been raised to respect God's ways and to follow His law. Try as he might, Asaph could not make sense of the ways of godless people, nor could he understand how they managed to do so well. He faced a choice. Would he let his bewilderment destroy his God-centered worldview or would he use it to grow in his understanding of God and God's world? The expression *it seemed hopeless* represents an interpretive translation of the Hebrew phrase "it was wearisome in my eyes." Asaph's word choice suggests he wore himself out mentally and emotionally as he struggled to deal with this perplexing issue.

Verse 17: *until I entered God's sanctuary. Then I understood their destiny.*

Asaph's agonizing questions were finally resolved when he entered God's sanctuary. The phrase translated *God's*

sanctuary is literally, "holy places of God." The fact that the psalmist referred to "holy places" and not a "holy place" is important. It suggests first that God doesn't live only at church; Asaph—and any other true seeker of the Lord—can encounter God anywhere.

The psalmist's use of the word *until* is crucial; *until* means that personal encounters with the living God can be life-transforming. Asaph was heavily burdened and hopelessly confused *until* he *entered God's sanctuary*. But because he encountered the living God, he was able for the first time to see a difficult problem in his life from God's point of view. Only then was he able to find peace and a satisfying resolution to his problem.

Viewing wicked people from God's point of view meant looking beyond their current circumstances to consider the outcome of their lives. God is not limited in time like people are; He sees the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10). Thus when God gave the psalmist insights from the Divine viewpoint, he understood the destiny of the wicked.

Verse 18: *Indeed You put them in slippery places; You make them fall into ruin.*

The first thing God did was help Asaph understand that the Divine judgment against the wicked that would culminate later had already begun. If it was true the unrighteous prospered for a time, it was also true their prosperity was fragile and could be wiped out in a moment. The ungodly were, so to speak, living in houses built on sand that could be brought down in a single storm.

But God was at work not only in the circumstances surrounding the wicked, He was also at work in the events that shaped their lives. The Lord had once described Himself as a God who would "not leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:7). Consistent with that truth, Asaph affirmed the sovereign God of the universe would ultimately make His enemies fall into ruin. Unrighteousness would not escape God's judgment; His justice ultimately would prevail.

Verse 19: *How suddenly they become a desolation! They come to an end, swept away by terrors.*

As the hammer of Divine justice fell on wicked individuals, they suddenly became a desolation. The Hebrew term translated *desolation* also carries with it the concept of horror. One moment the ungodly had been an object of envy; the next they were an object of horror.

The wicked, along with all their prosperity, came to a sudden end. The end had been terrifying to watch, and even

more terrifying to experience as these enemies of God had been swept away by terrors. The use of the plural *terrors* suggests the Lord used either a series of disasters against the unrighteous or they were struck by several terror-inducing judgments at the same time.

Verse 20: *Like one waking from a dream, Lord, when arising, You will despise their image.*

Because the psalmist was seeing things from God's perspective, he was able to understand how vulnerable and temporary wicked people truly were. From God's point of view the ungodly were like the phantom figures of a nightmare—dispersed by simply waking from a dream. As imposing as these men might seem, God would give them no respect and would not be intimidated by them. He would wipe them out as easily as one removes the images of a dream by simply waking up. After presenting his doubts to God in the context of worship, the psalmist's perspective changed and he understood that in the end, the wicked gain nothing.

3. GOD IS IN CONTROL (PSALM 73:25-28)

Asaph had experienced an inner transformation. Once he had been “embittered” and his “innermost being was wounded” (Ps. 73:21) because he had taken his focus off God and directed it to the prosperous wicked. But his envy of the ungodly vanished as he encountered the living God. In the clarifying light of God's presence, Israel's respected worship leader saw himself for who he actually was: “a fool,” “an unthinking animal” who “didn't understand” (73:22).

The psalmist had learned a huge lesson: peace and a right perspective on life could never be found in the pursuit of things or worldly values. Real life—one filled with meaning and contentment—was to be found only in close fellowship with the Lord. Accordingly, Asaph committed himself to be “always with” the Lord (73:23). Divine “counsel” would “guide” him through life, “and afterwards” the Lord Himself would “take” him “up in glory” (73:24).

Verse 25: *Whom do I have in heaven but You? And I desire nothing on earth but You.*

Asaph had learned that to find lasting peace and satisfaction in life it was necessary to look above the ever-shifting scenery of earth. He must look to heaven. Popular belief stated there were many gods; it was not uncommon for people to worship several of them to try to find help in dealing with life's problems. Could people look to other gods—perhaps many gods—to find what they needed?

Asaph would not find the answer to that question through experimentation; he would look to none but the Lord for his help; the psalmist's confidence would rest only in Him. And thanks to what he had just learned from God, he would never again covet the earthly ease and prosperity of the wicked; the psalmist would desire nothing on earth but the Lord.

Verse 26: *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever.*

Asaph was wise enough to know that trials and difficulties were an inevitable part of the human experience on earth. Under the right circumstances the psalmist knew that his flesh and his heart—that is, the physical and mental resources present within him—may fail. However, the psalmist also knew an empowering secret; in his weakest hour God would be the strength of his heart. He would never have to face life's difficult trials alone; the almighty Creator and Sustainer of the universe was a portion—a living resource and the sum total of his inheritance—he could count on forever.

Verse 27: *Those far from You will certainly perish; You destroy all who are unfaithful to You.*

In this verse Asaph presented the counterpoint to the truth found in verses 23-26. God had preserved and strengthened one who was close to Him, but those far from the Lord will certainly perish. Life can be found only in fellowship with the Lord. What's more, God actively judges those who deliberately reject Him. The Lord's will is for people to make a life-long commitment to Him and to remain true to Him throughout their days (Josh. 22:5; Matt. 22:37).

Verse 28: *But as for me, God's presence is my good. I have made the Lord God my refuge, so I can tell about all You do.*

As the psalm ends it is apparent that Asaph has learned his lesson and locked in his commitment to the Lord. Instead of envying the pleasures of the wicked, he has made the enjoyment of God's presence his ultimate good. He had made the Lord GOD alone his refuge; for him there would be no other sanctuary.

Through the testing of his faith, Asaph gained new insights and grew in his relationship with God. He learned to keep his focus on the Lord and find *refuge* from the trials of life in a personal relationship with Him. He also found a deeper purpose for living; from this point forward he would live to tell others about all the Lord was doing to accomplish His perfect purposes. He would affirm that all who live in close fellowship with the Lord have far greater treasure than the material prosperity of the wicked. The blessing of God is

real. However it is not measured in terms of material prosperity and ease of life, but in terms of God's goodness and presence in our lives.