

George Philip Bible Readings

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Psalms 120 to 150

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This is the first of fifteen Psalms bearing the title "Song of Degrees" or "Song of Ascents". They were probably sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the great feasts of the faith. Here the Psalmist: gives expression to the unrest of his spirit due to being compelled to be in the company of hostile, godless and unfriendly neighbours. His experiences of life seem to stand in contradiction of all that he holds dearest and all that his soul yearns for. He is weary of the spirit of this wicked world, and he finds himself confessing, like all the saints of God of all ages, that he is in fact a stranger and pilgrim on the earth (Heb.11:1-3, 8-10,13-16). No-one would seek to deny that the grace God in Jesus Christ is able to meet. the deepest longings of the human soul and to bring

life that is life indeed to our present experience. Yet it is also true that the Spirit of God, by Whom we are brought to spiritual birth and life, is yearning constantly within us to return with us to the full glory of the presence of the Father and the Son. A professing Christian who is content to settle down in this present wicked world is a contradiction in terms (1 John 2:15-17; 2 Cor. 5:1-6; Phil.1:21-24; Rom.8:18-25). We are in fact saved in hope and it is a happy Christian who remembers his true address. It is only thus that we can hold our ground surrounded by the babble of empty chatter that is so much a mark of the life of this world.

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However much the pilgrim longs to enter his true destiny, and however he may grieve over the barren badness of an unbelieving world, he should never be guilty of pining in the bad sense. True hope is a creative and dynamic grace and brings forth into the conscious experience of the believer a trust in God that is mighty in encouragement and comfort. Here the Psalmist has virtually forgotten the dangers and distresses of yesterday's Psalm, and this is not surprising when you find a six-fold declaration that God is his keeper. Could anything be more secure? Your life is hid with Christ in God (Col.3:3). We do not need to try to decide the singer's circumstances here, whether he is referring to the hills which are to be crossed before Jerusalem is in sight or whether he has just caught a glimpse of his destination, the city set on its hills. The fact is that it is not the hills which rivet his attention, but what these hills remind him of. Their massive structure quickens the thought of the everlasting throne of the God of His salvation. The second half of v.1 must always be read as a question, which is answered in v.2. Never forget that it is God Himself who keeps and prospers His own people and the work entrusted to their hands. It is not necessary to elaborate all the details of this Psalm in which every phrase has its message of grace to the heart. Lift up your eyes! How big is your God? Has He given you any cause to doubt Him?

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This Psalm speaks so serenely of GOD WITH US. This fact transforms all our goings out and comings in, all our undertakings and occupations. No situation we ever find ourselves in is outside the operation of his grace which, in spite of all its everlasting assurance, never violates our human personalities. Little wonder we love the words of Mary, "Be it unto me according to Thy word" (Lk.1:37AV). "Every pious Jew, as he leaves or enters the house, touches the Mezuza, that is the small metal cylinder affixed to the right-hand door-post, containing a piece of parchment inscribed with Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21, and recites this verse." (Kirkpatrick) If you have once seen and known the great salvation of God, you need never doubt again. All the external and secondary things of life may be stripped away from you, but your soul is safe in the hand of the living God. Whether the Psalmist in the last verse speaks of a man's last "going out" from the earth or his "abundant entrance" into his eternal home we cannot say. Give the whole Psalm its fullest and widest interpretation, and let your heart give testimony saying, "I know Him in whom I have believed" (2 Tim.1:12; 4:6-8). Dare we add another reference - Romans 8:31-39. We should know the passage by heart and by experience.

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To the Jewish pilgrim the city of God and the House of God within it spoke volumes concerning the faithful mercy of God, the promises and the springs of God's salvation, and the peace that His presence brings. Here it is almost as if the Psalmist is seeking to fix all the impressions of God he had known in the sanctuary upon his memory, so that he might take them back to his own home. Is this Psalm not a picture of how we should regard every opportunity of gathering in God's House? We should not forget the truths of the Bible Reading and the sermon as soon as we leave church after the service. In the first four verses you have both anticipation and realisation. Then also in v.4 and 5 there is the thought of having appeared before the face of God the righteous judge, beholding the throne of His glory. Out of this there comes the prayer that all the blessings of God will come to and abide on this city and this House for the sake of all the people who will ever gather there to seek the Lord. Throughout the Psalm there is the sense of being in the presence of God. God is there, that is why it is the city of peace. And it is because God is there to make known His salvation that the Psalmist prays that God's House may be hallowed. This is no mere idolatry of a city or a building of stone and lime, or a building of marble and jewels. Apart from the Presence of the Living God there is no sanctity, no worship and no salvation. Let us make sure our faith is grounded in spiritual realities and not in material structures and sentimental associations. Pray that people may know by our reverence and spirit of worship that God is really there in our church.

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Without doubt the Christian message has come to be scorned and ridiculed even by those who indulge in its various festivals and this Psalm gives expression to the feelings of God's faithful people in such a situation. From the heights of happiness and assurance of the previous Psalm, the man of God has now come right down to the realities of ordinary daily experience with its pressures and struggles. These can be faced only when the eyes and the heart are fixed upon God. At times, when the eager mounting up to the heights of spiritual experience transfigures life and causes it to shine with the brightness of heaven, it is virtually impossible not to rejoice in strong faith. But when the mountain top gives way to the darker valley with its experiences of the tormentings of the devil (Matt.17: 1-21), it is not so easy to be a happy carefree believer. What then are we to do? We must remember there is a God in heaven whose hand of power and sufficiency is the guarantee of the safety and well-being of all who belong to His household. There is undoubtedly here the thought of absolute submissiveness to the hand of God, whether in blessing or rebuke, as there is also the thought of the servant's watchful eye waiting for the slightest sign of the master's will (2). But it is the thought of implicit trust in a gracious Father which is the dominant note of the Psalm. "O God, our eyes are upon Thee" (2 Chron. 20:12-13, 15-17).

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What a Psalm to stand upon as the years go by! Think of how we love to sing it in the Metrical Version, "Now Israel may say." Note that the first word is "If". That can be a dangerous word when it is used by Satan to cause our minds to race and our emotions- rage, as we consider hypothetical situations. These may never in fact materialise, or when they do come they may be so small and bereft of real significance that we wonder why we ever worried about them. But some situations do materialise with suddenness and with real danger, and it is suggested that one such experience which may form the background of the Psalm is found in Nehemiah 4, which should be read in full. Times without number it seems that the enemy had come to the very gates of Jerusalem and that there was no possible hope or help. But then, God intervenes and turns them back by His own power, so that the powers of evil are confused and confounded (Neh. 6:15-16). Read the same astonishing story in (Isa. 37:5-8,32-37). Think of the Lord's deliverances in your own life. Have you never felt trapped, and waited like a struggling bird imprisoned in a net for the rough hand of the fowler who would, with a quick wrench, destroy you? But the hand that reached down was one of tenderness and. you were set free. But have you- been wiser since then?

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We cannot remind ourselves too often that God is always involved in our circumstances, however alarming they may be and however unobvious His presence may be. In exactly the same way we cannot remind ourselves too often that the Devil is the sworn enemy of all those who want to do business with God, and the more resolute we are in our determination to do the will of God, the more fierce and fiery will be the darts of the wicked. If we would remember this, we would be armed against the sudden onslaughts which, by their intensity and ferocity, are identified at once as Satanic. Look at the metaphors used by the Psalmist. He speaks of men rising up and almost *swallowing him* (like a wild beast or the opening up of the ground); wrath kindled like the spreading flames through dry bracken, so speedy that escape seems impossible; the suddenly swollen waters of the river carrying all before them, making him feel like a piece of cork tossed about helplessly. In v.5 the word raging has the root meaning of "boiling over" and can be applied to the waters, or better it can signify the haughty pride of the evil men who are against the servant of God. Now, it is right here that we must begin to see the total control of the God of our salvation over all the waves, in whatever form they are manifested (Job 38:11). But why does God allow the situation to develop right to the precipice of disaster before intervening on behalf of His own? Is it not that He might shut us up to faith, compelling us to believe because there is no alternative? It is in this way that we learn in experience the truth of v.8.

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Keep in mind that Psalms 120-134 are the songs of the pilgrims sung on their journeys to and from Jerusalem. It is suggested that this particular Psalm is associated with the return of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon. As they came within sight of the city of Jerusalem, built on and surrounded by mountains, they became aware of the mighty fortress that their God had been, was, and would always be for them. This must always be the confidence of God's people whatever their immediate circumstances. In fearing God we need fear nothing and no-one else, for it is not merely the strength of God's power that is our sure defence but also the depth, breadth length and height, of His love. Read of it for example in Zech. 2:1-5,8,10; 2 Kings 6.14-17; Eph. 3:14-21. It is an awareness of the depth of God's love and the extent of His purposes of grace that causes the Psalmist to be confident that the rod of the wicked will never be allowed too much sway and interference in the lives of God's people, for prolonged despair could lead to spiritual demoralisation. But, of course, we have a promise in Scripture concerning this in 1 Cor. 10:13. There is also a very wonderful prayer that we do well to make our own in Prov. 30:7-9. We are not far from the essential spirit of this Psalm when we say, "My times are in Thy hand, my God I wish them there." (W.F.Lloyd)

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The Psalms in the section 120-134 are entitled "A Song of Ascents" used by pilgrims on their journey to Jerusalem for the observance of feast days. We would expect them therefore to make reference to past experiences of God, to their immediate situations and needs, and also to their future hopes. We saw this clearly in Psalm 121 for example, where the Psalmist looks with confidence to God for present help and for future assurance. Today's Psalm clearly celebrates some significant past deliverance and the title of the Psalm could well be, "The God who restores". The occasion of the Psalm may well have been the time of the marvellous return of the Jews to their own land after seventy years of captivity in Babylon. During that captivity many would have lost hope and died mourning in their exile from Jerusalem and all it meant to them. Many others would have lived in hopelessness, conscious of spiritual failure and feeling that God had cast them off and that fellowship and service would never again be theirs. Then by the decree of Cyrus, a pagan emperor, at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the "Berlin wall" of exile, bondage, and separation was demolished and the way was opened for restoration and newness of life. Read the history of this event in 2 Chron. 36:15-23; Ezra 1:1-4, but keep in mind that the story in Ezra and Nehemiah tells of battles and setbacks as well as victories and progress. This will help us to understand the two seemingly different themes of the Psalm. Some suggest that the Psalm could be applied to any significant deliverance worked by God for His people and they cite the great deliverance from the siege recorded in Isaiah 36-37. Read the prayer in Isa. 37:14-20 and God's assured answer in 37:33-35.

Then note carefully in the Psalm that along with the rejoicing of the people in God's deliverance there was also a great testimony to God among the nations (v2).

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God was not just a "theory" or a "theological concept" to these people but a real personal God who had done great things for them. The fact that a great many of the Jews did not want to leave Babylon is not considered here. There are always people who fail to recognise that God is active and who, for worldly reasons, decline to be part of what He is doing. But here, people are very aware that God has been good to them, answering their prayers and their hopes beyond all expectations, and they are eager and determined to express their gratitude publicly as well as privately (hopefully to their human helpers as well as to God). Now, when the people of God (the church) are spiritually quickened and are gladly alive to their God, society simply cannot ignore that fact. The nations took note that these people had a real God and the Jews confirmed this by their response of testimony. When you are truly aware of the great salvation God has worked for you in Jesus Christ, you simply cannot keep silent. But beyond the level of personal testimony, the sight of the people of God going forward in faith and obedience is something that shakes society and, in the language of the New Testament, such a people begin to turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6). By the effective working of the Holy Spirit society draws the true conclusion, recognising that the dynamic of such people and work is that they have been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). When people say, "How do you manage to cope? How can you have such peace and hope in a world like this?" it is up to us to tell them and to say, "We have a God who does things for us." With a God like this we need to sing, and congregational praise is a vital part of both worship and testimony. Read Wesley's great hymn, "And can it be" and note how he speaks of his dungeon flaming with light, his chains of captivity falling off, and how he rose and followed the Saviour who had done great things for him.

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Two further important lessons must be learned from this Psalm. Looking back to and being thankful for God's past mercies is a good and necessary thing, but it *can become* counter-productive because we can end up trying to recapture the thrill of the past and so both neglect the present and endanger the future. It is wonderful to recall the bliss of your wedding day but not helpful to daydream when a pile of ironing is waiting to be done. It is encouraging to recall a time when you were guest preacher at a big occasion but not a good thing when hard preparation of a difficult sermon now waits to be done. The God who worked in the past is active in the present and is leading His people forward into a future that is prepared but which will prove to be demanding. This is why we must learn to prepare realistically for the future. When the exiles returned to Jerusalem the sheer size of the task facing them almost crushed them. Yes, they had been restored from Babylon, but here they pray for the ongoing situation, so demanding in terms of hard work, that they would be restored again. In v.4 they pray in terms of the dried up river beds (last year's rains all gone) being flooded again, almost overnight as the rain water in distant hills (no rain in Jerusalem) came rushing down. God is able to do this as He has done in the past in times of revival (Isa. 44:1-5). But in v.5-6 of our Psalm the picture is not of dramatic, sovereign activity on the part of God; it is rather a picture of the ongoing slog of hard work, long-term, on the part of ordinary men and women. Ezra and Nehemiah had a great deal of back-breaking and heart-breaking work to do in clearing away accumulated rubbish (Neh.4:10) and also in building walls and houses. It was slow progress with little to show at times and with many reverses. The Psalm speaks of tears of tiredness, disappointment, fears and criticism. The work is costly. It speaks also of seed for sowing when supply was scarce. Would it rot in the ground? Would the birds eat it? Would the rains fail and all be lost? Here is assurance. The seed carries its own power, growing secretly (Mk. 4:26-29), watched over by God (Jer. 1:12), and it will accomplish what it is sent to do (Isa. 55:10,11). He who sows in faith and goes on in faith, in spite of the tears, will without doubt (v6) come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves. Labour in the Lord is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). Of course, it is all the Lord's doing and marvellous in our eyes.

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It moves, thrills and challenges the heart when at wedding services we quote v. 1 a of this Psalm followed by v.8 of Ps. 124. The first is a declaration of fact concerning the whole of life and the second an affirmation of faith, hope and trust. Without the Lord's presence and activity we can do nothing (John 15:5), but on the other hand we are workers together with God (2 Cor. 6:1 AV). These were spiritual and practical realities which had to be grasped by the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. Human enthusiasm, which is largely a matter of feelings with little real spiritual content, fades quickly and leaves Christian work in a mess. But even spiritual enthusiasm, as we saw it in the previous Psalm, can stagger when faced with appalling ruin, enormous demand and bitter opposition in the situation where God has set His people to work. It has to be recognised that no matter how spiritual, earnest, competent, prayerful, dedicated and gifted we are, our activity *apart from God* comes to nothing. No matter how watchful, how spiritually alive we are, how we contend for the faith and defend it, apart from God it is all in vain. The Psalm is then, first of all, a warning against self confidence. The longer a work of God goes on, and the more securely the foundations and walls are built (remember the story of Ezra and Nehemiah), the greater the temptation to forget our total dependence on God. The same is true on a personal level. We may have been on the Christian road a long time, we may have been much used by God and recognised as "spiritually mature" by others, but those who think they stand firm need to be on guard lest they fall (1 Cor. 10:12). The whole of ministry, worship and personal devotions must be geared to instilling this sense of total dependence on God. This takes time and effort. In Ps. 16: 8-9a the man of God affirms that quite deliberately he *sets* the Lord before Him. This is the true, dependable basis of life.

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In domestic, personal, civic or national life there is no building up , security or hope apart from God. Jesus told stories about men who built on sand and rock (Matt. 7:24-27) and about a man who built barns, only to discover that all his business acumen, mortgages and insurances came to nothing because he died unexpectedly and in terms of eternity he left himself totally impoverished (Lk.12:13-31). Jesus was right-to-the point when He said we must seek first the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33) and only then will the other parts of life become integrated and cohere. Without God not only the house (family) and the city are in vain but also all our work (2), however diligent we may be. The picture seems to be of a man who is totally absorbed in his own work to the exclusion of all else and because he has forgotten God, he finds only anxiety and tension which lead to sleeplessness. It is so easy to forget that God gives and ministers to us in sleep (v.2). There are times when, in the rush, burden and worry of Christian service, what God wants us to do is simply to stop, go to bed and sleep. He gives us sleep because He loves us and He is mindful of the limitations of our humanity (Ps. 103:13,14). Besides, is it not a strange and inexcusable vanity to think that if we take time off to rest and to sleep, then somehow the work of God will crumble and fall? Do we think we and our sometimes frantic labours are indispensable? Did not Jesus speak of His yoke being easy to wear (Matt. 11:28-30)? Rest in the Lord (Ps. 37:7 AV). There was a time when the regular late night epilogue on BBC Radio always ended with the words of Ps. 4:8. The amazing thing is that resting in the Lord does not make us lazy. It sets us free to work harder and more effectively, but without the debilitating strain and fretting which come when we feel "it is all up to us."

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No one but frantic feminists or rabid chauvinists would think for a moment that "sons" excludes "daughters". After all, if there were no daughters there would be no more sons. The Psalmist is enthusiastic about children and large families of them, ' but a "quiver" full of them can at times be a mixed blessing! What we must never forget as we bring up our children, who are covenanted to the. Lord, is that we are engaged in what is possibly the most important and most significant piece of Christian service ever entrusted to us. We are in the realm of the continuity of both the people and the work of God and we must look to our children to grow up, humanly and spiritually, so that they are ready and willing to take their place in spiritual work and warfare. Every new-born child and every child growing up within the fellowship of God's people must be prayed for, recognising that the possibilities of that life, humanly and spiritually, are beyond calculation. We must train up a child in the way he or she should go (Prov. 22:6) and we must be prepared to be examples that they may safely follow. We

must not load them with, or expect from them a spirituality and a pattern of life which is not appropriate to their age or their understanding (and this has to be remembered in the debate about children coming to the Lord's Table). But neither must we allow children who want their human independence as they grow up (and this is right and legitimate) to refuse to accept their spiritual responsibilities. The church already has plenty adults who have remained spiritual adolescents. The Psalmist is clear about the privilege and treasure of being parents, but the words of Kidner in his commentary are on target. "It is not untypical of God's' gifts that first they are liabilities, or at least responsibilities, before they become obvious assets. The greater their promise, the more likely that these sons will be a handful before they are a quiverful."

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If Psalm 127 pictures God as the home-maker, today's Psalm shows us God as the home-keeper. If there is still some suggestion of the time of return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem then, the circumstances of life have to be seen as difficult and demanding even though the people realise God is with them to give them a new beginning and a future full of hope. But if God's blessings are to be a permanent and increasing reality, then life must be lived on a sound basis and according to valid spiritual principles. The first two verses seem to echo Psalm 1:1-3 and picture the man who walks with God in God's way, shunning the worldly ways of the godless. Note that there is a healthy negative aspect to the life of obedience. Applying the Psalm to the individual, we see that he fears, walks, works and is happy (1-2). The whole pattern of his life stems from and is governed by the fact that he fears the Lord, and this is both the beginning and the principal part of wisdom (knowledge *and* understanding) (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). This fear is reverential trust and is very different from being afraid. It signifies an attitude of worship, submission and obedience which makes the man God-fearing and God-directed in his attitudes and activities. This is the man as he really is when no-one but God is there to see. Of course, "no man is an island" (Donne) and we shall see tomorrow the family aspect of this Psalm. Today we emphasise the individual and personal message. If this, along with the others in this section, is a pilgrim Psalm, then it is addressed to those who, have chosen the costly way of obedience, leaving all to go with God and to God. Such will never be the losers. That is what Jesus said to the disciples in Matt. 19:29.

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On the face of it, this Psalm suggests that the man who walks with God will find unqualified blessing in his heart, his business-life and his home-life. But experience does not bear out this simplistic view of "blessing". Jesus had no place to lay His head and He was constantly reviled and rejected. Paul, the missionary, was never out of trouble, never free from criticism or suffering. The prophets and patriarchs in the Old Testament, and the Psalmist himself, knew plenty about battles and privations. What then does this Psalm promise? The Psalmist elsewhere speaks of being shepherded by God and therefore lacking nothing and being assured that goodness and mercy would follow him all his days (Ps. 23). In the New Testament Paul speaks of *learning* contentment, whatever his circumstances were, because he knew that God's will was by far the best that he could have (Phil. 4:11-12). Both the Psalmist and the Apostle had, of course, a long-term view and an expectation of the world to come. Since we are strangers and pilgrims here on earth and will never have a permanent "dwelling" (Heb. 11:13; 13:14), then our present situation will always be set against the background of the riches and glory that are to come. In a world that seems increasingly without hope, people feel there is nothing now and nothing to come. But to know that you *and* your family, your children and their children after them, are held in God's hand and are part of His glorious plan and purpose, this is blessing indeed, so great it can never be measured or understood in terms of worldly currency. In v.3-4 it is stated clearly that it is in his home-life that the man of God will be blessed. But the blessing does not stop there, as if the believer's life was totally self-centred. In v.5 the blessing reaches out to the city and in v.6 to the nation. Quite apart from Christians being involved in social and political activity, the influence of stable, loving, contented family life will be a powerful witness. Children growing up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord will become at school, university, in commerce and industry a positive blessing, because they have learned to walk with God and to live in righteousness. In this context consider Jesus words in (Matt.5:13-16) regarding the effect of salt and light.

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To summarise the lessons of this Psalm, note how it makes plain that the truly godly man is and always will be a means of grace to his wife and to his home. Husband and wife will be heirs together of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7 AV), giving and receiving on all levels and so being true "helpmeets", drawing out and inspiring each other to be God's best. Society certainly needs to see the quality of real Christian marriages. The picture in v.3 is of the children when young but v.6 seems to suggest the time coming when parents are spectators and see the on-going work of God in the hands of their children. Then the Psalm climaxes in outreach to the city. "Piety can be too individualistic and a family can be too self contained" (Kidner). We must guard against cutting ourselves off from society. If we do, and if we are too protective of our children, how will the "outsider" (as we call them) hear the Gospel and see evidences of the power of God to save and to keep? Paul speaks of this to the over-spiritual Corinthian Christians (1 Cor. 5:9-11). When the Psalmist speaks of Jerusalem and Israel, he is thinking of the people and the work of God and we must remember that there is something greater and more important than the human family. It is the family of the people of God, the church. Parents must remember their children belong to Christ before they belong to them and children likewise must recognise that there is a claim on their lives which takes priority over self and family. We were purchased, redeemed at great price and we are not our own (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). If the promised blessing of God is to be ours from generation to generation, as v.6 indicates, then we must see to it that we are true to our redeemed status and destiny and are ready and willing to take our places in obedience to God in the spiritual family where we are placed.

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Led by the Psalmist, the people of God look back over their experiences and testify that from the beginning and all along the way it had been a saga of costly suffering. Right from the time of the Exodus from Egypt the way had been hard, and the grimness of it is described in terms of the weals from the lash being like deep furrows in a ploughed field (3), and also like a beast of burden ill treated by its owner until the Lord cut the yoke (4). Israel looks back, not to recall achievements, but to record and marvel at just how much they had survived and come through by the grace and mercy of their God. Evil did its worst but did not prevail. This is how it was with our Lord Jesus Christ, delivered up and put to death, but in the sovereign plan of God working salvation (Acts 2:22-24). Think of how Paul describes his experiences in the service of God and the Gospel in 2 Cor. 1:8-10; 4:7-12; 11:22-29; 12:7-10. The Psalmist likewise is aware of those who hate Zion (5), and there is a vital lesson to learn here. The people of God and the work of God belong together and cannot be separated. This means that we must not evaluate and interpret life's experiences, especially the hard, harsh and seemingly cruel ones, simply on a personal and individual basis, as if what we experience was in terms of what we deserved according to our sins or our spirituality. Remember the story of Job! His terrible experiences came to him not because he was a bad man (as some of his "friends" thought and said) but because he was being used by God, for the glory of God on a level and to an extent far beyond anything he knew or could have grasped even if God had told him. Read also the experiences of the great Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53 and Isa. 50:6 and remember that Jesus said they persecuted and hated Him without a cause, and would do the same to all His servants (John 15:18-20). We begin to understand something of the meaning of "the fellowship of His sufferings" (Phil. 3:10).

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One of the Devil's most successful techniques ever since the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-5) is to suggest and to make us feel that God is against us or that He has forgotten us (Isa. 49:14-16). But at the heart of this Psalm there is the emphasis that God, the righteous One, delivers His trusting people (4), and in doing so deals with and brings to judgment those who have shown themselves to be against God because they are against His people and His work (5-7). The persecutors are likened to grass withering before it has reached maturity and are described as worthless rejects. They come to nothing because in fact they are nothing. It is important to remember this because often, in the on-going experiences of life, it does not seem to be the case that the wickedness of unbelieving men and women is being dealt with by the righteous God. That was the burden of the man of God in Psalm 73 and it was not until he reminded himself of the reality of God that he found peace, assurance and hope. Read Psalm 73, especially the conclusion in v. 27-28. Whether in the on-going situation or

finally at the great white throne (Rev. 20:11), God's righteous judgment operates and His methods are exactly fitted to the situation. We can depend on this. Faith always takes the attitude, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18: 25). It is not for nothing that the church in its worship sings, "Holy and true are all His ways." When we read v.5 we must not think this is merely vindictive and sub-Christian. The man of God will always say, "Do what you like to me, but hands off God's work." All who criticise and oppose any given work of God need to be very careful lest they find themselves fighting against God (Acts 5:33-39). Be quite clear: in this Psalm the man of God is not taking things into his own hands as he faces and reacts to evil. That is God's business. He will repay (Rom. 12:19).

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Down the ages of history the powers of the world have not only persecuted Israel, they have tried to destroy her as a people. From the time of Pharaoh in Egypt down to the deliberate extermination policies of Hitler, the anti-Jew attitude has been part of history. But still they survive as a people, not because their attitudes and actions are always right (they are not) but because God's hand is on them and God's plans for them are still to be worked out, as Paul expounds in detail in Romans 9-11. The only explanation is the hand, the plan and the power of God. The same is true of Christ's church in the world. It will always be persecuted because of the spirit of Anti-Christ in the world (1 John 5:19; Rev. 12:7-17). But Jesus made it plain that His church would be built and the gates of hell could not and would not prevail (Matt. 16:18 AV). Time and again in the Old Testament, just when it seemed Israel would be swallowed up, God turned the enemy away. For example, God stopped Pharaoh very effectively (Exod. 14:13-18,28, 29) and acted in the same sovereign way in 2 Chron. 20:12, 17, when the people did not even have to fight. The same swift action by God is spoken of in Psalm 2 and in 2 Thess. 2:7, 8. It is God who protects what belongs to God and this is immense comfort. But society forgets God and this seems to be the significance of the last verse of the Psalm. As people greet each other, God is not their thoughts or in their speech, and this is indeed increasingly the kind of society we live in and the atmosphere in which our children are growing up. But we remind ourselves from the vivid language of this Psalm that evil men and women and the evil they do are all short lived. They have neither permanence nor future. They have nothing. What a bleak prospect there is for those with an evil heart of unbelief (Heb. 3:12)! They are departing from God and God's hand is against them. It is clear from this Psalm that whatever else we do, we must not be panicked by evil, not even when it seems to win the day, as it appeared to do when Jesus was nailed to the cross (Acts 2:23).

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This is one of seven penitential Psalms, the others being Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 143, and it helps us by way of comfort and encouragement when we are brought low and feel low. When we are 'in a hole', or feel we are, the only direction we can look is upward and this the Psalmist does, making mention of 'the Lord' no less than eight times and a further eight times pronouns and adjectives also focus on the person of God. The Psalm begins in the depths of bleakness because of conviction of sin and failure, but it ends on the heights of hope, love and plenteous redemption. While never excusing sin nor ever suggesting sin is necessary for growth in grace, it seems right to say that at times it almost seemed worth the agony of desolation and demoralisation that was the result of his sinning in order that the man of God should discover what a marvellous and glorious God of salvation and forgiveness he had. Without doubt it was as he began to look to God, to know God and to cast himself on God, that the Psalmist was assured of forgiveness and restoration to fellowship and service. In v. 1-2 the man is going through deep waters and feels he is floundering and sinking. In Ps. 69:1-3 there is a vivid description of a similar experience in which the Psalmist is struggling, frightened and despairing because the situation is not one of momentary crisis but one that seems to be lasting and getting worse. What he is struggling with here is not simply the bleakness that can come from home-sickness, exhaustion or emotional depression. The problem is guilt. This is clear from v.3, even though we do not know, or need to know, just exactly what the sin was that weighed so heavily on his mind, heart and spirit. This feeling of being in the depths can come as an immediate result of one act of sin or that sin repeated. It can be the result of the effect of sin which should and does leave the believer shaken and shaky. It is a good sign when sin upsets us! The

desolation can be because of the memory of sin, and we find we cannot shake free from it. The memories keep coming back, and the only thing to do, the thing we *must* do, is to go to God, and to go at once, grasping firmly the promise that the blood of Jesus keeps on cleansing from sin (1 John 1:7-9).

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In v.3-4 the man of God, stricken with guilt and not just feelings of shame and regret, acknowledges that the grim situation is his own doing. He senses the deep seriousness of his position if God were to deal with him strictly on the basis of justice. The thought of God marking and recording all our sins is a solemn one indeed and should help us to grasp, understand and thrill to the Gospel statement in Col. 2:13-15 to the effect that 'the handwriting that was against us' (AV), the record of our sins in God's book, has been taken away and nailed to the Cross. We must not ever think that God simply excuses or overlooks sin. The price of sin was paid in the atoning death of Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21-26). 'There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin,' (C.F.Alexander) and it is only because the judgment of sin was carried by the One who took our place that there can ever be forgiveness. The Psalmist seems to see this by faith, recognising that forgiveness can come only from the free sovereign grace of God. It can never be deserved or earned. But there *is* forgiveness. We must not lose our sense of wonder that this is so. We must never lapse into the atheist's cynicism that says, 'God will forgive, that is His business.' We must marvel at the fact that God gave up His Son for us (Rom. 8:32); that the Son of God loved us and gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20). It is indeed altogether amazing. Read Micah 7:18-19. What a God for sinners to have! Little wonder the penitent sinner says, 'I will arise and go to my Father.' But note how the Psalmist says that the thought of forgiveness constrains him to fear. It is not that he is afraid of God but, along with reverence and trust towards God, he fears lest he should ever take such forgiveness for granted, presuming on it in order to live a careless life. When we see the cost of forgiveness (1 Pet. 1:18,19) we should be awed and solemnised.

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Only those who have known what it is to live with deep conviction of sin and have tasted the sweet forgiveness of God really become aware of the sinfulness of sin. These are the people who know what it is to wait for the Lord. Three times in v.5-6 the theme of waiting is emphasised and this is after the Psalmist has grasped the reality of forgiveness. It is not just forgiveness nor even deliverance from the dread consequences of sin that he longs for. He wants God Himself and the assurance of restoration to fellowship, not merely service. There is no substitute for seeing the king's face (2 Sam. 14:28), as David's own son knew. The Psalmist waits for God, trusting in His word, but what word of promise he had in mind we cannot tell. But if the Lord gives us a 'word' at a time of need, then we should cling to it in hope because God is not fickle. Of course waiting for the dawn, especially after a long sleepless night, seems a long weary wait. God often seems to be slow, but in the slow watches of the dark night of the soul God is at work, even though neither seen nor recognised. Sometimes we must wait until the storm of thought and feeling caused by our sinning subsides, because only then can we truly listen to God and respond to what he is saying. Sometimes we must wait until God, by His gracious Spirit, resolves the complicated situations we have caused for ourselves and others by our sinning. Sometimes God waits to give us His full blessing of restoration until His grace has constrained us to put things right with, and to make necessary restitution to, those we have hurt. Perhaps the Lord considers that those we have sinned against are more in need of His care than we are and that they would be baffled and hindered if they saw us swiftly recovered from our wrongdoing. God knows what he is doing. That is why we must learn to wait for Him. Read and ponder Psalm 40.

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If we feel it burdensome to spend a fourth day in this Psalm it may indicate that, in the pattern of much Christian experience these days, we have little real sense of sin. This may point to a serious defect in much contemporary preaching, because the Bible leaves us in no doubt as to the reality, the consequences, and the judgment of God on sin. Read for example Jas. 1:13-15; Hab. 1:13; Rev. 21:27; Eph. 5:3-6. Think how the

whole symbolism of Old Testament worship made it vividly plain that nothing sinful could ever enter the holy presence of God. We know that Christ and Christ alone can meet the true needs of the human heart, but we must not allow the Gospel to be distorted so that the note of salvation and eternal destiny is displaced by an emphasis, on the merely human level, on reconciliation, fulfilment, rights and identity. The closing verses of the Psalm emphasise that our real need is to deal with God and to discover that with Him there is unfailing love, in spite of all we are and all we fail to be. With Him there is abundant redemption, full scale salvation (Heb. 7:25 AV) from the power as well as from the guilt of sin. And with the Lord there is assurance, because what He has begun to do in us, for us and through us, He will complete. This is why we have hope arising out of our depths of despair. We have a God who saves and keeps. But ponder well the words of Hosea 2:15 that speak of a valley of weeping becoming a door of hope through which God leads us away from the wrong we have created into the future He has planned and prepared for us. Is it not true that failures and sore experiences are made a means of grace to us? Psalm 119:67,71 deserves consideration. So does Proverbs 30:7-9.

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Following the deep and sore experiences of Psalm 130, which brought the Psalmist to a new waiting on God, we have this brief, sweet Psalm that breathes a spirit of rest and contentment. Like a child cradled in his mother's arms, the Psalmist feels the hurts and fears subside, and he confesses that to be right with God and to know His pardon, peace and hope are what he wants from life from then on. We do well to take time to think of God's everlasting arms of love (Jer. 31:3; Deut. 33:27); of how, even though a mother may forget her own child, He will never forget (Isa. 49:15); and how the great and mighty God is indeed a loving shepherd who gathers the lambs and gently leads those with young (Isa. 40:11). Such thoughts should touch the hearts of all parents with little children and at the same time should cause those who are older, and indeed old, to recall the tender mercies of God down through the years of life (Isa. 46:3-4; Zech. 8:1-8; Gen. 48:15-16). But for the grace of God, which sometimes urges us on and at other times frustrated our every desire and rebellion, what would we be and where would we be? 'The Psalmist has learned the spirit of child-like humility in the school of suffering. His is not a naturally unambitious soul, but he has disciplined all worldly ambitions, and calmly and contentedly resigned himself to the will of God,' (Kirkpatrick). Whatever had led to the trauma of Psalm 130, the man of God knows now that the will of God is life, health, peace, hope and assurance for now and for evermore. The Psalmist's attitude is now that of wanting nothing more and nothing less than God's good and perfect will. It is in desiring, resting in and enjoying God's will that we find the kind of peace that sets us free to be, to become and to do all that satisfies the heart. In v.2 the words quieted and weaned really mean the same. The weaned child no longer frets for what it once demanded as necessary. The New Testament speaks of the need to put away childish things and to grow up spiritually (1 Cor. 13:11,12).

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Look in detail at the Psalm. David is not making a proud claim to total humility, but rather recognising just how proud and self-confident he had been with regard to his own spirituality and significance. This is, of course, one of the hazards of Christian life, especially when you are aware that God's hand is on you and that you have been used in service. Think of how Joseph boasted about his calling and created the jealousy that complicated his life (Gen. 37:5-11). Think of how the disciples argued as to who deserved the first place (Matt. 18:1-4). Remember how Paul testified that because of the abundance of the revelation given to him God had to lay on him sore affliction in order to keep him useful (2 Cor. 12:7-10). It is right to have holy ambition to be and do the best in God's service, but the moment we become self-conscious, we can become self-motivated, self-congratulatory and self-confident. Think well on the counsel given in Jer. 45:5; Rom. 12:3; and Phil. 2:3-8. The Psalmist is now content to rest in the will and work of God and not try to excel. But in v.2 we have an indication that it had been a battle to learn this contentment. It did not come easily. Perhaps part of the temptation to self-congratulation stemmed from the fact that no friend or associate ever expressed appreciation of all he had done. Taking things for granted, especially when they have led to our blessing, can set a snare for the feet and heart of the man or woman through whose loving service we have received God's goodness and mercy. David had a new hope for the future of his life and service, because the providences of God (including the ones that led him into

the depths of Psalm 130) had weaned him away from over-conscious spirituality, over dependence on other people, and self-absorbed activity. He had discovered just how much he could in fact do without and still be satisfied in God's service.

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132:1-10

It is clear from v.10 that this Psalm looks back to the time of David and that some “anointed one”, is speaking to God and asking that, for the sake of David, God would listen and answer prayer. In 2 Chron. 6:40-42 we find the words of the Psalm (8-10) being used in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the newly built Temple. Just as Solomon pleaded David's name and merit as the Lord's anointed, so we plead the name of “great David's greater Son”, our Lord Jesus Christ, as we come to God in prayer. We ask that God will hear and bless us “for Jesus' sake”, for the sake of who He is and what He did. The second half of the Psalm, as we shall see, speaks of God's faithfulness and the sureness of His promises. But if we are to understand the Psalm we need some background understanding of the significance of the Ark of the Covenant (8) and its place in Israel's history. The Ark was a rectangular box which contained the two tables of the Law given to Moses, the pot of manna, and Aaron's rod (Exod. 25:16,21-22; Heb. 9:1-5). It symbolised the place where God met with His people, His presence with them in all their journeys (Num. 10:33-36), and His power to work salvation and deliverance for them (Josh. 3:7-17). When the Ark was captured by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:11,21-22) it symbolised that the glory of God's presence with His people had gone. When in due time the Ark was brought back by David, there was great rejoicing (2 Sam. 6:12-15) because of the assurance that God's presence and blessing were again with His people. Think of the relief, joy and hopeful expectation that must have filled the hearts of the people, knowing that the Lord was once again making His face to shine on them after years of barrenness. Think of Psalm 46:5,10-11, and Jesus' words, “Lo, I am with you always”. In all our ways how we need to make sure that God's presence will indeed be with us (Exod. 33:14-15). Nothing can compensate for loss of fellowship with Him (1 John 1:3-7).

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132:1-10

When Solomon dedicated the Temple and the Ark was set in its place, the glory of God's presence came down and filled the place (2 Chron. 7:1-3). We referred yesterday to Solomon using v.8-10 in the climax of his prayer of dedication and we do well to read more of that prayer, in 2 Chron. 6:12-21, in order to see the earnestness of desire for himself and his people that God should indeed dwell amongst them. We begin to see that the Psalm has to do with the House of God, the people of God, the work of God and the glory of God. In v.1-5 we see David spoken of as a man whose supreme desire was to honour God and to do His will. The reference to hardships in v.1 may well signify the deep and painful heart-searchings of a man who was very aware of how often his life and actions had not been worthy of the God who had called him and blessed him so richly, and who had given him the privilege of holy service. David's commitment was to the mighty One of Jacob (Gen. 49:24-25). It was not David's name or fame that mattered, but the name, the honour and the kingdom of his God. David was not allowed to build a house for God (that was to be done by Solomon) but what he was given to do he did with the enthusiasm and gratitude of a man who knew he had been loved by God. He knew that he and his people had neglected their God (1Chron. 13:3) and we too know how easily God can be crowded out of our lives. David, giving the example, calls his people to return to the Lord (7) and then, more significantly, calls on the Lord to take His rightful place among and at the head of His people to lead them into the future. But if that is to be, then His people must be clothed in righteousness. A holy God calls for a holy people (1 Pet. 1:15-16). But it is not our own righteousness (Phil. 3:7-11) that avails. We need to be declared righteous and accepted for Jesus' sake (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:1-2). We are back where we started our study of this Psalm and in v.10 the servant of the Lord asks to be accepted and blessed for the sake of Another.

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132:11-18

The first half of the Psalm 1-10 can be regarded as the prayer of Solomon or of the whole congregation. The second half is the answer to the prayer and it is grounded in the faithful promises of God. The passage is simply

full of God, His promises and His intentions, indicating that in answer to prayer He intended doing far above all that had been asked (Eph. 3:20). There is a tendency in all of us to think of God as being almost reluctant or unwilling to give us His blessing in full measure, even though Jesus made it plain that He came to bring life to the full (John 10:10). The Metrical Version of Psalm 145:16 speaks of God's open-handed liberality and there is the note of vast generosity here. David's great desire had been to build a house for God, but instead God built a whole dynasty for David and his seed after him (11-12). Yes, there was the call and requirement of obedience which was not always forthcoming and God at times had to deal sternly with His people. But He never gave them up and, in the fullness of time, there became evident the full extent of God's promise, referred to on the basis of this Psalm in Acts 2:29-32. Did David see in any clear way that the promise would stretch so far and be fulfilled in Christ? When we pray, our prayers being prompted and inspired by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26), do we have any idea of the sheer extent of the working of God that we are involved in? One great man said that the prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work. What an encouragement to pray! We are involved with God, and God in person finds delight in dwelling among His people. If the Psalm began with suffering, it ends with glory. It is the glory of the Lord's anointed, but it shines also on those who are with Him.

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This little Psalm extols the blessings of brothers and sisters in Christ when they dwell together in unity. This is no mere ecclesiastical or organisational unity, but that one-ness of heart, mind and spirit that binds together all who know, love and serve the Lord. Social class, intellectual and financial standing, differences in personality, talent and capacity all become very secondary (or at least they should) in the fellowship of believing people, because we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:25-28). All we are and all we have is the gift of God's grace (1 Cor. 4:7) and we have no grounds for proud comparisons. All of us have sinned and failed again and again and there is no place for harsh criticism, let alone condemnation or rejection (Matt. 18:23-35). It is all too easy to give way to prejudices and preferences and to divide a congregation into little cliques of people who gravitate to each other after every service. This leads to hurt and neglect of others who are also precious to God and is a denial of all that is meant by fellowship. Read James 2:1-9 and contrast the unfeelingness of that kind of 'apartheid' with the sweet, gracious and heart-warming spirit of the Psalm which speaks of the Lord's people being drawn together in the kind of fellowship that is both pleasant and profitable. Both AV and NIV note specifically that this is a Psalm of David and we remind ourselves that among David's people and within his own family there came times when there was division and separation that brought sadness and bitterness. Little wonder we are exhorted in the New Testament to do all in our power to live at peace with others and to strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit within the life of the church (Rom. 12:18; Eph. 4:3). It is when we are set to do just that, that the Lord blesses, as the last verse of the Psalm declares.

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This Psalm is important in our generation when many who claim to be evangelical believers seem to be reluctant to commit themselves to the life and work of a congregation. They see no need to do so, claiming they get little 'blessing' in church, saying they would rather be out and about 'doing' things. But that is self-centred. We are commanded to gather together (Heb. 10:25) and reminded of the real dimension of gathering for worship in Heb. 12:22-24. We come together *to* God and *for* God to give Him the honour, glory, praise and pleasure. We come together as the people of God with spiritual identity and purpose (1 Pet. 2:9-10); for witness and worship; to rejoice in God's great salvation and to give thanks as we remember His unfailing goodness to us in Jesus Christ. It is when we are thus focused on and preoccupied with God that complaints, slights and hurts are laid aside and, becoming aware of God's presence, we taste His blessing. David speaks of the anointing oil that was poured on the High Priest's head and flowed down his person, spreading its fragrance around to all in his company. In Scripture, oil is usually a symbol or token of the Holy Spirit, and we must think of the oil of joy and gladness, the oil of unending supply, the oil that signified both consecration and separation unto God, anointed for service. We all know how the unpleasant smell of stale cigarette smoke can cling to clothes and linger in a room long after the smoker has gone. In a similar way the sweet fragrance of Christ, with whom we gather in fellowship and worship, can cling to our lives and personalities right through a week after a Sunday or

a Prayer Meeting or a gathering of believers in a home. This has an element of witness, as 2 Cor. 2:15-16 makes plain. When we gather together in the way this Psalm suggests, we gather with Him who is referred to as the Rose of Sharon (SofS 2:1), and His perfume clings to us, and that makes us better people and easier to live with.

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When unbelievers come to a living church, they often speak of a sense of peace or a 'nice spirit', not very sure what it is. We know what it is. It is Jesus among His people. Of course, if we who are Christians come to church in a wrong spirit, careless of the fact that we have grieved God, or not in fellowship with other Christians, then we create a wrong atmosphere. When we come in the spirit that says, "I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the House of the Lord," (Ps. 122:1), and when we come looking for and longing to meet with God, then our blessing is as this Psalm describes. Note that both the oil and the dew are *given*, not brought or manufactured by us. It is always dangerous to try to create an atmosphere. We spoke of the oil yesterday. Think of the dew, which comes so silently from above, settling on, refreshing and renewing what has dried out during the day. If the oil speaks of fragrance, the dew speaks of fruitfulness. The dew is silent, very different from torrential rain and having nothing of the histrionics of an electrical storm and the accompanying downpour. Granted the thunder and lightning are exciting, even frightening, but floods can often do damage rather than good. The comparison with dew is a stimulating one because it seems to suggest the life-giving breath of God's wonderful love coming in contact with our wilting hearts and lives and, almost without our noticing it, refreshing and reviving us. This is why we often *feel better* as a service of worship proceeds. It is indeed good to dwell together in God's presence with hearts that seek Him. These words of a hymn make a good prayer:

"Come as the dew: and sweetly bless
This consecrated hour;
May barrenness rejoice to own
Thy fertilising power." (Reed)

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We remind ourselves that Psalms 120-134 are Pilgrim Psalms sung as the people made their way to Jerusalem for the feasts and festivals. Yesterday's Psalm described the blessing, joy, peace, security, hope and indeed the glory of being the people of God in the presence of God. On such occasions, as we know for example on a Communion Sunday, there is a real awareness of spiritual realities. But the pilgrims would have to return home, just as we go back to the duties of the daily routine of home and work, with the inevitable demands and disappointments. They would remember that there was always someone on duty in the presence of God on their behalf. These God-appointed persons (Priests and Levites) lifted up their hands in prayer, exercising an unbroken ministry of intercession for all the people of God. As a result of this there was, and there always would be, blessing for the people. It seems that v.1-2 were to be spoken by the pilgrims, calling on their representatives to bless and praise the Lord for all He was and is and for all He had done for them. The Israelites were always reminded, in many different ways, that their God had saved them out of the bondage they knew in Egypt, had watched over them in all their journeys, and had led them into new life. This salvation is something we also need to remember and to make a point of giving thanks for to God. After all, if we learned more to count all our blessings, we would be delivered from a great deal of complaining and discontent in our lives. When we are criticising life, friends, congregations and activities, we need to be challenged: "Would you rather go back to what life was before Christ laid hold on you?" In the last verse of the Psalm we seem to have the words of the officiating Priest as he speaks the very personal blessing that was so familiar to the people. Read the full version of it in Numbers 6:22-27, and note how the Lord puts His name on His people. They are His personal possession (1 Pet. 2:9; Zech. 2:8,10,11).

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All the Old Testament foreshadows and points forward to the New Testament and to Christ, whose Person and work are the fulfilment of all the promises given and symbolised in the worship of the Old Testament. The pilgrims had someone to represent them in the presence of God, one of their own people, appointed and anointed by God for this task. In like manner we have Jesus, in a very real sense 'one of us', who knows our humanity, shares our experiences and is touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Heb. 4:15 AV). He does not just understand: He feels for us and with us. Because our representative is there, in God's presence, *we are there*, we are accepted for His sake, and in Him we have free access right into God's presence. We need not and must not hold back (Heb. 4:16). We must not let our sins, failures and sense of guilt keep us away, because this Jesus took our sins away when He stood in for us and died for us (Hebrews 9:12-14). Our representative is also our Advocate, who speaks on our behalf, presenting our pleas at the throne of God and doing so *in His own name*. Let our hearts be glad at this thought. Jesus ever lives in the presence of God to make intercession for us; He appears on our behalf; He speaks for us (Rom. 8:31-34; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1). Are we really aware of how totally we are accepted and welcomed by God for Jesus' sake? What encouragement this should be! But note how this short Psalm makes us focus our attention on God the Lord. The original word 'Lord' here is Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and our God. He is the unchanging God, who is a personal God to His people, who delights to have His people around Him, just as a father delights in His children of all ages. The description of Him in v.3 makes us think of the so-called children's hymn, 'God who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea; who gave the light its birth, careth for me.' Bless the Lord, O my soul (Psalm 103:1-5).

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135:1-4

This is obviously a call to praise God and we must consider it well because in our day there is a tendency for praise to be separated from preaching to such an extent that the preaching of God's Word is edged out of meetings and services. Singing praise is not in and by itself worship. If we look back to Ps. 134 we see in the reference to lifting up hands that prayer is inseparable from praise. Keep in mind that nowadays lifting hands or any other gestures may be simply a way of attracting attention to self, an attempt to show others how spiritual we think we are. If this be so we are not thinking about God, and therefore our praises are not worth much. But if praise cannot be separated from prayer, neither can it be separated from the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, because it is only through the Word that we can learn who God is, what He is like and what He has done. Praise, prayer and hearing the Word of God are the essential elements of worship, which must engage our moral, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional and volitional capacities. Consider this definition of worship given by the late Archbishop Temple, words that we have often quoted in preaching and in print. "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God; to feed the mind with the truth of God; to purge the imagination by the beauty of God; to open the heart to the love of God; and to devote the will to the purpose of God." This means that when we are called at the beginning of a service with the summons, "Let us worship God," we are being given the clear indication of why we are gathered and what we are to do. The whole of our capacities must be engaged so that worship will indeed be worthy of God in language, form and content. Worship is personal, but in its full sense it is corporate, and that is why we must gather together to meet with God. When we do, His presence, in and through His word, is our blessing.

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135:1-4

These verses are rich in meaning. We praise the name of the Lord, and His name signifies all He is in His nature and character, all He has revealed of Himself in word and action, and in His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." (John 14:8-9). "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear". It is the name of our shepherd, husband, friend, prophet, priest, king, lord, life, way and end, as John Newton's lovely hymn declares. We praise the Lord because we are honoured and privileged to be His servants, and what a wonderful Master He is! He insists that His servants should be His friends (John 15:14,15). We are to praise the Lord because He is good in Himself and good and nothing but good to His people. We praise Him because He is gracious, full of grace and plenteous in mercy and we receive from Him grace upon grace (John 2:16). What a God we have! Remember when Moses asked to see God's glory, God made all His *goodness* to pass

before him (Exod. 33:18-19). We are also to praise the Lord because He has chosen us to be His own possession (Deut. 7:6-8; Heb 11:16; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Eph. 1:3-8). "Chosen" is a wonderful word, it is so personal and specific, and leaves you in no doubt that you are wanted and valued. Such is the love with which God has loved us, and such is His commitment to us, that even when in foolish and rebellious sin and disobedience we go against God, as if determined to backslide, even then He cannot find it in His heart to give us up. What a God we have! Little wonder Wesley wanted to have a thousand tongues to sing His great Redeemer's praise. It is when we grasp, hold to, and rejoice in these great aspects of the character of God and are determined to go on with Him in faithfulness, that we begin to know what it is to praise.

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135:5-14

This section of the Psalm calls us to praise God because He is great. This is important because there is a tendency to think about God as if He was limited and under pressure, as we often feel ourselves to be. In v.5-7 the focus is on the sovereignty of God in creation and in providence. God rules, controls and guides all He has made, and His will is most certainly done on earth even as it is in Heaven. There is no questioning or resisting His power (6). He works and no-one can hinder (Isa. 43:11-13) and we believe, for our blessing, that in all things God works for good on behalf of them that love Him (Rom. 8:28). We have an echo here of Ps. 19:1-6 which affirms that, whether we see it or not, God is there in the life of creation and in the progress of history. And He is the God who works the wonders of salvation for His people. In v.8-12 we are reminded of how God delivered His people from the bondage of Egypt at the time of the Exodus and of how, mingled with the work of salvation, there was the judgment of Pharaoh and the confounding of his opposition. In like manner God dealt with the powers of evil that resisted the Israelites as they claimed and took possession of the land of Canaan which God had given to them. The powers of the world can still speak and act with great threatening but we must not fear, because God is greater (1 John 3:20). This section of the Psalm ends with reference to God who vindicates His people to whom He is committed in an everlasting covenant. He is, in His dealings with His people, a God of tender compassion. He remembers our frailty and limitations (Ps. 103:13-14). Little wonder the Psalmist rejoices in his God whose name endures for ever (Ps. 72:17-19) and little wonder there are so many calls to us to sing praise, to worship and to bow down before a God like this who has done so many wonderful things for us (Ps. 95:1-7).

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135:15-21

The Psalmist is realistic and recognises that there are false gods to whom men and women give not only belief but service and submission. The Psalmist is scornful of these "gods" who are "man-made", blind, deaf and dumb, and who do nothing to benefit their devotees but who demand so much sacrifice from them and bring them into terrible bondage. Read Ps. 115:3-8; Isa. 40:18-20; and 1 Kings 18:25-29. People set up and serve many "gods" and allow their lives to be ruled by these "idols". Some worship "the State", some worship "career" or "pleasure" or "sex" and these things become the dominant power in their lives. But there is also a sinister element in all forms of idolatry as v.18 makes plain. People grow to be like the "idols" they worship. Think of the greedy spirit of the miser or the ruthless and insatiable spirit of the man or woman who lives for carnal indulgence. But the sinister element goes further than the moulding of personality, the corruption of character and the bondage of life (Rom. 6:16). In 1 Cor. 10:14-21 Paul deals with idolatry in a searching way. He declares, as the Psalmist does, that an idol is "nothing" but at the same time makes plain that behind the "thing" of wood or stone or ritual there lies the spirit of evil, the Devil himself. This is why we must be very careful with whom and with what we get involved. Remember that all "idols" are not crude, ugly and grotesque! At the start of the human story the Devil approached our first parents as a "shining one", not a snake (Gen. 3:1), and Paul warns the believers in Corinth that Satan transforms himself into an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). But we who are God's people through Jesus Christ have no need to fear. We have a God who is able to save and to keep, and this is why the Psalm begins and ends with a call to praise the Lord. We have everything to live for and to hope for, and that hope will never disappoint us (Rom. 5:1-11). Praise the Lord!

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Some things are better felt than expressed in words and we need to get the feeling of this Psalm which seems to have been designed for use in public worship: the first statement in each couplet being said or sung by the priest or leader and the response given by the congregation. Some people like a pattern of worship that requires verbal responses and some do not, but it is both good and necessary to express in words our response of gratitude to God (and to those by whom God's blessing comes to us). Repetition can be monotonous and indeed mechanical and empty of meaning and that is a danger in reading through the whole of this Psalm, because no less than twenty-six times there is the repeated affirmation that the steadfast love of the Lord endures for ever. The words "steadfast love" give a translation of the Hebrew word for "mercy" and include thoughts of fidelity, loyalty, kindness and longsuffering on the part of God. We are thinking here of the love of God which endures, which will never let us go, which is always seeking to bless us and to lead us on into richer and fuller knowledge and experience of His grace. It is the enduring aspect of this love that is emphasised. No matter what His people did or failed to do, God refused, and still refuses, to withdraw His love. He will keep His covenant even if the people are faithless (2 Tim. 2:13). Think of how it is recorded of Jesus that having loved His own He loved them to the end (John 13:1 AV). Paul rejoices in Rom. 8:35-39 that there is nothing in all creation or experience that has the power to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. One translation of Jer. 31:3 reads "I have loved you with an everlasting love, and with loving kindness will I draw you gently home again." What a God! What love! "O Love Divine, how sweet thou art! When shall I find my willing heart all taken up by thee?" Read Wesley's hymn which starts with these words and think of the length, breadth, depth and height of God's love made plain and brought to us in Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:14-19).

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To help us to give thanks to God the Psalmist sweeps his view wide, high and long. He begins with the goodness and sovereignty of God (1-3) and goes on to the starry heavens (4-5), the whole order of creation (6-9), the sweep of redemption history (10-22), and to us in our low estate (23). Is it not marvellous to be told that God is mindful of us? It makes us think of Jesus' words telling us we are of more value than many sparrows (Lk. 12:6-7). The Psalmist goes on then to speak of God with us in all our battles (24) to rescue and deliver us. The final note is that of the God who gives us our daily bread and provides for us in our varied needs (25). All through the Psalm the emphasis is on the faithfulness and generosity of God. All He does for us is on the scale of the riches of His grace (Eph. 1:5-8). There is never anything mean or miserly in God's dealings with His people. How we need to express our gratitude, and how effectively some of the great hymns enable us to do this, if only we take real notice of the words as we sing them. "Praise my soul the King of heaven ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me His praise should sing? Slow to chide and swift to bless glorious in His faithfulness Father-like He tends and spares us, well our feeble frame He knows." (H.F.Lyte) But note how the Psalm is clearly meant for use by the people of God gathered together for worship. Another of the Psalms speaks of God inhabiting or being enthroned on the praises of His people (Ps. 22:3). Praise is appropriate and a means of grace at a time of dedication (1 Chron. 16:7-8, 34); at a time of battle (2 Chron. 20:15,17,21); and at the beginning of a new stage in the work of God (Ezra 3:10-11). O give thanks to the Lord, for He is the God who spared not even His own Son (Rom. 8:32).

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If yesterday's Psalm was full of joy, singing and thanksgiving, this one is full of pain, sadness and failure. We must not let the poignancy of v.1-6 be obscured by reaction at the grimness of v.7-9, which we will consider tomorrow. The people of God were captive in Babylon as a direct result of their spiritual backsliding, disobedience and compromise persisted in over a long spell of years, in spite of a succession of godly prophets who ministered to them (2 Chron. 36:15-16). Good, true, biblical ministry blessed by God does not guarantee that the hearers will not backslide. The people, once so proud of and glad of their spiritual privileges and blessings, had lost everything. The worldly nations knew that this once holy people were in disgrace, and mocked and tormented them about all their holy convictions and their professed faith in God. There was at least the beginnings of repentance, because they wept, not just because of their circumstances but because of their

spiritual loss. Sometimes it is only when we are taken away from the place where we have known God's blessing that we begin to realise just how lightly we regarded it, and how little we valued it. The people were exiles in a far country, feeling far from God, feeling ashamed and full of regret. They were really saying to God that if they ever got the chance again they would see to it that their spiritual priorities would be sorted out. A Czech pastor, in the grim days of Communist rule in his country, preached poignantly to us once and said, "You cannot sing the Lord's song and the song of the world at the same time." The picture in v.5 is like that of a backslider at a drunken party being asked mockingly to sing, "When I survey the wondrous Cross." How can we sing the Lord's song if we are adrift from Him?

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It is clear from the first half of the Psalm that the godless persecutors of the people of God were ruthless and contemptuous of them and of their faith in God. No doubt the conquering armies had perpetrated all manner of cruel and shameful crimes against them, but does this excuse or justify the ferocity of the language of v.7-9? Many who criticise evangelicals and their attitude to Scripture make use of these verses to pronounce the Old Testament to be "sub-Christian" and therefore to be rejected. But we must not theorise about the atrocities that are committed by evil regimes, especially if we have never lived through them. If we can think of cruelty, rape, terror, torture, massacre and degradation (and Israel suffered all these) and have no reaction and no thoughts of justice and judgment, then we are less than human. This does not mean we answer evil with evil, cruelty with cruelty, nor that we operate on a basis of personal revenge. But God is a God of judgment as well as salvation, and once we have seen the stark reality, ruthlessness and implacability of evil, and become aware that it is essentially diabolical, that is, inspired by the Devil, then we begin to see both the necessity and justice of judgment. When society and individuals reach the stage where they feel no anger against evil they have become de-humanised. Our generation that has condoned and even encouraged wholesale abortion and a disturbing range of genetic experiments and legalised euthanasia, is in no position to criticise the language of this Psalm. When the Psalmist calls on God to remember the evil done, we seem to have an echo of the solemn story in Gen. 18:20-21 where God came down to confirm that the evil was as bad as its reputation, and then to execute judgment. In the New Testament we are told very clearly that God has appointed the day for judgment and has in fact given notice of this by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Acts 17: 30-31).

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Consider the last three verses again to be clear that men and nations have to deal with God, who is everlastingly righteous and of purer eyes than to look on and tolerate evil (Hab. 1:13). His judgments are not reserved for the final day of judgment but are operative in righteousness and justice throughout history (Ps. 9:7-8). The New Testament makes this plain in, for example, Rom. 1:18-2:6 where the deliberate nature of human evil and its hardness and impenitence of heart are stated clearly. In our day there seems to be little belief in punishment, let alone judgment. People speak of punishment in terms of deterrence or reformation, but ultimately the only justification for punishment is that it is deserved: it is retribution, the right and just penalty for evil-doing. The Psalmist's language seems fiery and hot but we must remember that the absence of indignation and anger is not necessarily a good thing. It can indicate indifference, and God is not indifferent to evil. When human evil really begins to show, whether in ourselves or others, we should be afraid, not least because many have found themselves not only saying but doing evil things they never thought they would do. In relation to v.9, C. S. Lewis speaks of little things, the infantile beginnings of small indulgences and resentments, which can become terrible menaces in personality and life. He says that it would have been better if these "little things" had been dealt with and destroyed at birth. We need to be stern indeed with the things that will wage war against our souls (1 Pet. 2:11) and which have the potential to make us a scourge in society. Jesus used strong language when He spoke about plucking out our eye or cutting off our hand if these faculties and capacities were going to make us stumble and fall in the things of God (Matt. 18: 7-9). "This Psalm takes its place in Scripture as an impassioned protest, beyond all ignoring or toning down, not only against a particular act of cruelty but against all comfortable views of human wickedness, either with regard to the judgment it deserves or to the legacy it leaves; and not least, in relation to the cost, to God and man, of laying its enmity and bitterness to rest."

(Kidner) Read Isa.53: 5-7; 1 Pet. 3:18.

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C H Spurgeon referred to this Psalm as, "Choice comfort for the young believer," and it is indeed comfort and encouragement to every believer because v.8 echoes Paul's joyous affirmation in Phil. 1:6. The Psalm is entitled "a Psalm of David" and there is reference in v.3,7 to trouble and enemies. We cannot be sure of the particular situation that inspired the Psalm but some suggest it relates to God's words to David and David's words to God at the time when he was told not to build the Temple (2 Sam. 7:8-9,18-25), in which case the reference to the Temple in v.2 may be a recognition that God's dwelling place is vaster than any "house" (1 Kings 8:27).

Whatever the context, the Psalm is very personal, all about God and His dealings with David, and full of praise. David opens his heart to the God he knows, sure that God knows him. There is a boldness and lack of formality about David's approach to God because his relationship with God is a long-standing one, but at the same time there is real reverence, because he bows down (2). There is no familiarity about David's dealings with God because he is too aware of God's glory. This is important, because casual familiarity can devalue and eventually destroy relationships. All of us need to be able to "look up to" those we depend on and appeal to. David sees himself as God's man and he sings praise in a public and deliberate way. He bows down in worship reverently and he gives thanks to the name of the Lord. When he says "before the gods" (1) he is not suggesting that there are other gods similar to God, but rather he is aware of the powers of the world, the might of the heathen and their gods, the reality of evil and the danger of being enticed away by them. There could be echoes here of Eph.6:10ff and 1 John 2:15-17; 5:19.

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Unlike the RSV and NIV, in the AV and the Metrical Version, v.2b reads that God has exalted His word above His name and this seems strange because what God says (His word) cannot be greater than nor take precedence over His character (His name). God is, and always will be, greater than what we have been able to grasp in His revealed Word. We reverence Scripture because it is God's Word (2 Tim. 3:16), but God is greater, and yet nothing God says or does will contradict what He has said in His given Word. In the Psalm David sees the Person and Word of his God exalted above all, and bears testimony that answered prayer had had the effect of encouraging him and making him bold and confident (3). In Ps.3:3 David speaks of God as the lifter up of his head, the One who made him walk tall, equal to whatever the occasion demanded. There is a holy boldness (quite different from brashness and arrogance) that comes through confidence in God and, when we think of it, there is no reason at all why we should not be confident in God who hears and answers prayer. Indeed we must learn to boast in God as Ps. 34:1-8 calls us to do, and to boast even when our circumstances and experiences are painful. This is what Paul did (2 Cor. 12:1-10). On the other hand Paul refused to boast or to glory in anything save the Cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14). In today's Psalm David looks out beyond his own experience of and blessing from God to the wider world and to the testimony reaching all the nations of the earth. It is this outward looking attitude and the desire for others to know God that is the sign of real faith and gratitude. The man or woman who has been truly blessed by God will always want others to share in God's great salvation. If we are self-centred, there is something very wrong.

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Note the divisions of the Psalm: the God who hears (1-3); the God who acts (4-6); and the God who purposed (7-8). The whole Psalm is just full of God, and the Psalmist's heart thrills to the fact that he has a God like this. He has spoken of the greatness of God in love and faithfulness (3) and in v.5 he affirms the greatness of the glory of God. Then he declares, because he knows it is true, that this great God regards the lowly. This God comes down to the humblest, most ordinary believer, especially when that believer feels he is at rock bottom. Think of how Jesus, who reveals the Father, called those who were burdened to come to Himself because He is meek and lowly in heart. The hungry, the needy, the hurt and the devalued should never hesitate to turn to God because He is mindful of them and their need. But the proud and pretentious, the arrogant and self-centred, will

find God very different, because He stands back from them (1 Pet. 5:5). The opening words of v.7 are a reminder of Ps. 23, which Psalm speaks of journeys, rest, dark valleys, enemies, and goodness and mercy which guard, guide and bring to perfect completion all the plans and purposes of God. Note how immediate and personal the care and the help are in v.7. It is God's own hand that holds and guides, and that same hand controls the battle and works victory for His people. At the end of the Psalm David is really saying, "Go on, God, mould me and make me all You want me to be." God's plans are greater than we realise (1 Cor. 2:9 AV); His thoughts about us are beyond our grasp (Ps. 40:5), but He is quite clear about them (Jer. 29:11). What is more, He who calls us is faithful and will do it all (1 Thess. 5:24). Little wonder the Psalm began with David giving thanks.

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People use the words "God knows" in a variety of ways, in different situations. Sometimes the words are spoken without meaning, sometimes indicating bafflement and annoyance, but sometimes with faith, confidence, peace and hope. This whole Psalm declares in a glorious and encouraging way that God does in fact know. The emphasis of the Psalm is very personal. It is not simply that God knows everything and everybody everywhere, but that God knows *me*. Various titles have been given to the Psalm: "No escape and no regrets"; "Too wonderful for me"; and even "Hound of Heaven", which seems too strong, unless the hound is seen as a sheep-dog whose business it is to gather to safety, not to frighten or scatter. C S Lewis pinpoints v.13 and entitles the Psalm "God and the embryo," and that raises all sorts of profound questions and makes us think of two babies destined before conception to be significant in the purposes of God in world history (Jer. 1:5; Lk. 1:15). Men and women must be careful about interfering in the processes of birth. The Psalm's theme is "God everywhere, and concerned in all things and in all men; God coming closer to us than we can come to ourselves; God the ruler and judge of all." (J Elder Cumming) The Psalm, which we suggest should be read right through each day we study it, begins with the fact that God has searched the Psalmist's heart and life, and the effect of that is to constrain him to say at the end of the Psalm, "Search me and lead me in the way everlasting." To help us in our studies we give the main divisions of the Psalm: v. 1-6: the seeing, all- knowing God; v.7-12 the all- present God; v.13-18: the all sovereign powerful God; v.19-24: the all-holy God. The Psalmist marvels as he views life and experience and sees in it all, the good hand of his God.

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139:1 –6

When you begin to face the grim realities and perplexities of life in this wicked world you begin to be glad there is a God over all. Compare being lost, no-one knowing where you are, no-one caring very much, and no-one seeming to do anything to find and restore you, with being found, someone knowing, caring, valuing, keeping, protecting and rescuing. Such knowledge is not frightening or inhibiting, and certainly not a denial of freedom and personality. It is a relief and blessing. The one who knows and cares is interested in you personally. When we speak of God's omniscience, His all-knowing, there is a tendency to think in a mechanical, deterministic way. But the one who knows is a Father, not a computer, a Father with tender care because He Himself has feelings. Yes, He has perfect knowledge and understanding and He knows what we are feeling and thinking before we have sorted out our reactions, let alone put them into words. The Psalmist marvels that God is there, round about him like a rampart of protection and at the same time like a tender mother who puts a reassuring and soothing hand on a fretful child (Ps. 131:1,2). As a child in Sunday School, the writer of these notes used to be filled with dread by the words of the children's hymn, "God is always near me, hearing what I say; knowing all my thoughts and deeds, all my work and play." He was alarmed by the thought that not even the darkest night could conceal him from God. But then in adult life he began to be taught in the Scriptures, to learn what God is like, and the hymn took on a whole new meaning of exquisite comfort, encouragement and assurance. Yes, God sifts and searches us, revealing to us (not to others), that our assessments, attitudes, motives and actions have not always been as pure and balanced as we had persuaded ourselves that they were. In v.6 the Psalmist's reaction is one of wonder and worship and he feels that he wants to walk in the light with this God, to walk in fellowship not fear, and yet at the same time he wonders if he is capable of doing so, or even if he wants to (1 John 1:5-7).

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139:7-12

With his thoughts moving on from the all-seeing God to the everywhere-present God, it is not clear if the Psalmist is reassuring himself or wanting to escape. Of course the natural instinct of fallen human nature is to run away and to hide from God as the story in Gen. 3:8-10 makes plain. When Adam sinned he wanted to hide. When he heard God's voice calling, "Where are you, Adam?" he assumed it was a summons to rebuke and judgment, not a call from the Father of the prodigal. We have a tendency to be comforted by the omnipresence (being everywhere-present) of God when we are battling on at our best and, of course, God certainly is with us then, and in our circumstances ordering them to work out for our good (Rom. 8:28). But, because in Christ we are His people, no matter the actual condition of our spiritual lives, God is immediately present. When we are going through deep waters or fiery trials He is with us to keep us from being overwhelmed (Isa. 43:2). But if we are in a phase of life when we seem to be going from blunder to greater blunder, we are not left alone to work out remedy and restoration. If we are on a "high" (heaven) or a "low" (depths), in darkness or in light, at home or as far from home as it is possible to be, God is there to hold and lead, not to shake and frighten. God never loses sight of us. Even if v.11 indicates a panic desire to hide from God, the truth is that wherever we are, however we got there, whatever condition we are in, God is there to hold us by the right hand of His saving power and to lead us on in mercy. Read Isa. 41:10-14; 42:5-6a. What a comfort it is to put our hand into the hand of God, to be treated as a child, and guided where to go.

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139:13-18

It is good to have our minds and hearts fixed on God, to learn what God is like, because this is what enables us to go on steadily in service, having faith in God (Mk.11:22). Those who know their God will be strong, even when the way is both difficult and mysterious, because they believe that God always knows exactly what He is doing (Dan. 11:32; Job 23:10). In this passage the emphasis is on the omnipotence of God, the fact that He is all-powerful and totally sovereign. If v.7-12 emphasised space, distance and the extent of God's gracious activity from one end of the earth to the other, these verses emphasise length of time. The whole of life from before its beginning, through conception, development in the womb, right through to the conscious awakening of life, has been in the hand of God. Reference to the inward parts may indicate the psychological aspect of life and how that is linked with the physical (13). The emphasis in v.14-15 is on the supernatural, the miracle of life. It is God alone who gives life. Perhaps even more wonderful is the thought of God's plan and purpose for the individual life (16-18). People say of life, "You take your chance," or "Life is a gamble." But that cannot ever be said by the believer who knows that the grace of God plans and fulfils. One of the beneficial spiritual exercises we should carry out is to take time to look back over life in order to trace the evidences of God's good hand on us even when we did not realise it at the time. We cannot explain all the complications and mistakes of life that leave hurts, scars and complications, except to say that the world into which we were born is a fallen world and we ourselves are born sinners (Ps. 51:5). Like our parents before us we are sinners by nature, choice and practice. But where sin abounded grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20). God by His Spirit through His word brought us to Christ and to newness of life, born from above (Eph. 2:1-5; John 1:12-13). This all-powerful God is the ever-active God, and our salvation and life flow from and are governed by His sovereign grace.

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139:19-24

From his contemplation of God the Psalmist now turns his eyes on the realities of the world in which he lives. Having seen God in His omniscience, His omnipresence, and His omnipotence he is in no doubt at all that God is also the all-holy one and that sin and evil have no place in His scheme of things. Because God is holy (and all Scripture testifies to this), dwelling in unshadowed and unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16), nothing that is in any way defiled can possibly live in His presence. Light and dark are mutually exclusive. Once we see that behind human sin lie the person and power of evil, even the Devil himself, we can understand that there can be no compromise (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). David sees this very clearly; he agrees with God; and he expresses his resolve to have nothing to do with evil.

This resolve is not easy to carry out because we cannot contract out of the world in order to protect our own holiness, and if we did this the world would be left without the light of witness (1 Cor. 5:9-11). What David is doing is recognising the essential conflict and warfare that will always be in the world between what is of God and what is not. Remember Jesus' words in John 15:18-21. Of course, the Psalmist makes plain that he is not content with taking a stand against evil in the world and its affairs. He is equally determined, in the last two verses, that he wants sin and evil rooted out of his own life so that he might indeed be led by God in the way that is everlasting. This is holy resolve indeed. Havergal's hymn, "Who is on the Lord's side?" is very much to the point.

"Who will leave the world's side?
Who will face the foe?
Who is on the Lord's side?
Who for Him will go?"

But we cannot fight for God and truth if our lives are full of lies.

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140:1-8

There are many Psalms that sound just like this one and that is not surprising because trial, tribulation, difficulty and persecution are inescapable parts of true Christian life and service. We are told in the New Testament not to be surprised by fiery trial (1 Pet. 4: 12-19) and Jesus warned His disciples that they would be opposed, slandered and persecuted, just as the prophets had been (Matt. 5:11-12). Right through Scripture the men and women used by God had to battle, and when we find ourselves in the same situation we must do two things. We must realise first that our experience is normal (1 Cor. 10:13), and second, we must do what David does here and stand still, think about God, look to God and pray. In the first half of the Psalm David is preoccupied with the attitudes and activities of evil, but in the second half he expresses his confidence in God (12). There is an important lesson here, because it is all too easy to get preoccupied with evil and to be thinking more about people and about the Devil than about God. At times we get our thoughts so fixed on our own sins and failures that we have no time to think about God and His wonderful forgiveness. David's first prayer (1-3) is that he should be delivered from slander. The human tongue can indeed be set on fire by Hell and can do immense harm and inflict terrible hurt (Jas. 3:1-10). Evil speaking is referred to in the great charge against human nature in Rom. 3:9-14. Think of how prejudiced religious men slandered Jesus, accusing Him of being in league with the Devil (John 7:20; 8:48) and of being rejected by God even as He hung on the Cross (Matt. 27:43-44). Many a person's character and work, and indeed his family, have been destroyed by evil speaking, which has no place in Christian life (Eph. 4:25-31). Little wonder the Psalmist speaks elsewhere about setting a guard on his tongue lest he should sin against God (Ps. 39:1). Our speech can betray us, not just by what we say and how we say it, but also by the things we never say. It is not for nothing that a doctor may ask to see our tongues.

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140:1-8

David's second petition is that he should be guarded from violence. He is aware that while at times violence can burst out unexpectedly the situation here is one of deliberate and long-term intent. There is nothing these evil opponents would not stoop to. The references to snares, traps and nets make us think of the hunter who studies the habits of his prey so that he can best capture and destroy it. So far in the lives of most of us, we have not had to face the realities of physical persecution for the sake of our faith. But when you think of the bitter utterances and the deep-seated prejudice of many in the religious establishment against what they call "fundamentalists"; and when you think of the godless and often blasphemous language of many political leaders and their contemptuous utterances against people such as Mary Whitehouse; it does not take much imagination to visualise this leading eventually to open persecution of anyone and anything seeking to be true to God and to Christ. In many parts of the world already people risk their lives if they confess the name of Jesus. Stories abound of how under certain regimes clever children were denied further education simply because their fathers were ministers of the Gospel. The days may come when we will need to be very sure that God is indeed our rock and refuge when the whole of our world begins to erupt. Of course, we must face such situations in the right way. We must watch and pray (Matt. 26:41). We must be wise as serpents and harmless as doves (Matt.

10:16), resisting the temptation to let our feelings make us rush at situations like a bull at a gate. Jesus was not like that! We must see to it that the sheer integrity and grace of our lives are such that even our critics will have to admit that we are real (Matt. 5:16; 1 Pet. 2:12). Some of the things we are being taught in these days are to prepare us for a future that could be very demanding indeed. We need to be ready, standing on a good sure foundation.

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140:1-8

The third thing David asks is that God should answer his prayers and deny the prayers of his enemies. But he does this on the basis of his relationship with God, not on the basis of his own deserving. David feels a strong bond between himself and his God and speaks of *my God, my Lord, my* strong deliverer. This is not a man who prays earnestly only when he is in trouble but a man who has cultivated a personal relationship and friendship with God. God is not a stranger to David, not a God far away, remote and unknown. David knows whom he has believed (2 Tim. 1:12) and he is persuaded that, having helped and delivered him in the past, God will do so again. In his prayer David asks in faith, believing it is the right thing to do, that God will deny and frustrate the designs of those who are working against both God and himself. This is the most direct way to handle evil situations. It is not so much that "we pray against" evil, but rather that we go to God and ask Him to take specific action against it. Read Ps. 93 and be persuaded that the Lord is far mightier than all the raging powers of the world. Sometimes God deals with evil in the way of Ps. 2:1-4; sometimes in the way of Ps. 57:6; and sometimes in ways that are quite beyond our grasp, ways that seem to allow evil its own way. Compare Ps. 73 which reassures us that evil will be dealt with in the end (Deut. 32:35 AV) when God's purposes have been fulfilled. God is not only our defence, He is our sure hope.

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140:9-13

In the last section of the Psalm David rests his case and his person in God, to whom he has been speaking in a personal way right through the Psalm. We should link v.6 and v.12. David knows whom he has believed and is persuaded that God will keep and vindicate him (2 Tim. 1:12.). Here is a man of faith who commits himself to the God who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:23) and he ends his Psalm in terms of praise and confidence. But what then do we make of the strong language of v.9-11? Remember that this same David was the man who bore so much malice from King Saul and would not lift a hand against him, and also the man whose submission in the face of slander is recorded in 2 Sam. 16:5-14. Is David giving way to personal vengeance when he must have known the law of God in Deut. 32:35-36; cf. Rom. 12:14-21? Before we pass judgment, remember that it is God who judges, and He judges righteously and will not be hurried into precipitate activity by the passionate pleas and prayers of even the most godly people. David must have seen in his situation danger to the whole people and work of God, not just to himself. If there is a raging fire, those in authority may demolish nearby buildings to prevent its spread. If an outbreak of drug-peddling imperils a whole generation of school children, those with power will hit it hard and without mercy. God is long-suffering but He is also righteous and He will not stand idle and allow evil to destroy what is good. Sin and evil bring their own inevitable consequences to individuals and to society. But we must never forget that there is also the intervention of God in judgment. A young lad was asked in Sunday School, "What does God say about sin?" He replied, "God is against it!" That is something for us all to remember and to act on.

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141:1-10

Read the whole Psalm and consider it in general terms in order to sense the particular burden on the man's heart. He is obviously serious and in earnest but, whereas in Ps. 140 he was afraid of enemies, here he is really afraid of himself. He seems to be aware of the possibilities of his own personality; aware of the subtle power of temptation; aware of the attractiveness of coming to terms with people who are against God and of settling down to a compromised but peaceful co-existence in which true discipleship is abandoned. This is clear from v.4 and from the cry in v.8-9 and these sentiments are being uttered by the same man who in Ps. 140:12 testified that he knew whom he had believed. This is something that is known to all who are in earnest about their

commitment to Christ and the Gospel. "They who fain would serve Thee best are conscious most of wrong within." (Twell's) This is not surprising for two reasons. The more we draw near to the Light of the World the more we see the flaws and wrongs in ourselves. The second reason is simply the activity of Satan who detests and opposes all who are serious about being Christians, and when he cannot turn us back from following and serving Christ he seeks, by various standard ploys, to steal our peace and make us insecure. In some ways the Devil is inventive but in another way he is boringly constant. He is always a liar, and has been so from the beginning (John 8:44). He is always the slanderer suggesting that we could not possibly be of any use to God. He is always the accuser (Rev. 12:10), refusing to let us forget our past sins which God has forgotten (Jer. 31:34), refusing to let us be persuaded that forgiveness is total, that our failures have been overcome and that we are again trusted and reinstated (Lk. 15:22-24). In this Psalm the Devil is the seducer whose technique is to make us feel something powerfully in order to get us to make us do it, regardless of the rightness or wrongness of the action. It is the "atmosphere" of his situation that is troubling David and he calls on God. That is always the wise thing to do.

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In v.1-2 we hear David's voice, and he was wise in putting into words the concerns of his heart as he became aware of temptation. We need to speak to God and often we need to speak to a trusted friend. Why are we so reluctant to share with others what we really feel? Are we afraid to let it be seen that we have struggles the same as everyone else? Are we pretending to ourselves as well as to others that we are self-sufficient? David is making plain that his competence (NIV), his sufficiency (AV), is in God (2 Cor. 3:4-5). We are told that this is an evening prayer associated with the regular evening sacrifice in which the people, as a disciplined part of life, drew near to God. We know that routine in spiritual things can become lifeless but lack of routine can likewise have a bad effect, because time which belongs to God can be stolen away for irrelevant things, and then when we do go to God in prayer we are tired and preoccupied. In that kind of state God can get very little pleasure from our company and our conversation. We need to tell God honestly how we feel, fear and react (He knows, of course), but in the telling we ease the burden on to Him and that is what the Bible says we should do (Ps. 55:22). The Psalmist links prayer with sacrifice, the appointed sacrifice by virtue of which we can come near to God (Heb. 10:11-14, 19-22). He also links his prayers with the incense offering, thinking no doubt of the spiral of smoke rising up to God. Prayer is part of worship and is linked with the activity of God on the earth. Read Rev. 8:3-5. The prayers of the angel rise mingled with the prayers of the saints, the people of God, and when the prayers reach the throne no-one can distinguish the prayers of the heavenly agent from those of the Lord's people. If we think of Jesus who ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25; 9:24) and see some indication of His work in the angel and the incense, what an encouragement for us in our prayer life! Jesus, the great Intercessor, takes our poor prayers, makes them His own, and presents them perfectly at the throne of God in His own name.

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Beginning in v.3 David is concerned here not with what he says to God but what he speaks about when he is with people in the ordinary routine of daily life. It is easy to slip into a "double" way of life and speech. In church and in prayer we speak to God in a way that makes plain we belong to Him, and then in daily life we slip into the way that worldly unbelievers speak, as if we wanted so much to appear the same as them. We laugh at their doubtful jokes, we complain just as they complain, we gossip and criticise just as they do, denigrating those we feel are "poor things" and stealing character by slights and by silence. "Eating their delicacies"(4) suggests a conforming of speech and behaviour and seems very different from the clearly chosen attitude of Ps. 1:1-2. David is aware of the strange but powerful tendency to evil that remains within even the believer and he knows that it is dangerous to trifle with temptation. It is easy to say, "I am with them but I keep myself aloof. I do not go their way." But associations have an atmosphere which can bring infection into the spiritual bloodstream and this can have long-term effects which appear only later. No-one seems sure of the meaning of v.5-7. The NIV reads, "Let a righteous man strike me - it is a kindness; let him rebuke me - it is oil on my head." This would link with Prov. 27.6. The words of an evil person, however sweet and oily these words are,

can never do good (Ps. 55:21). In v.6-7 the Psalmist seems to be saying that evil can only come to judgment. In the last verses we have the man of God quite deliberately turning his eyes to God. Read Ps. 119:33-37; 123:1-2. When we look to God we check our bearings to set the course of life and we look to see if He is pleased with us. That is when we really pray, "Lord keep me."

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Here is a man of faith who is upset, under strain, aware of tension and he cries out to God. One of the great things about the Psalms is that they are set in the context of real human experience and they record the hopes, fears, hurts, disappointments and perplexities as well as the victories of the people of faith. The cave referred to in the title may be that of 1 Sam. 22 (when a company of those who had a *rightful* grievance gathered to David) or 1 Sam. 24 (when David was being hunted by Saul). In Ps. 57 we have another "prayer in the cave" but it is much more buoyant and positive. Spurgeon makes the comment that David prayed when he was in the cave but if he had prayed more when he was in the palace things would have been better. We all know from experience that it is when things go wrong, and sometimes *only* when things go wrong that we begin to be realistic with God, especially in the matter of prayer, and spiritual priorities begin to take precedence over personal preferences. Is it not also true that answered prayer, while it kindles a spirit of thanksgiving to God, also brings such a sense of relief from strain that we almost at once begin to be less prayerful, less sensitive to the need to stay close to God, and less earnest in our prayer life? It is clear here that David is cast down. He knows he is God's anointed servant but he feels that no-one else recognises this. No-one seems to acknowledge his worth. He feels hated and hunted because of Saul's enmity and he also feels a failure and humiliated by the circumstances immediately preceding the story of the cave of Adullam (1 Sam. 21:10-15). It is little wonder that he felt lonely, isolated and depressed. We will consider tomorrow the content of his prayer as he spoke out his feelings to God. But we do well to consider Ps. 42 and Ps. 43, where David seems to speak to himself, demanding an answer as to why he was cast down.

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On his own, David is being honest with God and he puts into words the turmoil of his feelings. He does this not to give God information (because God always knows) but to give himself relief by sharing his hurts and perplexities with the God he trusts, knowing that God will understand. Some people, trying to be very spiritual, speak only to God, forgetting that God gives us friends we can trust so that we can share burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). David had Jonathan who strengthened his hand in the Lord (1 Sam. 23:16 AV). He also had his mighty men who would do anything for him (2 Sam. 23:13-17); and already, almost before he had got his prayer into words, there were men of character and capacity gathering to him in the cave. Does not God say that at times He will answer before His people call (Isa. 65:24)? David's spirit was faint (3) and at such a time faith never seems to be very strong and yet David can say, "You know". He looks around and sees plenty evidence of opposition and rejection but no sign of God (4). It is then that he makes the statement that must have pierced the heart of his God: "No one cares" for me, my soul, my life. He was wrong. God cared. He always does. But when life's pressures have worn us down it is difficult, to the point of impossibility, to *feel* God's care and nearness. This is where "grim faith" comes in. We simply have to believe in spite of every circumstance and evidence. This was the experience of Job at a time of fluctuating faith and feelings, and even when at the end of the chapter there were still clouds of doubt and fear, he clung to the fact that God knew what He was doing (Job 23). No doubt David wondered if he had brought all this trouble on himself by his wrongdoing and impulsive reactions. This may well be part of the explanation, but without doubt we must see in David's darkness the work of Satan seeking to disable God's servant and so keep him from being God's instrument in future service.

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Those who are called to significant and public service in the Gospel, and especially those called to lead, will always be targets for the Devil. That is why the New Testament insists on the need for the armour of God (Eph.

6:10ff; Rom. 13:12). We will see that we are dealing with both the lies and the fiery darts of the evil one if we remember that the man in such a heart-broken state here is the man who in his youth had faced and conquered Goliath single-handed (1 Sam. 17:41-47) and whose "ten thousand" exploits had overshadowed Saul (1 Sam. 18: 7). This is the man who had been a blessing to countless others and yet here he feels that he stands alone in his time of need and that no one cares about him. Perhaps many would have said, "David knows we care, love and respect him and owe him a great deal." But did anyone actually say this to him? Did someone fail God by failing to encourage His needy servant? It may be, however, that there was something David needed to learn, some vital preparation for the future, that he could learn only by going through the valley of loneliness. Some Christians can limit their usefulness by refusing the discipline of loneliness and some do the same by keeping themselves too much to themselves. Here David casts himself on God, and that is safety. Later in 2 Sam. 11 David felt strong, secure, stable and victorious and it was then that he fell into great sin. Mark well in your heart, if not in your Bible, 1 Cor. 10:12. What David did not know was that this was a vital turning point in his life and service, as men burdened for the good of the nation began to gather to him. Do not fail to note that in v.5, 7 David is becoming more God-centred than problem-centred, and he is beginning to think of more significant things than just being delivered from his distress and unhappiness. He begins to see, to believe, and even to feel that the work God had called him to do was yet going to be done. It is worth a lot of struggle to come to the beginning of assurance like that.

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This is a crowded Psalm with many different emphases. It would be easy when reading a whole sequence of Psalms to become fixed on the theme of David's troubles and in that way become preoccupied with our own troubles and struggles. But we have to see that again and again the battles and hurts had the effect of making David run to God. This is what we see in v.9. Spurgeon suggests that three things make a man of faith do that: a sense of danger, a sense of weakness and a sense of confidence in God. Right at the start David is clear that he is appealing to the God who is both faithful and righteous. That is, his prayer is being made consciously on the basis of the character of God. God is utterly trustworthy. There is nothing fickle or changeable about Him (Mal. 3:6; 2 Tim. 2:13). But God is also unchangeably righteous, never excusing or justifying what is wrong, especially when the wrong has been done by the people whom He has blessed and favoured (Amos 3:1-2). There may be some excuse for those who have never been instructed and guided if they go astray, but those who live in the light of God's truth cannot plead ignorance. This seems to be the focus of v.2. David seems to acknowledge that his present predicament and distress had something to do with his own errors and transgressions. He is aware that if God acts only in righteousness and marks his sin against him then he has no hope (Ps. 130:3). But at the same time David seems to have caught a glimpse of something only to be fulfilled in the New Testament, namely a God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5), a God who can be both faithful and just to forgive (1 John 1:9; Rom. 3:21-26). David sees that the sinner can stand before God only on the ground of grace, and grace alone.

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In v.3-6 we have the words of a man who has gone through deep waters, not just in terms of his own failures but because of the reality of the enemy. Never forget that there is an enemy, Satan himself, who seeks to use the sore experiences of life to crush those who would serve God. David speaks of being crushed, plunged into darkness, feeling that death is inevitable, and his heart is appalled. Think of our Lord's experience in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-39) and Paul's similar experience described in (2 Cor. 1:8-10; 4:7-12). It was our Lord's sore experience that made Him an understanding and caring High Priest (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15; 5:7-9). Paul spoke of how he and we are able to comfort others because we have proved God's comfort (2 Cor. 1:3-7). The other aspect of our struggles and sufferings, even when they may be the result of our own folly, is that they constitute the "factory" in which we are forged and fashioned into tempered steel to be balanced instruments in God's hand. In the blacksmith's forge there is the fire, anvil, hammer and sizzling water, all somewhat frightening, but the end result is a useful shape forged out of shapeless metal. Think of the lesson Jeremiah learned in the house of the potter (Jer. 18:1-4). Note how David dealt with himself in this situation. It would

have been easy to lapse into self-pity but instead he remembered past days, recalling what God had done and was able to do again. He meditated, took time to think of all the good he had received from God, and as he counted his blessings the present difficulties did not seem so immense. He mused or considered all God had done on a far wider scale than his own little experience. He thought back over the stories of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and as he mused the fire of faith began to burn (Ps. 39:3). That made him hungry and thirsty for God and he stretched out his hand to God with desire kindled, resolve strengthened and weakness defied. No matter the immediate situation or the cause of it, he was God's man and wanted to be so.

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There are four elements in the earnest prayer of v.7-10 and the last two verses emphasise again the fact of spiritual warfare in which David hands over the action and the issue to God. The first thing David wants is the assurance of God's presence and blessing. He wants the comforting assurance that the Lord's face is not turned away from him (Num. 6:24-26). He wants to be reassured of God's love (8a). Then he asks to be taught the way he should go. It is the issue of guidance. David asks that God will spell out His plan and, believing God has a plan, he asks that God will take him in hand, open his eyes and show him how to avoid dangers. It seems that David recognises just how stupid, blind and prejudiced he could be, and indeed had been. He wants things to be different now. That is the good result of difficulties. Read Ps. 25:4-10. David's next petition is to be taught to do God's will (10). There is a recognition of how easy it is to let self-interest be the dominating factor in life. We can have a suspicion that to do God's will is the way of limitation and narrowing down of life and fulfilment. That was the lie of the Devil in the Garden of Eden, suggesting that God impoverishes life (Gen. 3:1-5). The New Testament speaks of God's will as good, acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12: 1-2). Jesus delighted to do His Father's will and He spoke of how He can give life and joy in full measure. This is where the good Spirit of God seeks to lead us (John 14: 25-27) and it is a level and balanced path. This request to be led is the fourth petition. It speaks of willingness and dependence. It reminds us of the shepherd who goes before the sheep, on the right path, and setting the pace. Perhaps we should read Ps. 23 to conclude our detailed study of this Psalm which is generally recognised as the last of the Penitential Psalms.

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144:1-2

The previous three Psalms each began with a cry, complaint and concern, but this one begins with praise and the theme of praise runs right through to the end. At the same time we read again strong words about battle, conflict and the routing of enemies by the direct intervention of God (1,5-8). It helps us to understand if we remember that David is not just an ordinary individual, but a man called to lead and to serve in God's work in the world. That work is, and always will be, persecuted and opposed, by aliens or outsiders as here, and at times from within the circle of friends (John 15:18-21; Matt. 10:34-36; Ps. 41:9). Remember that Judas was a trusted man at the heart of the Twelve, and Paul warned the elders at Ephesus that from among themselves would arise wolves who would harm the flock (Acts 20:29-30). David is fully aware that his life would be battle and that God was preparing and equipping him for future service. But at the same time he knows that along with the battles there are victories given by God and this is why he gives voice to his praises. He is aware that the Lord had prepared him well for the conflict and he was ready for the crisis when it came, This explains some at least of God's strong and strange dealings with us so that we are not caught unprepared. God has given David a great sense of security and this is seen in the words - rock, stronghold, deliverer, shield and refuge. But we need to note the margin of RSV which indicates that rock should be translated "my steadfast love", or "my loving God" (NIV), or "my help that never fails" (NEB). We must never let the strength and power we associate with God conceal His exquisite tenderness. Blessed is the man or woman who can say of God, "He is my loving God." That is the source of deep and abiding happiness. It seems that in this Psalm David is counting, his blessings and that is always a means of grace.

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144:3-4

David, set as king over the people and work of God, rejoices and in doing so he draws near to God in prayer. The enemy is still pressing but David's view goes right into the future and he sees and prays for the work in the next generation (12). He considers the God he has, "ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored." The picture in the first two verses which we pondered yesterday is of an all-sufficient God who trains, loves, protects and subdues people under His sway. There is a thought here of David's greater Son to whom God has ordained that every knee shall bow (Phil. 2:9-11). When David thinks of this all-caring, unfailing God, he marvels that God should condescend to and regard such unworthy creatures as mere men and women. Wesley had the same feeling when he wrote, "Amazing love, how can it be ..." and John Kent wrote, "Say, while lost in holy wonder, 'Why, O Lord such love to me?'" The answer to David's question is twofold. When he thinks of His God in His greatness and grace, mere man is cut down to size, and the forces of man are seen to be just a passing element in the on-going work of God. But on the other hand, what *is* man? He is made in the image of God, and in Christ he is chosen and called to a destiny of service and glory (Eph. 1:3-10; Heb. 2:5-10; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; 1 John 3:1-3). Man in and by himself is nothing, with no permanence, and he and all he does returns to the dust. But man, as the object of God's redeeming love, is altogether different. Compare Ps. 8:3-9 with Ps. 39:4-6. The whole of Scripture testifies that God has set His love on us and has raised us to royal honours (Eph. 2:4-7; Rev. 1:4-6). It is little wonder that we sing, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."(Watts). Never forget that God thinks about you, regards you as of great value, and cares for you. What a God!

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144:5-8

Read from the beginning of the Psalm and see the emphasis: "What a God!" (1-2), "What condescension!" (3-4) and now, "What a victory!" (5-8) followed by "What a song!" (9-11). We tend not to think of divine intervention in the affairs of the world in quite such a dramatic way as the Psalmist describes here. But when faced with moral issues which are a danger to the truth of the Gospel we need to learn to cry to God in prayer. This is far more effective than mere human protests, petitions and demonstrations, although such methods are legitimate, and at times may be necessary. But if in our day we are really looking to politicians to solve the problems rather than looking to God, then we have gone radically wrong. It certainly seems nowadays that in the evangelical section of the church people will commit themselves to any and every kind of "gospel" activity but not to the regular, consistent, persistent ministry of intercessory prayer. We cannot repeat often enough that God has said, "If my peoplewill prayI will heal their land" (2 Chron.7:14). There is a grandeur and majesty about the picture in today's verses of God's intervention. There is no suggestion of God being hard pushed to accomplish His will and save His people. God is pictured as bowing the heavens, whether in cloud or light; of touching the mountains with eruptions of smoke and the flashing of lightning. He is the great Creator God, and He stretches out His hand to intervene in both judgment and salvation. Do we think like this when we sing, "How great Thou art" or is our God too small?

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144:9-15

Now we have a song (9-11), a prayer (12-14) and a benediction (15). Note that it is a new song, not just a repetition of past thanksgiving. New experiences of God's mercy call for new expressions of thanksgiving because we are for ever discovering new things about God and realising more and more the debt we owe to Him. The best commentary on the theme of the new song is such scriptures as Ps. 40:1-3; 95:1-7; 96:1-13; 98: 1-9; Rev. 5:6-14. As we discover more and more about God we will sing His praise, and when we get to Heaven and see the perfection of all God's ways with us our praises will then begin to be worthy. Does not Ps. 22:3 speak of God inhabiting or being enthroned on the praises of His people? (AV and NIV footnote) .Towards the end of our Psalm David looks to the future of the work of God in succeeding generations and seems to speak of maturity and stability. He pictures a work well provided for, rejoicing in the unshadowed blessing of the Lord, a happy church and a peaceful fellowship. Why should it be otherwise? Why is the church at home and in its overseas work so constantly short of money and manpower? Why are there so few men giving themselves to the Lord's work so that heavy loads are left to faithful, dedicated women? It is recorded in Scripture that at one stage the Lord's work was embarrassed by too much provision so that the people had to be restrained from

giving (Ex. 36: 2-7). It is only when God's people are consciously aware of how much they owe and of how much they have been blessed that sacrificial giving becomes a blessing and a privilege. The benediction simply declares that the people who have a God like the One this Psalm speaks of are happy indeed. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

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145:1-3

In our congregation we love to sing v.1-6 of the first metrical version of this Psalm to the tune 'Glasgow'. It is a wonderful vehicle of praise and it focuses mind and heart on God. This is how worship should begin. Dr J Elder Cumming, the second minister of Sandyford (1871-1903), quotes in his commentary on the Psalms the words of a Jewish Rabbi, "Before you pray, repeat or read Psalm 145." It is full of encouragement. It is all about God, and once we begin to realise what a great and wonderful God we have there will be a new inspiration and peace about Christian worship, life and service. It is when we forget God, forget He is with us, forget that His purposes are sure and His grace sufficient, that we begin to crumple and become demoralised by circumstances. We are told that this is an acrostic or alphabetical Psalm and this means that the man who wrote it took time to think through what he wanted to say and set it all out systematically. He does not speak impulsively or "off the cuff" and his concern is to declare how marvellous God is. There are no petitions or complaints. In the background of the Psalm there is indication of a whole range of human needs met. In the foreground the emphasis is on the attributes of God, His greatness, goodness, honour, power and compassion. There is material here for a whole series of sermons and those called to preach or teach, whether in pulpit, Sunday School, Bible Study group, or anywhere else, should learn well from the Psalmist the need for careful preparation and clear presentation so that God will be shown in all His glory and grace. Some modern versions tidy up v.1-2 and lose the repeated "I will". The Psalmist states the clear intention and determination of faith. Praise and worship are not to be accidental, spasmodic or perfunctory. Having declared his intention, the Psalmist gives the reason for his attitude in v.3, and we return to his theme tomorrow.

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145:1-3

Praise is a vital element in a Christian's devotional and practical life because it reminds us of God, who He is and what He has done for us, for former generations and for the whole wide world. In the Metrical Version v.2 begins "Each day I rise," and suggests that morning by morning the Psalmist sets his sights on God and so gets his bearings and attitudes for the whole day. Rushing into a day tends to mean that we are swamped in the demands and confusions of the day before we have time to think about God. We forget God, and in the stories of the Book of Judges we find again and again the statement that when the people forgot God they sooner or later forsook God (Judges 2:10-13). The moral and social consequences of forgetting God are stated starkly in Rom.1:18ff. Here the Psalmist is fascinated and thrilled by thoughts of the greatness of God, a greatness far beyond our grasp, so that we must never be tempted to think we know all about Him. God's dealings with us are always far more abundant than all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20-21). That is why we need to learn the art or practice of doxology, giving praise to God. Praise is not to be cheap, easy or superficial, but worthy of the One we praise. Praise is not engaged in to make *us* feel good, nor to make God feel good (He is good and He knows it!). Praise is to set forth the glory of God, to magnify the Lord together (Ps. 34:3) and to show forth His greatness and goodness. Not even when we are dealing with children should we reduce praise to childish ditties. Childlikeness is something else! In one Sunday School the children were taught to sing a choral setting of the Te Deum, and one of the teachers (this writer) has remembered the words ever since. Read 1 Chron. 29:10-13 and consider if our praises conform in some measure to such an example.

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145:4-7

The theme is now God in the greatness of His Person and His works, and David senses the praise of God going on from generation to generation. His thoughts of God take on a historical dimension (John 4:37-38) and also a geographical dimension (1 Cor. 1:2) and in this way David begins to think of God's activity far beyond his own little circle of experience. This is important because it is so easy to become preoccupied with our own "little

corner". We forget the debt we owe to those who worked before us, sometimes regarding them as "less sound" and "less spiritual" than ourselves. We also forget that others will inherit the situation after us and may well be surprised and saddened to discover just how poor a spiritual inheritance we have left in spite of our reputation. David is thrilled by the glory and the continuity of God's working down through history. It amazes him what God has done and what He continues to do, and he recognises that some of God's actions and interventions in the human scene have been awesome or terrible (6), while others have been manifestations of goodness (7). But in all His activity David is quite sure that God's actions have been, are and always will be impeccably righteous (Gen. 18:25). Part of the message of these verses is that we should never assess and evaluate our situations and our work in terms of the immediate evidences. A few days, weeks or even years are but a part of the full "jigsaw" of God's plan of redemption. There is much God conceals from us (John 16:12-15) because we are not ready for it, and much that is kept from us because we do not need to know (Acts 1:6-7). What we do need to know and to be reminded of again and again is the glorious splendour of our God and the Majesty of His Person and His works.

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145:4-7

In order that we might be both awed and thrilled, consider some of the pictures, given in Scripture of the glory of God. Read Isa. 6:1-8; 2 Chron. 7:1-3; Matt. 17:1-8; Rev. 1:12-18; Isa. 40:25-31. The first chapter of Ezekiel, baffling in its imagery and complexity and yet fascinating in its suggestion, ends with the statement, "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." Is it not strange that we have learned in our generation to marvel at the wonders of science in the exploration of space and yet from so much of our worship we seem to have lost our sense of wonder in relation to God and all His purposes? We need to learn again to be impressed by God, to admire Him, to be awed by Him, and to be aware that He is a God who loves to be "discovered" by His people, so that they are captivated by Him and made to wonder just what He purposes for their future blessing and service. A personal testimony may be allowed from the writer of these Notes. In 1956, when the Presbytery of Glasgow inducted me to the congregation of Sandyford, there was sung at the formal service some verses from Psalm 102 and, although I noticed them at the time their real significance did not register. But as the years passed I have realised how truly prophetic the Psalm was regarding the situation God had set me in. We sang that evening:

"God in His glory shall appear,
When Sion He builds and repairs,
.....
And generations yet unborn
Shall praise and magnify the Lord."

Little did I think then that in the following forty years I would see children (human and spiritual) born and growing up to adulthood, coming to faith in Christ and going out in Christian service. The God of the past is the God of the future, and is to be trusted.

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145:8-9

Do not weary of slow progress through this Psalm. Let the truth warm your heart and encourage you. The truth about the glory, majesty and power of God does not deny, contradict or hide His wonderful compassion and tenderness. All the sweet, understanding and patient love of God is here, emphasising his long-suffering, how He refuses to be weary of His people, no matter their foolishness, rebellion or disobedience. Such is His heart of love that the very thought of giving up His own ransomed children creates an agonising turmoil in His heart (Hos. 11:1-4,7-9; 14:1,4-7). We have scarcely begun to understand the marvellous compassion of our God who is such an understanding Father (Ps. 103:1-5, 11-14). What a comfort it is that God remembers our human limitations and that He is the one who is always seeking to restore, revive and re-create. Circumstances can tend to crush us and people can so deal with us when we are "down" that they break our hearts and our resolution. But God does not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax (Isa. 42:3). In circumstances like these God comes to us and deals with us, not like a rushing mighty wind but with the gentle breath of His comforting,

encouraging Spirit, coming alongside us to nurture back into flame the embers of glad love and service. Think of these words of a 13th Century hymn that speaks of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

"What is soiled make Thou pure;
What is wounded, work its cure;
What is parched fructify.
What is rigid gently bend;
What is frozen warmly tend;
Straighten what goes erringly."

Now read again v.8-9 and be glad in God.

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145:10-13a

These verses that speak of God's everlasting kingdom are a great comfort in our own day when so many radical changes are taking place in the international situation. The vast, seemingly impregnable kingdom of atheistic communism has crumbled so swiftly before our eyes. The rising power of Islam, whose philosophy holds it to the idea of world dominion by war rather than by peaceful means, is an alarming factor from which we cannot escape. The subtle and powerful kingdom of materialism exercises its dominion far and wide and brings with it the breakdown of morals and of family life. Such are the forces arrayed against godly Christian faith and life that we must recognise that behind them all lie the principalities and powers of an evil kingdom that is well organised, competent and crafty in all its stratagems (Eph. 6:10ff). Against such armies of evil power we have no human strength and we must see to it that we use the armaments given to us by God, weapons that are not carnal or worldly but which are mighty under God to the pulling down of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:3-5). We who believe must become the intercessors, and if we do not do it no-one else will. Our eyes must be on God and we must go to God in prayer (2 Chron. 20.12). But we must pray from the ground of truth and confidence, assured that God's kingdom is everlasting and that He and He alone rules in the kingdoms of men (Dan. 4.1-3, 17). The kingdoms of the world rise and fall; powers, policies and governments change direction radically to contradict the past and to confuse the future. "Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be," (Tennyson) but God goes marching on. He does not change. He works and no one can hinder or contradict (Isa. 43:13). It is God's hand, and His alone, that is on the helm of history. This is peace, hope and assurance.

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145:13a-20

David speaks now of the God who provides and preserves, and Kidner comments that the examples are taken from life's emergencies and regularities alike. We must never let our faith degenerate into thinking of God as being needed only in times of crisis. If we do not want God or learn to walk with God when life is ordinary, we are not likely to know Him well enough to turn to Him when the extra-ordinary events of life overtake us. The description of God as being faithful, gracious, just and kind (13b,17) has a wonderfully human reassuring note about it and makes us feel we can go to this God without fear of being misunderstood or rejected, even if we have in fact done something wrong. "To those who fall, how kind Thou art," (St Bernard). "There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven; there is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given," (Faber). God is faithful, sticks by His children through thick and thin, and never changes. We can count on Him. He is full of grace, even when it is necessary to speak sternly. Right through this last section the Psalmist seems to uncover more and more aspects of the character of God. In v.14 he speaks of the Lord, the great and mighty God, as the one who gives help to the inadequate, holding them up even as they are falling, and not waiting for the collapse before helping. This same assured, confident God is the one who raises up the depressed, reviving hope and restoring ability. With a God like this you begin to discover that you are able to do things you never thought you would be able to do. In many ways the Gospel is always revealing to us wider and greater possibilities for our lives and encouraging us to go on into them trusting the God who never fails. The remaining verses (15-20) go on to elaborate this theme and they are marvellous in their encouragement.

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145:13b-20

Such thoughts of God as we expressed yesterday should turn our eyes to Him, recognising that He is the one to meet our need and in the fullest sense to give us day by day the bread and sustenance we need. God may not give us all we *want* because often we want what is not good for us, or we want God's good gifts but in excessive measure. No true father will give his child all he asks nor will he try to buy his child's favour and obedience with gifts. Neither will a true father or mother demand obedience by a relentless regime which simply seeks to impose their will upon the child. At the heart of all true nurture is love which is generous in its attitude and provision and God is spoken of here as "open-handed" and generous. Of course this calls for gratitude and thanksgiving, and it is all too possible in a generation that is obsessed with its rights and strident in its demands to take everything without a word of thanksgiving. But we must not make v.15-16 into challenge because they are essentially assurance. The message seems to be echoed in Jesus' words in Matt. 6:25-33. It seems in v.17 that the Psalmist is emphasising again that God is just, exactly right, in all He does and in the way He does it, even though at the time it all seems both mysterious and unnecessarily hard. God is never unkind. In even the sorest experiences He is working for good with them that love Him (Rom. 8:28). And the struggles of life, including the injustices and sufferings, which Paul describes as "slight affliction", do in fact work in us and for us a "weight" of glory which will in due time, and certainly in eternity, make sense of all God's dealing with us. But this calls for faith, because at present we walk by faith not by sight (2 Cor. 4:16-18; 5:7).

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145-13b-20

We are reminded that when we turn to God in prayer He is near, He hears our cry however incoherently it is expressed and He answers our prayers. When hearts are feeling cold and the spirit within seems dull and jaded, people sometimes say they feel their prayers get no further than the ceiling. But that is no problem, because God bows down His ear to listen (2 Chron. 6:40; Neh. 1:4-6). Think of how a parent watches over a sick child and, at night, leaves bedroom doors open so that at the slightest cry of need the child is heard and the reassuring presence, voice and arms of the parent are there to minister to the need. God cares far more than any parent could possibly care and He does so with human tenderness. He cares for you (1 Pet. 5:7). Think of the care of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-5, 11-14). Think of the God who never sleeps and who keeps our going out and coming in, from this time forth and for evermore (Ps. 121). This leads us to v.20 and to the thought of God's protection. He preserves His own *at times* by working rebuke, frustration and judgment on those who are intent on doing evil. Some may ask how this verse applies in the case of those who suffer and are martyred for their faith. The words of Jesus in Lk. 21:12-19 are relevant and realistic even though they do not answer the perplexity. But our Lord does bring together without any sense of embarrassment the fact of martyrdom and the affirmation that not a hair of our head will perish. Perhaps we should think more of being preserved than simply protected. God preserves us *in* all manner of situations, trials and dangers (2 Cor. 1:8-10; 2 Tim. 3:11). The day will come when, looking back over life's journey, we will indeed "bless the hand that guided, and bless the heart that planned," because we shall see clearly then just how often and from how many dangers God did actually preserve us.

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145:21

We have kept this one verse in order to emphasise two things. The first is that, having considered the personal character and the gracious dealings of his God, David recognises the need to witness to His name. It is all too easy to react to life's experiences, to explain them to others and to express how we have managed to cope, without bearing testimony to our personal faith and trust in God and our gratitude to Him for His goodness and mercy. In all sorts of ways and sometimes in the most unexpected situations we find ourselves with the opportunity to speak a word for Jesus. Too often we remain silent, and we can deny our Lord by silence just as much as Peter did with brash words, blurted out in panic (Matt. 26:69-75). We are told in Scripture to be *ready* to give a reason for the hope we have, and to do it with true grace (1 Pet. 3:15). We need to pray David's prayer in Ps. 51:15 and to remember that Wesley longed for a thousand tongues to sing his great Redeemer's praise. The second thing in this last verse is to recognise the need to bless, to praise and magnify the name of the Lord (Jehovah, God). We tend not to sing the Doxology, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," as a former

generation did, nor do we "say grace" or "give thanks" at meals as we ought. These spiritual "exercises" can become mere habit and at times in public can be self-conscious and inappropriate. But at the same time a thankful heart will find some way of expressing gratitude to God and to the men and women through whose sacrificial service and loving duty many of God's blessings come to us. We will be discovering in successive days that the last five Psalms all begin with the call, "Praise the Lord," and if we make it our business to count our blessings we shall see just how much the Lord has done for us and we shall be glad to offer the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:12-16).

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146:1-4

The last five Psalms all begin and end with the word, "Hallelujah," and they are concerned with various aspects of God's character, His activity, and His relationship with His people. As these are considered, the issue is praise which rejoices in God. It is as we learn the kind of God we have and the kind of things He does that we too will learn to praise. The opening verses are a personal testimony and a declaration of what is to be the Psalmist's settled attitude to life. J Elder Cumming suggests that the Psalm then goes on to give twelve reasons for praising and trusting God. We do not enumerate the twelve but simply ask ourselves whether, in the light of all we know and have learned about God, there is any real ground for not trusting Him! But note in today's verses that there is no mention of what God does, and this is significant because we must see that God is praiseworthy for what He is in Himself. We may praise God for what He has done for us but our concept of God must not be limited to what we have known of Him. He is great and greatly to be praised (1 Chron. 25). He is God and there is none else (Isa. 15.5). He is the high and holy one who inhabits eternity (Isa. 57:15). He is the God of light and love (1 John 1:5; 4:8), the God with whom there is no variableness or change (James 1:17), the God who cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). He is the God of peace whose person and presence can be thought of in terms of tranquility (Rom. 15.13) and He gives to His people His own peace which passes all understanding (Phil. 4:4-7). We do well, when we sing, "How great Thou art!" That this is a God to trust and hope in is highlighted by the futility of putting our trust in even the most princely of men who are, after all, merely dust and will return to dust. Our trust cannot ever be in any man-made political programme. For ourselves and our country our trust is in God and our appeal is to Him in prayer.

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146:5-7a

The word "Happy"(AV) is often translated "Blessed," and the second word seems to have more depth to it and more of God in it. In v.5 then, we have the last of the twenty-five or twenty-six times "Blessed" is used in the Psalter. Some of the best known are in Psalms 1, 32, 33, 65 and 84, and the particular verses can be searched for. In Ps. 32:1 there is intense feeling, which is really saying with great relief, "O the blessedness of the man whose sins are forgiven!" In many ways this is also the feeling in v.5, whether the reference is to Jacob as an individual or to the people of Israel. If ever a man, by temperament and by emotional manipulation when young, could have turned out a disaster, it was Jacob. He is seen in the Old Testament story as a twister, a double-dealer, calculating and ruthless and, without doubt, a very clever, capable man. He spent most of his life arguing with God until in the end at the brook Jabbok God broke him (Gen. 32:22-31). Jacob's wrestling is not really a lesson in prevailing prayer! It is more the story of a man of God at his last chance to be a truly useful servant of God's purposes. The amazing thing about the story is God's gracious but determined persistence with Jacob, refusing to let the man narrow down his spiritual life and usefulness. In the end there is testimony to Jacob as a man of faith handing on the work to those who came after him (Heb. 11:21). It could have been so different had Jacob not been held so securely by the hand of God. Read Gen. 28:15-17; 48:15-16. Note in today's verses that God is spoken of as great as well as good. He is the God who keeps faith for ever. Blessed indeed is the man or woman who has this God as their help!

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146:7b-10

The Psalmist continues the recital of what God does and who He does it for. He sets the prisoners free, but not for wrongdoing (1 Pet. 2:18-20; 4:14-16). The "liberation" spoken of is not necessarily that from social, economic and political bondage (although the Gospel works changes in these areas by changing people) but it is freedom for those "fast bound in sin and nature's night" (Wesley). The eyes of the blind are opened to see things as they really are so that they need no longer walk in darkness (John 8:12). It is the work of God's Spirit to open blind eyes so that men and women see their true condition and their need of a Saviour. Then they see Jesus. God lifts up those who are bowed down, whether by the burdens or disappointments of life. It is God Almighty (6) who comes down and lifts us up in His everlasting arms (Duet. 33:27). No matter how low down we are, these arms of love are underneath us. The Lord loves the righteous, those who do right and those who have believed unto righteousness, that is, salvation (Rom. 3:21-24). The Lord watches over the sojourners (aliens - NIV), those who are passing along life's road and who fed they do not belong. If you ever wonder just how you would cope with bereavement, we have the assurance here that God Himself upholds the widow and the fatherless and, of course, He expects us to be like Himself and to show care likewise (Jas. 1:27). Never forget that the Bible speaks of God wiping away the tears of His people (Rev. 7:17; 21:4) and He does in fact count and remember their tears (Ps. 56:8). God is very personal, and we must never forget this. There is no denial of God's kindness, love and tenderness in v.9b. We must always think of sin and evil as corrupting and destroying intruders into God's world, and those who choose to go the way of evil must and will meet the consequences. There is comfort here when we really face evil people speaking and working against our persons and our God-given work. Never fear. God will deal with evil. The last verse declares that our God reigns, for ever. The only response is to say "Hallelujah!"

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147:1-6

We love to sing the metrical version of these words to the tune "Huddersfield". As a company of God's people we declare that it is good, pleasant and seemly to sing praise to God, an activity that is totally beneficial. Such praise is part of worship. All who are able should be glad to make a joyful noise to the God of their salvation (Ps. 95:1-6) and all who have ability in song should be willing to share in the privilege of leading the praise in God's House. In the story of the rebuilding of the Temple in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah there are many references to the singers but, far from being a class separated from others, they were bound together in the service and worship of God (Neh. 12:38-47). To sing praise is a means of grace, not least at times of spiritual crisis. Before leaving the upper room to go to Gethsemane our Lord and His disciples sang together (Matt. 26:30), singing possibly some part of Psalms 115-118. (Could it have been Ps. 118:19-25?) In the great Ephesian Epistle, Paul teaches the believers to sing and he sets this in the context of holy living (Eph. 5:15-20). Of course, what really inspires praise is a sight of God and an awareness that He is at work in the world, in the church and in our personal lives. This is something we tend to forget and we seem to think that God is at work only when we are aware of His working. But this is not so. There are vast areas of the ongoing life of creation that we have no knowledge of and in which we are powerless to act. Take time to read the whole of Isaiah 40 with its exhortation to behold our God. The whole chapter asks the questions, "Who is like Him?"; "Whom did He consult?"; "Have you not known?" This is our God, and when we know Him we will break into praise.

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147:1-6

Look now at the details of these verses which speak of how God redeems and restores His people. He is spoken of as the great and mighty creator God with an exact knowledge, naming the stars, and with an understanding beyond measure. That is wonderful in itself but when that God is spoken of as the one who gathers the outcasts, healing broken hearts and binding up wounds and sores we have good cause to be amazed. The picture is of God going to where the outcasts are, the failures who cannot forgive themselves and yet cannot live with themselves because of what they are and have done. This is the picture of the good shepherd who searches all the deep, dark, dangerous places until he finds the lost sheep, rather than the picture of the father of the prodigal who, for good reason, waits until the grace of repentance has begun its work (Luke 15:3-7). These restored outcasts are the people who are taken and built into God's Jerusalem like living stones (1 Pet. 2:4-5). This is not

just forgiveness and reinstatement into life and service, it is what the prophet called the restoring of the years the locust had eaten (Joel 2:24-26AV). It means that the wasted years are forgotten because over-balanced by the richness of God's blessing. Remember that in Old Testament times being an outcast was something very real. No-one wanted the outcast, no-one saw any worth in him or her. But the Gospel says that while we were yet worthless, undeserving sinners Christ died for us (Rom.5:6-8). It was Jesus' critics who sneered, "This man receives sinners, and eats with them." They spoke wonderful truth. Yes, God lifts up the downtrodden, recognising that while some are outcasts because of their own deliberate sins and folly, some are broken and crushed because of what others have done to them or have failed to do for them. Is it not a relief that God knows and understands and never despises?

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147:7-11

The theme of God's goodness throughout all creation and His care for all that He has made is a recurring one throughout Scripture. It is a theme taken up in some of our familiar hymns such as "O worship the King, all glorious above," which is based on Psalm 104 which we could well read today, noting v.24 which speaks of how manifold, many-sided and varied, are God's works. Psalm 19 affirms that the heavens declare the glory of God, and the Te Deum declares, "Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Thy glory." Paul is clear that there is no excuse for unbelief because creation declares the fact of God (Rom. 1:19-20), and in Acts 17:22-31, preaching to a city of intellectuals, he made clear that the God of creation is separate from what He has made. God must not be identified with creation nor with what is currently being referred to as "the spirit" of creation. Nor must we think of spiritual life in terms of the current jargon of "tuning into the forces of the universe." We agree that there is much that we do not know and that there are realms of power beyond all the materialism that has reduced life to mere physical appetites and satisfactions. But God is not some unknown principle or force. He has made Himself known in His Son Jesus Christ and if we want to know God we must look to Jesus (John 14:8-11) who alone is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). God does not look for people to do something for Him, nor for people to try to condition both body and mind and so initiate themselves into "new life" for the "new age". God looks for those who will trust Him and put their hope in Him (11). When you read and hear of all the current fashions of so-called "spirituality", note carefully that they are all really a form of "do-it-yourself" salvation. The techniques are psychic manipulation. This is not faith and does not bring people to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The real test is, "Does it make Jesus and His atoning death central and essential?"

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147:12-20

In this Psalm we have seen the God who redeems and restores and the God who cares and provides. Now we see the God who commands and governs all. In eight of today's verses we have the personal pronoun "He". If the first theme is security and peace in God, the following theme is that of the provision from God of the finest wheat in great abundance. "Security, spiritual health, concord and prosperity are God's to give, not ours to achieve" (Kidner). With these gifts we lack nothing. But note how in v.15,18,19 there is the recurring emphasis on God's word or command by which He brings to pass the blessings He purposed for His people. God speaks and it is done and these verses of our Psalm seem to suggest something of the effortlessness of God's sovereign activity. He is never hard pushed, never under pressure from the powers of evil. After all, power belongs to God (Ps.62: 11AV) to use, or not use, to delegate or withdraw as he chooses. His power gives security (gates) and guarantees a future (sons RSV, or people NIV) and peace such as was given, for example, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when the order of a pagan king said, "Let the work of this house of God alone," (Ezra 6:6-8 AV). Recognise in this Psalm that we can consider the wonders of creation, the structure of a snowflake, the beauty of a sunset or the sharp brightness of a sunny winter sky, and think of God. We can ponder mighty storms and remember that "the waves and winds still know His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below". Creation can constrain us to worship. But when we consider how God says that only the best is good enough for His children (14) we are left in astonished wonder. What a God to love and serve!

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148:1-6

There is no petition or request in this whole psalm. It is praise from beginning to end. Thirteen times the word praise is used and the summons of the Psalm is well expressed in the Metrical Version, "The Lord of heaven confess, on high His glory raise." In this opening section the highest heavens and all they contain are called to praise God. The thing that should impress us is the Psalmist's expansive concept of God, as he gives expression to his thoughts of God as creator, sustainer, guide and controller of the universe. There is no suggestion that the Psalmist is thinking of God only in terms of and to the extent of his own experience of God. That is the folly of our own generation, even among evangelicals, in which so much of spiritual truth is interpreted in terms of subjective personal experience. Here his thoughts of God are being pushed out far beyond the local earthly scene to the vastness of space in the heavens of heavens. One of our poets speaks of those things that go "beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (Tennyson). Of course there are things that are beyond our grasp, and the so-called advances of science are revealing just how little we really know about many things. The Psalmist is aware that his God is great and that beside Him the whole creation and all it contains seems small. Here is the God who has the whole world in His hand; who called it all into being by His word of executive power (5); and who keeps its every development in His own power (6). We do well to consider Addison's hymn, "The spacious firmament on high", with its affirmation, "The hand that made us is divine". Much of contemporary praise seems to have left out thoughts of the sheer grandeur of the God of Creation.

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148:1-6

We do well to consider again this call to praise and to be reminded that there is a whole range of "beings", as well as the material creation, that is called to praise the Lord. Think of the angels, the ministering spirits, who are sent from the presence of God to serve those who are the heirs of salvation (Heb.1:7,13,14; Ps.34:7; 91:11; 103:20-22). Go to such passages as John 1:1-3; Col.1:15-17; 2 Pet.3:7 to realise that we must never think of the universe whirling in space, out of control. Fallen though it be, it is still firmly in the hand of the God who called it all into being by His own sovereign word of command. Go to Gen.1:1-5 and then follow through the repetition of the words "and God" right through the chapter. What we are being shown is the sheer greatness of God, who is far greater than all He has made. He is not to be identified with His creation nor is He to be thought of in terms of "force fields", "higher energies", "the God within", "channelling spirits" or any of the strange ill-defined sinister terms the so-called "New Age Movement" is peddling. We must never fall into the old pantheistic snare of saying, "God is everything and we are all part of God; we are all gods". No matter if the aims of such a movement seem plausible, this kind of talk is a denial of the whole Christian revelation. God exists. He is separate from and greater than all He has created; and He is the rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6). He is great, and even the heavens of the heavens cannot contain Him (1 Kings 8:27). But He is a God we can speak to (Neh.9:6,9, 19-20,32-37). This is the God who spared not even His own Son but gave Him up for us all (Rom.8:32). This is indeed a God to praise:

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148:7-13

The first half of the Psalm seemed to speak of the physical creation, together with hosts of angelic and spirit beings, all of them good, praising the Lord. We do not forget that there are also principalities and powers that are evil and that there are aspects of creation we do not yet know anything about. But all evil powers have been disarmed (Col.2:15) and there is nothing in all creation that has the power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom.8:35-39). Having reached right up to the heaven of heavens, the Psalmist now goes down to the deepest depths and speaks of sea monsters. We do not think enough about the wonders of nature. Think of the communication between porpoises, or salmon coming back from the sea to the same spawning grounds year after year, or the great migratory movements of birds and animals. How much there is to cause us to wonder and be amazed. The Psalm speaks of the elements of fire and wind, the changing seasons with hail, snow and frost all serving their purpose. Without doubt this man of faith kept his eyes open as he went about his daily life and wherever he looked he saw good reason to praise his God. If this fallen creation is so wonderful, what will God's new creation be in which there are none of the flaws or blights of sin? (2 Pet.3:13; Rev.21:3-4; 22:1-5; Isa. 55:12-13). Do we really think of the words when we sing:

"Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all Nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love".

That hymn has a good biblical basis (Lam.3:23).

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148:14

The closing verses of yesterdays section (10-11) make plain that God is not content with creation and with angelic beings alone. His name is exalted and that name is Love. Love calls and yearns for the response of love and so, without distinction of social rank, age or sex, all are called to praise this glorious God whose name and nature have been made known in what He has done for His people. He has raised up a "horn" or strong deliverer, and the thrill of this is seen in the great song of praise by Zechariah in Luke 1:67-79. But the deliverance is not merely the breaking of the chains of sin, nor just the restoration of the people whose sins and disobedience have led them into captivity. It is the restoration of fellowship. God has brought His people near to Himself, to be His people, a people for His own personal possession (1 Pet. 2:9). This is part of the thrill of the Gospel, as Paul expresses it in Eph. 2:12-22. We who were far off, have been brought near. We belong. We have the security of knowing that we belong. It is not just that we are near to God but that He is near to us, and wants to be near, so that we might indeed have fellowship with Him and with one another (1 John 1:3; Rev. 21:1-5). Jesus spoke of the joy in heaven when even one sinner comes to repentance (Lk. 15:7). Jesus also spoke of the joy of the Father's heart when the prodigal returned (Lk. 15:20-24). How much more will the Lord see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied when all His people are gathered home! What will our joy be like when all the hidden things are made plain? We are left thinking of the length, breadth, depth and height of the love of God. In His near presence there is fulness of joy, and that near presence is not to be applied only to Heaven. God with us! That is the basic fact of life.

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149:1-5

Kidner divides this Psalm into the church jubilant (1-5) and the church militant (6-9). The first half of the Psalm is glorious praise and the second half speaks of rather grim service for God. We have to deal with these verses carefully because their meaning can be distorted. The call for a new song has been used to justify the abandonment of the well tested Psalms and hymns in favour of new kinds of songs with a limited lifespan and sometimes suspect theology, indifferent poetry and inferior music. In v.3 the call for dancing and orchestras has been used to justify dancing round the Communion Table as part of worship, failing to see that we are dealing here with a cultural method of expressing joy at that time. Then v.5 could be used to justify staying in bed on Sunday and singing hymns along with the TV programme. Of course, couches (RSV), may suggest meals and banquets. That would indicate that there is a place for the people of God expressing their happiness in social gatherings. But these can so easily degenerate, as they did in New Testament times, that they become a hindrance to spiritual life and a grief to God (1 Cor. 11:17-22). We say these things to point the danger of selecting texts out of context to justify our actions, and also to emphasise that no passage of Scripture must be interpreted in a way that contradicts another passage. We must compare Scripture with Scripture. But why is there a call for a new song? The end of Ps. 148 seemed to refer to a specific deliverance God had worked for His people and it is true that right through life we discover more and more of God's goodness to us. This calls us to praise God with fresh praise. It is not that God is new, but that our awareness of Him is new, and there is a new gratitude and a new witness. Read Psalm 40:1-3. When David knew the forgiveness of God His mouth was opened in a new way (Ps. 51:7-13). Newness and novelty are very different things.

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149:1-5

The picture of the people of God singing to the Lord brings back the memory of the Pastor from Czechoslovakia, in the grim days now past for that land, preaching in Sandyford and saying, "You cannot sing

the Lord's song and the song of the world at the same time." After all, singing comes from the heart and whoever holds the heart calls the tune. There may be an indication here why some congregational singing is so dull and indifferent. It is only as we discover and prove the wonder of God and His salvation that we want to sing, and sing with new grace, gratitude, understanding and worship. Read Rev. 5:9-14; 14:1-5 and see that the new heavenly song was learned on earth by proving the power of God to save and keep. In Rev. 15:2-4 there is reference to the song of Moses and the Lamb, and again the theme is the great salvation God worked for His people. It is important to sing. During the war the radio programme, "Let the people sing," worked wonders for morale even though the words, "any sort of song they choose," left the options too wide. But praise undoubtedly lifts up the heart and the Lord takes pleasure in His people's praises (4). At the heart of worship the important thing is not that we should enjoy ourselves (although we do), nor that we should have the opportunity to use and display our gifts, but that God's name, His Person and His truth should be expressed in a way that is worthy. Note that God's people are happy in Him (2) and that He is happy in His people (4). He is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:16). We can also note that in v.1,5,9 in RSV there is the word "faithful" which is translated in NIV and AV as "saints". The faithful are the saints, and the saints are those set apart for God, or as the New Testament has it, those chosen and sanctified in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:2). One last thought: the reference to couches or beds reminds us that it is safe to lie down and sleep in peace, because it is the Lord Himself who makes us lie down and rest safely (Ps. 23:2; 4:8).

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149:6-9

The difference in tone when we reach v.6 is staggering but it does not spoil the Psalm as some suggest. We need to ask a question. Do we believe there is a difference between good and evil, between Christian and anti-Christian, between the world order that is inspired by and lies in the power of the Evil One and the kingdom of God and His Christ? The answer must be yes. But we must go further and ask if we really believe that there is this difference, opposition and conflict in the world to come as well as in this present world. Again the answer must be yes. That there is such an eternal separation is clear from Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, and in Jesus' words about the sheep and the goats and the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels (Matt. 25:31-46). It was Jesus, speaking to His bitter critics who tried to hide their antagonism behind a cloak of religion, who warned them about dying in their sins (John 8:21,24). But the issue is more than personal. In Christian service we are engaged in elemental spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10ff) and just as our work and witness are a witness to salvation for some, they are also a witness of judgment to others (2 Cor. 2:15-16). The conflict is one of fighting for truth and righteousness against the encroachments of hell. The sword is the two-edged sword of the Word of God (Heb. 4:12). This is the sword which the Spirit uses and it is linked with the praises of the people of God (6). Those who know most about spiritual battles are the ones who have most to sing about and they give thanks to God who gives them the victory (1 Cor. 15:57). If thoughts of judgment are hard to cope with, go to Rev. 6:9-11 and hear those who are free from all confusion and prejudice and who see things as they really are.

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150:1-6

All who are truly acquainted with the Psalter will be aware that the one hundred and fifty Psalms with their songs, testimonies and calls to worship, cover every possible human experience: great joys and sorrows, trials, battles, perplexities, failures and disappointments, and give us some of the most anguished cries of penitence in the whole Bible (Ps. 32 and 51). There is also right through the Psalter the note of praise and thanksgiving. The last five Psalms are all a summons to praise and this final one is a veritable doxology. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." Like Psalm 148 there are here thirteen calls to praise which seem to signify the place, reason, measure, and varied means of praise. Everything that breathes, that has received life from God, is called to praise His name. The praise is comprehensive and total. It is varied and seems at times to be very noisy indeed. Of course, when we think of noise and clashing cymbals we do well to remember that Paul likened loveless hearts and voices to clanging cymbals and made plain that even the most competent music and song rendered to its full volume is absolutely empty without love to God and to people. This Psalm is not easy to divide up for

study, but Dr Elder Cumming in 1906 and Derek Kidner in 1975 both decide on the headings: where (1), why (2), how (3-5) and who (6). It is all about praise and that includes thanksgiving, which is a great corrective to a complaining spirit. We do well when we are discontented to count our blessings, and if we do so honestly we will indeed be surprised at what the Lord has given to us and what He has spared us.

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150:1-6

We are to praise God in His sanctuary and in His firmament. This may refer to God's people on earth and His angel host in heaven uniting in their praises. We sing of this in the hymn, "Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious," when we come to the words, "In the seat of power enthroned Him while the vault of heaven rings: saints and angels crowd around Him, own His title, praise His name." Our verse clearly indicates a sanctuary, a chosen place or location in which God's people gather for praise, but it also indicates that wherever we are we can praise our God. People tend to say today that we do not need buildings like churches or meeting places, and in a sense that is true because God who made the world cannot be confined to a place made with hands (Acts 17:24-25; 1 Kings 8:27-30). But all through the Old Testament there was a specific, God-appointed place where God manifested His presence and where His people gathered to meet Him and to be blessed in His presence. The Psalmist joyed to go to the house of God and knew the blessedness of those who gathered for praise (Ps. 84:1-2; 122). We are commanded in Hebrews 10:25 not to forget to gather together, and even in these early days of the church some were beginning to be careless. Think of it this way. There is a testimony through the sight of every open church door, and those who pass by are made to know that there are still Christian believers who believe in, love and serve God. Not a few people who find their way into a church on a casual visit, for a funeral, a wedding or a baptism, express their reaction by saying "There is a peace here" or "There is a spirit here" or "You begin to be aware of God here" and that is not surprising. Where God and His people meet for worship, praise and prayer there is indeed a "spirit" present. The very place is hallowed by years of prayer. What is more, it is those who know most about dwelling in God's House who know most about meeting Him wherever they go. But the "tug" of God's House will always be stronger than the tug of creation.

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150:1-6

The "why" of praise (2) is expressed in a twofold way. We praise God for what He has done and for what He is in Himself. To answer the question about what God has done would require a full exposition of the Gospel and all its blessings, together with a personal testimony to His goodness to us. Even then we would still have to speak of God's greatness in creation and in His everlasting providence. Our thoughts of God tend to be far too limited and our attitude sometimes suggests we know all about Him. That is far from the truth. Think of Paul's great doxology in Rom. 11:33-36. What a God He is! He is the God who has spoken down the ages through the prophets and who has spoken finally in His Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1,2). He is the God who, through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, has qualified or entitled us (giving us the title deeds) to share in the inheritance of the saints. He has delivered us once for all from the dominion and jurisdiction of darkness. And He has transferred or lifted us up over into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have the full and free forgiveness of all our sins (Col. 1:12-14; 1 Pet. 1:3-5). That surely must kindle a song of praise in our hearts, on our lips and in the manner of our lives. But what of God in His own great and glorious person? Read 1 Chron. 29: 10-13. This is the God who is from everlasting to everlasting and who is the dwelling place of His people. This is the God with whom there is no shadow of change (Jas. 1:17). It was the everlasting God on whom Abraham called (Gen. 21:33), and there is a description of Him in Isa. 40: 28-31. Everything about God is everlasting. Think of His kindness and His love and how He draws His people to Himself (Isa. 54:8; Jer. 31:3).

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150:1-6

The methodology of praise, not least the accompanying instruments, takes up a lot of people's thinking these days and we need to be careful lest we are unduly influenced by the passing fancies of worldly fashion. It is important to remember that all the instruments mentioned here were natural to the culture of the people of Israel at that time and this emphasises an important lesson. Praise and worship must be natural rather than contrived

and must be of a kind that includes all ages and capacities as a family rather than the kind that divides a congregation into groups. Praise is a corporate exercise in which all take part and not a performance that some carry out and others watch and listen to. Of course there is in the Psalm a note of gladness, as there should be, but whether we are gifted or not we are called to make a joyful noise to the God of our salvation (Ps. 95:1-6). It is not a matter of stirring and manipulating emotions to create an atmosphere, because that is dangerous psychologically and spiritually and can be an opening of the door to alien influences. Praise is an expression of the heart's desire towards God, in the presence of God, in company with His people. It calls for the engagement of heart, soul, mind and strength: everything we have. The last verse declares who should praise God.

"Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like me His praise should sing?

"Father-like He tends and spares us;
Well our feeble frame He knows;
In His hands He gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes
Praise Him, praise Him!
Widely as His mercy flows." (Lyte)

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150:1-6

We have spent a long time on this short Psalm but the reference to everything that breathes (6) is an indication of just how broad and deep is this call to praise. In a day when the conservation of the earth is a concern to many, we do well to remember that the Bible speaks of how it is through man's sin that the earth is cursed and in bondage (Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:18-22). But the Bible speaks also of the redemption of creation and of a day coming when all that blights and spoils God's world will be done away. We are told that the wilderness will be glad and the desert blossom like the rose (Isa. 35:1-10). We are told of mountains singing and trees clapping their hands (Isa. 55:12-13). Of course, all this transforming blessing comes through the coming of the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 11:1-9). The New Testament makes plain that we who have believed do in fact look for a whole new order of creation in which dwells righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13). This new creation is described in glorious negatives in Rev. 21:1-4. And it is in Rev. 7:9-12 that we read of a multitude which no man could number all singing the praises of God. We could imagine the great and gracious Apostle John having the last verse of our Psalm in mind when he penned the words of Rev. 5:9-14. Every creature that had breath joined in the song of praise. We should do the same.

"Let all that dwell above the sky,
or on the earth below,
With fields, and floods, and ocean's shores,
to thee their homage show.

"To Him who sits upon the throne,
the God whom we adore,
And to the Lamb that once was slain,
be glory evermore."

(Scottish Paraphrases [No. 65] - Tune St Magnus