

Adult
Sabbath School
Bible Study Guide
Jan | Feb | Mar 2024

Psalms



Justine



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The Psalms: Where God and People Meet Heart to Heart



The Psalms are prayers and hymns of the Bible *par excellence*. Uttered in praise, joy, sorrow, and despair; spoken or sung in private and in public by laypeople, kings, poets, and priests; coming from both the righteous and repentant sinners, the Psalms have served as the prayer book and the hymnbook to generations of believers.

The book of Psalms owes its distinct role to the fact that while most of the Bible speaks *to* us, the Psalms speak *for* us and *with* us. The Psalms are a source of blessing, hope, and revival, a guide for both self-reflection and reflection on God's greatness, liberating when one cries out of the depths, and captivating for a renewed surrender to God. It is thus not surprising that many people find the Psalms resonating with their emotions and experiences and adopt them as their own prayers. Luther poignantly speaks of the Psalms: “Where can one find nobler words to express joy than in the Psalms of praise or gratitude? In them you can see into the hearts of all the saints as if you were looking at a lovely pleasure-garden, or were gazing into heaven. . . . Or where can one find more profound, more penitent, more sorrowful words in which to express grief than in the Psalms of lamentation? In these, you see into the hearts of all the saints as if you were looking at death or gazing into hell, so dark and obscure is the scene rendered by the changing shadows of the wrath of God. . . . It is therefore easy to understand why the book of Psalms is the favourite book of all the saints. For every man on every occasion can find in it Psalms which fit his needs, which he feels to be as appropriate as if they had been set there just for

his sake. In no other book can he find words to equal them, nor better words.”—Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), pp. 39, 40.

To experience the life-transforming power of the Psalms, we are called to sing and pray them as did the generations of believers who have used the Psalms to pour out their praises, petitions, confessions, laments, and thanksgiving to the sovereign God of grace and justice.

Do we need to *study* the Psalms, then? Like the rest of the Scriptures, the Psalms were written in their distinctive historical, theological, and literary contexts. The task of the study of the Psalms is to bring the particular world of the Psalms closer to the modern audience. We must note that while the Psalms are prayers of God’s people and even prayers that Jesus prayed as the incarnated Lord, the Psalms are also prayers about Jesus. They are God’s revelation to humanity. Another task of the study of the Psalms is, thus, to learn from the Psalms about all that God did, does, and will do for the world in and through Jesus Christ.

Although the Psalms are a collection of 150 poems, the collection may not be as random as it appears. The Psalms bear witness to a spiritual journey that is common to many of God’s children. The journey begins with a faith that is firmly established and secured by God’s sovereign rule and where good gets rewarded and evil punished. As we progress through our study, we will see what happens when the well-ordered world of faith is challenged and threatened by evil. Does God still reign? How can believers sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

Our desire and prayer are that the Psalms strengthen us on our life journey, and through them we get to meet God daily, heart to heart, until the day when we see Jesus Christ face to face.

The Psalms bear witness to a spiritual journey that is common to many of God’s children.

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How to Use This Teachers Edition

“The true teacher is not content with dull thoughts, an indolent mind, or a loose memory. He constantly seeks higher attainments and better methods. His life is one of continual growth. In the work of such a teacher there is a freshness, a quickening power, that awakens and inspires his [class].”

—Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, p. 103.

To be a Sabbath School teacher is both a privilege and a responsibility. A privilege because it offers the teacher the unique opportunity to lead and guide in the study and discussion of the week's lesson so as to enable the class to have both a personal appreciation for God's Word and a collective experience of spiritual fellowship with class members. When the class concludes, members should leave with a sense of having tasted the goodness of God's Word and having been strengthened by its enduring power. The responsibility of teaching demands that the teacher is fully aware of the Scripture to be studied, the flow of the lesson through the week, the interlinking of the lessons to the theme of the quarter, and the lesson's application to life and witness.

This guide is to help teachers to fulfill their responsibility adequately. It has three segments:

- 1. Overview** introduces the lesson topic, key texts, links with the previous lesson, and the lesson's theme. This segment deals with such questions as Why is this lesson important? What does the Bible say about this subject? What are some major themes covered in the lesson? How does this subject affect my personal life?
- 2. Commentary** is the chief segment in the Teachers Edition. It may have two or more sections, each one dealing with the theme introduced in the Overview segment. The Commentary may include several in-depth discussions that enlarge the themes outlined in the Overview. The Commentary provides an in-depth study of the themes and offers scriptural, exegetical, illustrative discussion material that leads to a better understanding of the themes. The Commentary also may have scriptural word study or exegesis appropriate to the lesson. On a participatory mode, the Commentary segment may have discussion leads, illustrations appropriate to the study, and thought questions.
- 3. Life Application** is the final segment of the Teachers Edition for each lesson. This section leads the class to discuss what was presented in the Commentary segment as it impacts Christian life. The application may involve discussion, further probing of what the lesson under study is all about, or perhaps personal testimony on how one may feel the impact of the lesson on one's life.

Final thought: What is mentioned above is only suggestive of the many possibilities available for presenting the lesson and is not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive in its scope. Teaching should not become monotonous, repetitious, or speculative. Good Sabbath School teaching should be Bible-based, Christ-centered, faith-strengthening, and fellowship-building.

How to Read the Psalms



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 1 Chron. 16:7; Neh. 12:8; Ps. 25:1–5; Ps. 33:1–3; Rom. 8:26, 27; Ps. 82:8; Ps. 121:7.

Memory Text: “Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44, 45, NKJV).

The Psalms have been a prayer book and hymnbook for both Jews and Christians through the ages. And though the Psalms are predominantly the psalmists' own words addressed to God, the Psalms did not originate with mortals but with God, who inspired their thoughts.

Indeed, the Lord inspired them to write what they did, which is why, as in all of Scripture (2 Pet. 1:21), God in the Psalms speaks to us through His servants and by His Spirit. Jesus, the apostles, and the writers of the New Testament cited the Psalms and referred to them as Scripture (Mark 12:10; John 10:34, 35; John 13:18). They are as surely the Word of God as are the books of Genesis and Romans.

The Psalms have been written in Hebrew poetry by different authors from ancient Israel, and so, the Psalms reflect their particular world, however universal their messages. Accepting the Psalms as God's Word and paying close attention to the Psalms' poetic features, as well as their historical, theological, and liturgical contexts, is fundamental for understanding their messages, which reach across thousands of years to our time today.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 6.

The Psalms in Ancient Israel's Worship

Read 1 Chronicles 16:7, Nehemiah 12:8, Psalm 18:1, Psalm 30:1, Psalm 92:1, Psalm 95:2, Psalm 105:2, Colossians 3:16, and James 5:13. What were the occasions that prompted the writing of some psalms? When did God's people use the Psalms?

The Psalms were composed for use in private and in communal worship. They were sung as hymns in temple worship, as suggested by the musical annotations that mention instruments (*Ps. 61:1*), tunes (*Ps. 9:1*), and music leaders (*Ps. 8:1*).

In the Hebrew Bible, the title of the book of Psalms, *tehilim*, “praises,” reflects its main purpose—that is, the praise of God. The English title *Book of Psalms* is derived from the Greek *psalmoi*, found in the Septuagint, an early (second and third century B.C.) Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

The Psalms were an indispensable part of Israel’s worship. For example, they were used in temple dedications, religious feasts, and processions, as well as during the setting down of the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem.

“The Songs of Ascents” (*Psalms 120–134*), also known as the pilgrimage songs, were traditionally sung during the pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the three major annual festivals (*Exod. 23:14–17*). The “Egyptian Hallel” (*Psalms 113–118*) and the “Great Hallel” (*Psalm 136*) were sung at the three major annual festivals, including the festivals of the New Moon and the dedication of the temple. The Egyptian Hallel received a significant place in the Passover ceremony. Psalms 113 and 114 were sung at the beginning of the Passover meal and Psalms 115–118 at the end (*Matt. 26:30*). The “Daily Hallel” (*Psalms 145–150*) was incorporated into the daily prayers in the synagogue morning services.

The Psalms did not only accompany the people’s worship, but they also instructed them on how they should worship God in the sanctuary. Jesus prayed with the words of Psalm 22 (*Matt. 27:46*). The Psalms found a significant place in the life of the early church, as well (*Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:19*).

Though we, of course, do not worship God in an earthly sanctuary like the temple, how can we use the Psalms in our own worship, whether in a private or in a corporate setting?

Meet the Psalmists

King David, whose name appears in the titles of most psalms, was active in organizing the liturgy of Israel's worship. He is called "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (*2 Sam. 23:1*). The New Testament attests to Davidic authorship of various psalms (*Matt. 22:43–45; Acts 2:25–29, 34, 35; Acts 4:25; Rom. 4:6–8*). Numerous psalms were composed by the temple musicians who were also Levites: for example, Psalm 50 and Psalms 73–83 by Asaph; Psalm 42, Psalms 44–47, Psalm 49, Psalm 84, Psalm 85, Psalms 87–88 by the sons of Korah; Psalm 88 also by Heman the Ezrahite; and Psalm 89 by Ethan the Ezrahite. Beyond them, Solomon (*Psalm 72, Psalm 127*) and Moses (*Psalm 90*) authored some psalms.

Read Psalm 25:1–5; Psalm 42:1; Psalm 75:1; Psalm 77:1; Psalm 84:1, 2; Psalm 88:1–3; and Psalm 89:1. What do these psalms reveal about the experiences their authors were going through?

The Holy Spirit inspired the psalmists and used their talents in service to God and to their community of faith. The psalmists were people of genuine devotion and profound faith and yet prone to discouragements and temptations, as are the rest of us. Though written a long time ago, the Psalms surely reflect some of what we experience today.

"Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the grave" (*Ps. 88:2, 3, NKJV*). This is a cry of the twenty-first-century soul as much as it was of someone 3,000 years ago.

Some psalms mention hardships; some focus on joys. The psalmists cried out to God to save them and experienced His undeserved favor. They glorified God for His faithfulness and love, and they pledged their untiring devotion to Him. The Psalms are, thus, testimonies of divine Redemption and signs of God's grace and hope. The Psalms convey a divine promise to all who embrace, by faith, God's gifts of forgiveness and of a new life. Yet, at the same time, they do not try to cover up, hide, or downplay the hardships and suffering prevalent in a fallen world.

How can we draw hope and comfort knowing that even faithful people, such as the psalmists, struggled with some of the same things that we do?

A Song for Every Season

Read Psalm 3, Psalm 33:1–3, and Psalm 109:6–15. What different facets of human experience do these psalms convey?

The Psalms make the believing community aware of the full range of human experience, and they demonstrate that believers can worship God in every season in life. In them we see the following:

(1) Hymns that magnify God for His majesty and power in creation, His kingly rule, judgment, and faithfulness. (2) Thanksgiving psalms that express profound gratitude for God's abundant blessings. (3) Laments that are heartfelt cries to God for deliverance from trouble. (4) Wisdom psalms that provide practical guidelines for righteous living. (5) Royal psalms that point to Christ, who is the sovereign King and Deliverer of God's people. (6) Historical psalms that recall Israel's past and highlight God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness to teach the coming generations not to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors but to trust God and remain faithful to His covenant.

The poetry of the Psalms demonstrates distinctive power to capture the attention of readers. Though some of these poetic devices are lost in translation, we can still, in our native language, appreciate many of them.

1. *Parallelism* involves the combining of symmetrically constructed words, phrases, or thoughts. Parallelism helps in understanding the meaning of corresponding parts. For instance: “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!” (*Ps. 103:1, NKJV*). In this parallelism, “my soul” is “all that is within me,” namely one’s whole being.

2. *Imagery* uses figurative language to strongly appeal to readers’ physical senses. For example, God’s refuge is depicted as “the shadow of [His] wings” (*Ps. 17:8, NKJV*).

3. *Merism* expresses totality by a pair of contrasting parts. “I have cried *day and night* before thee” denotes crying without ceasing (*Ps. 88:1, emphasis supplied*).

4. *Wordplays* employ the sound of words to make a pun and highlight a spiritual message. In Psalm 96:4, 5 the Hebrew words ‘*elohim*, “gods,” and ‘*elilim*, “idols,” create a wordplay to convey the message that the gods of the nations only appear to be ‘*elohim*, “gods,” but are merely ‘*elilim*, “idols.”

Finally, the word “selah” denotes a brief interlude, either for a call to pause and reflect on the message of a particular section of the psalm or a change of musical accompaniment (*Ps. 61:4*).

Inspired Prayers

Read 2 Samuel 23:1, 2 and Romans 8:26, 27. What do these texts teach us about prayer?

The Psalms are inspired prayers and praises of Israel, and so, in the Psalms the voice is that of God intermingled with that of His people. The Psalms assume the dynamics of vivid interactions with God.

The psalmists address God personally as “my God,” “O LORD,” and “my King” (*Ps. 5:2, Ps. 84:3*). The psalmists often implore God to “give ear” (*Ps. 5:1*), “hear my prayer” (*Ps. 39:12*), “look” (*Ps. 25:18*), “answer me” (*Ps. 102:2*), and “deliver me” (*Ps. 6:4, NKJV*). These are clearly the expressions of someone praying to God.

The remarkable beauty and appeal of the Psalms as prayers and praises lie in the fact that the Psalms are the Word of God in the form of the pious prayers and praises of believers. The Psalms, thus, provide God’s children with moments of intimacy, such as described in Romans 8:26, 27: “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God” (*NKJV*).

Jesus, too, quoted from the Psalms, such as in Luke 20:42, 43, when He quoted directly from Psalm 110:1—“ ‘Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms: “The LORD said to my Lord, / ‘Sit at My right hand, / Till I make Your enemies Your footstool’ ” ’ ” (*NKJV*).

Although some psalms have sprung from, or refer to, specific historical events and the experiences of the psalmists themselves, as well as the experiences of Israel as a nation, the Psalms’ spiritual depth speaks to a variety of life situations and crosses all cultural, religious, ethnic, and gender boundaries. In other words, as you read the Psalms, you will find them expressing hope, praise, fear, anger, sadness, and sorrow—things that people everywhere, in every age, no matter their circumstances, face. They speak to us all, in the language of our own experiences.

What should Jesus’ use of the Psalms tell us about the importance that they could play in our own faith experience?

The World of the Psalms

Read Psalm 16:8; Psalm 44:8; Psalm 46:1; Psalm 47:1, 7; Psalm 57:2; Psalm 62:8; Psalm 82:8; and Psalm 121:7. What place does God occupy in the psalmist's life?

The world of the Psalms is wholly God-centered; it seeks to submit, in prayer and praise, all life experiences to God. God is the Sovereign Creator, the King and Judge of all the earth. He provides all things for His children. Therefore, He is to be trusted at all times. Even the enemies of God's people ask, " 'Where is your God?' " when God's people seem to be failing (*Ps. 42:10, NKJV*). Just as the Lord is the ever-present and never-failing God of His people, so God's people have God always before them. Ultimately, the Psalms envision the time when all peoples and the entire creation will worship God (*Ps. 47:1, Ps. 64:9*).

The centrality of God in life produces the centrality of worship. The worship in which the Psalms lived was fundamentally different from worship as understood by many people today, because worship in the biblical culture was the natural and undisputed center of the entire community's life. Therefore, everything that happened, both the good and the bad, in the life of God's people inevitably was expressed in worship. God hears the psalmist, wherever he may be, and responds to him in His perfect time (*Ps. 3:4, Ps. 18:6, Ps. 20:6*).

The psalmist is aware that God's dwelling place is in heaven, but at the same time, God dwells in Zion, in the sanctuary among His people. God is at the same time far and near, everywhere, and in His temple (*Ps. 11:4*), hidden (*Ps. 10:1*) and disclosed (*Ps. 41:12*). In the Psalms these apparently mutually exclusive characteristics of God are brought together. The psalmists understood that proximity and remoteness were inseparable within the true being of God (*Ps. 24:7–10*). The psalmists understood the dynamics of this spiritual tension. Their awareness of God's goodness and presence, amid whatever they were experiencing, is what strengthens their hope while they wait for God to intervene, however and whenever He chooses to do so.

How can the Psalms help us understand that we cannot limit God to certain aspects of our existence only? What might be parts of your life in which you are seeking to keep the Lord at a distance?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Temple and Its Dedication,” pp. 35–50, in *Prophets and Kings*; “The Benefits of Music,” pp. 291, 292, in *Messages to Young People*.

The book of Psalms consists of 150 psalms, which are grouped into five books: Book I (*Psalms 1–41*), Book II (*Psalms 42–72*), Book III (*Psalms 73–89*), Book IV (*Psalms 90–106*), and Book V (*Psalms 107–150*). The five-book division of the Psalter is an early Jewish tradition that parallels the five-book division of the Pentateuch.

The book of Psalms provides evidence of some already-existing collections of psalms: the Korahite collections (*Psalms 42–49, 84, 85, 87, 88*), the Asaphite collection (*Psalms 73–83*), the Songs of the Ascents (*Psalms 120–134*), and the Hallelujah Psalms (*Psalms 111–118, 146–150*). Psalm 72:20 bears witness to a smaller collection of David’s psalms.

While most psalms are associated with the time of King David and early monarchy (tenth century B.C.), the collection of psalms continued to grow through the following centuries: the divided monarchy, the exile, and the postexilic period. It is conceivable that the Hebrew scribes under the leadership of Ezra combined the existing smaller collections of psalms into one book when they worked on establishing the services of the new temple.

The fact that scribes consolidated the book of Psalms does not take away from their divine inspiration. The scribes, like the psalmists, were devoted servants of God, and their work was directed by God (*Ezra 7:6, 10*). The divine-human nature of the Psalms is comparable to the union of the divine and the human in the incarnated Lord Jesus. “But the Bible, with its God-given truths expressed in the language of men, presents a union of the divine and the human. Such a union existed in the nature of Christ, who was the Son of God and the Son of man. Thus it is true of the Bible, as it was of Christ, that ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 8.

Discussion Questions:

- ①** What does it mean that the Psalms are divine-human prayers and hymns? How does this idea, however difficult to fully grasp, help us see the closeness that God wants with His people? How does it reveal, in its own way, how close to humanity, and to each of us, God is?
- ②** In class, talk about a time in which you found something in the Psalms speaking directly to your own situation. What comfort and hope did you find there?

Finding Jesus in a Holy Book

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Paul went from home to home to meet people in a European city. With him, he carried a Bible and the holy book of another major world religion.

One day, a man opened the door. His breath smelled of cigarette smoke.

"I would very much like to give you a gift today," Paul said.

"What kind of gift?" the man asked.

"I have this Bible," Paul said.

"I don't want a Bible," the man said. "I belong to another religion. You are a Christian."

"I have the holy book of your religion, too," Paul said.

The man was surprised. He seemed interested. "OK, read something to me but only from my holy book, not from the Bible," he said.

Paul opened the holy book and read about Jesus. The man's surprise grew.

"Is this the same Jesus as in the Bible?" he asked.

Over the next few weeks, he studied four lessons about Jesus from his holy book. The man saw that the book does not talk about Jesus being crucified. He saw that the book predicts Jesus will come again. He saw that both people from his religion and Christians were waiting for Jesus to return.

When Paul arrived for the fifth lesson, the man wasn't home.

A year passed, and one Sabbath the man showed up at Paul's church.

"I want to come to this church," he said. "Can I?"

It was Paul's turn to be surprised.

"I want to follow Christ," the man said.

After that, the man came every Sabbath. He said his holy book left him feeling empty. It offered no Savior for his sins. He longed to be baptized.

"Jesus says the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit," Paul said. "Do you want to be free of cigarettes? Jesus said, 'If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed' [John 8:36, NKJV]. You have to choose Jesus or cigarettes. You can throw away your cigarettes today if you choose."

The man looked scared. "It isn't possible!" he blurted out. But then he reached into his pocket and threw a cigarette pack into a trash can.

"Jesus, give me victory over cigarettes," he prayed. "I want to be free."

Late that night, he called Paul. "This is terrible," he said. "I feel awful. I cannot live without cigarettes."

The two men prayed together on the phone. God heard the prayer and gave the man victory. He has not smoked in the four and a half years since then. Today, he is an outreach leader for the church.

"He loves people," Paul told Adventist Mission. He is waiting eagerly for Jesus to return.

Thank you for your support of Adventist Mission, whose Global Mission Centers help train people to share the good news of salvation with precious people from other world religions. For more information, visit globalmissioncenters.org.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Luke 24:44*

The book of Psalms, also known as the Psalter, stands as the apex of Hebrew poetry. An inspiring and inspired collection of songs, the Psalms express the multifarious feelings and struggles of believers, spanning from the United Monarchy of Israel (tenth century B.C.) through the postexilic days (fifth century B.C.). The Psalter comprises a wide variety of genres: songs of thanksgiving, praises, confessions, prayers for deliverance, hymns for protection, imprecations, meditations on the Creator's works, etc. Our careful study of the Psalms this quarter will seek to reflect this rich diversity.

Lesson Themes: By way of introduction to this quarter's study, we will touch on the following preliminary topics:

1. The historical background to the book of Psalms
2. The various genres or categories of songs in the collection
3. Biblical guidance for worship

Additionally, we shall enlarge our study of the Psalter by surveying the following subjects: (a) the structure of the Psalms, (b) the various literary tools the psalmists used to express their emotions, and (c) the distinct divisions of books within the Psalter itself.

Part II: Commentary

A Well-Organized “Church Hymnal”

The Psalter is an assortment of songs edited during the fifth century B.C. Ezra and his fellow scribes most likely organized this collection.

The book is divided into five smaller sections, showing the intention of the editors to organize the songs in a thematic way, both chronologically and historically (see chart below):

BOOK	CHAPTERS/ PSALMS	THEME	CONTENT
I	1–41	Conflict between David and Saul	Personal laments: The majority of psalms in this section mention the psalmist's adversarial agents, designated as “my enemies.” Notable psalms among this collection include: 1, 2, and 24.

II	42–72	Kingship of David	Mention is likewise made of the enemy in many of the psalms in this section. Notable psalms: 45, 48, 51, 54–64.
III	73–89	Assyrian crisis during eighth century B.C.	Collections from the sons of Asaph and Korah. Notable psalm: 78.
IV	90–106	Theological evaluation after destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.	Collection of praise psalms: 95–100. Key psalms: 90, 103–105.
V	107–150	Praise and reflection after the exile—a new era	The Hallelujah collection: 111–117; pilgrimage: 120–134. Key psalms: 107, 110, 119.

Today, our church has its own collection of songs for worship, the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Hymnal*. If you consult the index at the back of our hymnbook, you will find the distribution of songs by topic. The Psalter has a similar organization, though it is chronological as opposed to topical.

The Lord is pleased when we give forethought to the activities and tools intended for use in worshiping His name. We must strive to offer Him only our best. This principle holds true not only for the presentation of our worship service but also for its planning and organization. Despite modern ideas and popular trends that advocate for a freer style of worship, the book of Psalms shows that we must be organized and orderly in our worship of God.

At the same time, order and organization by no means preclude variety, and we should seek to incorporate both in our worship service. To assist us in that endeavor, we shall consider further the distribution of the psalms, as outlined above. We will start by noting that each of the five sections of the Psalter ends with a doxology psalm, or liturgical expression of praise—namely, Psalm 41, Psalm 72, Psalm 89, Psalm 106, and Psalm 150.

Psalm 1 focuses on the theme of the Torah, and Psalm 2 focuses on the kingdom of the Messiah, both of which are principal topics of the Psalter. Some Bible thinkers consider that these two psalms constitute the introduction to this hymnbook.

We also note that certain key psalms (*Psalm 2, Psalm 72, and Psalm 89*) are placed in very specific and prominent positions within the book. Many theologians consider Psalm 89 to be the center of the whole Psalter because it focuses on the transfer of Israel's hope to the Lord after the failure of the Davidic monarchy.

The fifth section of the Psalter, comprised of the last five psalms, centers on praise. These five psalms start with "Hallelujah" (CSB, HCSB, ISV) or "Praise the LORD!" (NKJV, NRSV) as their superscription and finish with the same expression. These final psalms are replete with passional expressions of praise glorifying God as an act of worship (*Ps. 146:1, 2; Ps. 147:12; Ps. 148:1–5, 7, 13, 14; Ps. 149:3, 6; Ps. 150:1–6*); singing to the Lord (*Ps. 147:7, Ps. 149:1*); being "happy" in the Lord (*Ps. 146:5*); rejoicing in the King of Zion (*Ps. 149:2*); and being "joyful in glory" (*Ps. 149:5, NKJV*).

What a wonderful privilege is ours to organize the songs we use in offering praise to God! Our arrangement of songs should manifest a clear intention to worship the Lord and exalt His grace.

A Beautifully Crafted Psalter

A careful study of each psalm will reveal its singular beauty. The psalmists employed a variety of literary techniques to create their sublime poetry. Among the expressions they often used are figures of speech, such as simile and anthropomorphism. A simile is an expression in which two unlike things are explicitly compared, often introduced by *like* or *as* (*Ps. 1:3*). Anthropomorphism is the act of ascribing human form or attributes to a non-human being or thing, especially to a deity (*Ps. 18:8–10*).

The psalmists also used literary devices or expressions involving substitution, such as metonymy, a figure of speech that consists of using the name of one object or concept for that of another to which it is related (*Ps. 2:5*); synecdoche, a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part, or the particular for the general or the general for the particular (*Ps. 44:6*); and malediction (*Ps. 109:7*). The psalmists employed the acrostic (*Psalm 119*), a poetry form in which the first letters of the initial words of each line, when taken in order, spell out a word or phrase. We also see the use of anaphora, or repetition of a word or words at the beginning of two or more verses in a poem or song (*Psalm 136*). Additionally, we observe figures that involve omission or suppression, such as ellipsis, a sudden leap from one topic to another (*Ps. 21:12*); aposiopesis, a sudden breaking off in the midst of a sentence, as if from inability or unwillingness to proceed (*Ps. 6:3*); and erotesis, the use of a rhetorical question (which is employed solely to produce an effect or to make an assertion of affirmation or denial and is not meant to elicit a reply [*Ps. 106:2*], etc.).

All these figures of speech and various other literary devices applied by

the writers of the Psalter demonstrate literary sophistication and unparalleled craftsmanship.

Multiple Types of Psalms

A general classification of the Psalms is furnished in Tuesday's study. What follows is a more detailed grouping of the melodies of the Psalter, though it is certainly possible to find other acceptable distributions:

1. Hymns
 - General hymns: 8, 29, 33, 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145–150
 - Historical hymns: 78, 105
 - Zion hymns: 46, 48, 76, 87, 122
 - Kingship hymns: 47, 93, 96–99
2. Laments
 - Individual laments: 3, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 43, 51, 54, 55–57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69–71, 86, 88, 102, 109, 120, 130, 140–143
 - Communal laments: 44, 60, 74, 77, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 90, 94, 106, 108, 123, 126, 137
3. Miscellaneous forms
 - Royal psalms: 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144
 - Individual thanksgivings: 9, 10, 30, 32, 34, 40, 41, 92, 107, 116, 138
 - Communal thanksgivings: 65–68, 118, 124
 - Individual psalms of confidence: 4, 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 84, 91, 121, 131
 - Communal psalms of confidence: 115, 125, 129, 133
 - Liturgies: 15, 24, 134
 - Prophetic exhortations: 14, 50, 52, 53, 58, 75, 81, 95
 - Didactic psalms: 1, 19, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, 139

The organization of this list reveals that the Psalms are composed of personal songs as well as communal ones. Today, the emphasis of Western culture is on the individual. The Hebrew mind, however, was focused on a sense of community, an element that we, as Christians, cannot afford to lose sight of today, especially in light of the fact that, as a church, we are a global community with a worldwide mission.

A final observation that the above catalog affords us is the notion that there are psalms allocated for all the various occasions of life—songs for community and personal worship, spiritual songs for royal occasions, songs for pilgrimage to the holy city, and songs for liturgical moments. For the biblical writers, adoration is not an activity reserved solely for the temple. Adoration is a way of life.

“Collections” in the Book of Psalms

This week's lesson alludes to collections of songs for special occasions, such as

“The Songs of Ascents” (*Psalms 120–134*) and “Egyptian Hallel” (*Psalms 113–118*). Years of scholarship have unearthed more connections between the various psalms. One such connection is found in Psalms 15–24 (see W. Brown, “‘Here Comes the Sun!’ The Metaphorical Theology of Psalms 15–24,” in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* [Leuven, 2010], p. 260). This assemblage can be depicted in the following chiastic structure:

- A Psalm 15** (Entrance liturgy)
- B Psalm 16** (Song of confidence)
- C Psalm 17** (Prayer for help)
- D Psalm 18** (Royal song)
- E Psalm 19** (REVELATION: Creation and the Torah)
- D' Psalm 20, 21** (Royal songs)
- C' Psalm 22** (Prayer for help)
- B' Psalm 23** (Song of confidence)
- A' Psalm 24** (Entrance liturgy)

A chiasm is an extended parallelism (see Tuesday’s study for a short explanation about “parallelism”). By way of an analogy, a chiasm is akin to the reflection of a person’s face or image in a mirror wherein the second part (i.e., the reflection) is the repetition of ideas of the first section (original image) but in inverse order. Usually, the center of the chiasm points out the main idea of the parallelism. The idea, as seen in the chiastic structure formed by Psalms 15–24, is to exalt the revelation of God through His Creation and His Word. This chiastic structure is enclosed by two psalms connected with the sanctuary, both of which start with similar questions (*Ps. 15:1; compare with Ps. 24:3*).

This chiasm suggests that the editors of the Psalter worked carefully on its organization and presentation. Clearly, the Holy Spirit inspired its arrangement.

Part III: Life Application

In the Psalms, we find a wide range of emotions that run the gamut of human experience, from sublime reverence to abject sorrow. Though written more than 25 centuries ago, the Psalms transcend the time in which they were written and remain deeply relevant for us today. This quarter, encourage class members to pray through these songs, making them their personal prayers.

Teach us to Pray



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Ps. 105:5, Col. 3:16, James 5:13, Psalm 44, Psalm 22, Psalm 13, Ps. 60:1–5.

Memory Text: “Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples’ ” (Luke 11:1, NKJV).

A belief that only spontaneous, unlearned prayer is real prayer appears to be prevalent among some Christians. However, Jesus' disciples were immensely rewarded when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. God placed a prayer book, the Psalms, at the heart of the Bible, not simply to show us how God's people of ancient times prayed but also to teach us how we can pray today.

From the earliest ages, the Psalms have shaped the prayers of God's people, including Jesus' prayers (*1 Chron. 16:7, 9; Neh. 12:8; Matt. 27:46; Eph. 5:19*). This week we will look at the role the Psalms played in helping God's people traverse their life journey and grow in their relationship with God. We should remember that the Psalms are prayers and, as such, are invaluable, not only for their theological insight but also for the ways they can enrich and transform our individual and communal prayers.

Praying the Psalms has helped many believers establish and maintain regular and fulfilling prayer lives.

This week we will continue to look at the Psalms, especially in the context of times when things are not going great for us.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 13.

Fostering the Use of the Psalms in Prayer

Read Psalm 105:5, Colossians 3:16, and James 5:13. What is the place of the Psalms in the believer's worship experience?

A simple way of introducing the Psalms into daily life is to devote time each day to the reading of a psalm, beginning with Psalm 1, and following the order given in the psalter. Another way is to read the psalms that correspond to your present situation, whatever it happens to be: there are psalms of lament, the psalms of communal lament, the thanksgiving psalms, hymns, penitential psalms, the wisdom psalms (seeking God's wisdom and guidance), historical psalms, psalms containing anger and rage, and pilgrimage psalms. Over the course of this quarter, we will be looking at many of them and studying these psalms in the context in which they appear.

How, then, are we to read the Psalms?

First read the psalm, engaging in simple reflection, and then pray. Ruminating over the psalm involves reflection on the various aspects of the psalm: the way the psalmist addresses God and the reasons for the prayer. Consider how your situation corresponds to the psalmist's experience and how the psalm might be able to help you articulate your experience. You will be amazed at how often you will find yourself being able to resonate and relate to what you read there.

If something in the psalm challenges you, ponder, for example, whether the psalm corrects your present false hopes about something you are facing. Contemplate the psalm's message in the light of Christ's person and salvific work and the long-term hope Christ's work offers us. As we know, or should know, it always helps to look at everything in the Bible in light of Christ and the Cross.

Also, look for new motives for prayer that the psalm supplies, and think about their importance for you, your church, and the world. Ask God to put His Word on your heart and mind. If the psalm corresponds to the situation of someone you know, intercede in prayer for that person. The point is, the Psalms cover so many aspects of life, and we can be enriched by reading and absorbing into our hearts what they are saying to us.

What does it mean to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16)? Why is reading the Bible the first and most crucial step for that experience?

Trust in Times of Trouble

All Christians know, and have experienced, times of despair and suffering, times when they have wondered what the Lord is doing, or why the Lord is allowing these things to happen to them. The psalmists themselves went through similar things. And, through divine inspiration, they recorded what they had experienced.

Read Psalm 44. What is it saying to us, and why is this relevant to believers in all ages?

The selectiveness of Psalms in church worship services often reflects the exclusiveness of moods and words that we express in our communal prayers. Such restrictiveness may be a sign of our inability or uneasiness to engage the dark realities of life. Though we may sometimes feel that God treats us unfairly when suffering hits us, we do not find it appropriate to express our thoughts in public worship or even in private prayer.

This reluctance could cause us to miss the point of worship. The failure to express honestly and openly our feelings and views before God in prayer often leaves us in bondage to our own emotions. This also denies us confidence and trust in approaching God. Praying the Psalms gives an assurance that, when we pray and worship, we are not expected to censure or deny our experience.

Psalm 44, for example, can help worshipers articulate their experience of innocent suffering freely and adequately. Praying the Psalms helps people experience freedom of speech in prayer. The Psalms give us words that we can neither find nor dare to speak. “Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from Your way; but You have severely broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with the shadow of death” (*Ps. 44:18, 19, NKJV*).

Notice, however, how Psalm 44 begins. The writer is talking about how, in the past, God had done great things for His people. Hence, the author expresses his trust in God and not “in my bow” (*Ps. 44:6*).

Despite this, trouble has still come to God’s people. The list of woe and lament is long and painful. However, even amid all this, the psalmist cries out for God to deliver, to “redeem us for Your mercies’ sake” (*Ps. 44:26, NKJV*). That is, even amid the trouble, he knows the reality of God and His love.

How can drawing on past times, when God’s presence felt very real, help you deal with the times in which troubles make you think that God is far away?

A Psalm of Despair

Praying the Psalms does more than enable worshipers to articulate their prayers freely. The Psalms supervise their experience according to God's standards and make it bearable by introducing hope and reassurance of God's presence.

Read Psalm 22. What can we learn from this psalm about trust in God amid great suffering?

The lamenting words of Psalm 22:1 may help suffering people express their grief and sense of loneliness: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?" (*NKJV*).

These words, of course, have become famous among Christians because they were the same words that Jesus Himself, while on the cross, uttered, showing us how central to Christ's experience the Psalms were (*see Matt. 27:46*).

However, even amid the suffering and trials, these words also are expressed: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You" (*Ps. 22:22, NKJV*).

In other words, though these exact feelings may not coincide with the author's present dilemma, the psalmist was still expressing his faith in God and declaring that, no matter what, he would still praise God.

The point is, by giving us words to pray, the Psalms teach us to look beyond our current situation and, by faith, to see the time when our life will be restored by God's grace.

Praying the Psalms thus takes worshipers to new spiritual horizons. The Psalms let worshipers express their feelings and understandings, but they are not left where they presently are. The worshipers are led to abandon their burdens of pain, disappointment, anger, and despair before God and to trust in Him, whatever their circumstances.

The movement from lament to praise observed in many psalms is suggestive of the spiritual transformation that the believers experience when they receive divine grace and comfort in prayer.

How can we learn to see beyond our immediate trials and, thus, trust in God's goodness, whatever we face now?

From Despair to Hope

We all have probably faced times when the presence of God seemed very far from us. Who, at times, has not thought: *How could this have happened?*

The psalmists, humans like the rest of us, surely faced similar things. Though, yes, at times our sins bring trials upon us, at other times they seem to be so unfair, and we feel as if we did not deserve what we are now faced with. Again, who has not been there?

Read Psalm 13. What two main moods can you distinguish in this psalm? What decision do you think brought the radical change in the psalmist's general outlook?

"How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" (*Ps. 13:1, NKJV*). Again, who cannot relate to these sentiments, as wrong as they might be? (Does God ever forget any of us?)

Psalm 13, then, points to the way to avoid another common mistake—focusing on ourselves and our problems when praying. This psalm can transform our prayer by leading us to reaffirm the faithful and unchanging nature of God's dealings with His people.

Sure, though the psalm does begin with laments and complaints, it does not end there. And that's the crucial point.

The psalm leads us to deliberately choose to trust God's redemptive power (*Ps. 13:5*), so that our fear and anxiety (*Ps. 13:1–4*) can gradually give way to God's salvation, and we begin experiencing change from lament to praise, from despair to hope (*Ps. 13:5, 6*).

However, a mere repetition of the words of the Psalms with only a slight comprehension of their meaning will not produce the authentic transformation intended by their use. When praying the Psalms, we should seek the Holy Spirit to enable us to act in the way demanded by the psalm. The Psalms are the Word of God by which believers' characters and actions are transformed, not simply informed. By God's grace, the promises of the Psalms are made manifest in the lives of believers. This means that we allow God's Word to shape us according to God's will and to unite us with Christ, who demonstrated God's will perfectly and, as the incarnate Son of God, prayed the Psalms, as well.

How can your trials draw you closer to God? Why, if you're not careful, can they push you away from Him?

Oh, Restore Us Again

Read Psalm 60:1–5. For what occasions do you think this psalm would be a suitable prayer? How can we benefit from the psalms of lament even in joyous seasons of life?

Psalms of lament are generally understood as prayers of people living through trying times, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual. Or all three.

However, this does not mean that we should avoid these psalms, even in good times. Sometimes there may be a total disjunction between the words of the psalm and the worshiper's present experience. That is, psalms of lament can be beneficial to worshipers who are not in distress.

First, they can make us more aware that suffering is part of the general human experience and that it happens to both the righteous and the wicked. The Psalms assure us that God is in control and provides strength and solutions in times of trouble. Even in this psalm, even amid the trouble ("You have made the earth tremble," *Ps. 60:2, NKJV*), the psalmist displays his ultimate hope in God's deliverance.

Second, the lament psalms teach us compassion toward the sufferers. When expressing our happiness and gratitude to God, especially in public, we must be mindful of the less fortunate. Sure, we might have things good right now, but who doesn't know of people, all around us, who are suffering terribly? Praying such psalms can help us not forget those who are going through tough times. The Psalms should evoke in us compassion and a desire to minister to the suffering as Jesus did.

"This world is a vast lazarus house, but Christ came to heal the sick, to proclaim deliverance to the captives of Satan. He was in Himself health and strength. He imparted His life to the sick, the afflicted, those possessed of demons. He turned away none who came to receive His healing power. He knew that those who petitioned Him for help had brought disease upon themselves; yet, He did not refuse to heal them. And when virtue from Christ entered into these poor souls, they were convicted of sin, and many were healed of their spiritual disease, as well as of their physical maladies. The gospel still possesses the same power, and why should we not today witness the same results?"—Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, pp. 24, 25.

Whom do you know, right now, who needs not only your prayers but your ministering touch, as well?

Further Thought: Read Psalm 42:8 and Ellen G. White, “Poetry and Song,” pp. 159–168, in *Education*. How are prayer and song related according to these inspired texts?

Ellen G. White describes David’s penitent psalms (*e.g. Psalm 51*) as the language of his soul and prayers that illustrate the nature of true sorrow for sin (see *Steps to Christ*, pp. 24, 25). She encourages believers to memorize texts from the Psalms as the means of fostering the sense of God’s presence in their lives and highlights Jesus’ practice of lifting His voice with psalms when met with temptation and oppressive fear. She also remarks: “How often by words of holy song are unsealed in the soul the springs of penitence and faith, of hope and love and joy! . . . Indeed, many a song is prayer.”—*Education*, pp. 162–168.

When we pray and sing the Psalms, we assume the persistence, boldness, courage, and hope of the psalmists. They encourage us to continue our spiritual journey and comfort us that we are not alone. Other people, like us, have gone through dark times and yet were triumphant by the grace of God. At the same time, the Psalms reveal to us the glimpses of Christ’s fervent intercession on our behalf, as He always lives to pray for us (*Heb. 7:25*).

Engaging psalms in prayer and worship makes the believing community aware of the full range of human experience and teaches the worshipers to engage in the various facets of that experience in worship. The Psalms are divine-human prayers and songs. For that reason, including psalms consistently in worship brings the believing community to the center of God’s will and powerful healing grace.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why is spontaneous, unguided prayer not the only way to pray? How can our prayer life benefit from the Psalms, the biblical prayers?
- ❷ How can the Psalms enrich our communal prayer experience? Discuss some practical ways your local church can foster the use of the Psalms in its worship services.
- ❸ What do the Psalms reveal about the complexity of the human pilgrimage of faith and the power of God’s healing grace?

Cry of Radostin's Heart

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

Radostin disliked his life. His friends did not exert a good influence over him. He dabbled in illegal drugs and petty crime. The constant cry of his heart was, "I want to change, I want to change, I want to change."

Growing older, Radostin got married and had two sons. Times were tough, and he left his homeland of Bulgaria in search of work. As he worked in Western Europe, he made new friends. He longed for truth. He wished that his new friends would reveal the truth to him. Now, the constant cry of his heart was, "How can people who know the real truth find me?"

After some time, he moved again in search of a better job. But in six weeks, he hit rock bottom. He found himself living in a small, rented room with no money and no food. He was very, very hungry.

In desperation, his heart cried out to God one night.

"God, help me," he said, praying for the first time in his life. "Send me someone."

In the morning, someone knocked on his door. It was a man in a suit. In his hand was a Bible. Radostin understood that God had sent the man in answer to his prayer.

The man, Paul, brought food for Radostin to eat. He invited him to church. Radostin went and was surprised. He had never been to a house of worship where he sensed God's love. His heart was touched, and he wept.

Returning to Bulgaria, he told his family repeatedly about meeting God and experiencing His love at Paul's church. He longed to return to the church, but he wasn't sure that his wife would agree to even move. Like himself, she had been raised in another world religion.

He prayed, "God, if it is Your will, if You are God, help. If Paul's church is Your true church, send my family and me there. I want to have a complete change in my life."

One day, Radostin's wife abruptly announced, "I don't want to live in Bulgaria. I want to live in the city of Paul's church."

With those words, Radostin realized that it was God's will for his family to move. He also realized that his wife wanted to know God. The family moved. Today, Radostin is an active member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and goes to Paul's church every Sabbath.

Times still can be tough, but he is no longer worried. "We don't pray for God to give us everything, but we pray that He will protect us from evil," he told Adventist Mission. "We ask that He helps us to live through trials."

He has no doubt that God hears his prayers. "I was not a good person as a young man," he said. "But, praise God, He really has changed my heart!"

Thank you for your support of Adventist Mission, whose Global Mission Centers help people better understand how to share the good news of salvation with precious people from other world religions. For more information, visit globalmissioncenters.org.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Luke 11:1*

This week, we will reflect upon the desperation expressed by the psalmist amid times of trouble. In our study, we will consider four songs from the Psalter that are instructive in teaching us how to pray amid our daily struggles: Psalms 44, 22, 13, 60.

Part II: Commentary

Psalm 44

The honesty and straightforwardness of the psalmists in their petitions to YHWH may amaze or even shock us. For the most part, we tend to shy away from that level of boldness when addressing our Creator.

Not so the sons of Korah. Let's look at some of the lessons we can learn from their bold prayer in Psalm 44:

1. The sons of Korah trust in God (*Ps. 44:4–8*), no matter what humiliations they face, because they remember YHWH's works for them (*Ps. 44:1–3*). Their complaint is not one in which hard feelings and recrimination toward God dominate. Rather, their prayer is based on true faith in His strength and mercy.
2. They claim the Lord has abandoned them to the mercy of their enemies (*Ps. 44:9–16*). Can we express the same sentiment to our Creator without losing our faith?
3. The sons of Korah confirm they have not forgotten their God (*Ps. 44:17*). They have been faithful and acknowledge they cannot cheat the Lord (*Ps. 44:17–22*).
4. The song ends with strong cries for God to act on their behalf: “awake,” “arise,” “redeem” (*Ps. 44:23–26*). Thus, they plead mightily for deliverance.

The psalm ends without a clear answer from the Lord. His silence is a reminder that many times, this side of eternity, we may not always get the response from heaven that we desire. But we must not permit dismay to overwhelm us or cause us to make a shipwreck of our faith.

Psalm 22

This psalm is composed in the same vein as Psalm 44, although it should be noted that Psalm 22 is a personal petition. King David is the author of this psalm. According to discussion surrounding the historical setting of the psalm, we believe it was likely written either when David was under

the persecution of Saul or during his affliction under the rebellion of his son Absalom.

Whatever the historical origin of this song, there is no doubt that this psalm is Messianic. The New Testament quotes from it several times in the context of the suffering that Jesus experienced during His trial, torture, and crucifixion:

- “ ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?’ ” (*Mark 15:34, Matt. 27:46, NKJV*) is a direct quotation of Psalm 22:1.
- Psalm 22:7 is applied to Jesus on the cross and to His mockers (*Mark 15:29, Matt. 27:39, 40*).
- Psalm 22:16 (“ ‘My hands and feet have shriveled’ ” *NRSV*) is a direct allusion to Jesus being nailed to the cross, even though this particular verse is not quoted by the Gospels.
- Mark 15:24 and Matthew 27:35 allude to Psalm 22:18.
- Psalm 22:12–15 also can be applied, without any hesitation, to the experience of Jesus. Psalm 22:17 depicts the condition of our Savior on the cross: “ ‘I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me’ ” (*NKJV*).

In the context of the study of our lesson this week, it’s a comforting thought to know that this same Creator, when in our human condition, faced a degree of suffering that far exceeds any anguish or trial we shall ever face in our lives. For sure, our Lord recalled this psalm during that fateful Friday of His death and prayed it with tears in His eyes. We, too, can make these words our own amid our sorrows.

How inspiring to know that Jesus Himself lamented in the midst of His suffering and expressed His anguish to His heavenly Father. There is no sin in such an expression of raw honesty. Jesus even requested in the Garden of Gethsemane: “ ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me,’ ” reminding us that the genuine expression in prayer of our feelings and weaknesses is never an offense to God’s ears. After Jesus poured out the feelings of His heart to His Father, He ended His prayer with perfect submission to His Father’s will: “ ‘Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will’ ” (*Matt. 26:39, NKJV*).

Likewise, Psalm 22 expresses this same perfect trust and submission to the will of the Father. The psalm ends, as many other psalms do, with words of deliverance (*Ps. 22:20–22*) and praise (*Ps. 22:23–26*). It closes with a celebration of the Lord’s mercies (*Ps. 22:27–31*), spanning, in emotional breadth, from the pit of pain and suffering to the apogee of joy and blessing. Similarly, our prayers should aspire to such glorious heights.

Psalm 13

The writers of the Psalter list two questions to express desperation amid suffering and trials. One question is “Why?” [Heb. *lamah*]. “Why?”

is used when the interlocutor wants to understand the actions of God under difficult circumstances, as follows: (1) when it seems the Lord is not doing anything to save His follower (*Ps. 10:1; Ps. 44:23*); (2) when it seems that God has forsaken the sufferer (*Ps. 22:1; Ps. 42:9; Ps. 44:24*); or (3) when it appears that the Lord has cast him off (*Ps. 42:3; Ps. 74:1; Ps. 88:14*). In essence, this question is employed in an attempt to understand the reason for the action (or inaction) of God.

The second question the psalmists use is “How long?” (*Ps. 13:1, 2; Ps. 35:17; Ps. 74:10; Ps. 79:5; Ps. 80:4; Ps. 89:46; Ps. 90:13; Ps. 94:3*). “How long?” is utterly dissimilar to “Why?” in its intention. “How long?” doesn’t dispute God’s actions in the midst of one’s suffering. Rather, “How long?” acknowledges that the Lord is always in control. Further, this question doesn’t petition God for vengeance against the source of one’s pain and sorrow. This interrogative expression simply voices the desire to know how much longer God will require the believer to wait. Moreover, “How long?” requests the Lord to act. This question also embodies the feeling of spiritual fatigue we endure in the face of our ongoing suffering and the yearning for it to end. We, too, with the psalmist may ask the Lord in our prayers: “How long?” Likewise, we may submit to Him a petition for His intervention and mercy. Such a plea can be termed a “grievance of faith.”

After his painful complaint, David moves to his petition. This transition models for us an important principle in our own prayers: we must not stagnate or wallow in our regrets. Rather, we should move forward in faith: “Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; enlighten my eyes” (*Ps. 13:3, NKJV*). Many times what we really need is the assurance that the Creator is with us.

As with Psalm 22, this song also ends with words of confidence (*Ps. 13:5, 6*). But these words are more than a simple statement of faith. During tribulations, the psalmist expresses joy and assurance (*Ps. 13:5, 6*). His problems still persist, but he trusts that they will be solved, and he relies on God’s providence to sustain him. Such reliance and faith are exemplary. We, too, must trust in God, believe in His power, and claim His promises. The psalmist uses three verbs in his final stanza: “trust,” “rejoice,” and “sing.” How can we rejoice when we are in trouble? Likewise, how can we sing? We can do so when we “have trusted” in God’s “mercy . . . because He has dealt bountifully with me” (*Ps. 13:5, 6, NKJV*).

Psalm 60

The superscription of Psalm 60 gives us the historical context in which the song was written. Typically, the writers of the Psalter don’t provide such

background information. However, its inclusion furnishes us with helpful material for understanding the origins of this song.

Psalm 60 relates to the events in 2 Samuel 8:1–14. At that time, David was made king of all of Israel (*2 Sam. 5:1–5*) and had established Jerusalem as the capital city of his kingdom (*2 Sam. 5:6–10*). Nathan the prophet brought the covenant from God to the new king (*2 Samuel 7*). David stood ready to be a recipient of the fulfillment of the promises that the Lord made to Abraham—namely, that his descendants would inherit the land “‘from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates’” (*Gen. 15:18, NKJV*). After David’s first victories as Israel’s king against the Philistines (*2 Sam. 5:17–25; 2 Sam. 8:1, 2*) and Moab (*2 Sam. 8:2*), he faced another military threat from the Arameans. David fought against Hadadezer, king of Zobah, a conflict from which he returned victorious after killing 18,000 Syrians in the Valley of Salt. Also, “throughout all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became David’s servants. And the LORD preserved David wherever he went” (*2 Sam. 8:14, NKJV*).

The Psalms are not the philosophical musings of men on a distant deity. The songs are shaped by real problems faced in daily life (cf. 2 Samuel 8, with the mention of Moab, Edom, and Philistia in Psalm 60:8, 9). David wrote Psalm 60 in those terrible moments when Israel fought against powerful enemies. Despite intense opposition (*Ps. 60:1–3*), David expressed, with faith, “You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth” (*Ps. 60:4, NKJV*).

The melody that is Psalm 60 promises us that God is with His people (*Ps. 60:6–8*). For this reason, David asks for God’s presence during his most difficult hours (*Ps. 60:9–11*). In this mode, the psalm ends, not in a pessimistic spirit, brooding on the dark road ahead, but with strong confidence in God to succeed: “Through God we will do valiantly, for it is He who shall tread down our enemies” (*Ps. 60:12, NKJV*). When confronted with overwhelming challenges and opposition, the best way to face them is to pray. Then we must rise from our knees and trust in God to empower us to do great deeds for Him.

Part III: Life Application

The study of these four songs—*Psalms 44, 22, 13, 60*—teaches us how to pray in our times of tribulation. We have learned the necessity of honestly expressing our troubles, failures, and discouragement to the Lord in prayer. With assurance, we may bring our complaints and sorrows to our Creator, acting in faith and trusting that our prayers are heard.

Invite the members of your class to express their sorrows to God. Ask them to share with the rest of the group the new ideas this lesson has taught them about prayer. If possible, select a volunteer to share, in the spirit of the psalmists, an experience in his or her prayer life that was faith-strengthening and empowering. Remember, rather than merely being a collection of beautiful poems, the Psalter is an invitation to do God's will!

Notes

The Lord Reigns



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 8, Psalm 100, Psalm 97, Psalm 75, Ps. 105:7–10, Gal. 3:26–29, Ps. 25:10.*

Memory Text: “The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed in majesty and armed with strength; indeed, the world is established, firm and secure” (*Psalm 93:1, NIV*).

The Psalms unswervingly uphold the foundational belief in God’s sovereign reign. The Lord created and sustains everything that He had created. He is the Sovereign King over the whole world, and He rules the world with justice and righteousness. His laws and statutes are good and bring life to those who keep them. The Lord is a just Judge who ensures that the world remains well ordered, and He does so by rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked, but in His time, not ours.

God’s covenant with Israel plays a special role in securing the world because it heralds the Lord’s salvation. The Lord adopted Israel as His prized possession, making Israel, of all the nations, His people. The Lord is faithful to His covenant and continues to care for His flock despite their unfaithfulness and, at times, open rebellion.

The Lord’s sovereign rule thus renders the world firmly established and secure. The psalmists want the reader to understand this foundational truth. With this worldview as their lighthouse, the psalmists seek to thrive and to serve God with undivided devotion.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 20.

The Lord Has Made Us

Read Psalm 8 and Psalm 100. How are God and people portrayed in these psalms? What do these psalms reveal about God's character?

Creation plays a crucial role in the Psalms, in upholding God's sovereignty. The heavens, which are "His handiwork," proclaim His glory and power (*Ps. 19:1–4, Ps. 97:6*). God's name is majestic in all the earth (*Ps. 8:1, 9*). The Lord has created everything; He has no beginning (*Ps. 93:2*) and no end (*Ps. 102:25–27*). He is everlasting and superior over the gods of the nations, which are only "the work of men's hands" (*Ps. 115:4*), nothing more. The idols "have hands, but they handle not" (*Ps. 115:7*); as for the Lord, "in his hand are the deep places of the earth . . . and his hands formed the dry land" (*Ps. 95:4, 5*).

Several psalms portray God's power over the forces in nature that other nations believed to be divine (e.g. *Psalm 29, Psalm 93, and Psalm 104*). These psalms reassert the claim that the Lord reigns over all creation and is supreme in power and dignity. Psalm 100:3 strikes one subtle form of idolatry—self-reliance, stressing that God made us, "and not we ourselves."

Creation also testifies to God's love. Everything that exists owes its existence to God, who also sustains life (*Ps. 95:7, Ps. 147:4–9*). Notice that God not only granted people existence but He also made ancient Israel "His people and the sheep of His pasture" (*Ps. 100:3, NKJV*). The notion of "His people" and "His sheep" reveals God's desire for a close relationship with His people.

Only the Creator has the power to bless and cause His people to increase, and thus, He is the only One worthy of their worship and trust. Numerous psalms call everything that has breath, all the earth, the sea, and everything in it to shout for joy before the Lord.

The glory of God is seen in the creation, even in the fallen earthly creation, and the Psalms point us to God alone as worthy of worship.

"What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?" (*Ps. 8:4, NKJV*). **What is your response to God as your Creator? When God calls the stars by their names (*Ps. 147:4*), **how much more do you think God cares for you?****

The Lord Reigns

Closely tied—in fact inseparably tied—to the Lord as Creator is the Lord as Sovereign, as Ruler. The declaration “The LORD reigneth” is solemnly proclaimed in Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10, Psalm 97:1, and Psalm 99:1, but its echoes are heard throughout the book of Psalms.

The Lord is clothed with honor, majesty, and strength (*Ps. 93:1, Ps. 104:1*). He is surrounded with clouds and darkness (*Ps. 97:2*) but also covers Himself “with light as with a garment” (*Ps. 104:2*). These metaphors exalt the King’s power and splendor and are carefully chosen to express God’s unique greatness, which is beyond human comprehension.

Read Psalm 97. What characterizes the Lord’s reign? (*Ps. 97:2, 10*). What is the domain of His reign? (*Ps. 97:1, 5, 9*).

The Lord’s rule is demonstrated in His works of creation (*Ps. 96:5*), salvation (*Ps. 98:2*), and judgment (*Ps. 96:10*). The Lord establishes His kingship over the whole world (*Ps. 47:6–9*). God’s kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, unparalleled in power and majesty (*Ps. 45:6; Ps. 93:1, 2; Ps. 103:19*). The Lord’s reign is established on mercy, justice, and righteousness, and it brings order and stability to the created world (*Ps. 98:3, Ps. 99:4*). God’s reign unites both heavenly and earthly worshipers in the praise of God (*Ps. 103:20–22, Psalm 148*). Many psalms envision all humanity acknowledging God’s sovereign rule (*Ps. 96:10, Ps. 97:1, Ps. 99:1, Ps. 145:11–13*).

But not all people, or even earthly rulers, do, at least for now. The Lord’s reign is constantly defied by the wicked, who deny and mock the Lord and oppress His people (*Ps. 14:1, Ps. 74:3–22*). Though challenged by the prosperity of some wicked people and troubled by God’s forbearance, the psalmist trusts in God’s sovereign rule and continues to flourish in the assurance of God’s righteous judgments (*Ps. 68:21, Ps. 73:17–20*). By faith God’s people rejoice in the inauguration of God’s kingdom through Christ’s redeeming ministry and wait for the consummation of the kingdom at Christ’s second coming (*Matt. 12:26–28, 1 Cor. 15:20–28*).

“You who love the LORD, hate evil!” (*Ps. 97:10, NKJV*). Why should our love for God cause us to hate evil? How are these two concepts related?

God Is the Judge

Read Psalm 75. Why is the boasting of the wicked in vain?

As the Sovereign King, the Lord is also a Lawgiver (*Ps. 99:7*) and a Judge (*Ps. 98:9, Ps. 97:2*). The wicked constantly threaten the just order that God established in the world, but the Lord will judge the world and bring the rule of evil to its end (*Ps. 75:8–10, Ps. 96:13*).

In Psalm 75, several images depict the irrevocable destruction of the wicked. The image of a cup with red wine (*Ps. 75:8*) conveys the intensity of God's fury (*Jer. 25:15, Rev. 14:10*). Cutting off the horns of the wicked depicts the end of their power and dominion, while the horns of the righteous shall be exalted (*Ps. 75:10*). God chooses a “proper time” (*Ps. 75:2, NKJV*) or “appointed time” (*NIV*) for His judgment. This executive judgment clearly will take place at the end of time (*Ps. 96:13, 1 Cor. 15:23–26*).

The Lord probes people’s hearts as part of His judgment. Read Psalm 14:2. It is reminiscent of Genesis 6:5, 8. Both texts show that the execution of God’s judgment of the world is preceded by God’s examination of the people’s lives and seeking whomever He can save. This judgment is sometimes called “the investigative judgment,” when God defends the righteous and decides the fate of the wicked.

How does it work?

First, God delivers His people from the wicked (*Ps. 97:10, Ps. 146:9*) and crowns the humble with salvation (*Ps. 149:4*). Second, the unrepentant wicked are destroyed forever (*Ps. 97:3*). Some psalms poetically describe the uselessness of human weapons against the Divine Judge (*Ps. 76:3–6*). The Lord is also a forgiving God, although He punishes people’s misdeeds (*Ps. 99:8*). God’s people, not only the wicked, shall give an account to God (*Ps. 50:4, Ps. 135:14*).

The Psalms convey the same notion that is expressed in other biblical texts, that God’s judgment begins with God’s people and is extended to the whole earth (*Deut. 32:36, 1 Pet. 4:17*). The psalmist cries to God to judge him but relies on God’s righteousness to defend him (*Ps. 7:8–11; Ps. 139:23, 24*).

The Psalms call us to rejoice in anticipation of God’s judgments (*Ps. 67:4, Ps. 96:10–13, Ps. 98:4–9*). How is God’s judgment good news for those covered by the blood of Christ?

Ever Mindful of His Covenant

The theme of God's judgment prompts a significant question: How can God's people have peace with God and assurance of salvation at the time of judgment? *Read Ps. 94:14, Ps. 105:7–10, Dan. 7:22.*

God's people are secure because the Lord placed His dwelling place in Zion (*Ps. 76:1, 2*) and established His everlasting covenant with them as His treasured possession (*Ps. 94:14, Ps. 105:8–10*). God does not simply promise not to reject His covenantal people—He actively works to keep them secure in Him. He forgives their sins (*Ps. 103:3*); He instructs, blesses, and strengthens His people (*Ps. 25:8–11, Ps. 29:11, Ps. 105:24*). God's judgments are given to turn the people to righteousness and to demonstrate that God cares for them (*Ps. 94:8–15*).

Psalm 105 as a whole shows the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant in Israel's history. In everything that happened, the good and the bad, God was there. He providentially led Joseph to Egypt and through him saved His people and the nations in that area during the severe famine (*Ps. 105:16–24*). The Lord raised Moses to lead His people out of Egyptian slavery, which he did with signs and wonders on their behalf (*Ps. 105:25–38*).

The Lord granted His people the Promised Land (*Ps. 105:11, 44*) and His continual protection (*Ps. 105:12–15*). He multiplied them (*Ps. 105:24*), freed them from their overlords (*Ps. 105:37, 38*), and provided for their daily needs (*Ps. 105:39–41*). The Lord is undoubtedly in sovereign control of all that involves His people—a truth that the psalmists wanted His people never to forget.

When God remembers His covenant, it involves more than cognizance or memory because it always leads to action (*Gen. 8:1, 1 Sam. 1:19, Ps. 98:3, Ps. 105:42–44*). Likewise, when the people are called to remember God's wonders and judgments, it means that the people should live in ways that honor God.

In this covenant, Israel's primary calling is to remain faithful to the covenant by observing God's laws (*Ps. 78:5–7, Ps. 105:45*). God's people also are called to bear witness about God to other nations because the Lord wishes all nations to join His people Israel (*Ps. 105:1, 2*). The world is thus secure in the protective covenant of the almighty and merciful God (*Ps. 89:28–34*).

What do we have in Jesus, which shows why these promises made to ancient Israel can now apply to us? (See Gal. 3:26–29.)

Your Testimonies Are Very Sure

Read Psalm 19:7; Psalm 93:5; Psalm 119:165; Psalm 1:2, 6; Psalm 18:30; and Psalm 25:10. What common thread runs through them all?

The Lord's supremacy in the world as the Sovereign Creator, King, and Judge has theological implications for the reliability of His testimonies. The testimonies (Hebrew *'edut*, “decree,” “law”) refer to the body of laws and ordinances with which the Lord governs the religious and social life of His people (*Exod. 32:15*). They are “very sure” (*Ps. 93:5*), reflecting the stability and permanence of God’s throne and the world that God created and sustains (*Ps. 93:1, 2*). The Hebrew word translated as “sure” (the English word *amen* derives from this word) conveys the notion of reliability, faithfulness, and firmness (*2 Sam. 7:16, 1 Chron. 17:23*). God’s laws are unchangeable and indestructible.

God vouches for the integrity of His promises and commands. God’s faithfulness is both wholly reassuring in guaranteeing the unchangeable character of His rule and wholly demanding in asking the people’s responses of trust and obedience to God.

At the same time, the lack of justice in the world is poetically described as a shaking of earth’s foundation (*Ps. 18:7, Isa. 24:18–21*). God’s law instructs the people in the way of righteous life that can withstand God’s judgment. The righteous, thus, shall not be shaken because they are firmly rooted in God’s law, which provides stability and security, and their hearts are steadfast (Hebrew *kun*, also, means “be firm,” “be secure”) in the Lord (*Ps. 112:1, 6, 7*). Nothing causes those who keep God’s law to stumble (*Ps. 119:165*), which signifies God’s protection and guidance in life (*Ps. 1:2, 3, 6*).

God’s Word is depicted as the lamp to the psalmist’s feet, and so, it protects him from the enemies’ hidden snares (*Ps. 119:105, 110*). Great peace, which is enjoyed by those who love God’s law (*Ps. 119:165*), obviously does not result from a total absence of trials (*Ps. 119:161*). It rather derives from abiding in God’s presence and having a wholesome relationship with Him.

What are practical ways that keeping God’s laws and rules and testimonies have helped you in your life? On the other hand, what have you suffered from violating them?

Further Thought: Read Psalm 86:5, 15; Ellen G. White, “God’s Love for Man,” pp. 9–15, in *Steps to Christ*. How does the truth that God is love help us better understand the various descriptions of God and His deeds in the Psalms?

This week’s study focuses on some key descriptions of God and His activities, which establish the world and render it firm and secure. The psalmists appeal to God, who is the Creator, King, Judge, covenantal Savior, and Lawgiver. The roles in the world that God occupies are further reflected in God’s various other names and titles, including Shepherd (*Ps. 23:1*, *Ps. 80:1*), Rock of Salvation (*Ps. 95:1*), and Father (*Ps. 68:5*, *Ps. 89:26*). In the world we can be secure and safe, even amid the turmoil of the great controversy, because God is sovereign and faithful in all He does and says. Although these theological themes are by no means exhaustive, they are suggestive of the various ways in which God reveals Himself in the Psalms.

As we continue to study the Psalms, it is important to remember to read the Psalms in the light of God’s character of love and grace and His plan to save and restore the world. “The more we study the divine character in the light of the cross, the more we see mercy, tenderness, and forgiveness blended with equity and justice, and the more clearly we discern innumerable evidences of a love that is infinite and a tender pity surpassing a mother’s yearning sympathy for her wayward child.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 15. In the Psalms, even when the people face God’s judgment for their rebellion, they continue to call upon God because they know that God’s anger is only for a time, but His mercy is everlasting (*Ps. 103:8*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is understanding the reality and prevalence of the great controversy crucial in helping us understand that despite God’s ultimate rulership and sovereignty, there is still much turmoil and suffering in our world? Why is the great controversy motif so helpful to us?**
- 2 How should the belief in God as Creator shape our understanding of ourselves and our relationship with the rest of creation? What happens when the people stray from that truth (*Ps. 106:35–42*)?**
- 3 What was wrong with the idols of the nations in biblical times (*Ps. 115:4–8*)? What about modern idols? Why are they just as dangerous to our walk with the Lord?**
- 4 How should God’s people live knowing that God’s judgment begins with His people? How does God judge His people and to what end?**

“I Fought and Won”

By ANDREW MCCHESEY

Pedro was shocked at the greeting that he got when he returned from church services in Mozambique.

“Don’t go back to the Seventh-day Adventist church,” his sister said. “It’s not a good church because it has false prophets. If you go again, you can’t live here anymore.”

Worrisome thoughts filled Pedro’s head. Family problems in his hometown, Beira, had forced him to move 700 miles (1,140 kilometers) to his sister’s house in Mozambique’s capital, Maputo. Because he was new to town, he had missed a few worship services as he searched for an Adventist church. Now he had found a church, worshiped there for the first time, and returned home to find that his sister didn’t want him to go again.

Pedro prayed and kept going to church.

His sister stopped sharing her food with Pedro. She hoped that hunger would cause him to change his mind. But church members gave him food to eat.

Pedro thanked God for His care and kept going to church.

One Sabbath morning, as he was preparing to leave for church, his sister told him not to return.

“Are you still refusing to listen and insisting on going to your church?” she asked. “You don’t want to live here anymore because you don’t want to comply with the house rules.”

Pedro was sad but not discouraged. He realized that he wasn’t caught in a conflict with his sister but in a spiritual struggle between Jesus and Satan. He remembered Paul’s words in Ephesians 6:12, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (*NKJV*).

He went to church and asked the pastor and church members to pray for him. When he returned home later that day, he was kicked out.

A friend allowed Pedro to stay with him for two nights. Then a church member gave Pedro a job as the caretaker of his house in exchange for room and board.

Today, Pedro still works as a house caretaker, he is free to worship God every Sabbath, and he believes that God is working on his sister’s heart. Their friendship has been restored, and she no longer insists that he stop going to church on Sabbath. Pedro hopes that one day she will accept the whole Bible truth and learn to appreciate the inspired writings of Ellen White.

“I put on the armor of God,” he said. “I fought and won, and ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’” (*Philippians 4:13*).

Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus’ soon coming in Africa and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 93:1*

Study Focus: *Psalm 8, Psalm 100, Psalm 97, Psalm 75:1–10, Psalm 105:7–10, Galatians 3:26–29, and Psalm 25:10.*

This week, we shall examine five aspects of God’s sovereignty in the Psalter. We will see that the Psalms affirm the following:

1. The foundation of God’s sovereignty is based in the Creation. The Lord is the Maker of the heavens and the earth (*Gen. 1:1*) and humanity (*Gen. 1:26*).
2. On the basis of this Bible truth, the various psalmists proclaim that YHWH is the ruler over all the world and the nations.
3. The sovereignty of the Lord is inseparably intertwined in His work as Judge.
4. As Judge, God intercedes for His people because of His covenant with them.
5. He is faithful to the rules of this treaty because the Law of His covenant is the foundation of His kingdom.

As we shall see, these five topics are closely intertwined.

Part II: Commentary

God as Creator

Psalm 8 can be divided into two main ideas: God is the Creator (*Ps. 8:2–4*), and human beings are the crowning achievement of His creation (*Ps. 8:5–8*). These concepts are flanked at the beginning and at the end of the psalm by the same line, which is known as an *inclusio*: “O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth” (*Ps. 8:1, 9, NKJV*).

We cannot overlook the importance of the Creation in the teachings of the Scriptures. Isaiah uses the argument of God as Creator to annihilate the validity of a belief in idols (*Isa. 40:12–31*). Similarly, the psalmist uses the same reasoning to recognize YHWH as Sovereign of heaven and to reject idolatry (*Ps. 115:1–8; Ps. 95:3–5, 7; Ps. 96:5*). The foundation of God’s kingdom is Creation. That foundation should be the reason for our worship of Him (*Ps. 100:3–5*). The Creation is also the reason for the Sabbath (*Gen. 2:1–3, Exod. 20:8–11*), and the seventh day is a remembrance of the power of God. With this background, we better understand why the message of Revelation 14:7 states, “‘and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water’” (*NKJV*).

The preaching of this message is more relevant than ever at this time, a time in which the enemy has created a relatively newer etiological paradigm of life: evolution.

God as King

God made the universe; therefore, it belongs to Him. Thus, He is its King. “The LORD reigns, . . . Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting” (*Ps. 93:1, 2, NKJV*).

Psalm 97 summarizes well the message of God’s kingship:

1. God reigns (*Ps. 97:1*). Many psalms exalt God as King (*Psalm 47, Psalm 93, Psalms 95–99*).
2. Dramatic elements such as clouds, darkness, fire, lightning, the earth, mountains, and the heavens surround God (*Ps. 97:2–6*). These meteorological phenomena and geological splendors portray the greatness of the King of kings, who inspires our awe and reverence.
3. The shameful ness of idolatry is condemned in contrast to the superiority of worshiping God (*Ps. 97:7*).
4. God’s children praise Him and rejoice in the righteous judgments of His government (*Ps. 97:8, 9*).
5. Love for God inspires believers to “hate evil” (*Ps. 97:10*). The Lord preserves and delivers His people from the hand of the wicked. These reasons are grounds enough to rejoice and give thanks to Him (*Ps. 97:11, 12*).

God as King is the source of the peace and confidence of His children. “The King’s strength also loves justice; You have established equity; You have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob” (*Ps. 99:4, NKJV*). Because God is the King over all the earth, we should rejoice and “sing praises with understanding” (*Ps. 47:7; see also verses 1–6*).

God as Judge

The Lord is Judge because He is King. In ancient Israel, the monarch rendered the verdict in trials and judicial matters (*see David [2 Sam. 14:1–23]; Solomon [2 Kings 3:16–28]*). Thus, the idea of a king-judge was a familiar notion to the people in those days. When they listened to the psalmists sing their melodies about the Lord as Judge, they readily grasped the concept.

Psalm 75 states that God our Judge “will judge uprightly” (*Ps. 75:2, NKJV*). So, we need not fear His work as Judge, unless we are on the side of evil. “For He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He shall judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with His truth” (*Ps. 96:13, NKJV*).

The purpose of God’s judgment is to put “down one” (the wicked ones [*Ps. 75:4, 5*]) and to exalt another (the faithful ones [*Ps. 75:1, 2; Ps. 75:7, NKJV*]). This same principle is at work in the investigative judgment of

Daniel 7: God punishes the little horn (*Dan. 7:26*) and vindicates His people (*Dan. 7:22*).

The faithful celebrate God's judgment (*Ps. 75:9*), not because they rejoice in the destruction of the wicked but because God is faithful to His promises, and He delivers the innocent (*see Rev. 19:2*). We find, at the end of Psalm 75, this idea of divine fidelity and deliverance: “‘All the horns of the wicked I will also cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted’” (*Ps. 75:10, NKJV*).

God of the Covenant

In the ancient Near East, a covenant was an agreement between a powerful king and his vassal. This agreement included what was required of the vassal in order to remain under the protection of his suzerain. The Old Testament appropriated this secular trope of the day and applied it to the relationship between the King of heaven and His followers. “In an ancient Near Eastern treaty, the Great King would make two promises to the vassal: first, he would attack the vassal if he rebelled against him; and second, he would come to the defense of any loyal vassal who was set upon.”—Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 260. An understanding of this concept engenders confidence in the believer because through it, he learns that he can lean on the assuredness of God’s protection.

Within this context, YHWH is depicted as a warrior in the Psalter. Psalm 7 is a prayer before battle in which the psalmist asks for God’s intervention in favor of His people. The psalmist also claims God’s protection and asks for the destruction of God’s enemies (*Ps. 7:4–9*). God is the psalmist’s defense (*Ps. 7:10*), evoking either the idea of a castle or a shield. God, the Divine Warrior, is portrayed as wearing a sword, a bow, and arrows: “instruments of death” (*Ps. 7:12, 13, NKJV*). He has prepared a trap for His enemies (*Ps. 7:15*).

God of the Law

Because God is a righteous Sovereign, “He remembers His covenant forever, the word which He commanded” (*Ps. 105:8, NKJV*). The basis of the covenant is God’s Law. Therefore, it’s not a coincidence that one of the main themes in the book of Psalms is the commandments of the Lord (*see Psalm 1*). Actually, the longest psalm and chapter of the Bible, Psalm 119, is focused entirely on the Torah, or Law.

The psalmists’ view of the Law of God differs from the commonly held idea prevailing in many circles today—an idea which holds that the divine Law is a set of rigid regulations one must strictly obey or suffer harsh punishment in consequence of violating any of its precepts. Concerning

the Law, David states that the testimonies of the Lord convert the soul, making wise the simple; the Law causes the heart to rejoice and enlightens the eyes (*Ps. 19:7–10*). How many of us can say the same for the codes and laws of our countries? In the covenant relationship, the commandments are guidelines that enlighten our understanding and enable us to enjoy a deep relationship with our Creator, King, and Judge.

The Torah involves the idea of “teaching” more than “stipulations.” That is the reason the Psalter portrays God’s statutes as priceless treasures, which are “more to be desired . . . than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (*Ps. 19:10, NKJV*). To be under God’s covenant means to enjoy a close relationship with the Godhead.

Part III: Life Application

How fascinating to realize the degree to which the five theological themes we have studied this week are linked. This thematic series starts with, and rests on, the assertion of God as Creator. To deny this basic truth is to reject God’s right as Ruler of this world and Sovereign Judge of every human being. Thus, if God were not the Judge of all, then anyone could do whatever he or she thought best. There would not be any eternal law to obey. There wouldn’t be absolutes. Sad to say, we are inundated with this philosophy every day. Even some Christians are falling prey to its pernicious sophistry. For this reason, our lesson this week is very important for our families, our youth, and the members of our church.

Acknowledging the Lord as our Maker will lead us to accept His Lordship in our lives and His right to guide and reprimand us when needed. After all, He is our Judge. Our Creator wants to be in a loving covenant relationship with us. The Bible promises us that obeying Him and walking with Him will be a sweet and comforting experience.

One detail that we touched on lightly in this lesson but didn’t explore in great depth is cultivating an attitude of praise and rejoicing. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the verses below. Alternately, have class members read the psalm in unison. Encourage your students to aspire to the same spiritual life of the psalmist:

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD!
 Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation.
 Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving;
 Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.
 For the LORD is the great God,
 And the great King above all gods (*Psalm 95:1–3, NKJV*).

TEACHERS COMMENTS

More than with requests and complaints, we should fill our prayers to our King and Judge with praise. Also, our daily toil will be more easily borne, and our devotional life made happier, when we are in a covenant relationship with the God of the heavens.

Notes

The Lord Hears and Delivers



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Ps. 139:1–18; Psalm 121; Ps. 17:8; Matt. 23:37; 1 Cor. 10:1–4; Heb. 4:15, 16.

Memory Text: “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles” (Psalm 34:17, NKJV).

Again and again, the Psalms highlight the truth that the Sovereign Lord, who created and sustains the universe, also reveals Himself as a personal God who initiates and sustains a relationship with His people.

God is close to His people and to His creation, both in heaven and on earth (Ps. 73:23, 25). Though He “has established His throne in heaven” (Ps. 103:19, NKJV) and “rides on the clouds” (Ps. 68:4, NKJV), He also is “near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” (Ps. 145:18, NKJV). The Psalms unswervingly uphold the truth that the Lord is the living God, who acts on behalf of those who call upon Him (Ps. 55:16–22). The Psalms are meaningful precisely because they are prompted by, and are addressed to, the living God, who hears and answers prayers.

We should remember that the proper response to the Lord’s nearness consists in a life of faith in Him and of obedience to His commandments. Nothing short of this faith and obedience will be acceptable to Him, as the history of Israel often revealed.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 27.

My Frame Was Not Hidden From You

Read Psalm 139:1–18. How does this text poetically depict God's power (*Ps. 139:1–6*), presence (*Ps. 139:7–12*), and goodness (*Ps. 139:13–18*)? What does God's greatness say about God's promises?

Did you ever want to help someone but had no means? Likewise, some people tried to help you but did not understand your needs. Unlike even the most loving and best-intentioned people, God has both the perfect knowledge of us and of our circumstances, and also the means to help us. Therefore, His promises of help and deliverance are not shallow platitudes but firm assurances.

God's knowledge of the psalmist is so great and unique that even his mother's womb could not hide him from God (*Ps. 139:13, 15*). Divine knowledge pertains to time (*Ps. 139:2*), inner being (*Ps. 139:2, 4*), and space (*Ps. 139:3*)—the psalmist's entire existence. God's wonderful knowledge is the result of His creatorship and close acquaintance with people and is manifest in His care for them.

This wonderful truth about God knowing us intimately should not scare us but instead drive us into the arms of Jesus and what He has accomplished for us at the Cross. For by faith in Jesus, we have been given His righteousness, “the righteousness of God” Himself (*Rom. 3:5, 21*).

God's presence is highlighted by depicting God as reaching as far as “hell” (*sheol*, “grave”) and “darkness” (*Ps. 139:8, 11, 12*), places not typically depicted as where God dwells (*Ps. 56:13*). His presence also is depicted as taking “the wings of the morning” (east) to reach “the uttermost parts of the sea” (west) (*Ps. 139:9*). What these images convey is the truth that there is no place in the universe where we can be out of God's reach. Though God is not part of the universe, as some believe, He is close to it all, having not only created it but sustaining it, as well (*see Heb. 1:3*).

As the One who knows all about us, God can help and restore us. The fresh realization of His greatness prompts an outburst of praise and renewed trust in the psalmist. He welcomes divine scrutiny as the means that can remove from his life anything that troubles his relationship with God.

Some might find the fact that God knows so much about them, even their darkest secrets, a rather frightening thought. Why is the gospel, then, our only hope?

Assurance of God's Care

Read Psalm 40:1–3, Psalm 50:15, Psalm 55:22, and Psalm 121. How is God involved in our daily affairs?

The Lord reveals Himself in Scripture as the living God who acts on behalf of those who call upon Him.

For the psalmist, “the LORD [is] always before me” (*Ps. 16:8*). Therefore, he trusts God and calls upon Him (*Ps. 7:1, Ps. 9:10*). The Lord will hear him even when he cries out of the “depths” (*Ps. 130:1, 2*), conveying that no life circumstance escapes God’s sovereign dominion. Thus, the psalmist’s cry, no matter how urgent, is never devoid of hope.

Psalm 121, meanwhile, celebrates the power of the Creator in the faithful individual’s life. This power includes:

1. “He will not allow your foot to be moved” (*Ps. 121:3, NKJV*). The image of “foot” is often descriptive of one’s life journey (*Ps. 66:9, Ps. 119:105, Prov. 3:23*). The Hebrew word for “move” describes the security that God gives to the world (*Ps. 93:1*) and to Zion (*Ps. 125:1*).

2. The image of the Lord as Israel’s Keeper who does not slumber nor sleep highlights the Lord’s constant alertness and readiness to act on behalf of His children (*Ps. 121:3, 4*).

3. The Lord is “your shade” (*Ps. 121:5, 6, NKJV*) calls to mind the pillar of cloud in the time of the Exodus (*Exod. 13:21, 22*). Similarly, the Lord provides physical and spiritual shelter to His people.

4. God is at their right hand (*Ps. 121:5*). The right hand typically designates a person’s stronger hand, the hand of action (*Ps. 74:11, Ps. 89:13*). Here it conveys God’s nearness and favor (*Ps. 16:8, Ps. 109:31, Ps. 110:5*).

5. God’s protection of His people is clearly confirmed in Psalm 121:6–8. God shall preserve His children from all evil. Neither “the sun” nor “the moon” shall strike them. God shall preserve their “going out” and “coming in.” These poetic figures underscore God’s comprehensive, unceasing care.

The bottom line? The psalmist trusted in God’s loving care. We, of course, should do the same.

What are some practical ways that you can better experience the reality of God’s care? How can you better cooperate with God in order to enable Him to work within you and for you?

The Lord Is a Refuge in Adversity

Read Psalm 17:7–9, Psalm 31:1–3, and Psalm 91:2–7. What does the psalmist do in times of trouble?

The psalmist encounters various sorts of troubles and, in them, turns to the Lord, who is a refuge in every adversity. Trust is a deliberate choice to acknowledge God's lordship over one's life in all circumstances. If trust does not work in adversity, then it will not work anywhere.

The psalmist's testimony, "I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust'" (*Ps. 91:2, NKJV*), springs from his past experience with God and now serves to strengthen his faith for the future. The psalmist calls God the Most High and the Almighty (*Ps. 91:1, 2*), remembering the surpassing greatness of his God.

The psalmist also tells of the security that one can find in God: the "secret place" ("shelter" or "hiding place"), "shadow" (*Ps. 91:1*), "refuge," "fortress" (*Ps. 91:2*), "wings," "shield," "buckler" (*Ps. 91:4*), and "dwelling place" (*Ps. 91:9, NKJV*). These images represent safe havens in the psalmist's culture. One needs only to think of the unbearable heat of the sun in that part of the world in order to appreciate the shadow (or shade) or to recall the times of wars in Israel's history in order to value the security provided by the shield or the fortress.

Read Psalm 17:8 and Matthew 23:37. What image is used here, and what does it reveal?

One of the most intimate metaphors is the one that refers to being "under the shadow of Your wings" (*Ps. 17:8, Ps. 57:1, Ps. 63:7, NKJV*). This metaphor elicits comfort and assurance by implying the protection of a mother bird. The Lord is compared to an eagle who guards its young with its wings (*Exod. 19:4, Deut. 32:11*) and to a hen who gathers her chicks under her wings (*Matt. 23:37*).

How, though, do we deal with the times when calamity strikes, and we can't seem to see the Lord's protection? Why do these traumas not mean that the Lord is not there with us?

Defender and Deliverer

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1–4. How does Paul describe the Exodus story? What spiritual lesson does he seek to teach with it?

Read Psalm 114. How is the divine deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt poetically described here?

What a poetic depiction of God's marvelous deliverance of His children from the bondage of Egypt is given in Psalm 114. All through the Old Testament, and even in the New, the deliverance from Egypt was seen as a symbol of God's power to save His people. Paul in these verses in 1 Corinthians does just that, seeing the whole true story as a metaphor, a symbol of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 114 also depicts divine deliverance through God's sovereignty as the Creator over the powers of nature, which was how He saved His people in the Exodus. The sea, the river Jordan, and the mountains and hills poetically represent the natural and human powers opposing the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land (*Deut. 1:44, Josh. 3:14–17*). God, though, is sovereign over all of them.

In fact, for many of God's children in all times and in all places, the way to the heavenly Jerusalem is fraught with danger. The Psalms encourage them to look beyond the hills and toward the Creator of heaven and earth (*Ps. 121:1*).

The spirit of Psalm 114 is captured by Jesus' calming of the sea storm and His proclamation that the church has nothing to fear because He has overcome the world (*Matt. 8:23–27, John 16:33*).

The Lord's great deeds on behalf of His people should inspire the whole earth to tremble at His presence (*Ps. 114:7*). The trembling should be understood as acknowledging and worshiping rather than as being terrified (*Ps. 96:9, Ps. 99:1*). With God on their side, believers have nothing to fear.

What are some of the spiritual dangers we face as believers, and how can we learn to lean on the Lord's power to protect us from succumbing to these dangers that are as real for us now as they were for the psalmist?

Help From the Sanctuary

Read Psalm 3:4; Psalm 14:7; Psalm 20:1–3; Psalm 27:5; Psalm 36:8; Psalm 61:4; and Psalm 68:5, 35. Where does help come from in these texts?

The motif of spiritual and physical refuge and help notably appears in the context of the sanctuary. The sanctuary is a place of help, of safety, and of salvation. The sanctuary provides a shelter to the troubled. God defends the orphans and widows and gives strength to His people from His sanctuary. When “out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God will shine forth” (*Ps. 50:2, NKJV*), God’s righteous judgments are proclaimed, and the Lord’s blessing goes forth (*Ps. 84:4, Ps. 128:5, Ps. 134:3*).

The refuge in the sanctuary surpasses the security provided by any other place in the world because God personally dwells in the sanctuary. The presence of God, not merely the temple as a firm building, provides safety. Likewise, being the mountain where the Lord dwells, Mount Zion surpasses other mountains though in itself it is a modest hill (*Ps. 68:15, 16; Isa. 2:2*).

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (*Heb. 4:15, 16, NKJV*).

In what ways do these verses parallel what the psalmist says about the sanctuary?

The holiness of God’s sanctuary prompts the psalmist to acknowledge that all people are sinful and completely undeserving of God’s favor, and he claims that deliverance is based on God’s faithfulness and grace alone (*Ps. 143:2, 9–12*). Nothing in us gives us any merit before God. It is only when people stand in a right relationship with God through repentance and acceptance of God’s grace and forgiveness that they can plead for God’s assurance of deliverance. The sanctuary service represented the salvation found in Jesus.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Night of Wrestling,” pp. 195–203, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. What can we learn from Jacob’s experience about the power of importunate prayer and unreserved trust in God?

The Psalms strengthen our faith in God, who is the never-failing Refuge for those who entrust their lives into His mighty hands. “God will do great things for those who trust in Him. The reason why His professed people have no greater strength is that they trust so much to their own wisdom, and do not give the Lord an opportunity to reveal His power in their behalf. He will help His believing children in every emergency if they will place their entire confidence in Him and faithfully obey Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 493.

Yet, some psalms can pose a serious challenge when what they promise, and our current situation, do not match. At times such as this, we just have to learn to trust in the goodness of God, most powerfully revealed at the Cross.

Also, at times some psalms can be used to foster false hopes. Jesus’ response to Satan’s corrupted use of Psalm 91:11, 12 shows that trusting God must not be confused with tempting God (*Matt. 4:5–7*) or presumptuously asking God to do something that is contrary to His will.

“The greatest victories to the church of Christ or to the individual Christian are not those that are gained by talent or education, by wealth or the favor of men. They are those victories that are gained in the audience chamber with God, when earnest, agonizing faith lays hold upon the mighty arm of power.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 203.

Discussion Questions:

- ①** In class, discuss the answer to the last question in Tuesday’s study about trusting in God amid adversity and when things go terribly wrong. How does one understand these things and how they could happen to people, even with all the wonderful promises in the Psalms about God’s protection? Think about this too: Did not the psalmist, who wrote about those wonderful promises, suffer adversity or know of faithful people who did, as well?

- ②** How can we develop unreserved trust in God in all circumstances (e.g. *Ps. 91:14*; *Ps. 143:8, 10*; and *Ps. 145:18–20*)? What can cause us to lose this confidence? Why is trust in God in good times crucial for learning to trust Him in bad times, as well?

Prayer Answered in Perth

By JOE PEOLA

Margaret and her husband, Levana, were sitting one morning in their living room in Perth, Australia, after returning the previous night from a trip to Papua New Guinea, located some 2,000 miles (4,500 kilometers) away.

Margaret was reflecting quietly on her father's parting words at the airport. After praying with her, he had said, "Margaret, Jesus is coming back very soon. When you arrive at your home in Perth, my God will be at your door the next day."

Not far from Margaret and Levana's home, literature evangelist Jo Laing and several friends were praying at a Seventh-day Adventist church. They were praying for divine appointments as they prepared to head out for a day of canvassing.

A couple hours later, Jo knocked on the door of Margaret and Levana's home. The home looked no different from the other houses on the street.

Levana opened the door and politely looked through the cookbook that Jo showed him. But he didn't express any real interest in the book. Then Jo gave him a copy of Ellen White's *The Great Controversy* and began telling him about it.

Levana flipped through several pages and called to his wife.

"Do we have this book?" he asked.

Margaret came to the door and confirmed that they did have the book. She turned to Jo and explained that she was a former Seventh-day Adventist. The words tumbled from her mouth.

"We just came home from Papua New Guinea last night," she said. "The last thing that my dad said to me was that he would be praying for God to show up at my house."

It was a hot day in Perth—109.5 degrees Fahrenheit (43 degrees Celsius). But Jo felt goosebumps on her arms. She and Margaret looked at each other with big smiles and marveled at how God had answered the prayer of Margaret's father.

"Wouldn't it be great if I could come to your church and share this story?" Margaret said.

"It would," Jo agreed, and the two exchanged phone numbers.

A few weeks later, Margaret stood with tears in her eyes at Bickley Seventh-day Adventist Church and told her story of how God had found a lost, straying lamb.

God used a woman with a copy of *The Great Controversy* in Australia to answer a father's passionate prayer in Papua New Guinea.

Join the Seventh-day Adventist world church in the mass promotion and distribution of The Great Controversy in 2023 and 2024. Visit greatcontroversyproject.org for more information or ask your pastor.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 34:17*

The Psalter is a book of prayer. Whatever the subject—whether praise, lament, the Messianic hope, the kingdom of God, or redemption history—the psalmists manifest strong confidence in the Lord. No matter what their needs or circumstances, they trust that the Creator will abide with them.

Last week, we considered the supremacy of God and how, as Divine Sovereign, He is depicted in the Psalms—that is, as our Creator, King, and Judge. These depictions, and the statements of faith that grow out of them, inspire the psalmists with confidence to believe that God will deliver His children from any difficult circumstance. Let's carefully consider, and internalize, this wonderful assurance. Be ready to share with your class members the enthusiasm this hope engenders.

Part II: Commentary

God Hears

The psalmist constantly pleads with the Lord to hear him. Several psalms start with a cry for YHWH to listen: Psalm 4:1, Psalm 13:3, Psalm 17:1, Psalm 28:2, Psalm 54:2, Psalm 55:2, Psalm 60:5, Psalm 61:1, Psalm 64:1, Psalm 86:1, Psalm 102:1, Psalm 108:6, Psalm 130:2, Psalm 140:6, Psalm 142:6, and Psalm 143:1. In such songs, the psalmist cries out to God, his heart filled with grief: “O LORD God of hosts, *hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!*” (*Ps. 84:8, NKJV; emphasis supplied*). In their prayers, the psalmists insist on being heard (*Ps. 30:10; Ps. 38:16; Ps. 39:12; Ps. 66:16; Ps. 69:13, 16, 17; Ps. 119:145, 149*). They cry out in the assurance that “the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles” (*Ps. 34:17, NKJV*).

Sometimes the writers of the Psalms affirm that God has heard their complaints and needs (*Ps. 22:24, Ps. 28:7, Ps. 31:22, Ps. 34:4, Ps. 40:1, Ps. 66:19, Ps. 116:1, Ps. 120:1*): “I cried out to God with my voice—to God with my voice; and He gave ear to me” (*Ps. 77:1, NKJV*). Remembering God’s answers to prayer in the past strengthens the psalmists in the assurance that He will answer them now and in the future. In full confidence of a divine response, the psalmists state repeatedly that the Lord will answer their prayers (*Ps. 4:1; Ps. 6:8, 9; Ps. 17:6; Ps. 65:2*). They assure us that God is available to hear our prayers morning, noon, or night (*Ps. 5:3, Ps. 55:17*).

Experience has proven that, even if family fails them, God will hear their cry (*Ps. 106:44*).

“To hear, to listen” (Hebrew *shamah*) means more than to perceive the voice or register a sound. In the context of the Lord as auditor, the word hear, or listen, also means to act. That is, we can trust that God will act for His people in response to their prayers. When Israel was enslaved in Egypt, the Lord “heard” (*Exod. 2:24*), and He delivered them. The book of Psalms is an invitation to us to have this same level of confidence.

God Cares

In the book of Psalms, the Lord is depicted as a powerful King, ready to fight for His people. At the same time, He also is represented as a kind and loving God who cares for those who believe in Him. Various images are used to portray God’s tender care. God is depicted as a tender Shepherd taking care of His defenseless sheep (*Psalm 23*). As their Shepherd, He provides everything for them (*Ps. 23:1*)—rest, food, and water (*Ps. 23:2*); comfort and guidance (*Ps. 23:3*); His presence in the valley of the shadow of death (*Ps. 23:4*); abundance (*Ps. 23:5*); and goodness and mercy (*Ps. 23:6*).

The psalmist also uses the figure of a bird, protecting its young under its wings, to portray God’s watch care (*Ps. 91:1, 4*). God, our Keeper, is ever alert to the needs of His children (*Ps. 121:4*). He is like a father who pities his children (*Ps. 103:13*) and also is the Protector of the fatherless. Yet, God’s love and protection transcend even the human, parental bonds of love: “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me” (*Ps. 27:10, NKJV*).

What tender depictions of God’s solicitude on behalf of every one of us. May such pictures inspire us to lean fully on Him and trust His care in every aspect of our lives.

God Is Our Shelter

The Bible is stingy in its use of adjectives. To compensate for this paucity of modifiers, the Hebrew poets strongly depend on comparisons to articulate their ideas, using a wide array of rich metaphors to express, for example, how God protects His followers in a complicated world: “For You have been a shelter for me, a strong tower from the enemy” (*Ps. 61:3, NKJV*). Let’s take a brief moment to consider the connotations of the specific images in these comparisons:

1. **Shelter**—(*Ps. 61:3, Ps. 143:9*). This image suggests a safe place amid war, a refuge from storm and heat.
2. **Tower**—(*Ps. 61:3*). Towers in biblical times had a much stronger meaning as a safeguard than they do today. In times of war or persecution, the people hid in a tower, as in the cases of Gideon (*Judg. 8:17*) and Abimelech (*Judg. 9:50–52*).

Psalm 18:1, 2 provides a collection of other metaphors applied to YHWH, drawn from the rest of the Psalter:

3. **Strength**—This term alludes to the idea of firmness, as in the One who is our support.
4. **A Rock**—Usually this term in the Hebrew language referred to a big stone on a cliff that afforded protection from attacks. The remnant of Benjamin fled and hid in the rock of Rimmon (*Judg. 20:47*). Thus, they were spared from annihilation.
5. **A Fortress**—Fortresses were small, well-defended military posts. Jehoshaphat built many such fortresses in the land of Judah to protect his kingdom (*2 Chron. 17:12*).
6. **A Shield**—This piece of armor was the soldier's greatest defense on the battlefield (*see also Ps. 119:114*).
7. **A Stronghold**—Symbols of security, strongholds were defensive structures built in the mountains (*Judg. 6:2*) or in the wilderness (*1 Sam. 23:14, 19*).

Imagine the ways in which these images might be reinvented in modern terms to help us understand God's watch care and protection for us today. For sure, the Lord provides us with His guardianship, day by day, amid the perils of this world.

God Is Our Defender

God is our Vindicator, our Advocate, and our Champion. This imagery is obviously drawn from the legal realm and is primarily employed in the context of the widow and the fatherless. The book of Job and the Psalms depict the Lord as the Defender of widows and orphans (*Ps. 68:5*, Hebrew *dayin*, meaning “judge”). *Dayin* is paired with “my right and my cause” (*Ps. 9:4*), or parallels with judgment, as in Psalm 76:8, where God is depicted as the Defender of the needy and the oppressed (*Ps. 10:17, 18; compare with Deut. 10:18, Ps. 10:14*). God is praised by the poor (*Ps. 74:21*) because “He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hid-den His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard” (*Ps. 22:24, NKJV*). YHWH always defends the oppressed (*Ps. 72:4, Ps. 103:6, Ps. 146:7*).

God, Our Deliverer

All the terms and metaphors we have considered depict various aspects of God's watch care over His followers. Hence, the Lord is called our Deliverer. Four times He is called Deliverer in the book of Psalms, as follows:

1. Psalm 18:2 names God as Deliverer in the context of the psalmist's struggles with his enemies. As we have seen, this song depicts the Lord as a mighty warrior.
 2. Psalm 40:17 talks about deliverance from sin. David acknowledges the crushing reality that "innumerable evils have surrounded me; my iniquities have overtaken me" (*Ps. 40:12, NKJV*).
 3. The psalmist calls on his Deliverer (*Ps. 70:5*) when he is attacked by those who seek his life and desire to do him harm.
 4. In Psalm 144, the psalmist asks his Deliverer (*Ps. 144:2*) to rescue him from the one "whose mouth speaks lying words, and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood" (*Ps. 144:8, NKJV*).
- As the Psalms show, God wants to deliver us from our sins, anxieties, and problems with other people. Thus, in the fullest sense of the word, Jesus is our Savior.

Help From the Sanctuary

The purpose of our study this week is not simply to admire the literary prowess and artistry of the psalmists. More than the pleasure such skillful imagery affords us, the figures and metaphors of the Psalms furnish us with deep insights into the work of God in the redemption of humanity. David says: "I cried to the LORD with my voice, and He heard me from His holy hill [His sanctuary]" (*Ps. 3:4*); and "He heard my voice from His temple" (*Ps. 18:6, NKJV*). Thus, God's work of deliverance and His tender watch care begin with His work for us in the sanctuary in heaven.

Several key moments in the book of Psalms teach us that the Lord works on behalf of humans in His heavenly headquarters (*see Ps. 11:4-6; Ps. 20:2; Ps. 33:13, 14; Ps. 60:6; Ps. 68:35; Ps. 96:1-13; Ps. 102:19, 20; and Ps. 150:1-6*). After a study of these passages, along with other Old Testament texts related to the sanctuary, Elias Brasil de Souza states: "The heavenly sanctuary is also depicted as a place of worship where heavenly beings adore YHWH, source of help, and place of atonement, where cleansing and forgiveness are granted."—"The Heavenly Sanctuary/Temple Motif in the Hebrew Bible: Function and Relationship to the Earthly Counterparts" (dissertation, Andrews University, 2005), p. 358.

Our Defender and Deliverer hears from His holy hill and works in our behalf. For the most part, as Seventh-day Adventists, when we hear the expression "heavenly sanctuary," we most often think of the Day of Atonement and the pre-Advent judgment. Of course, that's central to "present truth." At the same time, we should strive to focus on the work of

forgiveness, defense, care, and protection that our Lord offers us from the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary—even before the closing work of the Day of Atonement. Christ's work of priestly intercession on our behalf is essential. All heaven is involved in the redemption of us sinners.

Part III: Life Application

The Psalms is a book of strong emotions that run the gamut from the ecstatic to the elegiac, and from the complex to the uncomplicated. But Psalms also is a book of deep theological concepts. The Bible truths studied this week, rich with imagery and metaphor, contain wonderful promises that we may claim in our daily struggles. As we read the imagery and figures of the Psalms, we should take time to meditate upon them, using our imagination to understand better the truths encapsulated in these profound word pictures.

The focus of this week has been to understand that the Lord of heaven is our Defender and Deliverer. He hears our prayers and petitions. He cares for us. “The LORD looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men” (*Ps. 33:13, NKJV*). With a compassionate and tender heart, the Lord scrutinizes us and our families. From the heavenly sanctuary, He weighs our works with infinite love and justice.

Notes

LESSON 5

*January 27–February 2

(page 36 of Standard Edition)

Singing *the Lord's Song in a Strange Land*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Ps. 79:5–13, Ps. 88:3–12, Ps. 69:1–3, Ps. 22:1, Psalm 77, Ps. 73:1–20, 1 Pet. 1:17.

Memory Text: “How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:4).

We do not need to get deep into the book of Psalms in order to discover that the Psalms are uttered in an imperfect world, one of sin, evil, suffering, and death. The stable creation run by the Sovereign Lord and His righteous laws is constantly threatened by evil. As sin corrupts the world more and more, the earth has increasingly become “a strange land” to God's people. This reality creates a problem for the psalmist: How does one live a life of faith in a strange land?

As we already have seen, the psalmists acknowledge God's sovereign rule and power, as well as His righteous judgments. They know that God is the everlasting and never-failing refuge and help in times of trouble. For this reason, the psalmists are at times perplexed (who isn't?) by the apparent absence of God and the flourishing of evil in the face of the good and Sovereign Lord. The paradoxical nature of the Psalms as prayers is demonstrated in the psalmists' responses to God's seeming silence. In other words, the psalmists respond to God's perceived absence, as well as to God's presence.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 3.

The Days of Evil

Read Psalm 74:18–22 and Psalm 79:5–13. What is at stake here?

The psalmist seeks to grasp the great controversy between God and the powers of evil, and he points to God's unfathomable forbearance, as well as to His infinite wisdom and power.

The problem of evil in the Psalms is primarily theological; it inevitably concerns questions about God. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is seen principally as a divine scandal because it provided an opportunity for the heathen to blaspheme God. God's inheritance (the people of Israel) is the sign of His divine election and covenant (*Deut. 4:32–38; Deut. 32:8, 9*) that will never fail. The concept of God's inheritance also contains an end-time dimension, as one day all nations will become God's inheritance and will serve Him. The notion that the nations invaded God's inheritance threatens these divine promises.

No question, the psalmist acknowledges that the sins of the people corrupted the people's covenantal relationship with God and brought upon the people all the consequences (*Ps. 79:8, 9*). The people's survival depends solely upon God's gracious intervention and the restoration of the covenantal bond through the atonement of sin. The Lord is "God of our salvation," which conveys God's faithfulness to His covenantal promises (*Ps. 79:9*).

However, more important than the restoration of Israel's fortunes is the defense of God's character in the world (*Ps. 79:9*). If the evil actions of the nations go unpunished, it will appear that God has lost His power (*Ps. 74:18–23, Ps. 83:16–18, Ps. 106:47*). Only when God saves His people will His name be justified and uplifted.

As today, the same principle existed back then. Our sins, our backsliding, our evils, can bring disrepute not only on ourselves but, worse, on the God whose name we profess. Our wrong actions can have detrimental spiritual effects on our witness and mission, as well. How many people have been turned off to our faith by the actions of those professing the name of Christ?

"The honor of God, the honor of Christ, is involved in the perfection of the character of His people."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671. How do you understand this important truth and what it should mean in your own Christian life?

At Death's Door

Read Psalm 41:1–4; Psalm 88:3–12; and Psalm 102:3–5, 11, 23, 24.
What experiences do these texts describe? In what can you relate to what is said here?

These prayers for salvation from illness and death demonstrate that God's children are not exempt from the sufferings of this world. The Psalms reveal the psalmist's terrible afflictions. He is without strength, withering like grass, unable to eat, set apart with the dead, lying like the slain in the grave, repulsive to his friends, suffering and in despair. His bones cling to his skin.

Many psalms assume the Lord has permitted the trouble because of Israel's disobedience. The psalmist recognizes that sin can bring sickness; therefore, he refers to the forgiveness that comes before healing (*Ps. 41:3, 4*). However, some psalms, such as Psalm 88 and Psalm 102, acknowledge that the innocent suffering of God's people is a fact of life, no matter how hard to understand.

In Psalm 88, God is charged with bringing the psalmist to the verge of death (*Ps. 88:6–8*). Notice, however, that even when the most daring complaints are uttered, the lament is clearly an act of faith, for if the Lord in His sovereignty allowed trouble, He could restore the well-being of His child.

At the grave's threshold, the psalmist remembers God's wonders, loving-kindness, faithfulness, and righteousness (*Ps. 88:10–12*). Despite his sense of being stricken by God, the psalmist clings to God. Although he suffers, he does not deny God's love and knows that God is his only salvation. These appeals show that the psalmist knows not only suffering but also has an intimate knowledge of God's grace and that the two do not necessarily exclude each other.

In short, both God's permitting of suffering and His deliverance are demonstrations of His ultimate sovereignty. Knowing that God is in control inspires hope. When we read Psalm 88 in the light of Christ's suffering, we are awed by the depths of His love, in which He was willing to pass through death's door for the sake of humanity.

Think about Jesus on the cross and what He suffered because of sin. How should that reality, that God in Christ suffered even worse than any of us, help us keep faith even amid times of suffering and trial?

Where Is God?

Read Psalm 42:1–3, Psalm 63:1, Psalm 69:1–3, and Psalm 102:1–7.
What causes great pain to the psalmist?

Not only does personal and communal sufferings trouble the psalmist but also, if not more, God's seeming lack of attention to His servants' hardships. God's absence is felt like intense thirst in a dry land (*Ps. 42:1–3, Ps. 63:1*) and mortal anguish (*Ps. 102:2–4*). The psalmist feels removed from God and compares himself to lonely birds. "I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop" (*Ps. 102:6, 7, NKJV*).

The mention of wilderness highlights the sense of isolation from God. A bird "alone on a housetop" is outside of its nest, its resting place. The psalmist cries to God "out of the depths," as if being engulfed by mighty waters and sinking into a "deep mire" (*Ps. 69:1–3, Ps. 130:1*). These images depict an oppressive situation from which there is no escape, except by divine intervention.

Read Psalm 10:12, Psalm 22:1, Psalm 27:9, and Psalm 39:12. How does the psalmist respond to God's apparent absence?

It is remarkable that the psalmists resolve not to keep silent in the face of God's silence. The psalmists unswervingly believe in prayer because prayer is directed to the living and gracious God. God is still there, even when He is apparently absent. He is still the same God who heard them in the past, and so, they are confident that He hears them now.

The occasions of God's silence cause the psalmists to examine themselves and to seek God, but with confession and humble petitions. They know that God will not remain silent forever. The Psalms demonstrate that communication with God must go on, regardless of life's circumstances.

What can we learn from the psalmists' responses to God's apparent absence? How do you respond to times when God does seem silent? What sustains your faith?

Has His Promise Failed Forevermore?

Read Psalm 77. What experience is the author going through?

Psalm 77 begins with a plea to God for help that is filled with lament and painful remembering of the past (*Ps. 77:1–6*). The psalmist's whole being is mournfully turned to God. He refuses to be comforted by any relief except the one coming from God.

However, remembering God appears to intensify his anguish. “When I remember God, I moan” (*Ps. 77:3, ESV*). Hebrew *hamah*, “moan,” often depicts the roar of raging waters (*Ps. 46:3*). Similarly, the psalmist's whole being is in a state of intense unrest.

How can remembering God produce such strong feelings of distress? A series of troubling questions betray the cause of his anguish (*Ps. 77:7–9*): *Has God changed? Can God possibly betray His covenant?*

The stark contrast between God's saving acts in the past and God's apparent absence in the present causes the psalmist to feel abandoned by God. If God has changed, then the psalmist has no hope, a conclusion that he struggles to reject.

Meanwhile, the psalmist cannot sleep because the Lord keeps him awake (*Ps. 77:4*). This recalls other biblical characters whose insomnia was providentially used by God to advance His purposes (*Gen. 41:1–8, Esther 6:1, Dan. 2:1–3*). The long sleepless night causes the psalmist to consider the Lord's past acts of deliverance but with new resolve (*Ps. 77:5, 10*).

The assurance that the psalmist receives from God does not consist of explanations about his personal situation but rather a confirmation of God's faithfulness and trustworthiness (like Job). The psalmist is encouraged to wait on the Lord in faith, knowing that He is the same God who performed miracles in Israel's past (*Ps. 77:11–18*). The psalmist also realizes that “Your footsteps were not known” (*Ps. 77:19, NKJV*), recognizing God's guidance, even in situations in which His presence is not obvious to human eyes. The psalmist acknowledges that God is simultaneously revealed and hidden, and so, he offers praise to the Lord's mysterious and sovereign ways.

Think about past times when the Lord worked in your life. How can that truth help you deal with whatever you are facing now?

Lest the Righteous Be Tempted

Read Psalm 37:1, 8; Psalm 49:5–7; Psalm 94:3–7; and Psalm 125:3. What struggle does the psalmist face?

These psalms lament the current prosperity of the wicked and the challenge that this fact poses to the righteous. The wicked not only prosper but at times also openly despise God and oppress others. The perplexing issue is that while “the scepter of wickedness” (*Ps. 125:3, NKJV*) dominates the world, the “scepter of righteousness” (*Ps. 45:6, NKJV*) seems to be failing. Why not, then, give up and embrace evil as others do?

Read Psalm 73:1–20, 27. What brings the psalmist through the crisis? What is the end of those who trust in futile things? See also 1 Pet. 1:17.

While the psalmist in Psalm 73 remained focused on the current iniquity in the world, he was unable to see the big picture from God’s point of view. The problem that the prosperity of evil posed to his faith was overwhelming; he believed, also, that his argument about the uselessness of faith was based on reality.

However, Psalm 73 shows that “these things mock those who ignore the first verse of this psalm, which is the summary of the whole psalm: ‘How good the God of Israel is to those who are upright in heart!’”—Johannes Bugenhagen, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), p. 11.

The psalmist is led to the sanctuary, the place of God’s sovereign rule, and was reminded there that “today” is only one piece of the mosaic, and he should consider the “end,” when the wicked will face God’s judgment. The fact that the psalmist understood this truth in the sanctuary and confessed his previous folly shows that reality can be grasped only by spiritual insight and not by human logic.

How does the promise of God’s judgment upon the world, and upon all its evil, give you comfort when so much evil now goes unpunished?

Further Thought: Read Psalm 56; Ellen G. White, “Rejoicing in the Lord,” pp. 115–126, in *Steps to Christ*.

Like the psalmists, God’s people of all times wonder every so often how to sing the Lord’s songs in “a strange land.” Our faith in the sovereign rule of the Lord is challenged, at times severely, and we may ponder whether God is in control or truly as powerful and good as the Scriptures say.

Biblical faith often implies uncertainty and suspense as much as confidence and assertion. Sometimes uncertainty and suspense, especially in the face of evil and God’s seeming absence, can be almost unbearable. Yet, uncertainty must never be about God or His loving and righteous character and trustworthiness. The psalmists may be uncertain about the future, but they often appeal to God’s unfailing love and faithfulness (*Ps. 36:5–10; Ps. 89:2, 8*).

Likewise, we are to follow the same example. “Summon all your powers to look up, not down at your difficulties; then you will never faint by the way. You will soon see Jesus behind the cloud, reaching out His hand to help you; and all you have to do is to give Him your hand in simple faith and let Him lead you. As you become trustful you will, through faith in Jesus, become hopeful.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 578, 579.

The times when God “hides His face” do not undermine the efficacy of prayer. On the contrary, these occasions cause the psalmists to examine themselves, recall God’s past saving acts, and seek God with confession and humble petitions (*Ps. 77:10–12, Ps. 89:46–52*). “Faith grows strong by coming in conflict with doubts and opposing influences. The experience gained in these trials is of more value than the most costly jewels.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 555.

Discussion Questions:

- ①** What tensions did the psalmists experience in the face of evil? What similar tensions have you faced, and how have you dealt with them? How do you maintain your faith during these times?
- ②** Where should we look for answers when our faith in God is tested by trials or by people whose own sufferings cause them to question the goodness and power of God?
- ③** How do you answer the common question about evil in a world created and sustained by an all-powerful God of love? How does the great controversy motif help answer, at least somewhat, this challenge?

Giving Up on God: Part 1

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

Five-year-old Sekule was frightened by Grandmother's warnings about hell. "You must be good," Grandmother said. "If you aren't good, you'll end up in hell."

"What do you mean 'end up in hell'?" the boy asked.

"You will end up in eternal flames if you lie or steal," she said. "You will feel the flames for all eternity."

Grandmother's words ignited great fear in the young boy's heart. He was confused. On the one hand, she said God is love. On the other, she said that if Sekule lied, he would end up in hell. Sekule was afraid because he couldn't help but lie sometimes.

The boy didn't know what to do. He couldn't turn to his parents. They were not Christian in then-communist Montenegro. Grandmother was the only Christian whom he knew in his village.

One day, when no one was looking, he hid behind a bush and scolded God. "I don't know why people say You are love," he said. "You aren't love but a monster. Why did You create me to end up in flames? Am I supposed to be faithful and not lie and do bad things? I can't believe in You, and I won't believe in You. You are a monster."

Sekule was finished with God. He was only 5 and had no interest in God.

Nine years later, at the age of 14, Sekule was sent away to a boarding high school in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among the 700 boys at the school, he was the only one from Montenegro. Sensing that he faced an uphill battle as an outsider, he resorted to fighting to gain acceptance with his classmates. He fought nearly every day. If someone even touched one of his ears—and they were a temptation to touch because they stuck out like teacup handles—he attacked viciously. One fight left him with a knife scar on a hand. Sekule also was a bully. When a younger boy received a food package from home, Sekule dangled him outside a dorm window by the ankles until he handed over the package.

After three years of fighting, a desire grew in Sekule to know truth. He wondered whether Grandmother had told him the truth about God. But what was truth? Sarajevo had several main religions: Islam, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Judaism. Sekule wondered, *If God is One, why are there so many religions?* He decided to become familiar with all religions to find the truth.

SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro. Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 137:4*

The presence of suffering and evil in our midst raises perplexing questions in the minds of many about God's character. Why did God allow sin to exist? Why does He allow the innocent to suffer? Why does He permit sin and suffering to continue? Why do the wicked prosper? Have God's promises in the Bible failed? Is Scripture merely a beautiful literary masterpiece—inspiring but not divinely inspired—for spiritually inclined people? Or worse, are the Bible and its promises the delusions of pious minds? Are they without any basis in reality because, ultimately, God, as secular minds allege, doesn't exist?

Sad to say, this line of inquiry is all too common among many minds today. The questioning of God's actions plants the seeds of incredulity and skepticism in the hearts of others, especially among the youth. All too often, when such questions of unbelief arise in the minds of believers, the result is that “‘the love of many will grow cold’” (*Matt. 24:12, NKJV*).

The Psalms are more than pretty songs in praise of God. They are meant to exert a profound impact on our understanding of such complex issues as the existence of sin and suffering. As we analyze the Psalter in light of this challenging subject, we again marvel at the raw honesty of the psalmists in their prayers. Their candor reminds us that we, too, can ask questions of the Lord; we also can express our doubts to Him. God will listen to our concerns happily if we inquire of Him in faith and humility. He will reply to our humble questions and concerns, giving us light in the midst of our struggle with doubt and fear.

Part II: Commentary

Why Did God Allow Sin and Suffering to Exist?

Even if the Psalter does not explicitly address this specific question, Psalms 74 and 79, which are about the destruction of Jerusalem, are based on these concerns. Between these two psalms, we see some notable similarities concerning the topic of sin and suffering:

1. Each psalm deals with the destruction of the beloved city (*Ps. 74:3–9, Ps. 79:1–4*), which elicits plaintive laments from the psalmist.
2. In both psalms, Asaph wants to see the Lord overturn the destruction (*Ps. 74:10, 11; Ps. 79:5–7*). Thus, he inquires of the Lord, “How long?”
3. The cause of Jerusalem’s misfortunes is the sin of the people (*Ps. 79:8–10*). Only Psalm 79 mentions this reason: God’s people have failed.

4. In both songs, Asaph doesn't lose faith in his heavenly King (*Ps. 74:12–17*) or confidence in "the greatness of Your power" (*Ps. 79:11, NKJV*).

As Asaph, we may ask why we face sin, suffering, and death. These are the universal questions that inquiring minds have asked from the dawn of human history. The answer is always the same: sin. Sin is the strange intruder in God's creation. From Satan's fall in heaven to our fallen condition today, iniquity has spawned all the suffering and death in history. We could argue, justifiably, that God has given free will to His creatures and, from there, philosophize about the ramifications of sin and suffering. But the biblical writers refrain from this tack. Let us then, as Asaph did, trust in our Creator's power and wisdom to resolve this question in His own way and time.

Why Did God Allow the Innocent to Suffer?

The lesson reminds us that sin can bring sickness (*Ps. 41:3, 4*). With this idea in mind, let's consider the question, "Why did God allow the innocent to suffer?" in light of four Psalms: Psalm 6, Psalm 41, Psalm 88, and Psalm 102.

First, we note that these four songs describe the suffering that the psalmists experience because of illness (*Ps. 6:2, 6, 7; Ps. 41:3; Ps. 88:3–9; Ps. 102:3–7, 9–11*). Second, the psalmists plead with the Lord for healing (*Ps. 6:2, 4; Ps. 41:1, 4; Ps. 88:1, 2, 13, 14; Ps. 102:1, 2*). They consider their healing to be a vindication from God in the presence of their enemies (*Ps. 6:8–10, Ps. 41:5–12, Ps. 102:15–19*). Finally, they argue persuasively that, had they died, they would have been bereft of the opportunity to praise God's name (*Ps. 6:5, Ps. 88:10–12*).

At this point in our analysis, we should note that the Hebrew mind was not interested in asking philosophical questions about human pain and suffering. Rather, its focus was on God and His glory. The psalmists acknowledge that the Lord permits their sorrows (*Ps. 6:1*). They also acknowledge that He alone can give health. Cured of their afflictions, they want to testify to God's healing mercies.

Have we exemplified this same attitude when afflicted with illness? We usually complain, "Why me, O Lord?" Would it not be better, surely, in that difficult moment, to trust in God and to await His vindication in order that we might testify to His glory?

Why Doesn't God End Our Present Suffering?

In the midst of our suffering, we often ask, "Where is God?" This question often wells up within us from a place of the deepest angst and desperation. In such moments, our tendency as humans is not to moralize or to engage philosophically with our pain and suffering. We just want answers and relief. In our desperation, we often, as did the psalmists, turn to God for help.

Notice that even if it seems the Creator is not present, the psalmist's plea is: " ‘Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; do not be silent at my tears’ " (*Ps. 39:12, NKJV*). The psalmist knows that God is there, even if he has no outward token of the divine presence. Now that's faith! The psalmist doesn't say, "I quit! I abandon my faith because God won't answer me. So, He must not exist." Instead, the psalmist trusts God and waits for Him to act in His behalf at the right moment. "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him" (*Ps. 37:7, NKJV*). If God keeps silent, it's time for us to keep silent, too, and wait. The question is not Where is God? God is there, and He cares for us. The question is Will we be there, too, waiting in faith on Him to act in our behalf?

Have His Promises in the Scriptures Failed?

Psalm 77 expresses well the feelings of doubt and discouragement that often oppress us in times of distress:

Will the Lord cast off forever?
 And will He be favorable no more?
 Has His mercy ceased forever?
 Has His promise failed forevermore?
 Has God forgotten to be gracious?
 Has He in anger shut up His tender mercies? (*Ps. 77:7–9, NKJV*).

The answer that the writer himself provides is simple but crucial: remember in the present the miracles that God has wrought for you in the past (*Ps. 77:11–20*). "I will remember the works of the LORD" (*Ps. 77:11, NKJV*). Thereafter, the psalmist describes the most paradigmatic moment of God's intervention in Israel's history: the Exodus from Egypt. The psalmist recalls the wonders that YHWH performed when He delivered His people from Egyptian bondage (*Ps. 77:14, 15*). Special attention is given to the miraculous parting of the Red Sea (*Ps. 77:16–19*): "Your way was in the sea" (*Ps. 77:19, NKJV*). The psalmist also recalls how God guided the ministry of Moses and Aaron (*Ps. 77:20*).

As the Spirit of Prophecy so aptly admonishes: "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 10.

When sick or beset by tribulation, we would do well to engage in the following faith-strengthening exercise: highlight in a journal the most precious blessings the Lord has given us in our lives, from the simplest to the most impactful. After all, was this act of remembrance not what the psalmist did?

Why Do the Wicked Ones Prosper?

David introduces the topic under consideration by couching it in the following counsel: “Do not fret because of evildoers” (*Ps. 37:1, NKJV*). He summarizes the rationale for his advice—evildoers will perish (*Ps. 37:2*)—before moving on to his main concern, which is the believer. David encourages him or her with several principles for godly living (*Ps. 37:3–9*). These moral imperatives are the basis for maintaining one’s mental health and fitness in an unfair world. David embeds promises in the midst of his imperatives, as follows:

1. “Trust in the LORD, . . .
2. “Do good;
Promise: “Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness” (*Ps. 37:3, NKJV*).
3. “Delight yourself also in the LORD,
Promise: “And He shall give you the desires of your heart” (*Ps. 37:4, NKJV*).
4. “Commit your way to the LORD,
5. “Trust also in Him,
Promises: “And He shall bring it to pass” (*Ps. 37:5, NKJV*). “He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noon-day” (*Ps. 37:6, NKJV*).
6. “Rest in the LORD,
7. “And wait patiently for Him;
8. “Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass” (*Ps. 37:7, NKJV*).
9. “Cease from anger,
10. “And forsake wrath;
11. “Do not fret—it only causes harm” (*Ps. 37:8, NKJV*).
Promise: “For evildoers shall be cut off; but those who wait on the LORD, they shall inherit the earth” (*Ps. 37:9, NKJV*).

This psalm is a masterpiece of literary form and substance. Were we to ardently endeavor to practice the guidelines contained within, we would avoid much disappointment and bitterness. As an extra bonus, the text of the psalm provides us with encouraging promises that motivate us to put its precepts into action.

The psalmist reviews the same concepts in the rest of his song: (a) the prosperity of the wicked ones (*Ps. 37:12, 14*); (b) the command to trust YHWH (*Ps. 37:27, 34, 37*); (c) the behavior of the righteous (*Ps. 37:21, 26, 30, 31*); (d) the destruction of the evildoers (*Ps. 37:10, 13, 15, 22, 35, 36, 38*); and (e) promises for the faithful (*Ps. 37:11, 16–20, 22–25, 28, 29, 32, 33, 39, 40*). The concepts expressed within this psalm make it worthy of our most profound study.

Part III: Life Application

The psalmist invites us to trust in God in the midst of suffering and trials. More often than not, we may not get clear answers to our most perplexing questions this side of eternity. At times, we may not feel the presence of our heavenly Protector beside us. Or we may feel as if God's promises are failing. But we must remember the moral imperatives of the psalmists: trust in God, regardless of the circumstances; remember His wonders in your life; study more deeply the Word of God; grab hold of God's promises; and hold tightly to the Lord! "But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the LORD shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in Him" (*Ps. 37:39, 40, NKJV*).

Notes

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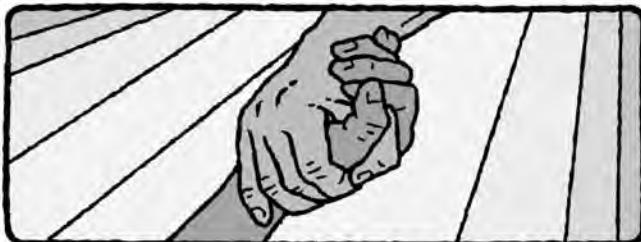


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I Will Arise



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Ps. 18:3–18, Ps. 41:1–3, Deut. 15:7–11, Psalm 82, Ps. 96:6–10, Ps. 99:1–4, Rom. 8:34.

Memory Text: “‘For the oppression of the poor, for the sighing of the needy, now I will arise,’ says the LORD; ‘I will set him in the safety for which he yearns’ ” (Psalm 12:5, NKJV).

Our age is not the only age in which evil, injustice, and oppression rage. The psalmists lived in such a time, as well. And so, whatever else they are, the Psalms are also God’s protests against the violence and oppression in the world, in our world, and that of the psalmists, as well.

Yes, the Lord is long-suffering and holds His wrath in His great forbearance, not wanting anyone to perish but to repent and change their ways (2 Pet. 3:9–15). And though God’s proper time for His intervention does not always coincide with human expectations, the day of God’s judgment is coming (Ps. 96:13, Ps. 98:9). We just need to trust in Him, and in His promises, until that day comes.

Only the Creator, whose throne is founded on righteousness and justice (Ps. 89:14, Ps. 97:2), can provide, with His sovereign judgment, stability and prosperity to the world. The twofold aspect of divine judgment includes deliverance of the oppressed and destruction of the wicked (Ps. 7:6–17).

This is what we have been promised, and this is what will, indeed, one day come—but in God’s time, not ours, a point that the psalmist emphasizes.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 10.

The Majestic Warrior

Read Psalm 18:3–18; Psalm 76:3–9, 12; and Psalm 144:5–7. How is the Lord portrayed in these texts? What do these images convey about God's readiness to deliver His people?

These hymns praise the Lord for His awesome power over the evil forces that threaten His people. They portray God in His majesty as Warrior and Judge. The image of God as Warrior is frequent in the Psalms and highlights the severity and urgency of God's response to His people's cries and suffering.

"The LORD thundered from heaven, / And the Most High uttered His voice, / Hailstones and coals of fire. / He sent out His arrows and scattered the foe, / Lightnings in abundance, and He vanquished them. / Then the channels of the sea were seen, / The foundations of the world were uncovered / At Your rebuke, O LORD, / At the blast of the breath of Your nostrils" (*Ps. 18:13–15, NKJV*).

The sheer determination and magnitude of God's action should disperse any doubt about God's great care and compassion for the sufferers or about His ability to defeat evil. We just need to wait for Him to do it.

In the end, even when God's people, such as David, were involved in war, deliverance did not come from human means. In his many battles against the enemies of God's people, King David praised God as the only One who achieved all the victories. It would have been easy for David to take credit for what happened, for his many successes and triumphs, but that was not his frame of mind. He knew where the Source of his power came from.

Although David states that the Lord trains his hands for war (*Ps. 18:34*), nowhere in the Psalms does he rely on his battle skills. Instead, the Lord fights for David and delivers him (*Ps. 18:47, 48*).

In the Psalms, King David, who was known as a successful warrior, assumes his role as a skilled musician and praises the Lord as the only Deliverer and Sustainer of His people (*Ps. 144:10–15*). Praise and prayer to the Lord are David's sources of strength, which are more powerful than any weapon of war. God alone is to be trusted and worshiped.

Whatever gifts and skills and success you have had in life, why must you always remember the Source of them all? What danger do you face if you forget that Source?

Justice for the Oppressed

Read Psalm 9:18, Psalm 12:5, Psalm 40:17, Psalm 113:7, Psalm 146:6–10, and Psalm 41:1–3. What is the message here to us, even today?

God exhibits special care and concern for justice regarding the various vulnerable groups of people, including the poor, needy, oppressed, fatherless, widows, widowers, and strangers. The Psalms, like the Law and the prophets, are clear on that point (*Exod. 22:21–27, Isa. 3:13–15*).

Many psalms use the expression “poor and needy” and avoid representing the oppressed in exclusively national and religious terms. This is done in order to highlight God’s universal care for all humanity.

The expression “poor and needy” is not limited to material poverty but also signifies vulnerability and helplessness. The expression appeals to God’s compassion, and it conveys the idea that the sufferer is alone and has no other help but God. The depiction “poor and needy” also pertains to one’s sincerity, truthfulness, and love for God in confessing one’s total dependence on God and renouncing any trace of self-reliance and self-assertion.

Meanwhile, caring for the deprived (*Ps. 41:1–3*) demonstrates the people’s faithfulness to God. Evil done against the vulnerable were particularly heinous sins in biblical culture (*Deut. 15:7–11*). The Psalms inspire faithful people to raise their voices against every oppression.

The Psalms also underline the futility of grounding one’s confidence on perishable human means as the ultimate source of wisdom and security. God’s people must resist the temptation to put ultimate faith for salvation in human leaders and institutions, especially when they differ from God’s ways.

In His grace, our Lord identified Himself with the poor by becoming poor Himself that through His poverty many might become rich (*2 Cor. 8:9*). Christ’s riches include deliverance from every oppression brought by sin, and He promises us eternal life in God’s kingdom (*Rev. 21:4*). Jesus Christ fulfills the Psalms’ promises as the divine Judge, who will judge every mistreatment of the deprived, as well as neglect of duty toward them (*Matt. 25:31–46*).

How much do we think of the “poor and needy” among us, and how much do we do for them?

How Long Will You Judge Unjustly?

The Lord has endowed Israel's leaders with authority to maintain justice in Israel (*Ps. 72:1–7, 12–14*). Israel's kings were to exercise their authority in accordance with God's will. The leaders' central concern should be ensuring peace and justice in the land and caring for the socially disadvantaged. Only then shall the land and the entire people prosper. The king's throne is strengthened by faithfulness to God, not by human power.

Read Psalm 82. What happens when the leaders pervert justice and oppress the people they are tasked to protect?

In Psalm 82, God declares His judgments upon Israel's corrupt judges. The "gods" (*Ps. 82:1, 6*) are clearly neither pagan gods nor angels because they were never tasked with delivering justice to God's people and so could not be judged for not fulfilling it. The charges listed in Psalm 82:2–4 echo the laws of the Torah, identifying the "gods" as Israel's leaders (*Deut. 1:16–18, Deut. 16:18–20, John 10:33–35*). God questions the "sons of men" whether they judge justly, and their punishment is announced because they have been found unrighteous. The leaders totter in darkness without knowledge (*Ps. 82:5*) because they have abandoned God's law, the light (*Ps. 119:105*).

The Scripture unwaveringly upholds the view that the Lord is the only God. God shares His governance of the world with appointed human leaders as His representatives (*Rom. 13:1*). How often, however, have these human representatives, both in history and even now, perverted the responsibility that they have been given?

Psalm 82 mockingly exposes the apostasy of some leaders who believed themselves to be "gods" above other people. Although God gave the authority and the privilege to the Israelite leaders to be called the "children of the Most High" and to represent Him, God renounces the wicked leaders. God reminds them that they are mortal and subject to the same moral laws as all people. No one is above God's law (*Ps. 82:6–8*).

God will judge the entire world; God's people, too, shall give an account to God. Both the leaders and the people should emulate the example of the divine Judge and place their ultimate hope in Him.

What kind of authority do you hold over others? How justly and fairly are you exercising that authority? Take heed.

Pour Out Your Indignation

Read Psalm 58:6–8; Psalm 69:22–28; Psalm 83:9–17; Psalm 94:1, 2; and Psalm 137:7–9. What sentiments do these psalms convey? Who is the agent of judgment in these psalms?

Some psalms beseech God to take vengeance on individuals and nations who intend to harm, or who have already harmed, the psalmists or their people. These psalms can sound perplexing because of their harsh language and apparent discord with the biblical principle of love for enemies (*Matt. 5:44*).

Yet, the psalmist's indignation in the face of oppression is a good one. It means that the psalmists took right and wrong more seriously than did many people. He cares, even greatly, about the evil that is done in the world, not just to himself but to others, as well.

However, nowhere does the psalmist suggest himself to be the agent of vengeance. Instead, he leaves retribution solely in God's hands. The Psalms evoke the divine covenant curses (*Deut. 27:9–16*) and implore God to act as He has promised.

The Psalms are prophetic proclamations about God's impending judgment; they are not solely the psalmist's prayers. Psalm 137 reflects the announcements of divine judgment on Babylon, as seen in the prophets. The devastation that the Babylonians brought to other nations would turn back on them. The Psalms convey divine warnings that evil will not go unpunished forever.

God's retribution is measured with justice and grace. God's children are called to pray for those who mistreat them and even to hope for their conversion (*Ps. 83:18, Jer. 29:7*).

However, while seeking to fit these psalms with the biblical norms of love for enemies, we must be careful not to minimize the agonizing experience expressed in them. God acknowledges the suffering of His children and reassures them that "precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints" (*Ps. 116:15, NKJV*). Divine judgment obliges God's people to raise their voices against all evil and seek the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness. The Psalms also give voice to those who suffer, letting them know that God is aware of their suffering and that one day justice will come.

Who doesn't, at times, have thoughts or fantasies about vengeance on those who have done them or their loved ones terrible wrong? How might these psalms help you put such feelings in proper perspective?

The Lord's Judgment and the Sanctuary

Read Psalm 96:6–10; Psalm 99:1–4; and Psalm 132:7–9, 13–18. Where does God's judgment take place, and what are the implications of the answer for us? How does the sanctuary help us understand how God will deal with evil?

The Lord's judgment is closely related to the sanctuary. The sanctuary was the environment where the psalmist's understanding of the problem of evil was transformed (*Ps. 73:17–20*). The sanctuary was designated as the place of divine judgment as indicated by the judgment of Urim (*Num. 27:21*) and by the breastplate of judgment of the high priest (*Exod. 28:15, 28–30*). Accordingly, many psalms depict God on His throne in the sanctuary ready to judge the world for its sin and evil.

At the sanctuary, the plan of salvation was revealed. In paganism, sin was understood primarily as a physical stain to be eliminated by magic rites. In contrast, the Bible presents sin as a violation of God's moral law. God's holiness means that He loves justice and righteousness. Likewise, God's people should pursue justice and righteousness and should worship God in His holiness. To do that, they must keep God's law, which is an expression of His holiness.

Thus, the sanctuary is the place of forgiveness of sin and restoration of righteousness as indicated by the mercy seat of God's throne and the "sacrifices of righteousness" (*Deut. 33:19, Ps. 4:5*).

Yet, the "God-Who-Forgives" takes vengeance upon the wicked deeds of unrepentant people (*Ps. 99:8, NKJV*). The practical implications of the sanctuary being the place of divine judgment are seen in the constant awareness of God's holiness and demands for righteous living according to God's covenantal requirements.

The Lord's judgment from Zion results in the well-being of the righteous and the defeat of the wicked (*Ps. 132:13–18*). The sanctuary fostered the jubilant expectations of the Lord's coming as the Judge, especially during the Day of Atonement. Likewise, the Psalms strengthen the certainty of the impending arrival of the divine Judge (*Ps. 96:13, Ps. 98:9*), namely, Jesus Christ in the heavenly sanctuary (*Rev. 11:15–19*).

Read Romans 8:34. How does this verse show us that what Christ is doing in the heavenly sanctuary is good news for His people?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, "The Beatitudes," pp. 6–13, 29–35, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*.

The Psalms are protests against human indifference to injustice; they are a refusal to accept evil. They are motivated not by a desire for revenge but by a zeal to glorify God's name. Hence, it is fitting for the righteous to rejoice when they shall see God's vengeance on evil because in this way God's name and His justice are restored in the world (*Ps. 58:10, 11*). The Psalms oblige people to raise their voices against evil and to seek the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness. In the Psalms, we are given assurance of divine comfort and deliverance. The Lord will arise!

"'When men shall revile you, and persecute you,' said Jesus, 'rejoice, and be exceeding glad.' And He pointed His hearers to the prophets who had spoken in the name of the Lord, as 'an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.' James 5:10. Abel, the very first Christian of Adam's children, died a martyr. Enoch walked with God, and the world knew him not. Noah was mocked as a fanatic and an alarmist. 'Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment.' 'Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.' Hebrews 11:36, 35."—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 33.

Discussion Questions:

- ①** Because the painful realization of the evil in the world can cause one to wonder whether the Lord actually reigns, how can we grow an unshakable faith that will stand strong even under temptation? That is, what must we focus on in order to maintain our faith in God's love and goodness and power? What should the Cross say to us about God and His character?
- ②** Why is it important not to rely on human means (leaders, institutions, and social movements) as the ultimate wisdom and solution for justice in the world but rely solely on God's Word and judgment?
- ③** What are the practical implications of the truth that the sanctuary is the place of divine judgment?
- ④** How can we understand the harsh language of some psalms? How does that language help us relate to the humanity of those who wrote them?

Invited to Church: Part 2

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

Seventeen-year-old Sekule wanted to know truth as a high school student in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, so, he started to visit various houses of worship. But he didn't find satisfactory answers to his questions about why a God of love would burn someone in hell for eternity. So, Sekule resolved to find the truth on his own by reading the New Testament.

When he returned to his home village in Montenegro that summer, he read one Bible book a day. On the first day, he read the 28 chapters of Matthew. The next day, he read Mark. Then he read Luke, John, Acts, and Romans. He read only one book a day, even when he came to such smaller epistles as Titus and Philemon.

Some answers to his questions about God emerged in his reading of the New Testament. But he longed for more information. He visited several more houses of worship. But he didn't visit a Seventh-day Adventist church. He had heard that Adventists celebrated "Sweet Sabbaths" every week, a time when they engaged in sexual relations with each other. He thought, *They're crazy. They cannot have the truth.*

Failing to find answers in the many houses of worship that he visited, he decided that God probably did not exist. He stopped reading the Bible.

Then a high school teacher saw Sekule's Bible. She was an Adventist, and she saw the Bible as faculty members conducted random searches of dormitory rooms to see whether boys were hiding alcohol or drugs.

"You have a Bible?" she said.

"Yes," Sekule said.

"What have you learned?"

"Many things."

She quizzed him about Daniel, and Sekule, who had a good memory, provided clear answers.

"You actually understand!" she exclaimed. "You're the first person whom I've met who understands. You must come to the Seventh-day Adventist church."

Sekule didn't dare refuse. She was his teacher. He feared that she would lower his grade if he didn't go.

"OK, I'll go," he said.

But he lied. He had no plans to go to church.

SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro. Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 12:5*

In Lesson 4, we explored the idea that God is our shelter, refuge, tower, and strength. These metaphors signify the Bible truth that God stands at the side of His faithful children, providing protection and care. This week, we will study a similar trope: that of our God, as a Mighty Warrior, fighting for His children. We also shall consider this idea within the context of social oppression, which was all too common in biblical times as it is, unfortunately, in our own. The theme of social oppression, a primary topic in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, is echoed throughout the Psalms. While the abuse of people by their political leaders causes us distress, we are not without recourse to hope; surely, the Lord is the defense of the humble.

Part II: Commentary

Social Oppression

Mosaic law commands God's people to take special care of three groups of people: "the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow" (*Deut. 10:18; Deut. 14:29; Deut. 16:11, 14; Deut. 24:17–20; Deut. 26:12, 13; Deut. 27:19*). Usually, these people didn't have a source of stable income; many times they often didn't own land that could be worked or tilled to sustain their families. Ideally, these fringe citizens and immigrants sought to find places where they could hire out their services or, at the very least, be permitted to gather the leftover fruits and sheaves behind the harvesters (*see Ruth 2:6–8*). Such persons didn't have familial protection. Given their vulnerability, we can see how the abuse of widows, orphans, and strangers was considered one of the worst sins in society during Old Testament times. The prophets regularly admonished the people to provide for this underprivileged class (*Isa. 1:17, 23; Jer. 7:6; Jer. 22:3; Ezek. 22:7; Zech. 7:10*).

For this reason, the psalmist depicts the Lord as "a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows" (*Ps. 68:5, NKJV*). This is the Psalter's promise: "The LORD watches over the strangers; He relieves the fatherless and widow; but the way of the wicked He turns upside down" (*Ps. 146:9, NKJV; compare with Ps. 10:14*). Our God is the God of the oppressed and the outcast.

Today, some places have social programs to help the fatherless and widows. Such programs provide opportunities to help the poor and needy

move forward. Some governments also provide much-needed financial assistance. But there are always more people in need, even within the church, than the system can support. Nowadays, other forms of abuse and oppression, such as bullying and torture, are prevalent besides poverty. We, as Christians, should identify the victims of such oppression and injustice and aid them. We must commit ourselves faithfully to finding ways to provide for their needs.

Immigration is another challenging issue in many countries around the world. Immigration has been an issue since the first days of human history. People have always looked for better places to live and thrive. We are the hands of God—He asks us to support and give succor to the lost, the straying, the stranger, and the outcast in our society. We should invite the members of this group to fix their eyes on the One who is the Defender of the fatherless and immigrants.

God, the Divine Warrior

There is a powerful metaphor about God in the Old Testament and, to a lesser degree, in the New, which is not too popular among Christians nowadays: God as a warrior. Such an idea may be too harsh or militaristic to a culture that prefers the expressions of God's love, mercy, inclusion, and peace.

The “LORD of hosts” (*Josh. 5:14, 1 Sam 1:11, 1 Sam. 4:4, 1 Sam. 17:45, 2 Sam. 7:26, Jer. 10:16, Jer. 31:35, Jer. 32:18, Amos 5:16, etc.*) is a common representation of God’s character. It depicts the Creator as a general of the heavenly armies. He is involved in conflict against evil powers. But the Word of God also describes Him as a warrior. “The LORD is a warrior” (*Exod. 15:3, NIV; He is a “man of war;” NKJV*); “The LORD marches out like a warrior” (*Isa. 42:13, ISV*).

The psalmist invokes this metaphor in Psalm 18:3–19. He claims to be delivered (*Ps. 18:3*) from a “strong enemy, from those who hated me, for they were too strong for me” (*Ps. 18:17, NKJV*). YHWH is described as a warrior, fighting for His servant, and as a Champion who, astride His warhorse, wields His weapons against the oppressors of His people. Read carefully verses 7–15. There are four scenarios, as follows:

Psalm 18:6–8: The Divine Warrior is in His castle (His temple); He is stirred to righteous anger on behalf of His servant after hearing his prayer. The Divine Warrior reacts with fury in His servant’s defense (*Ps. 18:8*).

Psalm 18:9–12: The description of the Divine Warrior, who rides down in a magnificent display of power, is impressive. This imagery creates confidence in the heart of the Warrior’s servant. Assuredly, our God is no weakling.

Psalm 18:13–15: In these verses, we read about an assault mounted by a Man of war, along with His fearsome munitions: hailstones, fire, arrows, and lightning. This figure of the Man of war, with His meteorological arsenal, connotes a powerful Soldier who, angered by injustice and

oppression, fights valiantly and righteously for His loyal servant.

Psalm 18:16–19: Here we read about the servant’s deliverance; the Warrior rescues, emancipates, and sustains him. “He also brought me out into a broad place” (*Ps. 18:19, NKJV*).

What an amazing and detailed description of the Lord’s work for His children under the most trying circumstances. This understanding of God’s character will transform the world and our church. The oppressed and persecuted must rest in the assurance that God is fighting for them.

Rebuke to the Leaders

Psalm 82 constitutes a strong reprimand to leaders, who have—but fail to exercise—the influence and power to change the situation of the “poor and fatherless; . . . the afflicted and needy” (*Ps. 82:3, NKJV*).

The Psalms describe a meeting in which leaders are scolded for their negligence and indifference toward the oppressed. They “judge unjustly, and show partiality to the wicked” (*Ps. 82:2, NKJV*). Are some leaders any less guilty of these crimes today? Is not the suffering of the poor and the needy the result of corruption? Also, does not our own selfishness and greed cause us to focus on ourselves and our families and forget those around us who need our support? Charity should start at home, within our own families and lives. We should teach our children always to be kind and generous to those who are in need.

The psalmist reminds us that we are “gods” and “children of the Most High” (*Ps. 82:6, NKJV*). God created humans in His image and likeness (*Gen. 1:26*), which means we are intelligent beings with a moral conscience. Therefore, we should support the afflicted, the stranger, and the needy. Whatever our sphere—whether the neighborhood or the workplace—we should strive to be a source of help to those in need.

God’s Judgment

Thursday’s study invites us to consider the plight of the oppressed within the context of the final judgment in the heavenly sanctuary (*Ps. 96:6–10; Ps. 99:1–4; and Ps. 132:7–9, 13–18*) and the great controversy between God and Satan, as depicted in the books of Daniel and Revelation especially.

Daniel 7 reveals two intentions of the pre-Advent judgment in heaven: to punish the oppressor (*Dan. 7:26*) and to vindicate the oppressed (*Dan. 7:22*). The judgment confirms that God’s actions are in favor of those who are righteous.

In the book of Revelation, the judgment transpires in the sanctuary. In Revelation 6, we learn that “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God” are “under the altar” (*Rev. 6:9, NKJV*). They receive white

robes while they wait for the final action of the Lord to redeem them from death.

Revelation 8 starts with the vision of the seven trumpets (*Rev. 8:2*), which are given to the seven angels who stand near the golden altar “before the throne” of God (*Rev. 8:3*). The trumpets are a symbol of the judgment of the Creator against those powers who have persecuted God’s people throughout the long centuries of human history (see the seven seals of Revelation 6 and 7). The sanctuary is the place where the Lord acts on behalf of His people to save and protect them from their oppressors. So, it’s no coincidence that the seven last plagues given to the seven angels are delivered from the temple, the seat of God’s judgment (*Rev. 15:5, 6*).

Thus, when the book of Psalms expresses the certainty that believers can pray to Heaven for deliverance, this statement is a serious indictment against the oppressors of God’s people and a source of faith for the oppressed. “Let us go into His tabernacle; let us worship at His footstool. Arise, O LORD, to Your resting place, You and the ark of Your strength” (*Ps. 132:7, 8, NKJV*).

The Bible truth in this verse reveals a fact we would do well to meditate upon as faithful believers. Yes, we should do all in our power to help and support the needy, the widows, the orphans. But we must bear in mind that the final and complete solution to all oppression and suffering will come from heaven. We must not be deceived by the idea that the church can achieve social justice on earth, or that the main goal of the church is to fight political battles in an attempt to solve all the injustice in the world. That kind of complicated issue can be totally solved only by the Lord of hosts. Our faith should be focused on the promise of divine action on our behalf and not on the illusory strength of human power, which is a mirage at best.

Part III: Life Application

God is the shelter and refuge of those who are in trouble, but He also is the divine Warrior who fights for the oppressed. Furthermore, He is a proactive leader. Thus, we should be proactive in confronting the social problems that face us today in the world. For sure, we cannot solve all of these problems, but we can strive to have a positive impact on our community and on the lives of the vulnerable and oppressed around us: the poor, the outcast, and the persecuted. We can do meaningful and life-changing work for those minorities who have been marginalized by society, just as Jesus did on behalf of the tax collectors, the sinners (*Matt. 9:10*), the prostitutes (*Luke 7:37–39*), and the outcasts (*Matt. 15:21–28*) in His time.

The psalmist’s rebuke for community and political leaders (*Psalm 82*) also includes us if we are indifferent to the suffering or injustices of society and fail to address or alleviate them. Finally, we must remember that the final

solution for the evils of our unjust world will come from the heavenly sanctuary. Let's do our part, trusting in the Divine Warrior for the final outcome of justice.

Notes

Your Mercy Reaches Unto the Heavens



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 136, Psalm 51, Psalm 130, Psalm 113, Psalm 123.*

Memory Text: “I will praise You, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing to You among the nations. For Your mercy reaches unto the heavens, and Your truth unto the clouds” (*Psalm 57:9, 10, NKJV*).

The psalmists realize that they are spiritually poor and have nothing good to offer to God; that is, they have nothing in and of themselves that would recommend them before God’s holy throne (*Ps. 40:17*). They understand that they, as do all of us, need grace, God’s grace.

In short, they need the gospel.

The Psalms stress the fact that people are fully dependent on God’s mercy. Fortunately, God’s mercy is everlasting, as evidenced in both God’s creation and the history of God’s people (*Psalm 136*). Before the everlasting God, human life is as transient as grass, but God pities humans and renews their strength (*Ps. 103:3, 5, 15*), and in Him they have the promise of eternity.

God’s people take comfort in the fact that the Lord is faithful to His covenant. The people’s appeals, no matter how pressing at times, are often filled with hope because they are directed to their compassionate heavenly Father (*Ps. 103:13, Ps. 68:5, Ps. 89:26*). Fresh experiences of God’s grace and love strengthen their resolve to worship and serve God and no one or nothing else.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 17.

His Mercy Endures Forever

Read Psalm 136. What thought predominates in this psalm? Where does the psalmist find evidence for his prevalent claim?

Psalm 136 summons God's people to praise the Lord for His mercy as revealed in creation (*Ps. 136:4–9*) and in Israel's history (*Ps. 136:10–22*). "Mercy" (Hebrew *khesed*, "steadfast love") conveys God's goodness and loyalty to His creation and to His covenant with Israel. The psalm shows that God's immense power and magnificence are grounded in His steadfast love.

The Lord is "the God of gods" and "the Lord of lords," which is a Hebrew idiom that means "the greatest God" (*Ps. 136:1–3*), not that there are other gods but that He is the only God.

The Lord's great wonders, which cannot be replicated by anyone else, are the undeniable demonstration of His dominion (*Ps. 136:4*). God created the heavens, the earth, and the heavenly bodies, which are worshiped by the pagans (*Deut. 4:19*). The Psalms, however, strip the pagan gods, and by extent every human-based source of confidence, of their authority. They are mere products of the creation. They are merely created things—not the Creator, a crucial distinction.

The image of the Lord's strong hand and outstretched arm (*Ps. 136:12*) stresses the efficacy of God's power and the far-reaching domain of His mercy.

God's mercy in creation and history should inspire His people to trust in Him and to remain faithful to His covenant. The refrain "For His mercy endures forever" is repeated 26 times in Psalm 136, thus reassuring the worshipers that the Lord does not change and will repeat His past favors to each new generation. God remembers His people (*Ps. 136:23*) and is faithful to His covenant of grace. The belief in the Lord's enduring mercy is at the core of biblical faith, which includes joyous worship and confidence, as well as reticence and repentance.

Psalm 136 closes with God's universal care of the world (*Ps. 136:23–25*). God's mercy is extended not only to Israel but to all creation. The psalm thus speaks of the universality of God's saving grace and exhorts the whole world to join Israel's praise of the Lord (*see also Luke 2:10, John 3:16, and Acts 15:17*).

How does the image of Jesus on the cross, dying as a Substitute for our sins, most powerfully reveal the great truth about God, that "His love endures forever"?

Create in Me a Clean Heart

Read Psalm 51:1–5. Why does the psalmist appeal to God’s mercy?

King David pours out his heart before the Lord, asking for the forgiveness of sin during the spiritually darkest moments in his life (*2 Samuel 12*). Forgiveness is God’s extraordinary gift of grace, the result of the “multitude of Your tender mercies” (*Ps. 51:1, NKJV*). King David appeals to God to deal with him not in accordance with what his sin deserves (*Ps. 103:10*) but in accordance with His divine character, namely His mercy, faithfulness, and compassion (*Ps. 51:1; Exod. 34:6, 7*).

Read Psalm 51:6–19. How is forgiveness of sin portrayed here? What is the goal of divine forgiveness?

Divine forgiveness involves more than a legal proclamation of innocence. It produces a profound change that reaches the most inner parts of human self (*Ps. 51:6, Heb. 4:12*). It brings about a new creation (*Ps. 51:10, John 3:3–8*). The Hebrew verb *bara'*, translated “create,” depicts divine creative power (*Gen. 1:1*). Only God can *bara'*; only God can produce a radical and lasting change in the repentant person’s heart (*2 Cor. 4:6*).

David asks for cleansing with hyssop (*Lev. 14:2–8, Ps. 51:7*). He feels that his guilt keeps him banned from the Lord’s presence in the same way as the leper is banned from the community while the state of uncleanness lasts (*Ps. 51:11*). He fears that sacrifices cannot restore him fully because there was no sacrifice that could atone for his pre-meditated sins of adultery and murder (*Exod. 21:14, Lev. 20:10*).

Only unconditional divine grace could accept David’s “broken and contrite heart” as a sacrifice and restore David back into harmony with God (*Ps. 51:16, 17*). By asking for cleansing with hyssop, he wants to return to God’s presence.

If God can forgive David for adultery, deception, and murder, what hope exists for you?

“If You, Lord, Should Mark Iniquities”

Read Psalm 130. How are the gravity of sin and hope for sinners portrayed?

The psalmist’s great affliction is related to his own and his people’s sins (*Ps. 130:3, 8*). The people’s sins are so grave that they threaten to separate the people from God forever (*Ps. 130:3*). Scripture speaks of the records of sins that are being kept for the Judgment Day (*Dan. 7:10, Rev. 20:12*) and of sinners’ names being removed from the book of life (*Exod. 32:32, Ps. 69:28, Rev. 13:8*).

The psalmist thus appeals to God’s forgiveness, which will eradicate the record of sins (*Ps. 51:1, 9; Jer. 31:34; Mic. 7:19*). He knows that “God is not angry by nature. His love is everlasting. His ‘anger’ is aroused only by man’s failure to appreciate His love. . . . The purpose of His anger is not to wound, but rather to heal man; not to destroy but to save His covenant people (*see Hos. 6:1, 2*).”—Hans K. LaRondelle, *Deliverance in the Psalms* (Berrien Springs, MI: First Impressions, 1983), pp. 180, 181. Remarkably, it is God’s readiness to forgive sins, and not to punish them, that inspires reverence of God (*Ps. 130:4, Rom. 2:4*). Genuine worship is built on admiration of God’s character of love, not on fear of punishment.

God’s children are called to wait on the Lord (*Ps. 27:14, Ps. 37:34*). The Hebrew *qawah*, “wait,” literally means “to stretch,” and is the root of the Hebrew word for “hope.” Thus, waiting for the Lord is not a passive surrender to miserable circumstances but rather a hopeful “stretching” or eager anticipation of the Lord’s intervention. The psalmist’s hope is grounded not in his personal optimism but in God’s Word (*Ps. 130:5*). Faithful waiting on the Lord is not in vain because after the dark night, the morning of divine deliverance comes.

See how the psalmist’s personal plea becomes that of the entire community (*Ps. 130:7, 8*). The individual’s well-being is inseparable from that of the whole people. Thus, one prays not only for himself but for the community. As believers, we are part of a community, and what impacts one part of the community impacts everyone.

Think about the question, “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (*Ps. 130:3, NKJV*). What does that mean to you personally? Where would you be if the Lord marked your iniquities?

Praise to the Majestic and Merciful God

Read Psalms 113 and 123. What two different aspects of God's character are depicted in these psalms?

Psalms 113 and 123 praise both the majesty and mercy of the Lord. The Lord's majesty is revealed in the greatness of His name and in the exalted place of His throne, which is above all nations and above the heavens (*Ps. 113:4, 5; Ps. 123:1*). “Who is like the LORD our God” (*Ps. 113:5, NKJV*) is a statement of faith that no power within or outside of the world can challenge the God of Israel.

The unapproachable heights where the Lord dwells are illustrated through the fact that the Lord is willing to “humble Himself” or “*stoops down* to look on the heavens and the earth” (see *Ps. 113:6, NIV*; emphasis supplied). God's abiding on high does not prevent Him from seeing what is occurring here below. The Lord's mercy is manifested in His gracious readiness to be involved with the world and to save the needy and poor from their troubles. His generous hand is obviously not hidden from His servants though His dwelling place is in the distant heavens.

God's greatness and care, which cannot be fully discerned in God's amazing transcendence, becomes explicit in God's deeds of mercy and compassion. The needy, the poor, and the oppressed might experience firsthand God's sovereign power in the remarkable reversals that He can perform in their favor. The exalted God manifests His greatness by using His power to exalt the downcast. The people are free to approach the Lord because His sovereign majesty and supremacy do not change the fact that He is their gracious Creator and Sustainer and that the people are His servants, His beloved children.

Worship is, thus, motivated, not only by God's magnificence but also by His goodness. Praise is not limited by time and space (*Ps. 113:2, 3*). God's greatness and mercy are best manifested in Jesus Christ, who was willing to stoop down from heaven and be brought as low as death on the cross in order to lift up fallen humanity (*Phil. 2:6–8*). Here, in the Cross, we have the greatest reasons possible to worship and praise God for what He had done for us.

Dwell on the Cross and what happened there for you personally. What has Jesus saved you from? Why is it so important to keep the Cross foremost in your mind?

Forget Not All His Benefits

Read Psalms 103. How is God's mercy portrayed here?

Psalm 103 enumerates the Lord's manifold blessings. The blessings include "all his benefits" (*Ps. 103:2*) for a flourishing life (*Ps. 103:3–6*). These blessings are grounded in God's gracious character and in His faithfulness to His covenant with Israel (*Ps. 103:7–18*). The Lord "remembers" human frailty and transience and has compassion on His people (*see Ps. 103:13–17*).

Remembering is more than mere cognitive activity. It involves a commitment that is expressed in action: God delivers and sustains His people (*Ps. 103:3–13*). The powerful images in Psalm 103:11–16 illustrate the immeasurable greatness of God's grace, which can be compared only to the infinite vastness of the heavens (*Isa. 55:9*).

How, then, should people respond to God's loving-kindness?

First, by blessing the Lord (*Ps. 103:1, 2*).

Blessing is generally understood as an act of bestowing material and spiritual benefits upon someone (*Gen. 49:25, Ps. 5:12*). Because God is the Source of all blessings, how can human beings bless God? An inferior can bless a superior as a means of thanking or praising him (*1 Kings 8:66, Job 29:13*). God blesses people by conferring good on them, and people bless God by praising the good in Him; that is, by revering Him for His gracious character.

Second, by remembering all His benefits and His covenant (*Ps. 103:2, 18–22*), just as the Lord remembers the feeble human condition and His covenant with His people (*Ps. 103:3–13*). Remembering is a crucial aspect of the relationship between God and His people. Just as God remembers His promises to the people, so the people are indebted to remember God's faithfulness and respond to God with love and obedience.

With this idea in mind, these famous words of Ellen G. White are so appropriate: "It would be well for us to spend a thoughtful hour each day in contemplation of the life of Christ. We should take it point by point, and let the imagination grasp each scene, especially the closing ones. As we thus dwell upon His great sacrifice for us, our confidence in Him will be more constant, our love will be quickened, and we shall be more deeply imbued with His spirit. If we would be saved at last, we must learn the lesson of penitence and humiliation at the foot of the cross."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 83.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Sinner’s Need of Christ,” pp. 17–22, in *Steps to Christ*.

In the Psalms, the voices of God’s people join as one in repeating the chorus “His mercy endures forever” in celebration of God’s eternal love (*Ps. 106:1, NKJV; Ps. 107:1, NKJV; Ps. 118:1–4, 29, NKJV; Psalm 136, NKJV*). “Not to praise God would mean to forget all His benefits, not to appreciate God’s gifts. Only those who praise do not forget. Thinking and speaking about God is not yet praising Him. Praise begins when one acknowledges God’s majesty and works and responds with adoration of His goodness, mercy, and wisdom.”—Hans LaRondelle, *Deliverance in the Psalms*, p. 178.

The significance of the solemn confession of God’s enduring mercy gains even deeper significance when we remember that God’s *khesed*—namely His covenantal loving-kindness and faithfulness—stands firm and unchanging amid human sin and rebellion against God.

“We have sinned against Him, and are undeserving of His favor; yet He Himself has put into our lips that most wonderful of pleas, ‘Do not abhor us, for Thy name’s sake; do not disgrace the throne of Thy glory; remember, break not Thy covenant with us.’ Jer. 14:21. When we come to Him confessing our unworthiness and sin, He has pledged Himself to give heed to our cry. The honor of His throne is staked for the fulfillment of His word unto us.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 148.

Experiencing God’s graciousness to him (*Ps. 103:2*) encourages the psalmist to say that “the LORD executes righteousness and justice for *all* who are oppressed” (*Ps. 103:6, NKJV*; emphasis supplied). Thus, the final aim of the psalmist’s personal testimony, and praise of God’s mercy in his life, is to reassure others of God’s loving-kindness so that they, too, can open their hearts to God and receive His saving grace and praise God (*Ps. 9:11, 12; Ps. 22:22–27; Ps. 66:16*).

Discussion Questions:

- ① What are the practical implications of the fact that God’s mercy is everlasting for the people’s salvation? Why does this not mean that one can continue sinning because God’s mercy is forever?**
- ② How do we reconcile God’s forgiveness of our sins with the idea of God’s judgment on sin?**
- ③ How do the expressions of God’s mercy in the New Testament fit with those in the Psalms (*Eph. 2:4, 5; 1 Tim. 1:16; Titus 3:5; Heb. 4:16*)?**

Burden Is Lifted: Part 3

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

On a Friday evening, Sekule was waiting outside the boys' dormitory at his high school in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was waiting for a boy who had insulted him, and he planned to beat him up.

As he waited, a friend offered him cognac. He drank and, after many more drinks, passed out in a drunken stupor. In the morning, he knew that his friends would tease him mercilessly for not getting revenge. He decided to hide for the day. But where? Then he remembered the invitation from his Adventist teacher to go to church. It was Sabbath morning.

Sekule's hair was long and greasy. He hadn't washed it for a month. His breath reeked. But he went to church. When he arrived, he looked carefully for a place to sit. He had heard that Adventists celebrated "Sweet Sabbath" orgies every week, and he didn't want to be found sitting next to a grandmother. Spotting an attractive young woman, he sat down near her.

When the church pastor began to preach, Sekule's mouth dropped open in surprise. The pastor was giving Bible answers to his questions about God and hell. A huge burden was lifted from his heart as he heard that God, indeed, is love (*1 John 4:8*), desires to save every sinner (*Luke 19:10*), and will cast no one into an eternal hell (*Malachi 4:1, 3; Psalm 37:10, 11*).

After the sermon, someone invited Sekule to evangelistic meetings, and he went. At the end of the meetings, he asked the church pastor, "Tell me, please, what am I allowed to do, and what am I not allowed to do?"

"You can do whatever you want," the pastor said.

"Don't talk that way," Sekule said. "Tell me what I can and cannot do."

"You cannot work on Sabbath anymore," the pastor said.

"OK, done."

"You cannot go to school on Sabbath anymore."

"OK, done."

"You cannot fight anymore."

"OK, done."

"You cannot eat unclean meat."

"OK. I won't eat unclean meat."

"Actually, we suggest that you not eat any meat at all."

"OK, I won't eat meat anymore."

From that day, Sekule never worked or went to school on Sabbath. He never fought, and he never ate meat. He was baptized six months later, at the age of 18. But he accepted Adventist teachings on the spot—all because his questions of God and hell had been answered from the Bible.

SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro. Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Psalm 51, Psalm 103, Psalm 113, Psalm 123, Psalm 130, Psalm 136*

The definition of the word *mercy*, as given by the *Oxford Language Dictionary*, is as follows: “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.” The scriptural examples provided above reflect this definition.

Mercy is an astounding word that inspires the human spirit with hope and motivation. Anyone suffering the consequences of poor decisions feels the crushing weight of guilt dissipate when shown mercy and grace. When a deadline is extended or a debt forgiven, we experience overwhelming relief and gratitude at the proffered mercy.

This week, we will learn about the mercy of the Creator, as revealed in six different psalms. Mercy in the Psalms is depicted in its highest manifestation: the mercy of the Holy One to the sinner—the mercy of a God ready to forgive and redeem because of His grace.

When we read these six psalms in the original Hebrew, we discover that the psalmists used four different Hebrew words to refer to what we call “mercy.” Understanding these four words and their implications will give us a deeper understanding of the love of God. As we examine these Hebrew terms, let us ponder how the insights they afford us enhance our personal concept of “mercy.”

Part II: Commentary

Hesed

Hesed is the most common Hebrew word used for “mercy” in the Old Testament. It is better understood as “loving kindness.” Psalm 109:12, 16 connects *hesed* with compassion to the poor, the fatherless, and the needy. Because God saves His people from disasters and oppressors, the psalmist praises His name for His merciful actions (*Ps. 31:7, 21; Ps. 32:10; Ps. 57:3; Ps. 59:10; Ps. 94:18; Ps. 143:12*).

With this context in mind, let’s begin our study of *hesed*, or mercy, by looking at how it relates to deliverance. The psalmist asks for mercy during calamity, persecution, wandering in the desert, illness, storm, or bondage (*Ps. 57:1–4, Ps. 23:6, Ps. 40:11*). The narrator of the Psalms also considers *hesed* a delivering power, or as the ability to deliver (*Ps. 31:16, 17; Ps. 94:18; Ps. 109:26; Ps. 62:11, 12; Ps. 59:11, 17*). Thus, *hesed* is, in essence, the redemptive act of God on behalf of His people. In Psalm

119, the writer asks God to spare, or deliver, him according to His *hesed*.

We also see *hesed* used in relation to protection. In Psalm 36:10, 11 and Psalm 32:10, the writer makes a plea for *hesed*, or God's protection, from the wicked and the arrogant. *Hesed* also is identified with the faithfulness of God (*see Psalm 85 and Psalm 90*).

Additionally, in Psalm 6:4, *hesed* safeguards existence. Elsewhere, the psalmist appeals to the Lord to preserve him (*Ps. 119:88, 149*), recognizing His loving precepts as an important factor in the preservation and restoration of life (*Ps. 119:159*).

Finally, *hesed* is eternal (*Ps. 89:2, 28, 33; Ps. 103:17; Ps. 138:8*) because it's part of the character of the Almighty. This assurance is good news to the believer. "For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations" (*Ps. 100:5, NKJV; see Ps. 106:1, Ps. 107:1*).

Psalms also tells us that the one who requests God's *hesed* is in a good relationship with Him. Believers should express trust in God (*Ps. 31:14, 17; Ps. 119:41, 42; Ps. 143:8*) and hope (*Ps. 33:18, 22; Ps. 147:11*) in order to become the recipients of His mercy. The gracious mercy of God is given to those who wait on the Lord. Moreover, faith is a condition of receiving God's *hesed*.

Raham

Psalm 51:1 uses three words for mercy:

"Have mercy [*hanan*] upon me, O God,
according to Your lovingkindness [*hesed*];
according to the multitude of Your tender mercies [*raham*],
blot out my transgressions" (*NKJV*).

Raham comes from a Hebrew noun that means "womb, belly" (*Gen. 29:31, Ps. 22:9*), a word that contains within it the idea of a mother's tender care for her baby. *Raham* also represents an emotion that stands in contrast to anger (*Amos 1:11, Zech. 1:12–17*). This emotion is a kindness that far exceeds what someone deserves (*Gen. 43:14, 1 Kings 8:50*). In this context, *raham* means to "show compassion, favor" (*Neh. 1:11, Ps. 106:46*), as in someone with power in a superior position who decides to show favor to a subordinate. This explanation is the quintessence of God's mercy to us.

God's mercy "signifies a warm compassion, a compassion which goes the second mile, which is ready to forgive sin, to replace judgment with grace."—*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Exegesis*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), vol. 3, p. 1091. What is more, the Lord shows His compassion to those who are sin-damaged and who have failed Him. Though we are undeserving of His mercy, He uplifts us by His grace and restores us to His favor.

Hanan

Hanan is a verb that means “favor, to be gracious to, generous toward, to take pity on.” Usually, *hanan* is used in the idiom “to find favor in the eyes of someone else” (*Gen. 39:7, Ruth 2:13, 1 Sam. 20:3*). This meaning is applied to the relationship between God and His people. *Hanan* is used primarily with God as its subject. It reveals God’s disposition and actions toward His creatures. God freely bestows His favor on willing recipients (*Gen. 6:8; Prov. 3:3, 4; Isa. 30:19*); but He can withhold His grace when the response to His offer is spurned (*Jer. 16:13*) or when there’s no indication of repentance on the part of His people (*Neh. 9:17, 31*).

It’s common in Psalms to find the plea “be gracious to me” (*Ps. 4:1, ESV*). The psalmist makes this plea because he knows that the Lord is gracious (*Ps. 86:15–17*) and hears the believer’s entreaty (*Ps. 6:9; Ps. 28:2, 6*). The Creator graciously provides food (*Ps. 111:4, 5*), a good harvest (*Ps. 67:1, 6*), vindication (*Ps. 103:6–8*), and especially, as we have studied this week, forgiveness (*Ps. 51:1; Ps. 123:3*).

Let’s look at Psalm 103 to consider what the psalmist has to say further about the nature of the Lord’s mercy:

“The LORD is merciful [*raham*] and gracious [*hanan*],
slow to anger, and abounding in mercy [*hesed*].
He will not always strive with us,
nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor punished us according to our iniquities” (*Ps. 103:8–10, NKJV*).

As we can see, the Psalter teaches us that God’s love is compassionate, tender, boundless, and infinite.

How do God’s followers manifest and demonstrate His mercy to others? Scripture uses *hanan* to reflect a person’s kindness to a neighbor, specifically in aiding the poor (*Prov. 28:8*), showing compassion for those who suffer (*Job 19:21*), and taking care of the young (*Deut. 28:50*). Such actions are not isolated but a way of life for the consecrated believer (*Prov. 14:21*). Psalms clearly delineates the divine expectation that God’s followers will be merciful, for “the righteous shows mercy and gives” (*Ps. 37:21, NKJV*) and “is ever merciful, and lends” (*Ps. 37:26, NKJV*). Such a spirit of generosity typically characterizes the righteous (*Ps. 112:4, 5*). The lesson is clear: we should be kind to others if we want God to be merciful to us. As Psalm 123:2 states:

“Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters,
as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
until He has mercy [*hanan*] on us” (*NKJV*).

Selihah

“There is forgiveness [*selihah*] with You” (*Ps. 130:4, NKJV*). This expression comes from the Hebrew verb *salah* (“pardon, forgive”). The Lord is the only subject of this verb in the entire Old Testament. *Selihah* means that forgiveness is an act made by God alone. The foundation of this forgiveness is the mercy of the Lord (*Ps. 86:5*).

Psalm 25:11–18 states that forgiveness is the removal of sins. Daniel would add that forgiveness also includes averting the punishment for sin (*Dan. 9:16*). Exodus 34:6–9 reminds us that God is “‘merciful [*rahah*] and gracious [*hanan*], longsuffering, and abounding in goodness [*hesed*] and truth, keeping mercy [*hesed*] for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, [and] by no means clearing the guilty’” (*NKJV*). Thus, David says that forgiveness requires a confession of guilt (*Ps. 32:2–5*). The Psalter also connects “forgiveness” with other words, such as purify (*Ps. 51:2*), conceal from (*Ps. 51:9*), and restore (*Ps. 103:3*).

Imbued with a spirit of contrition and humility, the psalmist implores God for His pardon in full assurance that his sin will be removed (*Ps. 25:11–18*). The psalmist praises God because He has been absolved (*Ps. 103:3, 4*). Thus, we may conclude that forgiveness comes to humanity only because of the *hesed* of God toward His creatures.

Part III: Life Application

There are clear lessons for our spiritual lives in the study of the Hebrew expressions for mercy that we have considered in our study this week:

1. The obvious lesson is that the Lord gives His amazing mercy to us, despite the fact that we don’t deserve it. The assurance of this gift should free us from anxiety, a guilty conscience, and the shadows of our past.
2. *Hesed* (mercy) is more than a tender feeling in God’s heart. It is deliverance and protection. It is real action on the part of God to His people.
3. The Lord’s compassion is eternal; that is, it’s always available to us. If we don’t avail ourselves of it, it’s because we are still in sin and not because we’ve exhausted the limits of God’s love.
4. Mercy (*rahah*) embodies the concept that the Greatest of All Beings is willing to bow down to lift us up and carry us in His arms. From His superior position, He condescends to show His compassion to us.
5. “To find favor before the eyes of Yahweh” implies that we are willing and open to receive God’s grace.
6. Finally, *selihah* provides us new insights into the depths and breadth of the loving-kindness of our Creator. But the most important idea it emphasizes is that we should be as merciful and kind to our neighbors as God is to us.

All these lessons are masterfully assembled together by Jesus in the parable of “the unforgiving servant” (*Matt. 18:23–35*). It illustrates the Old Testament *hesed* of God toward our desperate condition. The narrative suggests that we, the believers, are the cruel and unmerciful man of the parable. This sober realization should cause us to reflect with gratitude and humility upon the grace and mercy we have received freely from our heavenly Father.

Notes

Wisdom for Righteous Living



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Ps. 119:1–16, Psalm 90, John 3:16, Ps. 95:7–11, Psalm 141, Psalm 128.

Memory Text: “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12, NKJV).

As we have seen, God’s grace provides for the forgiveness of sin, and it creates a new heart in the repentant sinner, who now lives by faith.

God’s Word also provides instructions for righteous living (Ps. 119:9–16). Keeping God’s law is by no means a legalistic observance of rules but life in an intimate relationship with God, a life full of blessings (Ps. 119:1, 2; Psalm 128).

However, the life of the righteous person is not without temptations. Sometimes the righteous can be tempted by the cunning nature of sin (Ps. 141:2–4) and even fall to that temptation. God allows times of testing to let His children’s faithfulness (or unfaithfulness) be clearly revealed. If God’s children heed God’s instruction and admonishment, their faith will be purified and their trust in the Lord strengthened. Wisdom for righteous living is gained through the dynamics of life with God amid temptations and challenges. Thus, the prayer that God would teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom (Ps. 90:12) reflects an ongoing commitment to walk in faithfulness to the Lord.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 24.

Your Word I Have Hidden in My Heart

Read Psalm 119:1–16, 161–168. How should we keep God’s commandments, and what are the blessings that come from doing that?

The Bible depicts a daily life of faith as a pilgrimage (“walk”) with God in His path of righteousness. The life of faith is maintained by walking “in the law of the LORD” (*Ps. 119:1, NKJV*) and by walking “in the light of Your countenance” (*Ps. 89:15, NKJV*). These are by no means two different walks. Walking in the light of God’s countenance implies upholding God’s law. Equally, walking “in the law of the LORD” involves seeking God with the whole heart (*Ps. 119:1, 2, 10*).

Being “undefiled in the way” is another way the Psalms describe the righteous life (*Ps. 119:1*). “Undefiled” describes a sacrifice “without blemish” that is acceptable to God (*Exod. 12:5*). Likewise, the life of the righteous individual is a living sacrifice (*Rom. 12:1*). Thus, a love for sin must not defile it. A life devoted to God is also a “perfect way,” meaning that the person assumes a right direction in life that is pleasing to God (*Ps. 101:2, 6; see also Ps. 18:32*).

Keeping God’s commandments has nothing to do with a legalistic observance of divine rules. On the contrary, it consists of “a good understanding” of the difference between right and wrong and good and evil (*Ps. 111:10; see also 1 Chron. 22:12*), and involves the whole person, not merely outward actions. Being “undefiled,” keeping God’s commandments and seeking God with the whole heart, are inseparable attitudes in life (*Ps. 119:1, 2*).

God’s commandments are a revelation of God’s will for the world. They instruct people on how to become wise and to live in freedom and peace (*Ps. 119:7–11, 133*). The psalmist delights in the law because the law assures him of God’s faithfulness (*Ps. 119:77, 174*).

“Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble” (*Ps. 119:165, NKJV*). The image of stumbling depicts moral failure. As the lamp to the psalmist’s feet (*Ps. 119:105*), God’s Word protects us from temptations (*Ps. 119:110*).

How did Christ demonstrate the power of God’s Word in His life (*Matt. 4:1–11*)? What should this tell us about the power that comes from a heart set on obeying God’s law?

Teach Us to Number Our Days

Read Psalm 90, Psalm 102:11, and Psalm 103:14–16. What is the human predicament?

Fallen human existence is but a vapor in the light of eternity. A thousand years in God's sight is "like a watch in the night," which lasted three or four hours (*Ps. 90:4, NKJV*). Compared to divine time, a human lifetime flies away (*Ps. 90:10*). The strongest among humans are analogous to the weakest among plants (*Ps. 90:5, 6; Ps. 103:15, 16*). Yet, even that short life is filled with labor and sorrow (*Ps. 90:10*). Even secular people, who have no belief in God, mourn and lament the shortness of life, especially in contrast to the eternity that's out there and that, they know, threatens to go on without them.

Psalm 90 places the human predicament in the context of God's care for people as their Creator. The Lord has been the dwelling place of His people in all generations (*Ps. 90:1, 2*). The Hebrew word *ma'on*, "dwelling place," portrays the Lord as the shelter or refuge of His people (*Ps. 91:9*).

God restrains His righteous wrath and extends His grace anew. The psalmist exclaims, "Who knows the power of Your anger?" (*Ps. 90:11, NKJV*), implying that no one has ever experienced the full effect of God's anger against sin, and so, there is hope for people to repent and gain wisdom for righteous living.

Wisdom in the Bible depicts not merely intelligence but reverence for God. The wisdom that we need is knowing how "to number our days" (*Ps. 90:12*). If we can number our days, it means that our days are limited and that we know that they are limited. Wise living means living with an awareness of life's transience that leads to faith and obedience. This wisdom is gained only through repentance (*Ps. 90:8, 12*) and God's gifts of forgiveness, compassion, and mercy (*Ps. 90:13, 14*).

Our fundamental problem stems not from the fact that we are created as human beings but from sin and from what sin has wrought in our world. Its devastating effects are seen everywhere and in every person.

Thanks to Jesus, however, a way has been made for us out of our human predicament (*John 1:29, John 3:14–21*). Otherwise, we would have no hope at all.

No matter how quickly our life passes, what promise do we have in Jesus? (See *John 3:16*.) What hope would we have without Him?

The Lord's Test

Read Psalm 81:7, 8; Psalm 95:7–11; and Psalm 105:17–22. What does divine testing involve in these texts?

Meribah is the place where Israel tested God by challenging His faithfulness and power to provide for their needs (*Exod. 17:1–7; Ps. 95:8, 9*). Psalm 81 makes an intriguing reversal and interprets the same event as the time when God tested Israel (*Ps. 81:7*). And, by their disobedience and lack of trust (*Ps. 81:11*), the people failed God's test.

The reference to Meribah conveys a twofold message. First, God's people must not repeat the mistakes of past generations. Instead, they are to trust God and to walk in His way (*Ps. 81:13*). Second, although the people failed the test, God came to their rescue when they were in trouble (*Ps. 81:7*). God's saving grace in the past gives an assurance of God's grace to new generations.

Psalm 105 shows that the trials were God's means of testing Joseph's trust in God's foretelling of his future (*Gen. 37:5–10, Ps. 105:19*). The Hebrew *tsarap*, “tested,” in verse 19 conveys a sense of “purging,” “refining,” or “purifying.” Thus, the goal of God's testing of Joseph's faith was to remove any doubt in God's promise and to strengthen Joseph's trust in God's guidance.

The goal of divine discipline is to strengthen God's children and to prepare them for the fulfillment of the promise, as shown in Joseph's example (*Ps. 105:20–22*).

However, rejection of God's instruction results in growing stubbornness and hardening of an obstinate person's heart.

“God requires prompt and unquestioning obedience of His law; but men are asleep or paralyzed by the deceptions of Satan, who suggests excuses and subterfuges, and conquers their scruples, saying as he said to Eve in the garden: ‘Ye shall not surely die.’ Disobedience not only hardens the heart and conscience of the guilty one, but it tends to corrupt the faith of others. That which looked very wrong to them at first, gradually loses this appearance by being constantly before them, till finally they question whether it is really sin and unconsciously fall into the same error.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 146.

What has been your own experience with how sin hardens the heart? Why should that thought drive us to the Cross, where we can find the power to obey?

Deceitfulness of the Wicked Way

Read Psalm 141. What does the psalmist pray for?

Psalm 141 is a prayer for protection from temptations from within and from without. The psalmist is not only endangered by the schemes of the wicked (*Ps. 141:9, 10*) but also is tempted to act like the wicked. The first weak point is self-control in speech, and the psalmist prays that the Lord will keep watch over the door of his lips (*Ps. 141:3*). This image alludes to the guarding of city gates that, in biblical times, protected the city.

The temptation is also whether God's child will yield to the counsel of the righteous or be lured by the delicacies of the wicked (*Ps. 141:4, 5*). The psalmist depicts his heart as a primary threat because there the real battle happens. Only unceasing prayer of complete trust and devotion to God can save God's child from temptation (*Ps. 141:1, 2*).

Read Psalm 1:1 and Psalm 141:4. How is the progressive and cunning character of temptation depicted here?

Psalm 141:4 depicts the progressive nature of temptation. First, the heart is inclined toward evil. Second, it practices evil deeds (the meaning in Hebrew underlines the repetitive character of the action). Third, the heart eats of the delicacies of the wicked, namely, accepts their evil practices as something desirable.

Likewise, in Psalm 1:1 the temptation comes to prevent God's child from walking in the Lord's way by causing him to walk with the wicked, stand in the path of sinners, and, finally, sit with the scornful. Sinners, wicked, and scornful: we are not to be like them or let them lead us away from the Lord.

These psalms describe the progressive, alluring, and cunning character of temptation, which underscores the fact that only total dependency on the Lord can secure one's victory. They stress the importance of the words that one speaks, and listens to, amid temptation. The end of both the wicked and the righteous should teach the people to seek wisdom from God (*Ps. 1:4–6, Ps. 141:8–10*). Yet, in both psalms, the final vindication of God's children remains in the future. This means that the believers are called to patiently trust God and to wait upon Him.

Blessings of Righteous Living

Read Psalm 1:1–3, Psalm 112:1–9, and Psalm 128. What blessings are promised for those who revere the Lord?

Of the many blessings promised to those who revere the Lord, peace is perhaps one of the greatest. Psalm 1 depicts the righteous by a simile of a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruits in season and whose leaf does not wither (*Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:7, 8; Ezek. 47:12*). This simile identifies the source of all blessings, namely, abiding in God's presence in His sanctuary and enjoying uninterrupted and loving relationship with God. Unlike the wicked, who are portrayed as chaff, with no stability, place, and future, the righteous are like a fruitful tree with roots, a place near God and eternal life.

Psalm 128:2, 3 evokes the blessings of the Messianic kingdom, where sitting under one's own vine and fig tree is a symbol of peace and prosperity (*Mic. 4:4*). The blessing of peace upon Jerusalem (*Ps. 122:6–8; Ps. 128:5, 6*) conveys hope in the Messiah, who will end evil and restore peace in the world.

"In the Bible the inheritance of the saved is called 'a country.' Hebrews 11:14–16. There the heavenly Shepherd leads His flock to fountains of living waters. The tree of life yields its fruit every month, and the leaves of the tree are for the service of the nations. There are ever-flowing streams, clear as crystal, and beside them waving trees cast their shadows upon the paths prepared for the ransomed of the Lord. There the wide-spreading plains swell into hills of beauty, and the mountains of God rear their lofty summits. On those peaceful plains, beside those living streams, God's people, so long pilgrims and wanderers, shall find a home."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 675.

The New Testament describes the fulfillment of that hope in Christ's second advent and the creation of the new world (*Matt. 26:29, Revelation 21*). Therefore, while the righteous receive many blessings in this life, the fullness of God's favor awaits them when God's kingdom is fully restored at the end of time.

Why is the Cross, and what happened there, the guarantee of the promises found in the New Testament of what God has in store for us? How can we get comfort from those promises even now?

Further Thought: In these modern times, obtaining wisdom seems not to be so desirable as achieving happiness. People would rather be happy than wise. However, can we truly be happy and live a fulfilled life without godly wisdom? The Psalms clearly say that we cannot. The good news is that we are not asked to choose between wisdom and happiness. Godly wisdom brings genuine happiness.

A simple example from the Hebrew language can illustrate this point. In Hebrew, the word “step” in plural (*'ashurey*) sounds very much like the word “happiness” (*'ashrey*). Although we miss this association in English translations, it conveys a powerful message: “steps” holding to God’s path lead to a “happy” life (*Ps. 1:1, Ps. 17:5, Ps. 37:31, Ps. 44:18, Ps. 89:15, Ps. 119:1*). In the Bible, neither wisdom nor happiness are an abstract concept, but a real experience.

They are found in relationship with God, which consists of revering, praising, finding strength in, and trusting God. Psalm 25:14 says that “the secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant” (*NKJV*).

“Thank God for the bright pictures which He has presented to us. Let us group together the blessed assurances of His love, that we may look upon them continually: The Son of God leaving His Father’s throne, clothing His divinity with humanity, that He might rescue man from the power of Satan; His triumph in our behalf, opening heaven to men, revealing to human vision the presence chamber where the Deity unveils His glory; the fallen race uplifted from the pit of ruin into which sin had plunged it, and brought again into connection with the infinite God, and having endured the divine test through faith in our Redeemer, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and exalted to His throne—these are the pictures which God would have us contemplate.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 118.

Discussion Questions:

- ① How can God’s Word become the source of one’s delight and not merely instruction? How is feeding on God’s Word related to abiding in Jesus Christ, the Word (*John 1:1; John 15:5, 7*)?**
- ② What happens when people consciously and constantly reject God’s teaching (*Psalm 81, Psalm 95*)? Why do you think that happens?**
- ③ Why can the way of the wicked sometimes appear more desirable than the counsel of the righteous (*Psalm 141*)? That is, how do we deal with the apparent fact that oftentimes the wicked seem to be doing very well?**

Sabbath Farewell Party: Part 4

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Two weeks after Sekule's baptism, the Bosnian War erupted. Sekule fled his boarding high school in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and went into hiding for 15 days.

When he returned to the dormitory to retrieve his possessions, he found the building had been torched by soldiers. A small library of religious books that he had collected while seeking to find truth had been dumped in the middle of his room and set on fire. He had lost everything. He returned to his home village in Montenegro.

News that Sekule had joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church did not sit well with his family. Father could not understand why he had stopped eating meat and took him to a physician. Mother thought a spell had been cast on her son and sought help from someone who practiced black magic. When their attempts failed, they sent Sekule to the military. It was 1992, and the Bosnian War was raging. To enlist a son was to send him to war.

In those days, families threw big celebrations for newly enlisted soldiers. Sekule's parents planned his party for a Sabbath in December. Two hundred guests were expected. But Sekule went to church.

When the winter sun set around 4 p.m., he returned home. He didn't know what to expect. He thought that the house would be filled with relatives from across the country and beyond. He thought he would face criticism for not only arriving late to his own party but also for showing disrespect as the eldest grandson.

He found his grandfather on the front porch.

"Did the people come?" Sekule asked.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"No one knows why."

Then people started coming. Sekule asked them, "Why are you coming now?"

They all replied in the same way: "Somebody told us to come after 5 p.m."

"Who told you?" Sekule asked.

No one knew.

At that moment, Sekule understood that God would protect him. He went to the military.

SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro.

Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that

help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Psalms 1, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133*

How do we define wisdom? A modern dictionary defines wisdom as “the body of knowledge and principles that develops within a specified society or period.” Wisdom also relates to the “soundness of an action or decision.” We also use wisdom to mean “the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment.”—*Oxford Language Dictionary*. Wisdom relates to knowledge, including the ability to make a wise decision.

When we meet someone with vast knowledge in a specific area of science or literature, we call him or her “wise.” Wisdom in our common understanding today often refers to possessing expertise or knowledge in a specialized area. For some people, wisdom encompasses secret knowledge and the ability to decipher mysteries or reach a higher spiritual level.

This week, we consider what wisdom is from a biblical perspective. Our study will not only define wisdom according to Scripture but also will attempt to distill principles of wisdom for daily life. After all, what is biblical wisdom if not practical knowledge and discernment to live every day according to the precepts of Christ? The aim of our study is to grasp and apply this biblical wisdom to our lives.

Part II: Commentary

The Biblical Definition of Wisdom

The key text to understanding wisdom is Proverbs 1:7 (*see also Prov. 9:10*): “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (*NKJV*). The foundation of biblical wisdom is the “fear of the LORD,” which the Scriptures identify as reverent obedience (*Eccles. 12:13, Deut. 6:2, Deut. 8:6, Deut. 31:12*). Deuteronomy 10:12, 13 equates the “fear the LORD” with expressions such as “to walk in all His ways,” “to love Him,” “to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,” and “to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes” (*NKJV*). Taken together, these expressions stress the necessity of cultivating an intimate and deep experience with the Creator in one’s daily life.

Proverbs 8:13 provides an additional perspective on wisdom by way of affirming what it is through a statement of what it is not: “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse

mouth I hate” (*NKJV*). Note, again, that “the beginning of knowledge” is connected with practical and moral actions.

Thus, we can say that biblical wisdom is “a way of viewing and approaching life, which involved instructing the young in proper conduct and morality and answering the philosophical questions about life’s meaning.”—C. H. Bullock, “Wisdom,” Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, accessed on May 19, 2022, www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/wisdom.html. Our thoughts and our faith in God are revealed through loving-kindness and a godly life. There is no dichotomy between faith and deeds. Such a distinction is both artificial and arbitrary, resulting from the influence of Greek philosophy. For the people of the Old Testament, wisdom manifested itself in a mature faith that guided one to make right choices and to be kind and fair to one’s neighbor.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (*James 1:17, NKJV*). Wisdom is a gift from God that is given to those whom He chooses and to those who ask Him for it in humble faith (*1 Kings 3:12, Ps. 51:6, Prov. 2:6, James 1:5–7*).

Features of Wisdom

Biblical wisdom is chiefly recorded in the form of poetry. The books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are the representatives of wisdom literature in the Scriptures. Some authors include Song of Solomon, too, in this grouping (though, it must be noted, its inclusion is subject to debate).

The main themes of biblical wisdom are Creation, the Law, counsels for wise and mature living, the fear of God, and retribution. The book of Proverbs is, perhaps, the best-known example of wisdom literature in the Bible; chapters 1–9 depict the great value of wisdom. When these chapters are carefully read, one observes that the concept of wisdom comprises a set of teachings for living a godly life, with advice about how to avoid the snares of unrighteousness and the wicked. From chapters 10 onward, there are more than six hundred sayings, or “proverbs”—short sentences with practical advice applicable to various situations, such as marriage, love, relationships, financial issues, political matters, children, education, et cetera, in daily life.

In contrast to the practical advice of the Proverbs, the book of Job is more of a treatise on suffering, retribution, and vindication. These themes are concerned with wisdom but from God’s perspective. They unfold from the narrative of Job’s life and his troubles. This analysis is not philosophical but divine in nature. Chapter 28 is the core of the book, and it ends with the idea that reverence and obedience to God are central to wisdom: “‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding’ ” (*Job 28:28, NKJV*).

Wisdom in the Psalter

Many Bible scholars classify certain Psalms among the wisdom literature of the Scriptures. “Although the exact identification of sapiential psalms remains a moot point, the majority of scholars admit the influence of wisdom on Psalms 1, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133. Psalm 1 has a strong emphasis on law and conduct, and it opens the Psalms by placing a sapiential spin on the entire collection. Also, Psalm 19, with an emphasis on creation and law, definitely reveals a sapiential tone; and Psalm 119 exhales wisdom by offering the longest reflection on the torah.”—Elias Brasil de Souza, “Wisdom in Daniel,” in Benjamin Rojas, Teófilo Correa, Lael Caesar and Joel Turpo, eds., *The End from the Beginning: Festschrift Honoring Merling Alomía* (Lima, Peru: Universidad Peruana Union, 2015), pp. 267, 268.

Below we will examine the treatment of wisdom in the aforementioned psalms, as cited in the quotation above:

Psalm 1. This psalm presents two ways of life: the life of righteousness (*verses 2, 3*) and the life of wickedness (*verses 4, 5*). The song starts with a description of how the righteous go in the opposite direction from the unrighteous (*verse 1*). As a result of their choices, the wicked receive a very different destiny from the righteous (*verse 6*).

Psalm 19. This psalm is divided into two clear sections. The first section contains the revelation of God in the Creation (*verses 1–6*), and the second section contains His revelation in the Law (*verses 7–14*). These two themes are very important to an understanding and attainment of biblical wisdom. Both topics are an inspiration to the believer who aspires to be “blameless” and “innocent of great transgression” (*verse 13, NKJV*).

Psalm 32. This song provides a contrast between the repentant one and the wicked one (*verses 10, 11*). It also adopts the sapiential tone of instruction and teaching (*verses 8, 9*) that is common to wisdom literature (*Prov. 4:1–15, Prov. 6:20–23, Prov. 7:1–5*).

Psalm 34. Some portions of Psalm 34 are evocative of the practical advice that characterizes wisdom literature, as is seen in the tender call of the father to his son to desire long life, to pursue the fear of the Lord, and to flee from sin (*verses 11–14*). Subsequent to offering this advice, the psalmist describes the destiny of the faithful (*verses 15, 16, 21*). Doubtless, the best choice we can make in life is to walk in the way of wisdom.

Psalm 37. This psalm answers the big question: Why do the wicked prosper? Nowadays, we raise the same question. The answer provided is not philosophical in its analysis; rather, it is faith-based counsel for a righteous life. Carefully contemplate the timeless wisdom in this song!

Psalm 49. In the opening lines this song states: “My mouth shall speak wisdom, and the meditation of my heart shall give understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will disclose my dark saying on the harp” (*verses 3, 4, NKJV*). From there, the writer proceeds to describe the fate of the prosperous wicked (*verses 5–20*).

Psalm 73. The Hebrew people attempted to understand the origins of evil in this world and the injustice in society. They wrestled with whether or not divine retribution had failed. This issue presented no less a problem to them as it does to us today.

Psalm 112. This song depicts the blessings of fearing the Lord (*verse 1*). There are 16 blessings for those who are righteous (*verses 2–9*). A careful examination of these blessings will show that to fear the Lord is to aspire to the highest spiritual attainment in our daily lives. The psalmist ends with a short description of the dire fate of the wicked man in comparison to the righteous man.

Psalm 119. The longest psalm in the Psalter is about the *Torah* (Law), which comprises more than merely the Mosaic code. The Torah refers to the whole of Scripture. It changes the lives of those who grasp the teachings of God’s Word.

Psalm 127. Only five verses long, this psalm is focused on the Lord’s blessings upon the home and upon the children of those who trust in the Creator. Perhaps for this reason, the song is considered a sapiential expression. Wisdom must be the foundation upon which is laid the most precious treasure we have: our family.

Psalm 128. The six lines of this short psalm are classed among the writings of wisdom literature because they refer to God’s prosperity in the homes of everyone “who fears the LORD” (*verses 1, 4, NKJV*).

Psalm 133. Some may question the inclusion of this psalm in the sapiential literature of the Scriptures. But the expression “for the brethren to dwell together in unity” (*verse 1, NKJV*) infuses the verse with that characteristic tinge of biblical wisdom we have thus far identified as a distinguishing feature of wisdom literature. To be imbued with this spirit of brotherhood is the Almighty’s desire for us as His followers. Such unity is the practical evidence of a Christian life.

Part III: Life Application

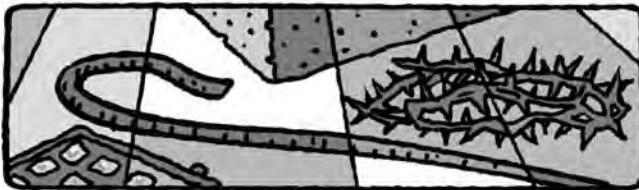
Biblical wisdom, as taught by the Old Testament, is an understanding of crucial salvific issues, such as our origins (Creation), the Law (the principles of God’s character in our daily life), the fear of God (a reverent love that results in joyful obedience), and retribution (the fate of the righteous

and the wicked). Wisdom also is practical knowledge that prepares us to live a mature and godly life in the home, within our neighborhoods, and at the workplace. Furthermore, biblical wisdom is godly advice for living harmoniously with our spouse and children. It equips us with principles that guide our use of money and many other aspects of daily existence.

Challenge your students to ponder the ways in which they can apply the lessons learned this week to the different circumstances of life. Remind them that to live in the fear of the Lord will bring great blessing (*Ps. 112:1*).

Notes

Blessed Is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 23, John 10:11–15, Psalm 22, Ps. 89:27–32, Col. 1:16, Psalm 2, Heb. 7:20–28.*

Memory Text: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes” (*Psalm 118:22, 23, NKJV*).

The Psalms testify about Christ’s person and ministry. Almost all aspects of His work in the plan of salvation are seen in the Psalms. In various ways, Christ’s life and work are prefigured and predicted in them, often with remarkable accuracy.

The topics revealed in the Psalms include Christ’s deity, His Sonship, His obedience, His zeal for God’s temple, His identity as the Good Shepherd, His betrayal, His suffering, His bones not being broken, His death, resurrection, ascension, priesthood, and kingship. It’s all there, as predicted many centuries before Jesus came in the flesh.

No wonder, for example, when talking about His ministry, Jesus pointed back to the Psalms when speaking to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (*Luke 24:44*). He wanted them to find in the Psalms evidence for who He was.

Some of the psalms that have a typological fulfillment in Christ include Psalms 24, 45, 72, and 101 (the ideal King and Judge), as well as Psalms 88 and 102 (prayers of the suffering servant of God).

In all the Psalms, through the psalmists’ laments, thanksgivings, praises, and cries for justice and deliverance, we can hear the echoes of Christ’s prayer for the salvation of the world.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 2.

Divine Self-Sacrificing Shepherd

Read Psalm 23; Psalm 28:9; Psalm 80:1; Psalm 78:52, 53; Psalm 79:13; and Psalm 100:3. How is the relationship between the Lord and His people portrayed in these texts?

The image of the Lord as Shepherd and God's people as the sheep of His pasture highlights God's guidance and sustaining care of His people and the people's dependence on God to meet all their needs. The image conveys the notion of closeness between God and His people because shepherds lived with their flocks and cared for each sheep individually. The pastoral imagery also underlines God's ownership of His flock, guaranteed by two strong bonds: creation (*Ps. 95:6, 7; Ps. 100:3*) and covenant (*Ps. 28:9, Heb. 13:20*).

The image of the divine Shepherd who leads Joseph like a flock (*Ps. 80:1*) perhaps alludes to Jacob's benediction of Joseph, which pictures God as the Shepherd of Israel, and so, appeals to this great promise and blessing (*Gen. 49:24*).

Kings were considered shepherds of their people (*2 Sam. 5:2*). Yet, only God truly deserves this title because most human kings did not live up to such a calling. Only Jesus did, which is why He is called the Good Shepherd.

Read John 10:11–15. What does Jesus say about Himself as the Good Shepherd?

The intimate bond between the divine Shepherd and His flock is seen in the flock's unmistakably knowing the Shepherd's voice (*John 10:4, 27*). To the current day, Middle Eastern shepherds can divide their flocks that have mingled simply by calling their sheep, who recognize and follow their shepherd's voice.

At times, God's flock suffers various afflictions that the people understand as the sign of God's discontent and abandonment. Yet, the Good Shepherd never forsakes His strayed sheep but searches to save them. This is a powerful image of God's relationship with His people. He is willing to die for His sheep (*John 10:11, 15*) and paradoxically become a sacrificial lamb on their behalf (*John 1:29*). Also, Jesus confirmed that He would call His sheep in other folds and unite them into one flock (*John 10:16*).

What are ways that you can on a daily and practical level take advantage of what is promised to us in having Jesus as our Good Shepherd?

The Suffering Messiah

Read Psalm 22 and Psalm 118:22. How was the Messiah treated by those He had come to save?

Many psalms express the agonizing feelings of utmost forsakenness of the suffering Messiah (*e.g. Psalm 42, Psalm 88, and Psalm 102*). Psalm 22 is a direct Messianic prophecy because many details in this psalm cannot be historically connected to King David but perfectly fit the circumstances of Christ's death. Jesus prayed with the words of Psalm 22:1 on the cross (*Matt. 27:46*).

The torment of Christ's separation from His Father, caused by Christ carrying the entire world's sins, can be measured only by the extent of their closeness, namely, their unparalleled oneness (*John 1:1, 2; John 10:30*). Yet, even the depths of inexplicable suffering could not break the unity between the Father and the Son. In His utter forsakenness, Christ unconditionally entrusts Himself to the Father, despite the utter depths of despair He faced.

"Upon Christ as our substitute and surety was laid the iniquity of us all. He was counted a transgressor, that He might redeem us from the condemnation of the law. The guilt of every descendant of Adam was pressing upon His heart. The wrath of God against sin, the terrible manifestation of His displeasure because of iniquity, filled the soul of His Son with consternation."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 753.

The threatening animal imagery of strong bulls, roaring lions, and dogs highlights the people's cruelty and animosity that Christ, who is compared to a harmless and helpless worm, met in His final hours. With amazing accuracy, Psalm 22 conveys the venomous remarks of the crowd that mocked Jesus with His own words to the Father (*Ps. 22:1, 8; Matt. 27:43*) and the soldiers dividing Jesus' garments (*Ps. 22:18, Matt. 27:35*). Little did the people understand then that the "worm" they sought to crush would become the chief "cornerstone" of the Temple and secure its foundation (*Ps. 118:22*).

However, the rejected Messiah became the Source of salvation for God's people after His resurrection from the dead (*Matt. 21:42, Acts 4:10–12*). Christ suffered the rejection of humanity, but God glorified His Son by making Him the living "chief cornerstone" of God's spiritual Temple (*Eph. 2:20–22, 1 Pet. 2:4–8*). For those who reject this Stone, namely, God's means of salvation, it will become the agent of judgment (*Isa. 8:14, Matt. 21:44*).

Jesus on the cross paid in Himself the penalty for every sin you have ever committed. How should the fact that He suffered on your behalf impact how you live now, that is, why you should find sin so abhorrent?

Forever Faithful to His Covenant

Read Psalm 89:27–32, 38–46 and Psalm 132:10–12. What is the Davidic covenant about? What seems to have endangered it?

The Davidic covenant contains God's promise of everlasting support of David's line and prosperity of God's people (*1 Sam. 7:5–16; Ps. 89:1–4, 19–37; Ps. 132:12–18*). The permanence of the covenant was established on God's solemn oath and the king's faithfulness to God. However, even the devoted kings, such as King David, were not always faithful to the Lord. Psalm 89 laments over the harsh reality that seems to indicate that the glorious promises of the Davidic covenant have been lost. Is Israel hopelessly deserted by God? The answer, of course, is—no!

God's wrath is, yes, an expression of divine judgment (*Ps. 38:1, Ps. 74:1*). Yet, it does not last forever because God's everlasting love forgives people's sins when people repent. However, while it lasts, God's discontent with His erring people is serious. The people feel the bitter consequences of their disobedience and realize the gravity of their sins (*Ps. 89:38–46*). Yet, they ask, "How long?" appealing to the passing character of God's wrath (*Ps. 89:46*). Renewed hope springs from new assurance in God's faithfulness to "remember" His grace (*Ps. 89:47, 50*).

In short, although the human component of the covenant failed, the people could rest in the promise of God's unchanging purposes through the Messiah, who embodies all righteousness and salvation of Israel and of the whole world. That is, in the end, God will prevail, and His eternal kingdom will be established forever—but only because of Jesus and not because of God's people.

Jesus Christ is the Son of David and the Messiah (*Matt. 1:1, Heb. 1:8*). He is called "the firstborn over all creation" (*Col. 1:15, NKJV*), alluding to Psalm 89:27, which calls David, who was a type of Christ, God's firstborn. "Also I will make him My firstborn, / The highest of the kings of the earth" (*NKJV*).

Clearly the title "firstborn" does not express David's biological status, because David was the eighth child of his parents (*1 Sam. 16:10, 11*). It's the same with Jesus. This title signifies His special honor and authority (*Col. 1:16, 20–22*). God made Jesus the supreme King over the whole world when He raised Jesus from the dead (*Acts 2:30, 31*).

Read Colossians 1:16, 20–22. What do these verses teach us about who Jesus was and what He has done for us? What promise can you take away from this for yourself?

Eternal King of Unrivaled Power

Read Psalm 2; Psalm 110:1–3; Psalm 89:4, 13–17; and Psalm 110:5, 6.
What do these texts teach us about Christ as King?

The portrayal of God as the Messiah's Father points to the coronation of the king when the king was adopted into God's covenant (*Ps. 2:7, Ps. 89:26–28*). Psalm 2:7 foresees Christ's resurrection and exaltation as the dawn of the new everlasting covenant and Christ's royal priesthood (*Acts 13:33–39, Heb. 1:5, Heb. 5:5*). The Messiah sits at God's right hand as Someone who has unprecedented honor and authority (*Ps. 110:1; Acts 7:55, 56*). “Moreover, the interplay between the Lord and the ‘anointed’ (Messiah) even suggests an intention to identify this Davidic Messiah with the Lord Himself. . . . If the one who sits at the right is the Lord, then, the Lord is the Messiah, since the latter is also seen at the right [see *Ps. 110:1, 5*.]”—Jacques Doukhan, *On the Way to Emmaus* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2012), pp. 26, 27.

In the end, Christ will have absolute victory over His enemies. To make the enemies a “footstool” is an image that reflects the custom of the ancient Near Eastern kings to place their feet on the necks of their defeated enemies to demonstrate total dominance over them. Yet, Christ's rod here is not a tool of terror (*Ps. 2:9, Ps. 110:2*).

The rod (“staff”) was originally held by tribal leaders as the symbol of the tribe (*Num. 17:2–10*). Christ's rod comes from Zion because He represents the people of Zion. His rod is a symbol of divine judgment, which ends the rule of evil and depicts Christ's unrivaled reign (*Rev. 2:27, Rev. 12:5*). Even the wicked kings are given a chance to repent and submit to the Messiah (*Ps. 2:10–12*).

One graphic depiction of Christ's ultimate victory is found in the pre-Advent scene in Daniel 7, which shows that, after judgment is given “‘in favor of the saints of the Most High’” (*Dan. 7:22, NKJV*), His kingdom is established, and “‘His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom’” (*Dan. 7:27, NKJV*). Because of the Cross, the promise of the kingdom is assured.

A blessing is promised to all who trust in the King, and the people rejoice in the Messiah's sovereign and righteous reign (*Ps. 2:12, Ps. 89:15–17*).

How nice it is to know that, yes, in the end, good will triumph over evil, justice will be done, and pain and suffering will forever be vanquished. How should this truth give us comfort now when, from a human perspective, evil seems to prosper?

Eternal Priest in the Order of Melchizedek

Read Psalm 110:4–7. How is Christ’s priesthood unique, and what great hope can we find in Christ’s heavenly priesthood?

God endows the Messiah with an everlasting kingship (*Ps. 110:1–3*) and a priesthood of a superior rank, the order of Melchizedek (*Ps. 110:4–7*). The Lord seals His word with a solemn promise (*Heb. 6:18*). God’s oath not to relent from giving us a perfect Priest is a sign of His grace. People’s sins and open rebellions constantly provoke God to abandon His people, but God’s oath is unchangeable and guarantees God’s grace in revoking His judgment over the repentant people (*Exod. 32:14*, *Ps. 106:45*).

The divine oath introduces a novel element to the Davidic covenant by declaring that the Messiah King is also a Priest (*Ps. 110:4*). Israel’s kings could never function as Levitical priests (*Num. 8:19*, *2 Chron. 26:16–21*). When Scripture mentions kings or people offering sacrifices, it implies their bringing sacrifices to the priests, who actually offered them. Psalm 110 sets the Messiah King apart from Israel’s other kings and priests. Christ’s eternal priesthood derives from Melchizedek, who was both the king of Salem (Jerusalem) and the priest of “the most high God” (*Gen. 14:18–20*). The Old Testament never speaks of King David or any other Israelite king as possessing the priesthood in the order of Melchizedek, except for Psalm 110. Clearly, the psalm speaks about a distinctive king-priest in Israel’s history.

Read Hebrews 7:20–28. What are some of the implications of Christ’s superior priesthood?

Being both Divine King and everlasting Priest, Christ has unprecedented superiority over human priests and kings; so, we may take hope. Christ upholds a superior covenant that is based on God’s oath, not human promises. He serves in the heavenly sanctuary. His priesthood is not affected by sin or death, like that of human priests, and thus, He can intercede for and save His people forever. The reconciling work of Christ as the perfect and compassionate Priest gives His people a lasting assurance of abiding in God’s very presence (*Heb. 6:19, 20*). Christ’s royal priesthood will abolish the rule of evil, not only in people’s hearts but also in the world. He will keep the promise of Psalm 2 that every nation and ruler will be subject to the royal judgment of Christ Jesus (*Ps. 2:6–9*; *Ps. 110:1, 2, 5, 6*). Jesus’ wonderful royal priesthood makes an absolute claim on our obedience and trust.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “God With Us,” pp. 19–26, in *The Desire of Ages*.

Being both Christ’s prayers and prayers about Christ, the Psalms provide a unique revelation of Christ’s person and redeeming ministry as the One who is “God with us” (*Matt. 1:23*). Jesus is “God with us” in the battling prayers of forsakenness and suffering. He is “God with us” in the cries for justice and deliverance. Jesus is “God with us” by not abandoning us to our lostness and despair but showing us the way of faith victorious. He became for us the eternal Priest and King to save us from the everlasting doom of sin. In Christ, the perfect Davidic King, all God’s solemn promises of salvation find their fulfillment (*2 Cor. 1:20*).

Ellen G. White insightfully describes Christ’s unity with humanity: “By His humanity, Christ touched humanity; by His divinity, He lays hold upon the throne of God. As the Son of man, He gave us an example of obedience; as the Son of God, He gives us power to obey. It was Christ who from the bush on Mount Horeb spoke to Moses saying, ‘I AM THAT I AM. . . . Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.’ Ex. 3:14. This was the pledge of Israel’s deliverance. So when He came ‘in the likeness of men,’ He declared Himself the I AM. The Child of Bethlehem, the meek and lowly Saviour, is God ‘manifest in the flesh.’ 1 Tim. 3:16. And to us He says: ‘I AM the Good Shepherd.’ ‘I AM the living Bread.’ ‘I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life.’ ‘All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth.’ John 10:11; 6:51; 14:6; Matt. 28:18. I AM the assurance of every promise. I AM; be not afraid.”—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 24, 25.

Discussion Questions:

- ① How has God demonstrated His unwavering faithfulness to His covenant despite the people’s unfaithfulness? What reassurance does that bring to God’s struggling children today?**
- ② How does Christ’s unique and superior priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek strengthen the certainty of salvation for God’s people?**
- ③ The Gospels show that many Messianic promises in the Psalms were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. How does this demonstrate the veracity of God’s Word? Why must we resist any and every sentiment that tends to weaken our trust in God’s Word?**
- ④ What great consolation can we get from Christ’s words, “‘All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth’ ” (*Matt. 28:18*)? How do we apply this promise to our own experience?**

Faithfulness Goes Far: Part 5

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

During his first few weeks in the military, Sekule was sent with a company of soldiers to work on a mountain in the former Yugoslavia. On a Friday afternoon, he received orders to shovel coal into the Sabbath hours.

"You have to shovel for 15 minutes, take a 10-minute rest, and then shovel again for 15 minutes," the commanding officer said.

"I will shovel for 2.5 hours without stopping until the sun goes down, but then I will stop," Sekule said.

"No one can shovel for two hours," the officer said.

"I can," Sekule said.

Sekule, who had learned to work hard while growing up in Montenegro, shoveled as quickly as he could. Other soldiers cautioned him to slow down.

"Why are you working so quickly?" they asked.

"I'm trying to do as much as I can to leave less work for the rest of you," he replied. "I don't care about myself. I just want to do the most that I can."

His words built respect among the other soldiers. They saw that he wanted to help them. To everyone's surprise, Sekule succeeded in shoveling the required amount of coal by sunset.

But the commanding officer didn't seem to grasp his desire to keep the Sabbath. On another Sabbath, the officer read a list of duties to the soldiers and declared, "You will work today."

Sekule stood tall. "Today is my Sabbath, and I can't do any work," he said. He knew that he might face prison if he said, "I won't do any work," so instead, he chose his words carefully and said, "I can't do any work."

"What do you mean 'can't'?" the officer asked.

"I'm a Seventh-day Adventist, and I can't work on Sabbath," Sekule said.

The officer stood tall and glared at Sekule. "Soldier, who will work in your place then?" he said.

All the other soldiers stood tall. "We will work in his place then," they said in unison.

Sekule realized at that moment that it was important not only to be faithful to God but also to be faithful to people. Jesus said, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (*Mark 12:30, 31; NKJV*). Sekule saw that if he treated others fairly, they also would treat him fairly.

SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro. Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Psalm 118:22, 23*

This week, we shall study the most sublime subject in all of Scripture: our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The centrality of Jesus to the whole Bible is of paramount importance to our understanding of Scripture, and in this regard, the Psalter is no exception. Among its various songs of praise—forgiveness, justice, and retribution—Jesus is portrayed as the Good Shepherd, the suffering Messiah, the Son of David, the King Eternal, and the heavenly Priest. These depictions help us to better comprehend His preeminent position in the plan of Redemption and His love for every one of us.

The book of Psalms gives us a broader perspective of Jesus' ministry in heaven and of His second coming. This week, we will consider from the Psalter some of these perspectives on Jesus and His work.

Part II: Commentary

The writers of the New Testament considered the book of Psalms an important source for understanding the life and work of Christ. The New Testament references many passages from the Psalter to show how Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecies. Some of these references are “quotations” (that is, word-for-word citations) and others are “allusions” (indirect references to an Old Testament text and its ideas as opposed to a word-for-word quotation).

There are many references in the Psalter to Christ’s deity and His ministry on earth. These references reveal intentionality on the part of the psalmists, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to foreground and herald the work of Jesus. With this overview in mind, let’s turn our attention to the verses of the Psalter that the New Testament writers apply to Jesus.

Jesus Is the Yahweh of the Old Testament—He Is God!

Prophecy	Psalm	New Testament Application
Jesus should be worshiped.	<i>Ps. 97:7</i>	<i>Heb. 1:6</i>
Jesus, as God, receives honors.	<i>Ps. 45:6, 7</i>	<i>Heb. 1:8, 9</i>
Jesus is Creator and is eternal.	<i>Ps. 102:25–27</i>	<i>Heb. 1:10–12</i>
Jesus is the Son of God.	<i>Ps. 2:7</i>	<i>Acts 13:33, Heb. 1:5, Heb. 5:5</i>

The divinity of Jesus is an important topic for New Testament writers as it should be for us, too. In the table on the previous page, we can see the passages from the Psalms, referring to Yahweh's divinity, that Paul and Luke apply to Jesus. Jesus' divinity makes His sacrifice both singular and powerful; that is, the One who died on the cross to redeem us was the Creator Himself. What a profound thought! We will never fully fathom its sublime depths in all of its dimensions, now or throughout the endless ages of eternity, though seeking to contemplate and internalize its beautiful truths will, nonetheless, transform our hearts.

The Life and Ministry of Jesus

Prophecy	Psalm	New Testament Application
Jesus' incarnation and complete offering	<i>Ps. 40:6–10</i>	<i>Heb. 10:5–7</i>
Zeal for God's house shall consume Jesus.	<i>Ps. 69:9</i>	<i>John 2:17</i>
Jesus shall open His mouth in a parable.	<i>Ps. 78:2</i>	<i>Matt. 13:35</i>
Jesus shall feed the people with the bread of heaven.	<i>Ps. 78:24</i>	<i>John 6:31</i>
Jesus is the cornerstone.	<i>Ps. 118:22</i>	<i>Matt. 21:42, Mark 12:10–11, Luke 20:17</i>
Children shall praise Jesus' works in the temple.	<i>Ps. 8:2</i>	<i>Matt. 21:16</i>

The writers of the Gospels and of the New Testament understood that particular passages from the Old Testament, such as certain Psalms, proclaimed the ministry of Jesus. On account of the numerous citations in the New Testament from the Psalter, one arguably could say that the Psalms was the favorite book of the New Testament authors. The New Testament writers used the Psalms to affirm that the prophets foretold the significant events of Jesus' ministry on earth, as highlighted by six of these events in the table above.

Jesus' Suffering and Passion

Prophecy	Psalm	New Testament Application
Jesus is betrayed by a close associate.	<i>Ps. 41:9</i>	<i>John 13:18</i>
His enemies give Him gall and vinegar to drink when He thirsts.	<i>Ps. 69:21</i>	<i>Matt. 27:34, 48</i>
He is forsaken by God.	<i>Ps. 22:1</i>	<i>Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34</i>
Jesus is mocked.	<i>Ps. 22:7, 8</i>	<i>Matt. 27:39, Luke 23:35</i>
His enemies shaked their heads at Him.	<i>Ps. 109:25</i>	<i>Matt. 27:39</i>
They defy Jesus' faith.	<i>Ps. 22:8</i>	<i>Matt. 27:43</i>
They divide His garments.	<i>Ps. 22:18</i>	<i>Matt. 27:35, Mark 15:24</i>
Jesus becomes a reproach to His friends.	<i>Ps. 88:8</i>	<i>Luke 23:49</i>
Jesus utters His last words.	<i>Ps. 31:5</i>	<i>Luke 23:46</i>
His bones are not broken.	<i>Ps. 34:20</i>	<i>John 19:36</i>
His body will not decay in the grave.	<i>Ps. 16:8–11</i>	<i>Acts 2:25–28, Acts 13:35</i>

The apostles sought to furnish scriptural evidence in support of the suffering and death of Jesus as an event predicted in detail in the Old Testament. (Keep in mind that we are working here with scriptural evidence based only on the Psalter. Of course, much more evidence in favor of the suffering of Christ can be found in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Isaiah.)

The accumulation of scriptural evidence from the Psalms validates the factualness of the agony, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are the culmination of salvation history between the Fall and the Second Coming as well as the central point of the Redemption plan.

Jesus' Exaltation After His Resurrection

Prophecy	Psalm	New Testament Application
The Messiah sits at the right hand of the Lord.	<i>Ps. 110:1</i>	<i>Matt. 22:44, Mark 12:36, Luke 20:42, Acts 2:34</i>
A descendant from David will be on David's throne.	<i>Ps. 132:11</i>	<i>Acts 2:30</i>
Jesus rules the nations.	<i>Ps. 2:1, 2</i>	<i>Acts 4:25, 26</i>
Jesus is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek.	<i>Ps. 110:4</i>	<i>Heb. 5:6, 10; Heb. 6:20; Heb. 7:17, 21</i>
Jesus led captivity captive.	<i>Ps. 68:18</i>	<i>Eph. 4:7, 8</i>

Jesus' ministry of atonement in heaven is of no less importance than the atoning sacrifice He accomplished on Mount Calvary. Thus, it's no coincidence that, among New Testament writers, Psalm 110 is the most quoted, or alluded to, passage from the Old Testament. Case in point, Psalm 110:1 is used 17 times in the New Testament: Matthew 22:44; Matthew 26:64; Mark 12:36; Mark 16:19; Luke 20:42–43; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34, 35; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; Hebrews 8:1; Hebrews 10:12, 13; Hebrews 12:2; Colossians 3:1; while Psalm 110:4 is quoted a total of four times: Hebrews 5:6; Hebrews 6:20; Hebrews 7:17, 21.

The heavenly ministry of Jesus, along with our understanding of His work on our behalf, is central to our daily spiritual experience as Christians. Hebrews states with confidence: "This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (*Heb. 6:19, 20, NKJV*, where it quotes the end of Psalm 110:4).

Attributes of God's Character in the Psalms Applied to Jesus in the New Testament

To further understand how the Messianic perspectives provided in the Psalms relate to Jesus, let's examine the following examples from the Psalter and their New Testament applications:

- The goodness of the Lord can be "tasted" or experienced personally: Ps. 34:8 (*1 Pet. 2:3*)
- Jesus forgives sins: Ps. 103:2, 3 (*Luke 5:21, 24*)
- He is the Life: Ps. 36:9 (*John 1:4*)
- He is the Rock: Ps. 18:2, Ps. 95:1 (*1 Pet. 2:6, 1 Cor. 10:4*)
- He is righteous: Ps. 129:4, Ps. 145:17 (*1 John 1:9, 1 John 2:1*)
- He is omnipresent: Ps. 139:8 (*Eph. 1:23, Matt. 18:20*)
- His kingdom is eternal: Ps. 145:13 (*Dan. 7:14, the Son of Man*)
- His Word dwells in the believer: Ps. 119:11 (*Col. 3:16*)

As these examples show, the God of the Psalms is the Messiah revealed in the New Testament. Thus, the God of the Old Testament is not a different deity from the Divinity revealed in the New Testament.

The Messianic Tone of Psalm 24

Some psalms allude to certain Messianic events or pictures. Psalm 24 is one such psalm. Verses 1–6 relate back to Psalm 15, given their thematic similarity. Psalm 24 also provides insight into the identity of the ones who are permitted to go into the Holy Place, or God's holy hill.

In verses 7–10, the psalm assumes a Messianic tone. It describes the Lord entering a holy city. Many commentators, one of whom is Ellen G. White, apply this section to Jesus' ascension to heaven (see *Early Writings*, pp. 190–192). These verses are a joyful depiction of the entrance of Jesus into the celestial kingdom amidst the singing of the angels, who proclaim Him the “King of glory” and “the LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle” (*Ps. 24:8, NKJV*). This scene is a representation in miniature of the grand event in the future when all the redeemed will enter through the gates of the Holy City.

Part III: Life Application

In review, let's consider the reasons for the importance of this week's study to our spiritual lives. First, our study has been a confirmation of the divine origins of the prophetic Word. How else can we explain the myriad pronouncements of biblical writers, from the tenth to fifth centuries B.C., who predicted with unerring accuracy the seminal life events of the coming Messiah? How else could Jesus, in turn, fulfill all the particulars of these prophecies, if not by the guidance of the Spirit, under whose inspiration the prophets foretold of the coming Savior? Nowadays the workplace, the echelons of academia and science, and various social media platforms are rife with the derision and scorn of incredulous minds who mock the Scriptures. In the face of such rank skepticism, it is our sincere hope that this week's study strengthens the faith of your students in the Anointed One and His Word.

If nothing else, our study this week reveals the unity of the Bible. While it is outwardly a collection of writings from different authors, recorded in different places and cultures over the course of 16 centuries, together these writings form a cohesive whole. The Bible's ideas and themes are carefully intertwined, revealing the Spirit that inspired the minds of the prophets and the apostles who wrote it. The end result is the creation of the greatest masterpiece ever penned in human history. Our faith and actions should be founded on this solid rock.

Finally, our comparison of the Psalter with the New Testament has afforded us new insights into the Person and character of Jesus. The Scriptures are like a treasure chest wherein we may discover more precious gems of truth about our amazing God.

Lessons of the Past



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Psalm 78, Psalm 105, Gal. 3:29, Psalm 106, Psalm 80, Num. 6:22–27, Psalm 135.

Memory Text: “Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done” (Psalm 78:3, 4, NKJV).

In numerous psalms, praise takes the form of narrating the Lord’s mighty acts of salvation. These psalms are often called “salvation history psalms” or “historical psalms.” Some appeal to God’s people, telling them to learn from their history, particularly from their mistakes and the mistakes of their ancestors. Certain historical psalms contain a predominant hymnal note that highlights God’s past wonderful deeds on behalf of God’s people and that strengthen their trust in the Lord, who is able and faithful to deliver them from their present hardships.

The special appeal of the historical psalms is that they help us to see our lives as part of the history of God’s people and to claim that past as our own. As we have been adopted into the family of the historic people of God through Christ (Rom. 8:15; Rom. 9:24–26; Gal. 4:6, 7), the historical heritage of the ancient people of Israel is indeed the account of our spiritual ancestry. Therefore, we can and should learn from their past, which is ours, as well.

The final goal is to realize that each generation of God’s people plays a small but significant part in the grand historical unfolding of God’s sovereign purposes in the great controversy.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 9.

The Lord's Unstoppable Faithfulness

Read Psalm 78. What three key historical epochs are highlighted in this psalm? What recurring lessons does Asaph draw from each period?

The reviews of Israel's past highlight God's faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness. They also should teach coming generations not to repeat their ancestors' mistakes but to trust God and to remain faithful to His covenant. The psalmist uses history as a parable (*Ps. 78:2*), which means that the people should deeply ponder the psalm's message and search for the meaning for themselves. Psalm 78:2 is a prophetic description of Jesus' method of teaching in parables (*Matt. 13:34, 35*).

The psalm also reflects on the time of the Exodus (*Ps. 78:9–54*), the settlement in Canaan (*Ps. 78:55–64*), and the time of David (*Ps. 78:65–72*). It demonstrates the Lord's glorious deeds and the consequences of the people's breaking of their covenant with God. Israel's history recounts many forms of the people's disloyalty to God, especially their idolatry (*Ps. 78:58*).

The psalmist, however, stresses the root of the Israelites' unfaithfulness: they forgot what God had done for them, did not trust God, put God to the test (*Ps. 78:18, 41, 56*), rebelled against Him, and failed to keep His law, His covenant, and His testimonies (*Ps. 78:10, 37, 56*). By stressing these specific forms of disloyalty, the psalmist implies that the rejection of Israel in history has resulted from one core sin, namely, the people's failure to trust the Lord (*Ps. 78:7, 8*).

When reading the psalm, one is overwhelmed with the people's constant stubbornness and spiritual blindness in contrast to the Lord's boundless patience and grace. How was each new generation so slow to learn?

Before we get overly judgmental of past generations, we should consider ourselves. Aren't we, also, forgetful of God's past wonders and neglectful of His covenantal requirements? The psalm does not encourage people to rely on their own deeds. Instead, Psalm 78 shows the futility of human will unless it is grounded in constant awareness of God's faithfulness and an acceptance of His grace. The unsuccessful battles of God's people (*Ps. 78:9, 62–64*) elucidate the psalm's lesson that human efforts apart from faithfulness to God are doomed to end in failure.

What lessons have you learned, or should have learned, from your past mistakes?

Remembering History and the Praise of God

Read Psalm 105. What historical events and their lessons are highlighted in this psalm?

Psalm 105 recalls key events that shaped the covenantal relationship between the Lord and His people Israel. It focuses on God's covenant with Abraham to give the Promised Land to him and his descendants, and how this promise, confirmed to Isaac and Jacob, was providentially fulfilled through Joseph, Moses, and Aaron, and in the time of the conquest of Canaan. The psalm gives hope to God's people in all generations because God's marvelous works in the past guarantee God's unchanging love to His people in all times (*Ps. 105:1–5, 7, 8*).

Psalm 105 resembles Psalm 78 (see yesterday's study) in highlighting God's faithfulness to His people in history, and it does so in order to glorify God and to inspire faithfulness. However, unlike Psalm 78, Psalm 105 does not mention the people's past mistakes. This psalm has a different purpose.

Instead, history is retold in Psalm 105 through the lives of Israel's greatest patriarchs, showing God's providential leading and the patriarchs' patient endurance of hardships. The patriarchs' perseverance and loyalty to God were richly rewarded. Thus, Psalm 105 invites people to emulate the patriarchs' faith and trustingly wait on God's deliverance in their time.

Psalm 105 possesses a hymnal note (*Ps. 105:1–7*), showing that in order to truly praise God, God's people need to know the facts of their history. History provides both validation for our faith and countless reasons for praising God.

The worshipers are addressed as the seed of Abraham and children of Jacob (*Ps. 105:6*), thereby deeming them to be the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation (*Gen. 15:3–6*). The psalmist underscores the continuity between the patriarchs and the subsequent generations of God's people. The psalmist stresses that "His judgments are in *all the earth*" (*Ps. 105:7, NKJV; emphasis supplied*), thereby admonishing the worshipers not to forget that "our God" is also the sovereign Lord of the whole world and that His loving-kindness extends to all peoples (*Ps. 96:1, Ps. 97:1*). It is, clearly, a call to faithfulness to every generation of believers.

How should we, as Seventh-day Adventists, see ourselves in this line of people, from Abraham on? (See Galatians 3:29.) What lessons should we learn from this history?

Remembering History and Repentance

Read Psalm 106. What historical events and their lessons are highlighted in this psalm?

Psalm 106 also evokes the major events in Israel's history, including the Exodus, sojourn in the wilderness, and life in Canaan. It stresses the heinous sins of the fathers that culminated in the generation that was carried into exile. Thus, the psalm almost certainly was written when the nation was in Babylon, or after they had returned home, and the psalmist, inspired by the Holy Spirit, recounted for God's people these historical incidents and the lessons that the people should have learned from them.

This psalm, too, as the others, points to God's faithfulness to His covenant of grace, by which He saved His people in the past (*Ps. 106:45*). It expresses hope that God will again show favor to His repentant people and gather them from among the nations (*Ps. 106:47*). The plea for present deliverance is not some wishful thinking but a prayer of faith based on the assurance of God's past deliverances (*Ps. 106:1–3*) and the unfailing character of God's faithfulness to His covenant with His people.

The recollection of Israel's historical failures in Psalm 106 is an integral part of the people's confession of their sins and acknowledgment that they are not better than their forefathers. The present generation admits that it is even worse than its ancestors because it knew the consequences of the past generations' iniquities and how God exercised His great patience and grace in saving them, even though they had deliberately walked in wicked ways in the past. If this were true for them, think about how much more so for us, today, who have the revelation of God's character and saving grace as revealed in Jesus and the Cross.

The good news of Psalm 106 is that God's steadfast love always prevails over the people's sins (*Ps. 106:8–10, 30, 43–46*). The key role of Moses and Phinehas in turning away God's wrath points to the significance of Christ's intercession on behalf of believers. Only personal experience of God's grace can transform a past story into *our* story.

Psalm 106:13 reads: “They soon forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel” (*NKJV*). Why is that so easy for us to do in our own lives, as well?

The Parable of the Lord's Vine

Read Psalm 80. How are God's people portrayed in this psalm, and what great hope do they plead for?

Israel is portrayed as a vineyard that God uprooted from Egypt, the land of oppression, and transported to the Promised Land of abundance. The image of a vineyard conveys God's election of Israel and His providential care (*read also Gen. 49:11, 12, 22; and Deut. 7:7–11*).

However, in Psalm 80, God's vineyard is under His wrath (*Ps. 80:12*). The prophets announce the vineyard's destruction as the sign of God's judgment because the vine has turned bad (*Isa. 5:1–7, Jer. 2:21*).

However, Psalm 80 does not ponder over the reasons for divine judgment. Given the depths of God's grace, the psalmist is perplexed that God can withhold His presence from His people for such an extended time. The tension between God's wrath and judgment, on the one hand, and God's grace and forgiveness, on the other, causes the psalmist to fear that divine wrath may prevail and consume the people completely (*Ps. 80:16*).

Read Numbers 6:22–27. How is this blessing used by Psalm 80?

The psalm's refrain evokes Aaron's promise of God's perpetual blessing of His people (*Num. 6:22–27*) and highlights the hope that God's grace will triumph over the causes of the people's misery: "Restore us, O God; cause Your face to shine, and we shall be saved!" (*Ps. 80:3, NKJV; see also Ps. 80:7, 19, NKJV*).

The Hebrew word for "restore" here comes from a common word that means to "return," and it is used again and again in the Bible with God calling His people, who have wandered away, to return to Him. It is closely linked to the idea of repentance, of turning away from sin and back to God. " ‘ ‘ Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart’ ’" (*Jer. 24:7, NKJV*).

How have you experienced for yourself repentance as a return to God?

The Lord's Supremacy in History

Read Psalm 135. What historical events are highlighted in the psalm? What lessons does the psalmist draw from them?

Psalm 135 summons God's people to praise the Lord for His goodness and faithfulness demonstrated in Creation (*Ps. 135:6, 7*) and in Israel's salvation history in the time of the Exodus (*Ps. 135:8, 9*) and in the conquering of the Promised Land (*Ps. 135:10–12*).

The Lord demonstrated His grace by choosing the people of Israel as His special treasure (*Ps. 135:4*). "Special treasure" conveys the distinctive covenantal relationship between the Lord and His people (*Deut. 7:6–11; 1 Pet. 2:9, 10*). The choosing of Israel was based on the Lord's sovereign will, and thus, Israel has no ground to feel superior over the other peoples. Psalm 135:6, 7 demonstrates that the Lord's sovereign purposes for the world did not begin with Israel but with the Creation. Therefore, Israel should humbly fulfill its assigned role in God's salvific purposes for the entire world.

The recounting of God's great deeds on behalf of His people (*Ps. 135:8–13*) culminates in the promise that God will "judge" His people and have compassion on them (*Ps. 135:14*). The judgment here is God's vindication of the oppressed and the destitute (*Ps. 9:4, Ps. 7:8, Ps. 54:1, Dan. 7:22*). The promise is that the Lord will uphold His people's cause and defend them (*Deut. 32:36*). Thus, Psalm 135 aims to inspire God's people to trust in the Lord and to remain faithful to their covenant with Him.

The Lord's faithfulness to His people leads the psalmist to affirm the nothingness of idols and to the unique supremacy of the Lord in the world (*Ps. 135:15–18*). Reliance on idols renders their worshipers as hopeless and powerless as their idols are (*Ps. 135:18*). The psalm demonstrates that God is to be praised as both Creator and Savior of His people. This is wonderfully conveyed in the two complementary versions of the fourth commandment of the Decalogue (*Exod. 20:8–11, Deut. 5:12–15*). Because God's power in creation and history is unparalleled in the world, God's people should always rely on Him and worship Him alone. As our Creator and our Redeemer, He alone should be worshiped, and worship of anything else, or anyone else, is idolatry.

**How can we make sure that we don't have idols in our own lives?
Why might idolatry be easier to do than we realize?**

Further Thought: Read Acts 7 and Hebrews 11. What does the New Testament say is the ultimate goal of God's sovereign leading of His people in history?

The historical psalms are a powerful witness to God's fidelity to His people. Each event in the history of God's people was a providential step leading toward the final fulfillment of the divine promise of the world's Savior in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Even the trials, which often perplexed God's people and made them think that God had abandoned them, were under God's sovereign control and part of His providence because God is the supreme Lord of history. The psalmist skillfully presents the truth that even the people's disloyalty cannot prevent God from keeping faith to His people and fulfilling His promises. However, the unrepentant individuals and groups were excluded from the covenantal blessings, and their infamous end serves as a lasting warning of how life without or opposed to God destroys people.

The Psalms encourage God's children in all times to hope in the Lord and remain faithful to Him. "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history."—Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches of Ellen G. White*, p. 196.

For God's people to go forward fearlessly, they need to know the facts of their history. Ellen G. White advises believers to read Psalms 105 and 106 "at least once every week."—*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 98.

The history of God's people demonstrates that no promise that God has made in His Word will be left unfulfilled. This includes both divine promises of present individual care and future promises of Christ's second coming, which will establish God's kingdom of justice and peace on the new earth.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What are the blessings of remembering God's faithful leading of His people in history? What are the consequences of forgetting or ignoring the lessons of the past? How can we apply that same principle to us, as a church called to do the same thing that ancient Israel had been called to do?
- ❷ How do the Psalms encourage us to recognize God's providential care in our life and to exercise patience and trust in God's sovereign ways, even when it's not easy to understand why things are happening as they are?
- ❸ How can we make the study of the history of God's people more prominent in our personal and communal worship services? How can we be more intentional in telling our children about the more recent history of God's people?

No Work, No Food: Part 6

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

After Sekule refused to work for several Sabbaths, his commanding military officer began to understand that he could not compel the young soldier to violate his conscience.

“So, you can’t work on the Sabbath in the army?” the officer said.

“That’s right. I can’t work on the Sabbath,” Sekule said.

“From Friday evening to Saturday evening?”

“Yes, I can’t work.”

“Then you can’t eat during those 24 hours.”

“Why can’t I eat?”

“If you’re not working, you don’t need to eat. Eating is working. Also, some of the food is prepared on your Sabbath, so you shouldn’t eat it.”

Sekule was eating only bread and drinking tea because the other military rations contained lard. But he agreed not to eat bread and drink tea that was prepared on the Sabbath. As a recently baptized Seventh-day Adventist, he wasn’t sure that food prepared on the Sabbath was off-limits. But he needed to give an answer that met the officer’s expectations. If he had refused to work but demanded bread and tea, the officer would think that he was being unfaithful to God.

Several months passed, and the military cooks began to cook one meal a week without lard. It was the only meal that Sekule could eat. But it was prepared and served only on the Sabbath.

Sekule prayed, “God, please, could You change the day from Sabbath to Sunday? Would You do that for me?”

He prayed for a month, and the lard-free meal was moved to Sunday.

Sunday happened to be a recreational day for the soldiers, a time when they could relax by playing soccer, basketball, and other sports. Sekule wished that the recreational day was on the Sabbath. It would be easier for him to refuse to play soccer than to refuse to work every Sabbath.

He prayed again. “I’m sorry, but could I ask You one more thing? Could You move the recreational day from Sunday to Sabbath so I don’t need to explain every Sabbath why I can’t work?”

A week after the lard-free meal was changed to Sunday, the recreational day suddenly was moved to Saturday.

SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro. Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus’ soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Texts: *Psalm 78:3, 4*

The holy Scriptures are not a book of philosophy filled with human conjecture regarding God's attributes and teachings. The Bible is the Lord's action in human history from the beginning of time. Through these events, we may learn who He is and what His plans are for humanity. Many critics of Scripture stumble on this biblical truth. They cannot accept the idea that God is working in human history. They reject the notion that the Creator is involved in human affairs. To acknowledge His involvement would be tantamount to admitting that He is the Ruler of the universe and the rightful Lord and Sovereign of every human being; and, as such, we must accept His kingship and His law. The last thing the selfish heart wishes to recognize is God's claims upon his or her allegiance or divine authority over human life.

This week, we will consider how the psalmists acknowledged the work of Yahweh in the history of their nation.

Part II: Commentary

History as the Backbone of Scripture

As mentioned in the introduction, the Bible reflects the outworking of the Almighty's purposes in human affairs from the beginning of time. "We behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will."—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 173.

From Genesis to Revelation, we see the story of Redemption. Everything the Lord has done has been for the purpose of saving lost souls. We see this purpose in the content of the Bible itself: it is a book of the history of salvation. While 21 books of the Bible are narrative in nature, or composed of stories, the remainder of the books—whether prophecy, poetry, wisdom, apocalyptic literature, pastoral, or personal epistle—also relate to, or contain, stories or history.

The Scriptures in their entirety are based on the understanding that their Author is alive and moving through, or intervening in, earthly events. The power of the Bible's message resides in this fact. When we learn, for instance, that God controls the sea, the winds, the big fish, the vine, and the worm in Jonah's story, we know that these four chapters are no mere novella of an obscure nature writer, scrawled thousands of centuries ago. If the Bible teaches us anything, it is that the Creator

rules over natural forces, then and now. Remove the historicity from Scripture, and we will have religious tales without the power to impact our current lives. Unfortunately, this situation is just what we see transpiring in our society today. The Bible denounces such secular thinking and affirms that not only does the Lord work in history but He also has dynamic and salvific relationships with His creatures.

History Narrated in Poetry

An interesting feature of the Scriptures is that historical events are often narrated in the form of poetry as well as in prose. We usually have this preconceived idea—no doubt conditioned by the study of secular literature within our given culture—that history should be written only in a formal style of prose. In most societies today, poetry is reserved for the expression of emotions and is not considered the suitable domain of serious writing or for the subject matter of historians.

But the Holy Writ defies any such literary restriction or classification. Just compare Exodus 14 and 15. Both chapters talk about the miraculous parting of the Red Sea but use different literary forms to do so. The account in chapter 14 is rendered in prose while the account in chapter 15 is rendered in poetry. We find the same technique employed in Judges 4 and 5 in the record of the victory of Deborah and Barak over Jabin, king of Hazor, and his armies. Chapter 4 is written in prose while chapter 5 is rendered in poetry. The comparisons between the prose and poetic accounts of the same events are instructive; we should not dismiss historical events in the Psalms as less than “historical” or authentic simply because they are rendered through poetry. Poetry is a legitimate form of expression that the Bible writers used, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to appeal to and affirm the faith of the believer in God’s actions.

The Paradigmatic Importance of the Exodus in the Old Testament

There is an event in the book of Psalms, highlighted in six songs, to which we shall now turn our attention: the Exodus (*Ps. 78:10–53, Ps. 80:8–11, Ps. 105:26–41, Ps. 106:7–33, Ps. 135:8–12, Ps. 136:10–22*). The deliverance from Egypt is, for Israel, a symbol of God’s deliverance from sin. In Psalm 136, the Exodus is paralleled with the Creation as evidence of God’s power. The Exodus is the foundation of the Ten Commandments (*Exod. 20:2*). The Passover, which is the remembrance of the Exodus event, is Israel’s independence day celebration. But far more than being a mere civil, political, or military celebration, the Passover is a spiritual festival that foresees a greater liberation by the Messiah. The Exodus is an important climax of Israel’s history and thus a fitting paradigm for God’s deliverance of the human family from sin. Furthermore, the overthrow of

the oppressor from his invincible position in the world, the overwhelming predicament of hard servitude and bondage, the humbleness of a simple shepherd who is sent as deliverer, and the amazing miracles performed by the Almighty to save His people make this narrative an epic of unparalleled drama, as well.

The Exodus paradigm is repeated in the new exodus when the Jews came back from Babylon to Judea. Paul tells us that the most important lessons the Exodus can instill in us are faith in God's deliverance of His people from this world of sin and hope in a new life in Jesus Christ (*1 Cor. 10:1–4*). All the details of the Passover (*Exodus 12*, *Lev. 23:4–8*, *Deut. 16:1–8*) "are shadows of things to come" (see *Col. 2:16, 17*), revealing in types and symbols the passion and death of Jesus Christ. With this idea in mind, we can understand better why the focus on the Exodus in the Psalter extends in relevance beyond the Hebrew people and has a special significance to the believers in the time of the end.

Tell Your Children

The actions of God in history offer us another important lesson, as stated by the psalmist:

I will open my mouth in a parable;
 I will utter dark sayings of old,
 which we have heard and known,
 and our fathers have told us.
 We will not hide them from their children,
 telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD,
 and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done (*Ps. 78:2–4, NKJV*).

In ancient Israel, parents educated their children by reciting to them the actions of the God of their forefathers. Time after time, the command is given to parents to repeat those deeds of salvation—the slaying of the firstborn males in Egypt (*Exod. 13:14–16*), the miracles of the Exodus (*Deut. 6:20–25*), and the crossing of the Jordan River (*Josh. 4:20–24*)—to their children. Such recitation involved more than simply memorizing statements and laws. Rather, implicit in this form of education is the idea that a strong grasp of history was the best way for the next generation to preserve their parents' faith.

There is intentionality in the commands to teach our children. We should teach the events of salvation history to our kids in as many different, and interesting, ways as possible. Scripture and the testimonies of Jesus alike warn us that the enemy is doing his utmost to deceive minds, especially those of scholars, and to cause them to reject the historicity

of the Scriptures. If Satan can convince us that the Bible is only tales, many believers will be dragged into unbelief and, by default, will turn aside to the all-absorbing pleasures of this world.

Don't Forget Your Past

It oft has been said, “The people who forget their past are condemned to repeat it.” Likewise, the Spirit of Prophecy tells us, “We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history.”—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, p. 72. Psalm 105:5 asserts, “Remember His marvelous works which He has done, His wonders, and the judgments of His mouth” (*NKJV*).

History was often expressed in song to facilitate its memorization and instill biblical truth in the minds of the people of ancient Israel. We can benefit from an application of this vital truth in our own lives. To repeat the miracles and providences of our Almighty God, as recorded in the Scriptures and from our own personal experience, is a source of inspiration, faith, and strength.

God Is Merciful to His People

For the psalmists, recalling “the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done” (*Ps. 78:4, NKJV*) was of paramount importance. God’s actions in the past are the assurance that He will save His people from present and future troubles (*Ps. 80:7–11, 19*). God is faithful in that He remembers His holy covenant to His people (*Ps. 105:42, 43*) to give them the Promised Land as a heritage (*Ps. 105:44; Ps. 136:21, 22*).

Our Lord is faithful. He is always ready to show His mercy to us and our children, despite our mistakes. Thus, we should always remember His love for us and for His church.

Praise and Sing to the Lord

Let us endeavor to bring a spirit of honoring our Creator into our personal worship and into our congregational adoration. Toward the accomplishment of that goal, we should reverently and thoughtfully select music to augment our worship.

A cursory glance at the topical index at the back of the hymnal will suffice to show us the wide array of hymns of praise that are available to us. Many churches are blessed with a myriad of instruments. We also may have at our disposal the latest technology for our worship service.

But what good do all these things do us if we lack the accompanying spirit of praise that we are exhorted to have, per Psalm 105:1–7, Psalm 106:1–3, and Psalm 135:1–7? These texts are not an invitation to be noisy but to be enthusiastic in our praise. They invite us to focus on God’s mercy and His deeds, which are countless. On that basis, we are enjoined to sing with enthusiasm in our hearts, our homes, and our church.

The Lord Judges His People

“For the LORD will judge His people” (*Ps. 135:14, NKJV*) is one of the most important themes of Psalm 135. In this song, the psalmist emphasizes God’s deliverance of His people from the bondage of Egypt (*Ps. 135:8–14*). However, the deliverance of God’s people is not only a judgment against Egypt but also results in the vindication of God’s people. We usually conceive of punishment as the result of judgment, but this psalm reminds us that God’s judgments bestow blessings and favor on His faithful people. The Exodus is the quintessential manifestation of this truth.

Part III: Life Application

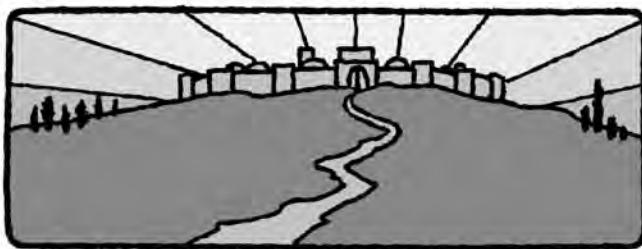
Below is a summary of the important concepts of this week’s lesson. Share them with your class:

1. The Lord is a personal God. Additionally, the Lord of the Old Testament is intimately involved in the affairs of human beings.
2. God acts even today; if He acted on behalf of His people in the past, there’s no reason He cannot do the same for His people today. It’s our privilege to see His deeds in our daily life.
3. Every event of human existence—our personal experiences, the actions and decisions of our church, the government of our country—is in His hands. Everything is controlled and guided by Him.

Praise the Lord that our God is a real Person and our Friend!

Notes

Longing for God in Zion



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 84; Rev. 21:3; Psalm 122; Psalm 87; Gal. 3:28, 29; Matt. 28:18–20; Psalm 46; Psalm 125.*

Memory Text: “My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (*Psalm 84:2, NKJV*).

The songs of Zion are joyous hymns that magnify the beauty of Zion and the sovereignty of the Lord, who reigns from His holy mountain. These psalms often praise the merits of the Lord’s house and express a love for the sanctuary that can be found in other psalms, as well. Many of these psalms were composed by the sons of Korah, who had firsthand experience of the blessedness of the Lord’s house as the temple musicians (*1 Chron. 6:31–38*) and keepers of the temple gates (*1 Chron. 9:19*).

What makes Zion the source of hope and joy? Zion represented God’s living presence among His people. As the people of Israel are God’s chosen people (*Deut. 7:6*), so Zion is God’s chosen mountain (*Ps. 78:68, Ps. 87:2*). God reigns from Zion (*Ps. 99:1, 2*) and founded His temple on Zion, as well (*Ps. 87:1*). Thus, Zion is a place of divine blessings and refuge. Zion is often referred to in parallel, or even interchangeably with, Jerusalem and the sanctuary, the center of God’s work of salvation for the ancient world.

The blessings of Zion overflow to the ends of the earth because the Lord’s person and grace exceed the boundaries of any holy place. Zion is the joy of all the earth (*Ps. 48:2*), affirming that the whole earth belongs to God.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 16.

A Day in Your Courts Is Better Than a Thousand

Read Psalm 84:1–4. Why does the psalmist long to dwell in the sanctuary?

The psalmist “longs” and “faints” to make the sanctuary his permanent abode so that he can be near God forever (*Ps. 84:1, 2*). God’s living presence (*Ps. 84:2*) makes the sanctuary a unique place. In the sanctuary, worshipers can “behold the beauty of the LORD” (*Ps. 27:4, NKJV; also, see Ps. 63:2*) and be “satisfied with the goodness of [His] house” (*Ps. 65:4, NKJV*). In Psalm 84, unparalleled happiness is achieved in relationship with God, which consists of praising Him (*Ps. 84:4*), finding strength in Him (*Ps. 84:5*), and trusting Him (*Ps. 84:12*). The sanctuary is the place where such a relationship is nourished through worship and fellowship with fellow believers. The living presence of God in the sanctuary gives the worshipers a glimpse of God’s glorious kingdom and a taste of eternal life.

Read Psalm 84:5–12. Who else can be blessed by the sanctuary?

God’s blessings are described as radiating from the sanctuary, bestowed first on those who serve in the sanctuary (*Ps. 84:4*), then on the pilgrims on their way to the sanctuary (*Ps. 84:5–10*), and finally reaching as far as the ends of the earth. The expectation of meeting God in the sanctuary strengthens the faith of the pilgrims (*Ps. 84:7*). Whereas the strength of the ordinary traveler weakens under the burden of the tiresome journey, with the pilgrims to the sanctuary, their strength increases the nearer they come to the sanctuary.

Even when physically removed from the sanctuary, God’s children continue to bear a stamp of God’s sanctuary by living a worthy life (*Ps. 84:11*), which characterizes the righteous who enter the Lord’s sanctuary (*Ps. 15:1, 2*). The Lord is called “a sun,” showing that the blessings from the sanctuary, like the sunrays, extend to the ends of the earth (*Ps. 84:11*). Thus, those who abide with God through faith receive His grace, regardless of the place where they are.

Read Revelation 21:3. What hope reflected in the earthly sanctuary is revealed here to us? How do we now even begin to imagine what this experience will be like?

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem

Read Psalm 122:1–5. What are the sentiments of the worshipers upon their arrival to Jerusalem? What do they hope to find in Jerusalem?

Psalm 122 expresses the pilgrims' excitement upon their arrival at Jerusalem. The pilgrimages to Jerusalem were joyful occasions when God's people joined together three times during the year to commemorate God's goodness toward them in the past and present (*Deut. 16:16*). Jerusalem was the center of the nation's life because it contained "the Testimony of Israel" (*Ps. 122:4, NKJV*) and the thrones for judgment (*Ps. 122:5*). "The Testimony of Israel" refers to the sanctuary that was at times called "the tabernacle of the Testimony" (*Num. 1:50, NKJV*) and contained the "ark of the Testimony" (*Exod. 25:22, NKJV*). The thrones set for judgment depict the judicial system in Jerusalem (*2 Sam. 8:15*). Pilgrimage was thus the time when one could seek and obtain justice. Faithfulness to God and administering justice to people were never to be separated.

Read Psalm 122:6–9. What is the main prayer of God's people?

Praying for the peace of Jerusalem invokes God's blessings upon the city and its inhabitants, and it unites the worshipers, causing peace to spread among them (*Ps. 122:8*). Jerusalem could be the city of peace only if peace existed between God and His people, and among God's children themselves. Thus, prayer for the peace of Jerusalem conveys an appeal to God's people to live in peace with God and one another. In Jerusalem's peace, the people will prosper (*Ps. 147:12–14*).

The psalm teaches us that the prayer for the well-being of the community of faith should be the main subject of the prayers of God's children because only the strong and united people of God can proclaim the good tidings of God's peace and salvation to the world (*John 13:34, 35*).

Praying for the peace of Jerusalem is still a privilege and responsibility of the believers because it keeps alive the hope in the end-time coming of God's kingdom of peace, which will embrace not only the city of Jerusalem but the whole world (*Isa. 52:7; Isa. 66:12, 13; Revelation 21, 22*).

What are practical ways that we can strive for harmony among us as a people now?

Zion—The Home of All Nations

Read Psalm 87:1, 2. What makes Zion such an esteemed place?

Psalm 87 is a hymn celebrating Zion as God's specially chosen and beloved city. The foundation of God's temple is on Mount Zion (*Ps. 2:6, Ps. 15:1*). At the end of time, Zion will rise above all mountains, signifying the Lord's sovereign supremacy over the whole world (*Ps. 99:2, Isa. 2:2, Mic. 4:1*). Psalm 87 refers to Zion as "mountains" to highlight its majesty (*Ps. 133:3*). God loves the gates of Zion "more than all the dwellings of Jacob" (*Ps. 87:2, NKJV*), expressing the superiority of Zion over all other places in Israel that were special gathering places of God's people in the past, such as Shiloh and Bethel. Thus, the psalm affirms that true worship of God is in His chosen place and in His prescribed way.

Read Psalm 87:3–7. What are the glorious things that are spoken of Zion?

The glory of Zion draws all the nations to God, and so, the borders of God's kingdom are extended to include the whole world. Notice that God does not treat the other nations as second-level citizens, even if Zion is portrayed as the spiritual birthplace of all peoples who accept the Lord as their Savior.

The registering of individuals was done according to their birthplace (*Neh. 7:5, Luke 2:1–3*). Three times the psalm states that the nations are born in Zion, meaning that the Lord provides them with a new identity and grants them all the privileges of lawfully born children of Zion (*Ps. 87:4–6*).

Psalm 87 points to salvation of both the Jews and the Gentiles and their being united in one church through Christ's redeeming ministry (*Rom. 3:22; Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28, 29; Col. 3:11*). The psalm's portrayal of the prosperity of Zion is reminiscent of Daniel's vision of God's kingdom becoming an enormous mountain that fills the whole earth (*Dan. 2:34, 35, 44, 45*) and of Jesus' parable about God's kingdom growing into a huge tree that hosts the birds of the air (*Matt. 13:32*).

How does Zion's readiness to adopt all people find its fulfillment in the church's Great Commission to preach the gospel to every nation (*Matt. 28:18–20*)? How does this idea fit in with our call to preach the three angels' messages?

Safety and Peace of Zion

Read Psalm 46:1–7. How is the world poetically depicted here?

This psalm gives a vivid description of the world in turmoil, and it is portrayed with the images of natural disasters of unprecedented intensity (*Ps. 46:2, 3*). The image of disturbed waters often depicts the rebellious nations and various problems that the wicked cause in the world (*Ps. 93:3, 4; Ps. 124:2–5*). Likewise, in Psalm 46 the images of natural calamities depict the world controlled by nations waging wars (*Ps. 46:6*).

It is clearly a world without the knowledge of God because God is in the midst of His people, and where God dwells, peace abounds (*Ps. 46:4, 5*). Yet, although the world rejects Him, God does not abandon the world. God is present in the world by being among His people. In other words, no matter how bad things appear, God's presence is here, in the world, and we can draw personal hope and encouragement from knowing this foundational truth.

The Lord, who is the perfect refuge, is the Source of Zion's lasting peace and security. The word that highlights the security of Zion is “though” in Psalm 46:3. Though the world is in turmoil, the people of God are safe. This shows that peace is not the result of total absence of trials but God's gift to His trusting children. Unreserved trust in God can render God's child peaceful and secure in the middle of the storm (*Matt. 8:23–27*). The question that poses itself is: Will God leave the world to its destructive choices and actions forever?

Read Psalm 46:6–11. What is God's response to violence and destruction in the world?

God responds with such a force of displeasure that His word, which had created the earth, now causes the earth to melt (*Ps. 46:6*). Yet, the melting does not end in destruction but renewal. Notice that God extends His peace from Zion to the ends of the earth. God will make wars cease and extinguish the tools of destruction, which the wicked nations used to bring oppression into the world (*Ps. 46:9*). This is the great hope that Christians have, which will occur at the second coming of Jesus.

How do we learn to have peace and to trust God amid a world that, indeed, has so much turmoil?

Immovable Like Mount Zion

Read Psalm 125:1, 2. How are those who trust God portrayed here?

Those who trust in the Lord are compared to Mount Zion, the symbol of steadfastness and strength. The magnificent view of the mountains surrounding the city of Jerusalem inspired the psalmist to acknowledge the certainty of divine protection (*Ps. 5:12, Ps. 32:7, 10*). Unlike the mountains ruled by the wicked, which are being tossed into the seas (*Ps. 46:2*), the impressive durability of the mountain upon which Jerusalem was built inspires profound trust. The confidence in God's protection becomes even bolder in the face of the painful reality in which evil seems to prevail so often. Yet, even amid that evil, God's people can have hope.

Read Psalm 125:3–5. How are the righteous tempted? What is the lesson for us?

God's children can be discouraged by the success of the wicked and, perhaps, tempted to follow their ways (*Ps. 73:2–13, Ps. 94:3*). The utmost stability of Mount Zion cannot secure those who depart from the Lord. The people are still given freedom to "put forth their hands unto iniquity" (*Ps. 125:3*) and "turn aside unto their crooked ways" (*Ps. 125:5*). The Lord is just and will judge the individuals who remain in rebellion along with other unrepentant sinners.

Here is the call for God's people to remain immovable in faith and trust in the Lord, just as Mount Zion is their immovable refuge. That is, even when we don't understand things, we can still trust in the goodness of God.

"The entrance of sin into the world, the incarnation of Christ, regeneration, the resurrection, and many other subjects presented in the Bible, are mysteries too deep for the human mind to explain, or even fully to comprehend. But we have no reason to doubt God's word because we cannot understand the mysteries of His providence. . . . Everywhere are wonders beyond our ken. Should we then be surprised to find that in the spiritual world also there are mysteries that we cannot fathom? The difficulty lies solely in the weakness and narrowness of the human mind. God has given us in the Scriptures sufficient evidence of their divine character, and we are not to doubt His word because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His providence."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 106, 107.

Further Thought: Contemplate the message of Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 51:1–16.

The songs of Zion make an absolute commitment to staying mindful of Zion and the living hope in God's sovereign reign that it represents. While many blessings of God's sanctuary are experienced in this life, the hope in the fullness of life and joy in Zion is still in the future. Many of God's children long for the heavenly Zion with tears (*Ps. 137:1*). To remember Zion implies not merely an occasional thought but also a deliberate mindfulness and decision to live in accordance with that living memory (*Exod. 13:3*, *Exod. 20:8*).

Therefore, singing the songs of Zion carries a passionate resolve to keep alive the hope in the restoration of God's kingdom on the new earth (*Rev. 21:1–5*). "There, immortal minds will contemplate with never-failing delight the wonders of creative power, the mysteries of redeeming love. There is no cruel, deceiving foe to tempt to forgetfulness of God. Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 677.

A commitment not to forget Zion is an implicit pledge of the Lord's pilgrims that they will never accept this world as their homeland but await the new heavens and the new earth.

Thus, the psalms of Zion can be sung by believers of all generations who long to live in the New Jerusalem (*Rev. 3:12*). The songs of Zion encourage us to anticipate the future world with hope, but they also oblige us to be agents of God's grace in this present world.

Discussion Questions:

- ① How do we take the spiritual and theological principles that centered on God's people in Zion, a literal place in Jerusalem, and apply them to the church and its mission to the world?**
- ② How can believers abide in God's sanctuary today? (*John 1:14–18*, *Heb. 12:22–24*).**
- ③ How will Zion become the city of all nations as envisioned in Psalm 87? (*Rom. 5:10*, *Eph. 2:11–16*, *Col. 1:19–23*).**
- ④ How do you answer the person who points to the reality of the wicked prospering in this world while many "good" people suffer? What do you say? Why is it important to acknowledge that we don't have full answers for everything here now?**

Skin and Bones: Part 7

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

Returning to the barracks after a short stint of shoveling coal on a mountain, Sekule informed his commander that he would not bear arms, even in the ongoing Bosnian War.

"I don't want to shoot people," he said.

"You must take a weapon," the commander insisted. "Otherwise, you will have to serve two years instead of one." Noncombatants were required to serve two years rather than one in the army.

"I don't care," Sekule said. "I won't carry a weapon."

The commander sent Sekule to an intelligence officer. Only soldiers who were in deep trouble were sent to the officer. He could imprison soldiers.

Sekule explained his position to the officer.

"Fine," the officer said. "Take a gun and, if you are sent to the front, give it back. That way you will serve only one year instead of two."

"What do you mean?" Sekule said.

"Agree to carry a gun during training, but the training that you will receive will be on teleprinters instead of the shooting range," the officer said.

Sekule agreed. He was assigned to office work, helping run military communications by typing on a teleprinter.

The Sabbath turned out to be a bigger challenge than guns for Sekule. Because of the war, Sekule needed to be trained quickly to work on a teleprinter. But he refused to attend training sessions on Sabbath.

Food, also, was a challenge. Military rations were prepared with lard. Sekule's parents refused to send money for food because they hoped he would change his diet.

Sekule prayed, "Please bless me like You blessed Daniel. He decided not to eat unclean food, and I want to do the same."

Sekule's commander didn't know what to do.

"You won't work on Saturday?" he asked.

"No," Sekule said.

"Do you have any suggestions about what we can do?"

"No."

"You won't eat meat?"

"No."

"Do you have any suggestions about what we can do?"

"No."

The only thing Sekule could eat was bread and tea. In four months, he lost 50 pounds (23 kilograms), dropping to 137 pounds (85 kilograms). He was skin and bones.

SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro. Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 84:2*

This week we shall focus on the trope, “Zion,” as expressed in the book of Psalms (*see Psalm 46, Psalm 84, Psalm 87, Psalm 122, and Psalm 125*). Psalms is full of hope and the expectation of the righteous to visit and dwell securely in God’s sanctuary, a refuge of safety and peace.

The concept of “Zion” in the Scriptures is itself a mix of geography, politics, and theology. We shall consider these different aspects in order to grasp Zion’s spiritual meaning for God’s people in the past as well as for ourselves, who are in urgent need today of the hope that Zion offers.

Part II: Commentary

The Geography of Zion

The location of Mount Zion in Jerusalem in relation to Mount Moriah has important theological significance. David conquered Mount Zion (*2 Samuel 5:6, 7; 1 Chron. 11:5–7*), occupying a relatively small area of the hill that came to be called the City of David. To the north, about 600 meters away, stood Mount Moriah, where Isaac had been “offered” in sacrifice (*Gen. 22:1–12*). Here also the angel of the Lord stood by the threshing floor of Araunah, the Jebusite, and was halted in the midst of destroying Israel in consequence of the sin of David, who attempted to carry out a census (*2 Sam. 24:16*) contrary to God’s will. Subsequently, David purchased the threshing floor and reared an altar to the Lord there, and in atonement for his presumption, gave burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord (*2 Sam. 24:25; compare with 1 Chron. 21:15–30*).

Solomon’s temple and its outbuildings also were built on this same spot (*2 Chron. 3:1*). The city of Jerusalem extended to the north and embraced the holy mountain, and eventually the name “Zion” came to include the Temple Mount. As we have seen in the Psalms, “Zion” often refers to the city of Jerusalem as a whole (*Ps. 48:1–3; Ps. 69:35; Ps. 74:2; Ps. 87:2–5; Ps. 125:1, 2*).

Zion, the Holy Mountain

Long before Solomon built God a temple, the Lord manifested Himself on Mount Sinai and commanded Israel to build Him a tabernacle so that He might dwell in their midst (*Exod. 25:8, 9*). When the sanctuary was completed and erected, the presence of God descended in a cloud and rested on the tabernacle of meeting (*Exod. 40:34, 35*), making it the center of

divine manifestation and worship for Israel. Thus, God moved the physical manifestation of His presence from Sinai into the midst of the Israelite camp. The Sinai theophany continued to abide above the Tent of Meeting during the journey through the desert.

The tabernacle perpetuates, intensifies, and completes God's work upon Mount Sinai. The tabernacle, as a divine dwelling, is fundamental to the later understanding of the importance of the "holy mount." God initially dwelt in the sanctuary, and when His temple was afterward built by Solomon, its placement upon Mount Moriah conferred honor upon it. When King Solomon dedicated the temple and prayed for God to bestow His blessing upon it, the Lord expressed His approval in fire from heaven (*2 Chron. 7:1–3*). Thus, Mount Moriah in the time of the Israelite kings was considered the "holy mountain" because God dwelt there amid His people.

Keep in mind that Jehovah is never confined to a specific mountain. Nor is He limited to a particular earthly location in the Old Testament because no location is, in and of itself, holy. Although He is frequently linked to Sinai and Zion, God reveals Himself in connection with a wide variety of mountains. He manifests His presence wherever He desires. Even Zion itself merits no special distinction as the earthly residence of the Lord. Rather, Zion is simply the footstool of a majesty that not even the heavens can contain (*1 Kings 8:27, 2 Chron. 6:18*).

Zion and Its Eschatological Perspective

How is Zion portrayed in the Scriptures? Mount Zion, which is a symbol of God's people (*Isa. 29:8*), also is the place from which Jehovah fights against enemy nations (*Isa. 31:4*) who war against Israel. A remnant of Israel will go forth from Zion and be preserved (*2 Kings 19:31*), and to Zion they will return Israel (*Isa. 51:11*). Salvation is found in Zion (*Isa. 37:32, Joel 2:32*). This mount also relates to cosmic signs (*Isa. 24:23*). Ultimately, the Lord will reign over His people in Mount Zion (*Mic. 4:7*) in the earth made new.

Joel 3:1–17 speaks of the gathering of the nations in the valley of Jehoshaphat, where God will contend with them in judgment and plead for the deliverance of His people. The valley of Jehoshaphat is the symbolic name given to the place of ultimate judgment. Geographically, it was a deep ravine that separated Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, through which the Kidron flowed. Because of its location, the valley of Jehoshaphat played a significant role in Israel's religious traditions and rituals (*1 Kings 1:9, 33*), such as in the religious reforms of Asa (*1 Kings 15:13, 2 Chron. 15:16*), in the reigns of Jehoshaphat (*2 Kings 23:4, 6, 12*) and Hezekiah (*2 Chron. 29:16, 2 Chron. 30:14*), and in the future purifi-

cation of Jerusalem (*Jer. 31:40*). It was there that Solomon was anointed as monarch. Therefore, there is a close relationship between the “holy mount,” or Zion, with the judgment and coronation of the king.

At the climax of the confrontation between the Lord and the nations, “the LORD also will roar from Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem” (*Joel 3:16, NKJV*), and God’s people will know that “I am the LORD your God, dwelling in Zion My holy mountain” (*Joel 3:17, NKJV*).

The righteous (*Ps. 15:2–5*) are depicted as those who will dwell on the holy mountain of God (*Ps. 15:1*), from whence God answers prayers (*Ps. 3:4*). In contrast, those who forsake Jehovah forget His holy mountain (*Isa. 65:11*). The Lord chose to make the earthly Zion His center of action, not because it was inherently unique or valuable but because He willed it so.

Noteworthy Psalms About Zion

Psalm 2

Psalm 2 is recognized as a royal, or Messianic, anthem that exalts Jehovah’s Anointed. It contains the following three aspects or themes: the historical, the Messianic, and the cultic or devotional. The poem is structured in four stanzas. In the second stanza (*Ps. 2:4–6*), God shows His disdain for the arrogance of the nations (*Ps. 2:1–3*); the stanza concludes by indicating that God has set His King on Zion, His holy mountain (*Ps. 2:6*).

This hymn teaches the concept that YHWH reigns, with His Anointed One, in Zion. Once again, the idea is affirmed that the mountain is holy because of the presence of the Deity of heaven in its midst.

Thus, Zion, the sacred mount, consecrated by the theophanic presence of YHWH in His temple, is the seat of God’s earthly dominion, the residence of the anointed king of Israel, and the capital of the world, before which all nations and kings are bound by cords of love or iron bonds. (Compare with *Isaiah 2:2–4* and *Micah 4:1–4*, wherein the mountain of the house of YHWH is the refuge and resource of all nations for instruction and government and for universal peace.)

Psalm 2:6, 7 reveals that the Lord claims as His own both the Anointed One and jurisdiction over the mount. The Anointed One and the mount are of central importance to the theology of the kingdom of God in Psalms. In the election of the king as my Anointed (*Ps. 2:2*), My King (*Ps. 2:6*), and My Son (*Ps. 2:7*), who is placed on “the mount of my holiness,” we see that the election is determined by divine decree and that human beings have no influence in this selection. Hans LaRondelle insists that “as long as the Lord stayed in the Most Holy Place of that sanctuary, that mountain was ‘holy’ because God’s Shekinah glory dwelled there.”—*Deliverance in the Psalms* (Bradenton, FL: First Impressions, 2006), p. 55.

Psalm 48:1–3

This psalm expands on the Messianic concept of Zion, both as the dwelling place of God and as the capital of His kingdom. The psalmist sings of Jehovah's care for Jerusalem and the deliverance of His people from the hands of the enemy. The central theme of the song is the praise of the greatness of God, as symbolized by Zion, "the mountain of his holiness" (*verse 1*).

In verses 1–3, the psalmist uses different expressions to refer to the site of the divine manifestation, such as "the city of our God," "Mount Zion," "the sides of the north," and "the city of the great King." The psalmist also refers to Zion as this "holy mountain of His," which could be translated as "the mountain consecrated to Him" (*see Ps. 2:6, Ps. 87:1, 2, Ps. 121:1, Zech. 8:3*).

Psalm 99

In Psalm 99, we again see the connection between Mount Zion and Israel's experiences in both the wilderness and at Mount Sinai. The psalm is composed of three stanzas, each of which ends with the sentence: "He is holy" (*Ps. 99:3, 5, 9, NKJV*). After exalting Jehovah as king (*Ps. 99:1*), as the One who dwells in Zion (*Ps. 99:2*), and declaring Him to be "great," "dreadful," "holy" (*Ps. 99:3*), and "righteous" (*Ps. 99:4*), the psalmist invites the people to worship Him (*Ps. 99:5*).

Psalm 99:6–8 discusses the experiences of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. The cloudy pillar undoubtedly recalls the wilderness experience, a direct reference to Moses and Aaron, with whom God spoke. Samuel also heard Jehovah speak in the temple at Shiloh (*1 Sam. 3:1–14*).

The psalm concludes with a call for the people to exalt the Lord and worship Him "at his holy mountain" (*Ps. 99:9, ESV*) because of the forgiveness that God manifested toward them there (*verse 8*). As we see from our study, the holiness that Mount Sinai once held as the abode of God was transferred to Zion after the temple was built there.

Part III: Life Application

Our Creator God is a most excellent Teacher. He uses physical places and material things to express spiritual concepts, as in the case of the literal Mount Zion and its surrounding hills. Through this object lesson, Israelites could better understand God's redemption plan.

Zion is a symbol of God's presence, the place where the Lord is interceding for, and protecting, His people. As the Israelites in the past, we should keep in our hearts a burning desire to be in the presence of the Almighty.

Fellowship on Sabbath is undeniably essential. But let us also seek, throughout the week, to commune with the presence of God in His heavenly sanctuary. “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (*Heb. 10:22, NKJV*).

Notes

LESSON 12

**March 16–22*

(page 92 of Standard Edition)

Worship That Never Ends



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalm 134; Isa. 42:10–12; Rev. 14:3; Psalm 15; Ps. 101:1–3; Psalm 96; Rev. 14:6–12; John 4:23, 24.*

Memory Text: “I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being” (*Psalm 104:33, NKJV*).

As our experience of God’s grace and power increases, we are prompted to ask with the psalmist: “What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits toward me?” (*Ps. 116:12, NKJV*). The inevitable reply is to devote one’s life to being faithful to God.

In the Psalms, Israel is not simply a nation but “the great assembly” (*Ps. 22:22, 25, NKJV; Ps. 35:18*). This reveals Israel’s primary calling to praise God and to bear witness about Him to other nations because the Lord wants all the world to join His people in worship. The Lord’s people are identified with the righteous, who worship the Lord and whose hope is in Him and in His love.

Praising the Lord in the congregation is perceived as ideal worship. This does not mean that the prayer and praise of the individual in Israel assume a secondary meaning. By contrast, the individual’s worship of God feeds the communal worship with renewed praise (*Ps. 22:22, 25*) while in turn individual worship develops its fullest potential in close relationship with the community. The worshiping community also is called the “assembly of the upright” (*Ps. 111:1*). The upright know God (*Ps. 36:10*) and are known by God (*Ps. 37:18*), and this experience permeates every aspect of their existence.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 23.

Lift Up Your Hands in the Sanctuary

Read Psalm 134. Where is the worship offered here? What is the outcome of the worship of the Lord?

Psalm 134 recalls the Aaronic priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24–26 (*also Ps. 67:1*) and highlights blessing as the underlying principle and outcome of the relationship between God and Israel. The people bless God in the sanctuary, and God blesses His people from Zion. The blessings extend to all of life because the Lord is the Creator of heaven and earth. The mention of Zion as the place of divine special blessings underlines the Lord’s covenantal bond with His people. It is thus within the covenant of grace that Israel exercises the privilege to bless the Lord and is blessed by Him.

Read Psalm 18:1; Psalm 36:1; Psalm 113:1; Psalm 134:1, 2; and Psalm 135:1, 2. How are the worshipers depicted here?

The Psalms often depict the worshipers as the servants of the Lord. “Who by night stand in the house of the LORD” (*Ps. 134:1, NKJV*) likely refers to the night guard of the Levites (*1 Chron. 9:23–27*) or to the praise that was offered to God by the Levites both day and night (*1 Chron. 9:33*).

Because the Israelites worshiped the invisible God, who could not be represented in the form of any image, the sanctuary served to reflect the glory of the Lord and provide a secure environment for sinful people to approach their holy King. This encounter is initiated by the Lord Himself and is regulated by His statutes and decrees.

“Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (*1 Pet. 2:4, 5, NKJV*). What we see here, in the words of Peter, is a New Testament expression of the same ideas presented in these psalms, that of God’s people, now a holy priesthood, offering praise and thanksgiving to their Lord Jesus Christ, their Creator and Redeemer, for all the good things that He had done for them.

As New Testament believers, we, also, have a priestly role in that we are called to mediate the good news of the gospel to the world. What are the most effective ways we can do this?

Sing to the Lord a New Song

Read Psalm 33:3, Psalm 40:3, Psalm 96:1, Psalm 98:1, Psalm 144:9, and Psalm 149:1. What is the common motif in these texts?

These psalms summon people to sing a “new song.” What is a “new song” here? The reason for the “new song” is the fresh recognition of the Lord’s majesty and sovereignty over the world and gratitude for His care and salvation as the Creator and Judge of the earth. Deliverance from enemies and from death, and God’s special favor toward Israel, are some of the more personal motives to sing “a new song.” While other songs also praise the Lord for His loving-kindness and wonders, the “new song” is a special song, expressing rekindled joy and promising renewed devotion to God. The new experience of divine deliverance inspires the people to acknowledge the Lord as their Creator and King. The common themes in the psalms that tell of “a new song” are trust in God, praise of His wonderful works, and deliverance from affliction, among other things.

Read Isaiah 42:10–12, Revelation 5:9, and Revelation 14:3. What can we infer about the “new song” from these biblical texts?

God’s people Israel is depicted in affectionate terms as “a people near to Him [God]” (*Ps. 148:14, NKJV*), implying that of all the creation, Israel has the most special status, and thus is most obliged and privileged to praise God. The Bible thus encourages believers of all generations to sing the new song in praise of their Redeemer, which carries their unique testimony about salvation in the blood of the Lamb. A “new song” can depict a fresh song that no one has ever heard before, a song that commemorates a vivid experience of God’s grace in one’s life. The “new song” can also express hope, in which case the newness of the song is demonstrated in the anticipation of the unique, unprecedented experience of God’s majesty in the future. True worship goes beyond sacrifices and offerings and reflects a living relationship with God that is always fresh and dynamic. In a sense, one could simply say that the “new song” is a new expression, even each day, of our love and appreciation for what God has done for us.

Dwell on God’s blessings in your life. If you were to sing a new song, what would it be?

Lord, Who May Abide in Your Tabernacle?

Read Psalm 15. Who are the people worthy of worshiping in God's presence?

The answer given in this psalm is the summary of the requirements already given in God's law and the prophets: the ones whose actions ("works righteousness") and character ("in his heart") (*see Deut. 6:5, Mic. 6:6–8*) are a reflection of God. The sanctuary was a holy place, and everything in it, including the priests, was consecrated. Thus, holiness is a mandatory requirement for entering the presence of God. Israel's holiness was to be comprehensive, uniting worship with ethics and exercised in all aspects of life. The law was given to God's people to enable them to fulfill their greatest potential (i.e., live as a kingdom of priests). The royal priesthood includes a life of holiness in the presence of God and bringing the covenant blessings to other nations.

Read Psalm 24:3–6 and Psalm 101:1–3. What does it mean to be holy?

"A perfect heart" is the worshiper's greatest quality before God. The Hebrew *tamim*, "perfect," conveys the notion of "completeness" and "wholeness." A "perfect" vine is whole, undamaged, and healthy (*Ezek. 15:5*). Animals offered as sacrifices had to be *tamim*, or without blemish (*Lev. 22:21–24*). "Perfect" speech is entirely truthful (*Job 36:4*). A "perfect heart" thus is a "pure heart" (*Ps. 24:4*) or a heart of integrity (*Ps. 15:2*). It seeks God (*Ps. 24:6*) and is restored by God's forgiveness (*Ps. 51:2–10*). A blameless life springs from the acknowledgment of God's grace and His righteousness. Divine grace inspires and enables God's servants to live in the fear of the Lord, which means to live in unhindered fellowship with God and in submission to His Word. A testimony of a devoted and pious life brings praise to God and not to one's own self. Notice that most requirements in Psalm 15 are given in negative terms (*Ps. 15:3–5*). This is not about earning God's favor but about avoiding the things that would separate us from God.

How can we make conscious choices to avoid the things that push us away from God? What are some of those things, and how can we avoid doing them?

Declare His Glory Among the Nations

Read Psalm 96. What manifold aspects of worship are mentioned in this psalm?

Worship includes singing to the Lord (*Ps. 96:1, 2*), praising His name (*Ps. 96:2*), proclaiming His goodness and greatness (*Ps. 96:3, 4*), and bringing gifts to His temple (*Ps. 96:8*). In addition to these familiar traits of worship, Psalm 96 highlights one not so obvious aspect of worship—the evangelical dimension in proclaiming the Lord’s kingdom to other peoples (*Ps. 96:2, 3, 10*).

Yet, singing, praising, bringing gifts, and proclaiming the gospel are not separate actions but are varied expressions of worship. The proclamation of God’s salvation to all nations gives substance to praise and content to worship. Notice how the reasons for worship coincide with the message proclaimed to other peoples: “for the LORD is great” (*Ps. 96:4*), “for all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (*Ps. 96:5, NKJV*), “‘the LORD reigns’ ” (*Ps. 96:10, NKJV*), and “for He is coming to judge the earth” (*Ps. 96:13, NKJV*). Thus, the goal of evangelism is to unite other peoples with God’s people, and ultimately the whole creation in the worship of the Lord (*Ps. 96:11–13*).

Worship springs from the inward recognition of who the Lord is, that is, Creator, King, and Judge (*Ps. 96:5, 10, 13*). Worship thus involves remembering God’s past acts (Creation), celebrating His present wonders (God’s sustaining of the world and His present reign), and anticipating His future deeds (end-time judgment and a new life in a new heavens and earth).

Judgment in the Psalms means restoration of the divine order of peace, justice, and well-being in a world presently burdened by injustice and suffering. Hence, the whole earth rejoices in anticipation of God’s judgments (*Ps. 96:10–13, Ps. 98:4–9*). The fact that the Lord is a righteous Judge should additionally motivate people to worship Him in holiness and “tremble,” and should caution them against taking worship lightly (*Ps. 96:9*). Worship involves both immense joy and confidence (*Ps. 96:1, 2, 11–13*) and holy fear and awe (*Ps. 96:4, 9*).

The universal appeal of Psalm 96 to worship the Creator and the Judge is reflected in God’s final gospel proclamation to the world, the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12. In many ways this psalm seems to incorporate this end-time message: creation, salvation (“everlasting gospel”), worship, and judgment. It’s all there.

Compare this psalm with the three angels’ messages (*Rev. 14:6–12*). In what ways does it teach the same basic truths as does this end-time message that we are to proclaim to the world?

When God Does Not Delight in Sacrifices

Read Psalm 40:6–8, Psalm 50:7–23, and Psalm 51:16–19. What important issue do these texts address? Why does God not delight in the sacrifices that He prescribed in His Word (*Exod. 20:24*)?

Like the prophets, the psalmists decry various misuses of worship. Their main point in these verses is not the Lord's aversion to Israel's sacrifices and festivals but the reasons for such repugnance: the fatal distance between worship and spirituality.

God is not rebuking His people for their sacrifices and burnt offerings but for their wickedness and acts of injustice that they had done in their personal lives (*Ps. 50:8, 17–21*). The Psalms are not preaching against sacrifice and worship but against *vain* sacrifice and *empty* worship, demonstrated in the unrighteousness of these worshipers.

When the unity between the outward expression of worship and the correct inner motivation for worship falls apart, rituals usually become more important in and of themselves than does the actual experience of drawing close to God. That is, the forms of worship become an end in themselves as opposed to the God whom those rituals are supposed to point to and to reveal.

Read John 4:23, 24. What point is Jesus making here that fits exactly with what the psalms for today are warning about?

Sacrifices alone are not enough. What good were these sacrifices if the hearts of those offering them were not filled with repentance, faith, and a sorrow for sin? Only when accompanied by repentance and sincere thanksgiving could the sacrifices of bulls please God as “sacrifices of righteousness” (*Ps. 51:19, see also Ps. 50:14*). Jesus, quoting Isaiah, expressed it like this: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (*Matt. 15:8, NKJV*). The problems the psalmists saw were the same problems that Jesus encountered with some of the people, especially the leaders, during His earthly ministry.

How can we make sure that we, as Adventists, with all this light and knowledge, don't fall into the trap of thinking that merely knowing truth and going through the rituals of the truth is enough?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “How to Pray,” pp. 39–42, in *A Call to Stand Apart*.

Central to worship is the need for repentance, true repentance: “Repentance includes sorrow for sin and a turning away from it. We shall not renounce sin unless we see its sinfulness; until we turn away from it in heart, there will be no real change in the life.

“There are many who fail to understand the true nature of repentance. Multitudes sorrow that they have sinned and even make an outward reformation because they fear that their wrongdoing will bring suffering upon themselves. But this is not repentance in the Bible sense. They lament the suffering rather than the sin. Such was the grief of Esau when he saw that the birthright was lost to him forever. Balaam, terrified by the angel standing in his pathway with drawn sword, acknowledged his guilt lest he should lose his life; but there was no genuine repentance for sin, no conversion of purpose, no abhorrence of evil. Judas Iscariot, after betraying his Lord, exclaimed, ‘I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.’ Matthew 27:4.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 22, 23.

“Although God dwells not in temples made with hands, yet He honors with His presence the assemblies of His people. He has promised that when they come together to seek Him, to acknowledge their sins, and to pray for one another, He will meet with them by His Spirit. But those who assemble to worship Him should put away every evil thing. Unless they worship Him in spirit and truth and in the beauty of holiness, their coming together will be of no avail. Of such the Lord declares, ‘This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoreth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me.’ Matthew 15:8, 9. Those who worship God must worship Him ‘in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.’ John 4:23.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 50.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What is the worshiper’s greatest offering to God (*Ps. 40:6–10; Rom. 12:1, 2*)?**
- ② How are individual and communal worship related? Why do we really need both? How does each one enhance the other?**
- ③ Many people understand worship to pertain only to prayer, singing of hymns, and study of the Bible and spiritual literature. While these activities are essential for worship, is worship limited to them? Give some examples of other forms of worship.**
- ④ Ellen G. White wrote: “His service should not be looked upon as a heart-saddening, distressing exercise. It should be a pleasure to worship the Lord and to take part in His work.”—*Steps to Christ*, p. 103. How can worship of the Lord become a pleasure?**

No Hair, but a Hat: Part 8

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Sekule learned of two other Sabbath-keepers in the military: a lieutenant preparing for baptism and an older man born in a Seventh-day Adventist home. The Bosnian War was raging, and the lieutenant tried to convince Sekule that desperate times called for desperate measures.

"This is a special time, and you have to eat what you have," he said. "You can practice your religion after you leave the military, but now you have to eat for your health."

Sekule decided that the lieutenant wasn't an Adventist. He was talking like Sekule's unbelieving parents, and Sekule didn't want to eat meat.

Sekule longed to meet the soldier born in an Adventist home. He wanted to ask for advice about what to eat, what to do if he were sent to the front, or just to pray together. He felt so alone.

One day, someone pointed out the Adventist to Sekule in the mess hall. Sekule watched as the man sat down with a plate of pork sausages and brown beans fried in lard, removed the sausages, and ate the beans.

A struggle broke out inside Sekule. *He's eating unclean food, he thought. Are you stupid? You've lost so much weight and you don't have strength because you don't want to eat anything. Look at him. He's smart. When you leave the military, you can eat whatever you want.*

Sekule took a step toward the serving line. Then he took another step. He wasn't hungry—he was famished after eating only bread with tea for 20 days.

A few steps away from the food, he stopped. *I won't take it, he thought. If God died for me, I will be faithful to Him.*

After a few months, spring arrived, and Sekule ate budding leaves on trees. He also ate grass that he knew was edible from his childhood.

Four months into his military service, he left the barracks to eat his first meal with a spoon. An Adventist pastor invited him to his home for a meal.

Not long after that, Sekule was sent to Serbia's capital, Belgrade, to serve under the military's top general. He was one of the best teleprinter typers in the country. His new barracks were located only a 20-minute walk away from a Seventh-day Adventist seminary. In his new role, he was allowed to leave the barracks whenever he wanted, and he ate vegetarian meals at the seminary nearly every day. Sekule believed God was rewarding his faithfulness.

Sekule enjoyed good health in the military. Never once did he fall ill. He lost only his hair. He entered the military with hair and left with none. He says it was as if God were saying, "If you are faithful to Me, I will take care of you. Yes, you will have problems. Yes, you lost your hair. But it is not a problem. I have a hat for you."

Read about SEKULE SEKULIĆ's post-military life in the third quarter 2023 Mission quarterly available at bit.ly/adultmission. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Psalm 104:33*

Worship may be summarized as follows: the response of the creature to the gifts of the Creator. Two Bible truths are evident in this abstract.

First, God has given many blessings to humanity. These gifts should awaken gratitude in the human heart for the greatness of God's love so that we may unite with the psalmist in proclaiming "with the voice of thanksgiving" all of His "wondrous works" (*Ps. 26:7, NKJV*). The psalmist's ardor for blazoning to others the greatness of God reminds us that worship has an evangelical dimension. Thus, as a church, we should proclaim to the world the Lord's deeds for every individual and His divine mercy.

Second, human beings are hardwired with an inborn predisposition to respond to God's wonders. In response to divine grace, we should bow with a grateful heart, submitting everything in our lives to the will of our Creator and Redeemer.

Worship should come from the heart. At the same time, the book of Psalms instructs us that worship should not be conducted capriciously. There are appropriate ways to revere the Lord. Keeping a wise balance between gratitude and reverent submission will make our worship enjoyable and unifying.

Part II: Commentary

The Psalter is a book *of* worship and *for* worship. Every song and prayer is, in some way, devotion to God. Let's consider different approaches to worship in this sacred church hymnal.

Psalm 3: Worship in the Morning and in the Evening

David wrote Psalm 3 in a time of distress. David knows that he can confide in God and that the Lord will hear him (*Ps. 3:4*). God's tender regard strengthens David's confidence daily in divine faithfulness, as Psalm 3:5 reveals. This text also evokes Psalm 55:17, "Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice" (*NKJV*). This verse teaches us that worship can be done in our heart at any moment of the day.

Also, place or location is no impediment to our worship. Psalm 4:3 states, "The LORD will hear when I call to Him" (*NKJV*). Immediately the psalmist adds, "Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart

on your bed, and be still” (*Ps. 4:4, NKJV*). Whether from the privacy of the bedchamber, as in the case of the psalmist, or from the rocky isolation of Patmos, where the apostle John was exiled, our prayers ascend, unobstructed by geography or location, to God.

The Psalter is full of personal prayers, laments, and blessings (*Psalm 9, Psalm 10, Psalm 30, Psalm 32, Psalm 34, Psalm 40, Psalm 41, Psalm 92, Psalm 107, Psalm 116, Psalm 138*). Congregational worship begins with the commitment of every member of the church to personal devotion.

Psalm 22: Worship in the Assembly

In Psalm 22, we note that David adopts the first-person point of view (*Ps. 22:22, 25*). The intimacy and immediacy of this point of view reinforce the notion that congregational praise starts with the individual worshiper. David proclaims, “I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You” (*Ps. 22:22, NKJV*). Subsequently, he adds, “My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him” (*Ps. 22:25, NKJV*). What a lesson for us as we seek to come into the presence of God in worship! Psalm 22 shows us the importance of congregational worship to our faith and vitality. Our children should be made to understand this essential truth when we take them to church. Moreover, we go to the temple in a spirit of submission, not to get a blessing so much as to give, and be, one.

While personal consecration is the basis for our congregational worship, we must equally assert that church members cannot thrive in isolation. Thus, the psalmist joins together with the body of God’s people in worship in Psalm 22:22–25. The argument that “I can worship at home; I don’t need the members of the church” dissolves in the face of this passage. Congregational worship brings unity, nurtures love among God’s people, and shapes our identity worldwide.

Worship in a Broader Sense

As noted in our first lesson, the books of the Psalter end with Psalm 145. The last five songs—Psalms 146–150—constitute a majestic conclusion to the book. Given that honoring the name of the God Almighty is the goal of our adoration, these final five melodies are devoted fittingly to His worship and praise: “Sing to the LORD a new song, and His praise in the assembly of saints” (*Ps. 149:1, NKJV*).

The verb *halal* (Hebrew “to praise”) is used more than 30 times in Psalms 146–150, and each usage is related to God Himself. Our reasons for praising the Lord, as given in these psalms, are manifold. The Lord is our help and hope (*Ps. 146:5*); He is Creator and Sustainer (*Ps. 146:6; Ps. 147:4, 8, 9, 16–19*); He defends and delivers the needy and the oppressed (*Ps. 149:7–9; Ps. 147:2, 3*); He sustains the humble and punishes the

wicked (*Ps. 147:6, Ps. 149:5*); He provides for the needs of His people (*Ps. 147:14, Ps. 146:7–9*); and He reigns forever (*Ps. 146:10*). Psalm 148:13 summarizes the preeminent reason for our worship and praise of God: “For His name alone is exalted; His glory is above the earth and heaven” (*NKJV*). The Lord is the only God there is, and He is worthy of praise because of His “excellent greatness” (*Ps. 150:2, NKJV*).

Our worship, both public and private, should be conducted intelligently and thoughtfully. We should take time every day, and especially every Sabbath, to recall the blessings that the Lord has poured out upon us. Recording each blessing in a journal will be of inestimable benefit to both our faith and our worship.

As we have already observed, worship is a collective experience in which the whole body of Christ participates (*Ps. 147:12, 19, 20; Ps. 148:14; Ps. 149:1; Ps. 150:1*). While an individual certainly can adore God alone in the privacy of his or her home, and according to his or her personal understanding of the Scriptures, the Lord intended that His adoration should take place in His sanctuary (*Ps. 150:1*) or other consecrated place of worship, in communal convocation among the “assembly of the saints” (*Ps. 149:1, ASV*). Our worship is incomplete if we regularly isolate ourselves away from one another and offer tribute to God alone.

The last songs of the Psalter invite not only God’s people to praise His name but call upon the whole world to adore the Creator and pay Him tribute. “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD” (*Ps. 150:6, NKJV; compare with Ps. 148:11, 12*). As we learned this week, worship has an evangelical dimension. If our worship service strives to be happy, creative, inclusive, and varied, we can, and will, reach people for the kingdom of the Lord.

In the wake of such an assessment, the following question naturally emerges and begs an inquest: How extensive and broad should our worship of God be? In Psalm 148, the psalmist exhorts not only the angels to praise God’s name (*Ps. 148:2*) but also the “sun and moon” and “stars of light” (*Psalm 148:3, NKJV*). Through the personification of these inanimate objects and heavenly bodies (*Ps. 148:3, 4*), the psalmist conveys to us the idea that worship should pervade every sphere of life. In light of this Bible truth, many of us who have limited our praise and veneration of God only to the Sabbath would do well to reevaluate our concept and practice of divine adoration.

A final topic for consideration in Psalms 146 to 150 is the use of live instruments in our devotion. Seven instruments are mentioned in these final psalms: (1) harp (*Ps. 147:7, Ps. 149:3, Ps. 150:3*), (2) timbrel (*Ps.*

149:3, Ps. 150:4), (3) trumpet and (4) lute (Ps. 150:3), (5) stringed instruments and (6) flutes (Ps. 150:4), and (7) “loud . . . clashing” cymbals (Ps. 150:5). Worship requires that we bring God our best gifts, and the area of music is no exception. All the technology we have at our disposal today certainly is a blessing to our church service. At the same time, nothing can compare to live singing and music. Not only is such music more personal and immediate, it has the power to touch hearts in a unique way. Along these lines, parents would do well to encourage their children to learn to play a musical instrument and to sing. We should do all we can to facilitate the use of different kinds of instruments in our worship service. Ultimately, the focus of all the music in our worship service should be to exalt our Savior.

Part III: Life Application

Worship is an integral part of the believer’s experience, not merely an accessory to it. The book of Psalms provides motivation and inspiration for our devotional life. Thus, we should carefully and prayerfully read every psalm with an intention to deepen our communion with God. Invite your students to bow down and pray with the Bible open, using the words of the Psalms as their prayers. In this way, they will find that the Psalms boost their personal submission and devotion to the Lord.

We have considered different modes of worship during this week and the ways in which they may be a blessing in our lives and in our church. Now, in our final section, we turn to the practical application of these principles. The implementation of different modes of worship has sometimes brought divisions among us in the church. That’s a sure sign that we are moving in the wrong direction. We have learned that worship brings union and harmony among God’s people. When a spirit and intention of harmony exists in our worship service, the worshipers come away from the experience feeling blessed from it. That’s why achieving and maintaining this balance of harmony is so important. We should strive for it in every area of our worship service, as outlined in our study. In humility of spirit, let us be ready to join with our fellow church members in harmonious worship to our Creator; He expects from us as much.

Notes

TEACHERS' COMMENTS

LESSON 13

*March 23–29

(page 100 of Standard Edition)

Wait on the Lord



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Ps. 27:14, Rom. 8:18–25, Psalm 131, Matt. 18:3, Psalm 126, Psalm 92, Mark 16:1–8, 2 Pet. 1:19.

Memory Text: “Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!” (Psalm 27:14, NKJV).

We have reached the last week in this quarter's study of the Psalms. The spiritual journey has taken us through the experience of awe before the majestic Creator, King, and Judge; through the joys of divine deliverance, forgiveness, and salvation; through moments of surrender in grief and lament; and through the glorious promises of God's everlasting presence and the anticipation of the unending universal worship of God. The journey continues, though, as we live in the hope of the Lord's coming when our longing for God will find its ultimate fulfillment. If there is a final word that we can draw from the Psalms, it should be “wait on the LORD.”

Waiting on the Lord is not an idle and desperate biding of one's time. Instead, waiting on the Lord is an act full of trust and faith, a trust and faith revealed in action. Waiting on the Lord transforms our gloomy evenings with the expectancy of the bright morning (Ps. 30:5, Ps. 143:8). It strengthens our hearts with renewed hope and peace. It motivates us to work harder, bringing in the sheaves of plentiful harvest from the Lord's mission fields (Ps. 126:6, Matt. 9:36–38). Waiting on the Lord will never put us to shame but will be richly rewarded because the Lord is faithful to all His promises (Ps. 37:7–11, 18, 34; Ps. 71:1; Ps. 119:137, 138).

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 30.

The Call of Waiting

Read Psalm 27:14; Psalm 37:7, 9, 34; Psalm 39:7; Psalm 40:1; Psalm 69:6; Galatians 5:5; and Romans 8:18–25. What do these texts implore God's people to do?

Perhaps one of the greatest stresses in life is the stress of waiting. No matter who we are, where we live, what our station in life is, we all at times must wait for things. From waiting in line in a store to waiting to hear a medical prognosis, we wait—which we don't always like doing, do we?

What, then, about waiting for God? The notion of waiting on the Lord is found not only in the Psalms but abounds all through the Bible. The operative word in all this is *perseverance*. Perseverance is our supreme commitment of refusing to succumb to fear of disappointment that somehow God will not come through for us. God's devoted child waits, knowing with certainty that God is faithful and those who wait on Him can trust that if we leave our situation to Him, we can be sure that He will work it out for our best, even if at the time we don't necessarily see it that way.

Waiting on the Lord is more than just hanging on. It is a deep longing for God that is compared to intense thirst in a dry land (*Ps. 63:1*). The psalmist waits on many blessings from God, but his yearning to be brought close to his God surpasses any other desire and need in life.

As we read in Paul, in this amazing passage in Romans, God and the whole creation are waiting for the renewal of the world and the blessed meeting of God and His people at the end of time. He writes: “For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God” (*Rom. 8:19, NKJV*).

What an incredible promise!

Yet, while we are waiting for the ultimate salvation and reunion with God, even as “the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs” (*Rom. 8:22, NKJV*), the Lord still abides with His people now, through the Holy Spirit.

Meanwhile, we are called to bear witness (*Acts 1:4–8*) to the plan of salvation, which will culminate in a new creation. That new creation is, ultimately, what we are waiting for, the final fulfillment of our hopes as Adventist Christians, whose very name, Adventist, contains the idea of the hope that we await. We wait, but we know that it's not in vain. Christ's death and resurrection, at the first coming, is our surety of His second coming.

What are some things you are waiting for now from God? How do we learn to wait in faith and in trust, especially when what we are praying for hasn't yet come?

Peace of a Weaned Child

Read Psalm 131. What does this psalm teach us about our relationship with God?

God's people live in a world that afflicts the faithful, a world full of temptations and hardship for almost everyone. A refreshed conviction that he is a child of God and dependent on God for his life consoles the psalmist and brings him to confess that his pride has no value. The deceitfulness of pride is that it causes the proud to become self-centered and unable to look beyond themselves. The proud are thus blinded to the higher reality of God.

In contrast, the righteous lift their eyes to God (*Ps. 123:1, 2*). The acknowledgment of God's greatness makes them humble and free from self-seeking and vain ambition. The psalmist confesses that he does not seek "great matters" and "things too high" (*Ps. 131:1*). These expressions describe God's works in the world that are beyond human comprehension. Modern science has shown us that even the "simplest" things can be incredibly complicated and far beyond our understanding, at least for now. In fact, there's a great irony: the more we learn about the physical world, the greater the mysteries that appear before us.

Meanwhile, the metaphor in Psalm 131:2, "like a weaned child with [its] mother" (*NKJV*), is a powerful image of one who finds calmness and who is quieted in the embrace of God. It points to the loving relationship a child has with its mother at various stages in that child's young life.

Through weaning us from insubstantial ambitions and pride, God introduces us to the nourishment of solid food, which is to "do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (*John 4:34, also Heb. 5:12–14*). The childlike trust depicted in Psalm 131 is mature faith that has been tried and tested by the hardships of life and has found God to be faithful and true to His Word.

The psalmist's attention at the end rests on the well-being of God's people. Ultimately, we are called to use our experience with God to strengthen His church. That is, from what we have learned, personally, of God's faithfulness and goodness, we can share with others who, for whatever reason, still struggle with their faith. Our witness about Christ can even be within the church itself, where many need to know Him for themselves.

"‘Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven’" (*Matt. 18:3, NKJV*). What is Jesus saying to us here? What does this idea entail?

Bringing in the Sheaves

Read Psalm 126. What gives strength and hope to God's people? What is being said here, in this context, that we can apply to our own lives today?

The Lord's miraculous deliverances in the past are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for God's people and their source of hope for the future. The past deliverance was so great that it could be described as a dream-come-true experience (*Isa. 29:7, 8*). Notice that the generation that praises the Lord in Psalm 126 for His past deliverance of His people from captivity (*Ps. 126:1*) is presently in captivity (*Ps. 126:4*).

Yet, the past joy and relief are relived through songs and appropriated in present experience. The new generations keep biblical history alive by counting themselves as present among those who saw the events firsthand. Thus, a living faith cherishes God's great deeds for His people in the past as something that the Lord has done for us and not simply things that the Lord did only for *them* (the past generations of believers).

In fact, the memory of the past spurs renewed hope for the present. The image of "the streams in the south" (*Ps. 126:4*) is a powerful metaphor of God's acting suddenly and powerfully on behalf of His people. The very south of Judah was an arid desert region. The streams were formed suddenly and filled with rushing waters after heavy rainfalls during the rainy season. The early and late rains played a crucial role in the success of the agricultural year (*Deut. 11:14, Deut. 28:12*). Similarly, the image of sowing in tears and reaping in joy (*Ps. 126:5, 6*) is a powerful promise of divine leading from a difficult present to a happy future.

The end of the harvest season was the time when the ancient Hebrew pilgrimages brought the fruits of the season to God's temple in Jerusalem (*Exod. 34:22, 26*). The harvest motif provided a potent spiritual lesson to the people at that time. Just as the hard labor of sowing and caring for the fields, orchards, and vineyards is rewarded with the joy of a plentiful harvest, so the present trials of God's people will be crowned with the joy of salvation at the end of time. The image of the great harvest points to God's restoration of His kingdom on earth at Christ's second coming (*Amos 9:13–15, Matt. 9:37*). Here, too, however, the theme of waiting arises. As with the harvest, we must wait to see the fruit and results of our labor.

Dwell on some times when you clearly and unmistakably saw the Lord working in your life or in the lives of others. How can you draw hope from those experiences for whatever you might be going through now?

Waiting in God's Sabbath Rest

Read Psalm 92. What two aspects of the Sabbath day are highlighted in this song for the Sabbath day?

The praise of God for the great works of His hands (*Ps. 92:4, 5*) and the Eden-like portrayal of the righteous (*Ps. 92:12–14*) clearly point to Creation, the first aspect that the Sabbath commemorates. The psalm also magnifies the Lord for His victory over enemies as the God of justice (*Ps. 92:7–15*) and so reinforces the second Sabbath theme—redemption from evil (*Deut. 5:12–15*). Thus, Psalm 92 extols God for His past Creation and present sustaining of the world, and it points to the end-time hope in eternal divine peace and order.

The people can enjoy Sabbath rest because God is the “Most High” (*Ps. 92:1, NKJV*); His superior position on the high places gives Him an unparalleled advantage over their enemies.

Yet, although He is the Most High, the Lord readily reaches down to rescue those who call on Him. The Lord’s work of creation and especially redemption of that creation should inspire people to worship God and love Him. After all, living in a fallen creation, without the hope of redemption, isn’t anything to be particularly thrilled about. We love, we suffer, we die—and do so without any hope. Hence, we praise the Lord, not only as our Creator but as our Redeemer, as well.

“Fresh oil” conveys the psalmist’s renewed devotion to serve God as His reconsecrated servant (*Ps. 92:10*). The anointing with oil was done for consecration of chosen people such as priests and kings (*Exod. 40:15, 1 Sam. 10:1*). Yet, the psalmist chose an unusual Hebrew word, *balal*, to describe his anointing that does not typically depict anointing of God’s servants but denotes “mixing” of oil with other parts of the sacrifice (*Exod. 29:2, NKJV; Lev. 2:4, 5*). The psalmist’s unique use of *balal* implies that the psalmist wishes to present himself as a living sacrifice to the Lord and to consecrate his whole self to God (*Rom. 12:1*).

It is not surprising to find thoughts about consecration in a psalm that is dedicated to the Sabbath because the Sabbath is the sign that the Lord sanctifies His people (*Exod. 31:13*). The images of palm trees and cedars of Lebanon portray God’s people growing in faith and true appreciation of God’s wonderful purposes and love. The Sabbath is the sign of the Lord’s eternal covenant with His people (*Ezek. 20:20*). Thus, the Sabbath rest is essential to God’s people because it empowers them to trustingly wait upon the Lord to fulfill all His covenantal promises (*Heb. 4:1–10*).

Read through Psalm 92 again. What great hope is offered to us there, and how can we, even right now, take comfort in what it says?

Joy Comes in the Morning

Read Psalm 5:3, Psalm 30:5, Psalm 49:14, Psalm 59:16, Psalm 92:2, Psalm 119:147, 2 Peter 1:19, and Revelation 22:16. What time of day is symbolically portrayed as the time of divine redemption and why?

In the Psalms, morning is typically the time when God's redemption is anticipated. Morning reveals God's favor, which ends the long night of despair and trouble (*Ps. 130:5, 6*). In Psalm 143, God's deliverance will reverse the present darkness of death (*Ps. 143:3*) into the light of a new morning (*Ps. 143:8*), and from being in the pit (*Ps. 143:7*) into residing in "the land of uprightness" (*Ps. 143:10*).

Read Mark 16:1–8. What happened in the morning talked about here, and why is that so important to us?

The resurrection morning of Jesus Christ opened the way for the eternal morning of God's salvation for all who believe in His name. Jesus' disciples experienced the full strength of the promise in Psalm 30:5: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning," when they met the resurrected Lord. It is only by God's favor and unconditional love that our weeping is transformed to joy (*Ps. 30:5, 7*).

As the morning star announces the birth of a new day, so faith heralds the new reality of eternal life in God's children (*2 Pet. 1:19*). Jesus is called the bright and morning star (*Rev. 22:16*), whom we eagerly await to establish His kingdom in which there will be no more night, evil, and death (*Rev. 21:1–8, 25*). In the end, more than anything else, this is what we are waiting for when we talk about waiting on the Lord. And, surely, the wait is worth it.

"Over the rent sepulcher of Joseph, Christ had proclaimed in triumph, 'I am the resurrection, and the life.' These words could be spoken only by the Deity. All created beings live by the will and power of God. They are dependent recipients of the life of God. From the highest seraph to the humblest animate being, all are replenished from the Source of life. Only He who is one with God could say, I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again. In His divinity, Christ possessed the power to break the bonds of death."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 785.

Death, it has been said, has been etched in our cells at birth. Though true, at least for us fallen beings, what has the resurrection of Jesus promised us about the temporality of death? Why must we never forget just how temporal death is for us?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Growing Up Into Christ,” pp. 67–75, in *Steps to Christ*.

The Psalms utter fervent appeals to wait on the Lord. “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him” (*Ps. 37:7, NKJV*). When waiting strikes us as burdensome, uncertain, and lonely, we should remember the disciples on the day of Jesus’ ascension to heaven (*Acts 1:4–11*). Jesus was taken up to heaven before their eyes, while they were left behind to wait for Him to come back on some unknown future day. Who has ever experienced a more intense yearning to receive God’s blessing now than the disciples on that day? They surely longed, “Lord, take us with You now.” Yet, they were instructed to wait for the promise of the Father and for Jesus’ return. If we think that the disciples were filled with despair and disappointment, we will be surprised. They returned to Jerusalem and did exactly what Jesus told them—they waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit and then preached the gospel to the world with power (*Acts 1:12–14, Acts 2*).

Our Lord’s commandment to wait on Him is an impossible one unless He has done His work in us through the Holy Spirit. No amount of human enthusiasm will ever stand up to the strain that waiting will impose upon our frail self. Only one thing will bear the strain, and that is abiding in Jesus Christ, namely, a personal relationship with Him. “Then if Christ is dwelling in our hearts, He will work in us ‘both to will and to do of His good pleasure.’ *Philippians 2:13*. We shall work as He worked; we shall manifest the same spirit. And thus, loving Him and abiding in Him, we shall ‘grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.’ *Ephesians 4:15*.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 75. As we continue to wait on the Lord, we will find peace and contentment in the Psalms. Our prayers and songs are where God’s heart and our hearts meet daily.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Why is waiting significant in our spiritual life? Discuss the experiences of waiting of some biblical heroes of faith. How did waiting purify and strengthen their faith? (*Rom. 4:19–22, Hebrews 11*).**
- ② What is the end of our waiting? (*Ps. 37:34–40*). That is, what are we promised when all things are, finally, resolved? What hope do we find in these texts, for instance, about the justice that has so long been missing in this life?**
- ③ Why, as far as the dead are concerned, and as far as their own experience goes (*Eccles. 9:5*), is their waiting for Jesus almost done? What hope can we take from the answer?**

Waldensians in Poland

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

Ryszard Jankowski couldn't get the police to leave him alone. Every time he set up a stand to sell Ellen White's *The Great Controversy* and other books in a Baltic resort town in Poland, the police showed up and demanded that he remove the stand and the books.

Then the Polish Seventh-day Adventist publishing house released a special issue of the *Signs of the Times* magazine, and church leaders sent copies to members of the Polish government. One government minister liked the issue so much that he wrote a letter asking towns across Poland to support its distribution. Ryszard took the letter and a copy of the magazine to the mayor of the resort town where he had trouble with the police.

The mayor was impressed. He knew the government minister.

"He was my university professor," he said. "Of course, you can freely distribute this magazine here."

"Can I get your permission in writing?" Ryszard asked.

The mayor wrote a letter and gave it to Ryszard.

Ryszard took the letter and again set up his book stand on the street. He placed the *Signs of the Times* magazine on the stand together with *The Great Controversy* and other books. Before long, the police appeared.

"You can't sell your books in our city," a police officer said.

"Look, I have a letter from the mayor," Ryszard said.

The police officers read the letter carefully. Then they saluted.

"OK, you can stay," one said.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Shortly afterward, a grandmother stopped by the book stand. Someone had given her *The Great Controversy* some time earlier, and she had read it to her grandson. He had liked it very much, especially the portrayal of Waldensian young people clandestinely sharing the Word of God at the risk of their lives in the Middle Ages. The grandmother told Ryszard that her grandson wanted to be like the Waldensians. Her grandson understood that he needed to be like them—faithful to the Word of God at all costs.

"He saw your stand and your book *The Great Controversy*," she said. "He said to me, 'Grandma, the Waldensians are in our town.' "

So, the grandmother sought out Ryszard to tell him about her grandson. She later joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Thank you for your Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2017 that helped build a television studio for Hope Channel Poland. Ryszard Jankowski is the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Poland and a regular speaker on Hope Channel Poland, the local affiliate of Hope Channel International.

Join the global church in the mass promotion and distribution of The Great Controversy in 2023 and 2024. Visit greatcontroversyproject.org for details or ask your pastor.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: Psalm 27:14

The concept of *waiting* in the book of Psalms denotes having, and demonstrating, an enduring faith. Believers are called to wait upon the Lord for the fulfillment of His promises, just as Abraham and Sarah were called to wait for the blessing of the promised child (*Gen. 12:1–4, Gen. 21:1–5*), which, finally, was bestowed after 25 years. Similarly, Israel waited for deliverance, enduring 430 years in Egypt, before departing for the Promised Land (*Gen. 15:13; Exod. 12:40, 41*). Likewise, the psalmists, with enduring faith, held on to God's promises, as did Daniel, who, in fulfillment of the 70 years of Jeremiah's prophecy (*Jer. 29:10, 11*), waited for the return of the Jews to the Promised Land (*Dan. 9:1, 2*). The Jews also waited hundreds of years for the promised Messiah until the fullness of time was reached and Jesus came to this earth in human flesh.

Waiting is made up of two variables: (1) the anticipation of the fulfillment of a promise, and (2) the expectation that what is promised will be fulfilled within, or by, a certain time. In life, when we wait, we actively anticipate an event to come, whether we await a new job, an imminent wedding, the birth of a baby, the completion of an academic degree, an upcoming voyage, a new appointment, et cetera. A lapse of time must transpire between the anticipation of the event itself and its fulfillment. The same is true for God's promises in our daily life as well as for the ultimate fulfillment of the great events in the plan of Redemption.

Part II: Commentary

Six Hebrew verbs or words are used by the psalmists when they wish to express the challenges associated with waiting. We shall consider each of them briefly.

Qawah

Qawah is the most common Hebrew verb used to express the concept of *hope*, which also can be expressed in the verbal form “to wait for,” “to await,” “to expect.” Of the 20 times in which *qawah* is used in the Psalter, the Lord is the object or the One longed for: “Let no one who waits on You be ashamed” (*Ps. 25:3, NKJV; see Ps. 69:6*); “Let integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for You” (*Ps. 25:21, NKJV*); “My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is

from Him” (*Ps. 62:5, NKJV*). As these verses amply show, our confidence should always be in the Lord.

The noun form, “hope” (Hebrew *tiqvah*), also comes from the verbal root of *qawah*: “You are my hope, O Lord God, you are my trust from my youth” (*Ps. 71:5, NKJV*). For the psalmist, the only hope we have in this life is in God. After considering how ephemeral this existence is, the psalmist exclaims to the Lord, “My hope is in You” (*Ps. 39:7, NKJV*).

The verb *qawah* can be used in a negative sense, as in waiting for the destruction of God’s people at the hands of the enemy (*Ps. 56:6, Ps. 119:95*). The negative use of this word reminds us, as sinners, that the focus of our hope is often centered on an anticipation of an evil outcome. To guard against this tendency, our expectations must come from hearts regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Yahal

Yahal means “to wait, hope, endure, long for.” After *qawah*, it’s the verbal root most used in the Old Testament to express hope. Of the 48 times in which it is used, 21 of those instances occur in the book of Psalms. *Yahal* is usually connected with *qawah* (*Job 30:26, Ps. 39:7, Ps. 130:5, Prov. 10:28, Prov. 11:7, Isa. 51:5*).

In the book of Job, *yahal* is usually applied to hope that is futile or seems useless, and is thus not connected to God (*Job 6:11, Job 14:14, Job 29:21*). But such is not the case in the Psalter. God is the explicit object of the hope that is rendered from *yahal*, as indicated in Psalm 31:24, “all you who hope in the LORD” (*NKJV*); Psalm 33:22, “just as we hope in You” (*NKJV*); Psalm 38:15, “for in You, O LORD, I hope” (*NKJV*); Psalm 39:7, “my hope is in You” (*NKJV*); Psalm 42:11, “hope in God” (*NKJV*); and Psalm 69:3, “my eyes fail while I wait for my God” (*NKJV*). Our Creator is worthy of all our confidence. Our trust in His faithfulness and love is the foundation of all true religion, and the basis of the relationship between God and humans. This relationship is based on His mercy and on His loving-kindness, which He bestows upon those who trust in Him (*Ps. 33:18, Ps. 147:11*).

In light of the aforementioned Bible truths, we find it expedient to direct our attention, once again, to Psalm 119. As this psalm testifies, the object of hope is the Word of God (*Ps. 119:43, 49, 74, 81, 114, 147*). Moreover, the words from the mouth of God, as recorded in the Scriptures, are the only true foundation for the Christian faith. It is within the pages and promises of the Scriptures that the Christian may find the assurance of his hope and salvation. The enemy is well aware of this fact and has made the Bible a special focus of his attacks, attempting to distract the believer from its truths or to deceive him into believing that the Scriptures are mere myth, invented by humans. All

evidence we encounter in support of the Bible, its transforming power, its fulfilled prophecies, and its wonderful promises, should impel us to join with the psalmist in asserting, “And in His word I do hope” (*Ps. 130:5, NKJV*). Above all else, our attention should be focused on the Scriptures as the source of all our hope.

Hkah

The verb *hkah* means “to wait, endure, expect, hope.” As with the previous verb, *yahal*, the object of *hkah* is usually God (*Isa. 8:17; Isa. 30:18; Isa. 64:3, 4; Zeph. 3:8*).

Hkah is used only twice in the Psalter. The first usage appears in Psalm 33:20, a song that exalts the Creator and Sustainer of the world (*Ps. 33:1–11*). Psalm 33:12 is the key verse of this psalm, stating the election of God’s people by the Lord. Such election is the foundation of a believer’s confidence in God. By contrast, we cannot trust in force of arms, weapons, or warriors (*Ps. 33:16, 17*). The psalmist proclaims, “Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield” (*Ps. 33:20, NKJV*). As humans living in a secular, materialistic culture, we tend to put our faith in our money, in our abilities and diplomas, in science, or in our country; but, as Christians, our trust should rest solely in the Lord.

The other usage of the verb, in Psalm 106, shows the lack of a patient, enduring spirit. Psalm 106 is a historical psalm as we saw in a previous lesson. In Psalm 106:6–12, the writer recalls God’s miracles on behalf of His people during the Exodus and the subsequent wilderness sojourn. But God’s people “soon forgot His works; they did not wait (*hkah*) for His counsel” (*Ps. 106:13, NKJV*). We face the same great temptation today, as well. We all too easily can forget what the Lord has done in our lives, making it difficult to wait for His promises. The heart that forgets to wait upon the Lord may make a desperate attempt to “help” the Lord fulfill His promises, as we see in the story of Jacob and his mother, Rebekah. Their impatience to secure the birthright blessing, at almost any cost, serves as a potent reminder to us to wait on the Lord to provide, in His own time, what He has promised.

Dumah

Dumah is a noun that means “silence, rest.” “It refers to the silence of death ([Pss.] 94:17; 115:17) . . . *dumah* refers to a silence or rest that reflects trust in God (Ps. 39:2 [3]; 62:1 [2]) or to a lack of silence that results from God’s apparent inactivity ([Ps.] 22:2).”—*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Exegesis*, entry on *dumah*, vol. 1, p. 912.

Psalm 62 uses this noun to mean waiting in silence. The word is translated twice, as follows:

Psalm 62:1: “Truly my soul silently waits for God; from Him comes my salvation” (*NKJV*).

Psalm 62:5: “My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from Him” (*NKJV*).

Elsewhere in the Scriptures, “waiting” implies “to keep silent.” In times of waiting, the best way to endure and remain steadfast is to remain silent and meditate on God’s Word. Such a mindset helps to sustain and prepare us for the test of endurance that we must pass through before we see the fulfillment of our expectations. The Scripture comforts us in our waiting with these words: “For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry” (*Hab. 2:3, NKJV*).

Sabar

The verb *sabar* is used less often for hope in the Old Testament than the other words we’ve considered thus far. *Sabar* conveys the idea of “to expect, hope, examine.” The psalmist states with confidence, “Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope [*sabar*] is in the LORD his God” (*Ps. 146:5, NKJV*). Trusting the Lord will bring happiness to the believer, even in the midst of trials. We have studied about the reasons to trust God and to worship Him; the core of these reasons is hope.

Interestingly, the psalmist uses *sabar* twice to express the action of waiting and, as such, it exemplifies what waiting is all about. Psalm 104:27 and Psalm 145:15 depict the animals waiting for the Creator to feed them: “these all wait for You,” and “the eyes of all look expectantly to You” (*NKJV*). This imagery evokes the words of Jesus: “ ‘Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?’ ” (*Matt. 6:26, NKJV*). As this imagery instructs us, we should wait, with the patient expectation of the birds of the air, without anguish or desperation, for the blessings from heaven that God has promised us. As we cultivate patience and the humble faith of a child, we will be strengthened in our waiting. Our prayer life, as a result, will become more empowered too.

Hil

The verb *hil* means “to labor, writhe, tremble” and also “to bring to labor” or “brought to birth.” Thus, Psalm 37:7 can be translated, literally: “Rest in YHWH and ‘*travail, or bring forth in birth*’ for Him” (emphasis supplied). The implication is that the long-suffering endurance we must have as we wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled is like the anguish of an expectant mother ready to deliver her child. This period of suffering implies hard labor, intense pain, and tears. The result of the newborn

baby, however, offsets the anticipation and experience of suffering. In the same way, waiting for the Lord often involves temporary anguish and suffering, but the outcome will be rich in blessings from the Lord.

Part III: Life Application

Hope is an important component of every aspect of temporal and spiritual life. The apostle Paul ranks it, along with faith and love, as among the three supreme virtues of a fruit-bearing, Spirit-filled Christian life (*1 Cor. 13:13*).

Hope motivates us to persevere in the face of sickness or tragedy. Hope is the fire that burns inside of us, igniting the desire to grasp the power in God's promises. This flame is fed by the daily reading of and meditation upon the Scriptures. Every trouble in our lives finds its solution in a specific gem of Bible truth. Hope is the hand that catches these scintillating treasures and sets them firmly in the heart. As we wait for God's fulfillment, our endurance will be tested, sometimes for hours, sometimes for years, but hope gives us the strength to be steadfast, no matter the duration or severity of our trial.

Assuredly, hope is the attribute that keeps our eyes turned toward heaven as we await the second coming of Jesus.

Notes

2024 Bible Study Guide for the Second Quarter

The “great controversy” theme pervades the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. This quarter’s lessons, written by Mark Finley, trace this theme through world history from God’s viewpoint, as prophecy reveals it, from the time of Christ down to our day and beyond. God’s love is revealed as the great controversy unfolds. We see its height and depth most clearly through the Cross, where God’s love was displayed before the entire universe as Christ poured out His life to redeem humanity, and Satan’s ultimate defeat was assured.

This quarter will explore the central issues of the conflict between Christ and Satan. We will see the courage of the Waldenses despite persecution, and the determination of the Reformers to follow Bible truth in the face of torture and martyrdom. The Reformers’ faith in Scripture and assurance of salvation by grace through faith paved the way for the rise of the Advent movement.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was raised up by God to build on the foundation laid by the Reformers to restore biblical truths that had been lost through the centuries. Central to our mission is proclaiming the three angels’ messages (*Rev. 14:6–12*), God’s final warning to a world soon to come to an end.

Thus, we will use the book, *The Great Controversy*, by Ellen G. White, along with the Bible, as our thematic outline to study this tremendous topic. The book chapters on which each lesson is based are noted to facilitate its use as a companion book for further study and sharing, that we all might more fully “know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge” (*Eph. 3:19, NKJV*).

Lesson 1—The War Behind All Wars

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: War in Heaven (*Rev. 12:7–9*)

MONDAY: Lucifer Deceives; Christ Prevails (*Rev. 12:4, Rev. 22:17*)

TUESDAY: Planet Earth Becomes Involved (*Gen. 3:15*)

WEDNESDAY: Love Finds a Way (*Heb. 2:9*)

THURSDAY: Our High Priest (*Heb. 4:15, 16*)

Memory Text—*Rev. 12:7, 8*

Sabbath Gem: Looking at the world through the lens of God’s love, in light of the great controversy between good and evil, reassures each of us that right will triumph over wrong, and will do so forever.

Lesson 2—The Central Issue: Love or Selfishness

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: A Broken-Hearted Savior (*Luke 19:41–44*)

MONDAY: Christians Providentially Preserved (*Psalm 46:1*)

TUESDAY: Faithful Amid Persecution (*Acts 8:1–8*)

WEDNESDAY: Caring for the Community (*Acts 2:44–47*)

THURSDAY: A Legacy of Love (*John 13:35*)

Memory Text—*Isaiah 41:10, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 24 clearly outlines last-day events in the context of Jerusalem’s fall.

Lessons for People Who Are Legally Blind

The Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide is available free in braille, on MP3 disc, and via online download to people who are legally blind individuals who cannot hold or focus on ink print. Contact Christian Record Services, Inc., Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981, option 3; e-mail: info@christianrecord.org; website: www.christianrecord.org.