

BEFORE THEY BEGAN THEIR DUTIES FOR THE FIRST TIME, the Levites were set apart by a ritual God himself established to “make them ceremonially clean” (Num. 8:5-14). The details need not concern us here. What we shall reflect on is the theological reasoning God gives for ordering things this way.


Part of it we have heard before: this is by way of review. God himself has “taken them as my own” (8:16), i.e., he has selected the Levites “from among the other Israelites” (8:6) to be peculiarly his, “in place of the firstborn, the first male offspring from every Israelite woman” (8:16). The rationale is reviewed: this stems from the Exodus, from the first Passover, when the firstborn of the Egyptians were struck down but not the firstborn sons of Israel (8:17-18).

But now a new element is introduced. God has “taken” the Levites to be peculiarly his, and, having “taken” them, he has also “given” them as “gifts” to Aaron and his sons, the chief priests, “to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary” (8:19). So God has “taken” them and then “given” them to his people.

Formally, of course, God has “given” them to Aaron and his sons, but since the work the Levites do is for the benefit of all Israel, there is a sense in which God has given the Levites to the entire nation. The pattern is spelled out again ten chapters later (Num. 18:5-7). God says to Aaron, “I myself have selected your fellow Levites from among the Israelites as a gift to you” (18:6).

The closest New Testament parallel is found in Ephesians 4. By his death and resurrection, Christ Jesus “led captives in his train and gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8). The words are ostensibly quoted from Psalm 68:18, where the Hebrew text says that God *received* gifts *from* men. But it has been argued, rightly, that Psalm 68 assumes such themes as those in Numbers 8 and 18, and that in any case Paul is melding together both Numbers and Psalm 68 to make a point. Under the new covenant, Christ Jesus by his triumph has captured us, and to *each one of us* (Eph. 4:7) he has apportioned grace and then poured us back on the church as his “gifts to men.”

That is how we are to think of ourselves. We are Christ’s captives, captured from the race of rebellious image-bearers and now poured out as God’s “gifts to men.” That invests all our service with unimaginable dignity.



TWO THEMES CONTROL NUMBERS 9. The *second* is the descent of the pillar of cloud and fire onto the tabernacle, the “Tent of the Testimony,” the first day it was set up (9:15-23). This pillar had guided and protected the people from the time of their first departure from Egypt. It was the visible sign of God’s presence—and from now on it is associated with the tabernacle (and later with the temple). Thus the storyline of the manifestation of the presence of God continues.

But the *first* theme is the celebration of the Passover on the first anniversary of the original Passover (9:1-14). The original Passover, described in Exodus 12, was not only bound up with the Exodus, but was to be commemorated, according to the Mosaic covenant, in well-defined ways (see Ex. 12; Lev. 23:5-8; Deut. 16:1-8). God’s instructions to Moses are that the people are to celebrate the Passover “in accordance with all its rules and regulations” (Num. 9:3). But this stipulation precipitates a crisis. Because some of the people had become ceremonially unclean by coming into contact with a dead body (for instance, if a member of their family had died), strictly speaking they could not participate in the Passover feast until they had become ceremonially clean—and that took enough time that they would be unable to celebrate on the prescribed day, the fourteenth of Abib (called Nisan after the exile), the first month in the Jewish calendar.

So Moses consults the Lord. The Lord’s answer is that such ceremonially unclean people may postpone their celebration of Passover until the fourteenth of the *second* month. But this postponement, the Lord insists, is *only* for those unable, for ceremonial reasons, to celebrate at the prescribed time. Those who opt for postponement for reasons of personal expediency are to be cut off from the people.

There are many lessons to be learned from this episode, but one of them is sometimes overlooked. In any complex system of laws, sooner or later different laws will lay down competing or even conflicting claims. The result is that such laws must be laid out in some hierarchy of importance. Here the *month* is considered less critical than ceremonial cleanliness or the Passover celebration itself. Jesus himself recognizes the general point. The Law forbids regular work on the Sabbath, and it says a male child should be circumcised on the eighth day. Suppose the eighth day is a Sabbath (John 7:23)? Which takes precedence?

Minds that think *only* on the legal plane may not grasp the direction in which laws point. Organize them aright, Jesus says (and Paul elsewhere makes the same point in other ways), and you discover that they point to him (John 7:24).

A COMMON THEME OF PSALMS 46 AND 47 is the sovereign authority of God over all the nations. He is not some mere tribal deity. He is the Most High (46:4). Nations may be in an uproar; kingdoms rise and fall. But God needs only to lift his voice, and the earth itself melts away (46:6). By his authority desolation works its catastrophic judgment; by his authority wars cease (46:8-9). The Lord Most High is “the great King over all the earth” (47:2, 7). “God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne” (47:8).

This ensures the security of the covenant community. The surrounding pagan nations may threaten, but if God is in charge, the covenant people of God can testify, “The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (46:7). “He subdued nations under us, peoples under our feet” (47:3). Indeed, as for Jerusalem, the “place where the Most High dwells”: “God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day” (46:4-5).

The psalmist sees at least two further entailments. *First*, sooner or later God “will be exalted among the nations” (46:10). “For God is the King of all the earth” (47:7). These last two references *could* be understood as a threat rather than a promise of blessing: God will be exalted among these pagan nations in exactly the same way he was exalted by destroying the Egyptian army at the Red Sea. But in the light of Psalm 47:9 we would probably be unwise to insist on so negative a reading: “The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted.” In other words, one of the entailments of monotheism is that God is the God of all, whether acknowledged as such or not. And one day he will be acknowledged by all; in many cases such acknowledgment will be accompanied by worship and adoration, as the nobles of the nations assemble before God exactly as do the people of the God of Abraham. To use Paul’s categories, here is the inclusion of Gentiles as Abraham’s sons (cf. Rom. 4:11; Gal. 3:7-9). “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (46:10).

The *second* entailment is praise. “Come and see the works of the LORD” (Ps. 46:8). “Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!” (47:1-2). “Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises” (47:6).



ONE OF THE WAYS GOD TALKS ABOUT THE FUTURE IS . . . well, by simply talking about the future. There are places in the Bible where God predicts, in words, what will happen: he *talks* about the future. But he also provides pictures, patterns, types, and models. In these cases he establishes an institution, or a rite, or a pattern of relationships. Then he drops hints, pretty soon a cascade of hints, that these pictures or patterns or types or models are not ends in themselves, but are ways of anticipating something even better. In these cases, then, God talks about the future in pictures.

Christians who read their Bibles a lot ponder the connections between the Davidic kingship and Jesus' kingship, between the Passover lamb and Jesus as "Passover Lamb," between Melchizedek and Jesus, between the Sabbath rest and the rest Jesus gives, between the high priest's role and Jesus' priestly role, between the temple the old covenant priest entered and the heavenly "holy of holies" that Jesus entered, and much more. Of course, for those who lived under the old covenant stipulations, covenantal fidelity *meant* adherence to the institutions and rites God laid down, even while those same institutions and rites, on the broader canonical scale, looked forward to something even better. Through these pictures, God talked about the future. Once a Christian grasps this point, parts of the Bible come alive in fresh ways.

One of these picture-models is Jerusalem itself, sometimes referred to as Zion (the historic stronghold). Jerusalem was bound up not only with the fact that from David on, it was the capital city (even after the division into Israel and Judah, it was the capital of the southern kingdom), but also with the fact that from Solomon on it was the site of the temple, and therefore of the focus of God's self-disclosure.

So for the psalmist, "the city of our God, his holy mountain" is not only "beautiful" but "the joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 48:1-2). It is not only the center of armed security (48:4-8), but the locus where God's people meditate on his unending love (48:9), the center of praise (48:10). Yet the psalmist looks beyond the city to God himself: *he* is the one who "makes her secure forever" (48:8), whose praise reaches to the end of the earth, for ever and ever (48:10, 14).

As rooted as they are in historic Jerusalem, the writers of the new covenant look to a "Jerusalem that is above" (Gal. 4:26), to "Mount Zion," to "the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (Heb. 12:22), to the "new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21:2). Reflect long and often on the connections.



REBELLION HAS many faces.


Numbers 12—13 reports two quite different and complex forms of rebellion. The *first* finds Aaron and Miriam bad-mouthing their brother Moses. The presenting problem is that because the Lord has spoken through them as well as through Moses, they feel they have the right to share whatever authority he enjoys. But other layers lie hidden: they are upset with Moses because of his marriage to a Cushite. Human motives are often convoluted.

Inevitably, the protest sounds reasonable and sensible, even (to our ears) democratic. Further, it is calculated to put Moses into a horrible position. If he insists that he alone is the leader whom God has peculiarly called to this task, he could be accused by the envious and the skeptical as guilty of self-promoting turf-protection. What saves him, in part, is that, like the Savior who followed him, Moses is an extraordinarily humble man (12:3; cf. Matt. 11:29).

God himself intervenes and designates who the leader is. Moses is unique, for the immediacy of the revelation he receives and transmits is beyond that of all other prophets; further, Moses has proved faithful in all God's household (12:6-8). Miriam faces dreadful judgment. Why Miriam is so afflicted and not Aaron is unclear: perhaps in this rebellion she was the leader, or perhaps God did not want to undermine the legitimate authority Aaron possessed as high priest. What is clear is that even when Miriam, owing to Moses' intercessory intervention, is forgiven, she faces a week of disgrace and illness outside the camp, to teach both her and the nation that the rebellion that manifests itself in lust for power deserves judgment from the living God.

The *second* rebellion, reported in Numbers 13, begins with the fears of ten of the twelve spies commissioned to reconnoiter the Promised Land. They could not fail to report its lush fertility, but they focused on the obstacles. In this they had forgotten, or willfully ignored, all that God had miraculously performed to bring them this far. But their rebellion is worse yet. As leaders they were charged not only with accurate reporting but also with forming the opinion of the people. As leaders of the people of God, they should have presented the features of the land as they found them, and then focused attention on the faithful, covenantal God, reminding the people of the plagues, the Passover, the Exodus, the supply of food and safety in the desert, and God's self-disclosure at Sinai. But in fact, they succeed only in fomenting a major mutiny (see chap. 14), primarily by fostering fear and unbelief.

In what ways does rebellion manifest itself among the people of God today?



ANOTHER DAY THINKING ABOUT REBELLION—this time the rebellion displayed by the people at Kadesh Barnea, when they forfeited the opportunity to enter the Promised Land because of their sin (Num. 14).

(1) Just as in the previous chapter the ten spies who gave a negative report were responsible for discouraging the people, so the people are responsible to decide to whom they will give heed. They simply go with the majority. If they had adhered to the covenant to which they had pledged themselves, if they had remembered what God had already done for them, they would have sided with Caleb and Joshua. Those who side with the majority voice and not with the word of God are always wrong and are courting disaster.


(2) To doubt the covenantal faithfulness of God, not the least his ability and his will to save his own people and to do what he has said he will do, is to treat God with contempt (14:11, 23). Virtually all perpetual grumbling partakes of such contempt. This is a great evil.

(3) People often hide their own lack of faith, their blatant unbelief, by erecting a pious front. Here they express their concern that their wives and children will be taken as plunder (14:3). Instead of admitting they are scared to death and turning to God for help, implicitly they blame God for being less concerned for their wives and children than they are themselves.

(4) The punishment exacted therefore precisely suits the crime: that adult generation, with a couple of exceptions, dies out in the desert before their children (the very children about whom they profess such concern) inherit the land almost forty years later (14:20-35).

(5) There is a kind of repentance that grieves over past failures but is not resolved to submit to the word of God. The Israelites grieve—and decide to take over the Promised Land, even though God has now told them not to attempt it, since he will no longer be their bulwark and strength. Moses rightly sees that this is nothing other than further disobedience (14:41). Inevitably they are beaten up for their pains (14:44-45).

These five characteristics of this terrible rebellion are not unknown today: a popular adherence to majority religious opinion with very little concern to know and obey the word of God, an indifferent dismissal of God with contempt stemming from rank unbelief, pious excuses that mask fear and unbelief, temporal judgments that kill any possibility of courageous Christian work, and a faulty and superficial “repentance” that leaves a meeting determined to make things right, and yet is still unwilling to listen to the Word of God and obey him. God help us all.



GUILT. What a horrendous burden.

Sometimes people carry a tremendous weight of subjective guilt—i.e., of felt guilt—when they are not really guilty. Far worse is the situation where they carry a tremendous weight of objective guilt—i.e., they really are guilty of some odious sin in the eyes of the living God—and are so hardened that they do not know it.

The superscription of **Psalm 51** discloses that as David writes he consciously carries both objective and subjective guilt. Objectively, he has committed adultery with Bathsheba and has arranged the murder of her husband Uriah; subjectively, Nathan's parable (2 Sam. 12; see the meditation for September 16) has driven home to David's conscience something of the proportion of his own sin, and he writes in shame.

(1) David confesses his sin and cries for mercy (51:1-2). There is no echo of the cries for vindication that mark some of the earlier psalms. When we are guilty, and know we are guilty, no other course is possible, and only this course is helpful.

(2) David frankly recognizes that his offense is primarily against God (51:4), not against Uriah, Bathsheba, the child that was conceived, or even the covenant people who bear some of the judgment. God sets the standards. When we break them, we are defying him. Further, David knows that he sits on the throne out of God's sheer elective grace. To betray the covenant from a position of God-appointed trust is doubly appalling.

(3) David is honest enough to recognize that this sequence of sins, though particularly vile, does not stand alone. It is a display of what is in the heart, of the sin nature that we inherit from our parents. Nothing avails if we are not finally cleansed inwardly, if we are not granted a pure heart and a steadfast spirit (51:5-6, 10).

(4) For David this is not some merely cerebral or cool theological process. Objective guilt and subjective recognition of it so merge that David feels oppressed: his bones are crushed (51:8), he cannot escape the specter of his own sin (51:3), and the joy of his salvation has dissolved (51:12). The transparent honesty and passion of David's prayer disclose that he seeks no blasé or formulaic cleansing.

(5) David recognizes the testimonial value of being forgiven, and uses it as an argument before God as to why he should be forgiven (51:12-15). Implicitly, of course, this is an appeal for God's glory.

(6) Steeped as he is in the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant, David nevertheless adopts more fundamental priorities. The prescribed sacrifices mean nothing apart from the sacrifice of a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart (51:16-19).

TWO MORE WRETCHED EPISODES of rebellion now blemish the history of the Israelites in the wilderness (Num. 16).


The *first* is the plot engineered by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. They stir up trouble not among the riffraff, but among a sizable number of community leaders, about 250 of them. The heart of their criticism against Moses is twofold: (a) They think he has taken too much on himself. “The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them” (16:3). Moses has no right to set himself above “the LORD’s assembly” (16:3). (b) The track record of Moses’ ministry is so sullied by failure that he cannot be trusted. He brought them out of “a land flowing with milk and honey” (16:13), promising them much, but in reality leading them into the desert. So why on earth should he “lord it over” the people? (16:13)?

Their reasoning would have a certain believability among those who focused on their hardships, who resented all authority, who had short memories of how they had been rescued from Egypt, who did not value all that God had carefully revealed, and who were swayed by the instant appeal of rhetoric but who did not value their own solemn covenantal vows. Their descendants are numerous today. In the name of the priesthood of all believers and of the truth that the whole Christian community is holy, other things that God has *said* about Christian leaders are rapidly skirted. Behind these pretensions of fairness lies, very often, naked lust for power, nurtured by resentments.

Of course, not every leader in the Christian church is to be treated with equal deference: some are self-promoted upstarts that the church is to get rid of (e.g., 2 Cor. 10—13). Nor are all who protest cursed with the judgment that fell on Korah and his friends: some, like Luther and Calvin, like Whitefield and Wesley, and like Paul and Amos before them, are genuine reformers. But in an anti-authoritarian age like ours, one should always check to see if the would-be reformers are shaped by passionate devotion to the words of God, or simply manipulate those words for their own selfish ends.

In the *second* rebellion, the “whole Israelite community” (16:41), fed by pathetic resentments, mutters against Moses and Aaron, accusing them of having killed the rebels the day before—as if they could have opened the ground to swallow them up. Thousands perish because the community as a whole still has not come to grips with God’s holiness, the exclusiveness of his claims, the inevitability of his wrath against rebels, his just refusal to be treated with contempt.

And why should our generation be spared?





AT ONE LEVEL, THE BRIEF ACCOUNT IN NUMBERS 17 wraps up the report of the rebellions in the previous chapter. God wishes to rid himself of the constant grumbling of the Israelites as they challenge Aaron's priestly authority (17:5). So the staff of the ancestral leader of each tribe is carefully labeled and then secreted by Moses, as directed, in the tabernacle, the "Tent of Testimony." God declares, in advance, that the staff belonging to the man he chooses will sprout.

Moses does as he is told. The next morning he fetches the twelve staffs. Aaron's staff, and only his staff, has budded—indeed, it has budded, blossomed, and produced almonds. This staff, by God's instruction, is preserved for posterity. As for the Israelites, it dawns on them that their rebellion was not just against a couple of men, Aaron and Moses, but against the living God. Now they cry, "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die. Are we all going to die?" (17:12-13).

What shall we make of this account?

(1) The response of the Israelites is partly good, but is still horribly deficient. It is good in that this event, at least for the time being, prompts them to see that their rebellion was not against Moses and Aaron alone, but against the living God. Fear of God can be a good thing. Yet this sounds more like the cringing fear of people who do not know God very well. They are afraid of being destroyed, but they are not in consequence more devoted to God. In Numbers 20 and 21, the people are whining and grumbling again; this miraculous display of the staff that budded settled nothing for very long. That, too, is horribly realistic: the church has a long history of powerful revivals that have been dissipated or prostituted within a short space of time.

(2) One must ask why God attaches so much importance to the fact that only the designated high priest may perform the priestly duties. We must not infer that this is the way we should defer to all Christian leaders. Within the canonical framework, much more than this is at stake in the account of Aaron's rod that budded. The point is that *only* God's prescribed high priest is acceptable to God for discharging the priestly office. As the opening lines of Numbers 18 make clear, only Aaron and his sons are to "bear the responsibility for offenses against the sanctuary and . . . priesthood." The New Testament insists, "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was" (Heb. 5:4). So *also Christ* (Heb. 5:5)! Only God's appointed priest will do.




AMERICAN COINS have the words “In God we trust.” In our pluralistic age, it is not unreasonable to respond, “Which God?” Even if the answer to that were unambiguously the God of the Bible, most people, I suspect, would think of this trust in God in fairly privatized or mystical ways. It is distressingly easy to think of trust in God as a kind of religious intuition, a pious sensibility, with only the vaguest perception of what this trust entails.

David is under no such delusions. Twice in **Psalm 56** his description of the God in whom he trusts implicitly gives some substance to the nature of trust. David writes, “When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, *whose word I praise*, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?” (56:3-4, emphasis added). Again: “In God, *whose word I praise*, in the LORD, *whose word I praise*—in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (56:10-11, emphasis added).

In both passages, David grasps that trust in God is the only solution to his fear: “*When I am afraid*, I will trust in you . . . in God I trust; *I will not be afraid* . . . in God I trust; *I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?*” The superscription of the psalm shows that David wrote it shortly after his horrible experience in Gath (1 Sam. 21:10-15). While fleeing Saul, David hid out in Philistine territory and came within a whisker of being killed. He escaped by feigning madness. Doubtless he had been very afraid, and in his fear he trusted God, and found the strength to pull off a remarkable act that saved his life.

But for our purposes, the striking element in David’s confession of his trust is his repetition of one clause. Three times he mentions the Lord God *whose word I praise*. In this context, the specific word that calls forth this description probably has something to do with *why* David could trust him so fully under these circumstances. The most likely candidate for what this “word” is that David praises is God’s promise to give him the kingdom and to establish him as the head of a dynasty. His current circumstances are so dire that unbelief might seem more obviously warranted. But David trusts the Lord *whose word I praise*.

What we need is faith in the speaking God, faith in God that is firmly grounded in what this speaking God has said. Then, in the midst of even appalling circumstances, we can find deep rest in the God who does not go back on his word. Transparently, such faith is grounded in God’s revelatory words.



THERE ARE FEW PASSAGES in the Pentateuch which on first reading are more discouraging than the outcome of Numbers 20:1-13.

Yet the account carries some subtle complexities. It begins with more of the usual griping. The need of the people is real: they are thirsty (20:2). But instead of humbly seeking the Lord in joyous confidence that he would provide for his own people, they quarrel with Moses and charge him with the usual: they were better off in slavery, their current life in the desert is unbearable, and so forth.

Moses and Aaron seek the Lord's face. The glory of God appears to them (20:6). God specifically says, "Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water" (20:8). But Moses has had it. He assembles the crowd and cries, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (20:10)—which rhetorical question, at its face value, is more than a little pretentious. Then he strikes the rock twice, and water gushes out. But the Lord tells Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them" (20:12).

Three observations:

(1) God does not say, "Because you did not *obey* me enough . . ." but "Because you did not *trust* in me enough to honor me as holy. . . ." There was, of course, formal disobedience: God said to speak, and Moses struck the rock. But God perceives that the problem is deeper yet. The people have worn Moses down, and Moses responds in kind. His response is not only the striking of the rock, it is the answer of a man who under pressure has become bitter and pretentious (which is certainly not to say that any of us would have done any better!). What has evaporated is transparent trust in God: God is not being honored as holy.

(2) Read the Pentateuch as a whole: the final point is that Moses does not enter the land. Read the first seven books of the Old Testament: one cannot fail to see that the old covenant had not transformed the people. Canonically, that is an important lesson: *the Law was never adequate to save and transform*.

(3) In light of 1 Corinthians 10:4, which shows Christ to be the antitype of the rock, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the reason God had insisted the rock be struck in Exodus 17:1-7, and forbids it here, is that he perceives a wonderful opportunity to make a symbol-laden point: the ultimate Rock, from whom life-giving streams flow, is struck once, and no more.



THE BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE BRONZE SNAKE (**Num. 21:4-9**) is probably better known than other Old Testament accounts of similar brevity, owing to the fact that it is referred to by Jesus himself in John 3:14-15: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” What is the nature of the parallel that Jesus is drawing?

In the Numbers account, we are told that as the people continue their God-directed route through the desert, they “grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses” (21:4-5). They even whine against the food that God has been providing for them, the daily provision of manna: “We detest this miserable food” (21:5). In consequence the Lord sends judgment in the form of a plague of venomous snakes. Many die. Under the lash of punishment, the people confess to Moses, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you” (21:7). They beg Moses to intercede with God. God instructs Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole; “anyone who is bitten can look at it and live” (21:8). So Moses casts a bronze snake and places it on a pole, and it has just the effect that God had ordained.

So here we have an ungrateful people, standing in judgment of what God has done, questioning their leader. They face the judgment of God, and the only release from that judgment is a provision that God himself makes, which they receive by simply looking to the bronze serpent.

The situation of Nicodemus is not so very different in John 3. His opening remarks suggest that he sees himself as capable of standing in judgment of Jesus (John 3:1-2), when in fact he really has very little understanding of what Jesus is talking about (3:4, 10). The world is condemned and perishing. Its only hope is in the provision that God makes—in something else that is lifted up on a pole, or more precisely, in *someone* who is lifted up on a cross. This is the first occurrence of “lifted up” in John’s gospel. As the chapters unwind, it becomes almost a technical expression for Jesus’ crucifixion. The only remedy, the only escape from God’s judgment, depends on looking to this provision God has made: We must believe in the Son of Man who is “lifted up” if we are to have eternal life.

That word still comes to us. Massive muttering is a sign of culpable unbelief. Sooner or later we will answer to God for it. Our only hope is to look to the One who was hoisted on a pole.





RECENTLY I WAS PHONED BY A MAN who told me he wanted to put me on a retainer as his private theologian. Then, when he phoned or wrote again, I would try to answer his questions.

I did not bother asking what figure he had in mind. Nor do I want to question his motives: he may well have meant to help me or even honor me, or simply to pay his way. But knowing how easily my own motives can be corrupted, I told him that I could not possibly enter into that sort of arrangement with him. Preachers should not see themselves as being *paid* for what they do. Rather, they are supported by the people of God so that they are free to serve. If he wrote or called and asked questions, I would happily do my best to answer, using the criteria I use for whether or not I answer the countless numbers of questions I receive each year.

Numbers 22 begins the account of Balaam. His checkered life teaches us much, but the lesson that stands out in this first chapter is how dangerous it is for a preacher, or a prophet, to sacrifice independence on the altar of material prosperity. Sooner or later a love of money will corrupt ministry.

That Balaam was a prophet of God shows that there were still people around who retained some genuine knowledge of the one true God. The call of Abraham and the rise of the Israelite nation do not mean that there were no others who knew the one sovereign Creator: witness Melchizedek (Gen. 14). Moreover, Balaam clearly enjoyed some powerful prophetic gift: on occasion he spoke genuine oracles from God. He knew enough about this mysterious gift to grasp that it could not be turned on and off, and that if he was transmitting a genuine oracle he himself could not control its content. He could speak only what God gave him to say.

But that did not stop him from lusting after Balak's offer of money. Balak saw Balaam as some sort of semi-magical character akin to a voodoo practitioner, someone to come and put a curse on the hated Israelites. God unambiguously forbids Balaam to go with Balak, for he has blessed the people Balak wants cursed. Balaam nags God; God relents and lets Balaam go, but only on condition that he does only what God tells him (22:20). At the same time, God stands against Balaam in judgment, for his going is driven by a greedy heart. Only the miraculous incident with the donkey instills sufficient fear in him that he will indeed guard his tongue (22:32-38).

Never stoop to become a peddler of the Word of God.




BALAAAM RECOGNIZES THAT he cannot control the oracles he receives (Num. 23). He cannot even be sure that an oracle will be given him: “Perhaps the LORD will come to meet with me,” he explains (23:3).

“The LORD put a message in Balaam’s mouth” (23:5), and this message is reported in the oracle of vv. 7-10. (1) Cast in poetic form, it stakes out the independence of the true prophet. Although Balak is the one who summoned him, Balaam asks, “How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced?” (23:8). (2) The last part of this first oracle reflects on the Israelites themselves. They consider themselves different from the other nations—after all, they are the covenant people of God—and therefore they will not be assimilated (23:9). Not only will their numbers vastly increase (“Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?”), but they are declared to be righteous, the kind of people who ultimately meet a glorious end (23:10).

Balak does not give up easily, and in due course the Lord gives Balaam a second oracle (23:18-24). Here the same themes are repeated and strengthened. (1) Balaam can pronounce only blessing on Israel. After all, God is not going to change his mind just because Balak wants Balaam to take another shot at it. “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind” (23:19). In any case, not only has Balaam “received a command to bless,” but even if Balaam disobeyed the command, he frankly admits, God “has blessed, and I cannot change it” (23:20). “There is no sorcery against Jacob, no divination against Israel” (23:23). (2) As for Israel, no misfortune or misery is observed there, for “the LORD their God is with them” (23:21). Since the God of the Exodus is their God, they have the strength of a wild ox, and will triumph over their enemies (23:22, 24).

Two observations: (1) Balak represents the kind of approach to religion cherished by superstitious people. For them, religion serves to crank up blessings and call down curses. The gods serve me, and I am angry and frustrated if they can’t be tamed. (2) After the succession of reports of the dreary rebellions of the Israelites, it is astonishing to hear them praised so highly. But the reason, of course, is because it is *God* who sustains and strengthens them. If God blesses his people, no curse against them can stand. And *since God is the source of this oracle*, this is *God’s* view of things—and our great ground of confidence and hope.



IN AN AGE OF MANY “PRAISE CHORUSES,” people are tempted to think that our generation is especially rich in praise. Surely we know more about praise than our stuffy parents and grandparents in their somber suits and staid services, busily singing their old-fashioned hymns.

It does not help clarity of thought on these matters to evaluate in stereotypes. Despite the suspicions of some older people, not all contemporary expressions of praise are frivolous and shallow; despite the suspicions of some young people, not all forms of praise from an earlier generation are to be abandoned in favor of the immediate and the contemporary.


But there are two elements expressed in the praise of **Psalm 66** that are almost never heard today, and that badly need to be reincorporated both into our praise and into our thinking.

The *first* is found in 66:8-12. There the psalmist begins by inviting the peoples of the world to listen in on the people of God as they praise him because “he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.” Then the psalmist directly addresses God, and mentions *the context* in which the Lord God preserved them: “For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance” (66:10-12).

This is stunning. The psalmist thanks God for testing his covenant people, for refining them under the pressure of some extraordinarily difficult circumstances and for sustaining them through that experience. This is the response of perceptive, godly faith. It is not heard on the lips of those who thank God only when they *escape* trial or are feeling happy.

The *second* connects the psalmist’s desperate cry with righteousness: “I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer*” (66:17-19, emphasis added). This is not to say that the Lord answers us because we have merited his favor by our righteous endeavor. Rather, because we have entered into a personal and covenantal relationship with God, we owe him our allegiance, our faith, our obedience. If instead we nurture sin in our inmost being, and then turn to God for help, why should he not respond with the judgment and chastisement that we urgently deserve? He may turn away, and sovereignly let sin take its ugly course.

Our generation desperately needs to connect praise with righteousness, worship with obedience, and the Lord’s response with a clean heart.



THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY to defeat the people of God.

Balak wanted Balaam to curse the Israelites (Num. 22—24). Under threat of divine sanction, Balaam stood fast and proclaimed only what God gave him to say. But here in **Numbers 25** we discover a quite different tactic. Some of the Moabite women invited some of the Israelite men over for visits. Some of these visits were to the festivals and sacrifices of their gods. Liaisons sprang up. Soon there was both sexual immorality and blatant worship of these pagan gods (25:1-2), in particular the Baal (lit. *Lord*) of Peor (25:3). “And the LORD’s anger burned against them” (25:3).


The result is inevitable. Now the Israelites face not the wrath of Moab but the wrath of Almighty God. A plague drives through the camp and kills 24,000 people (25:9). Phinehas takes the most drastic action (25:7-8). If we evaluate it under the conditions of contemporary pluralism, or even against the nature of the sanctions that the church is authorized to impose (e.g., 1 Cor. 5), Phinehas’s execution of this man and woman will evoke horror and charges of primitive barbarism. But if we recall that under the agreed covenant of this theocratic nation, the stipulated sanction for both blatant adultery and for idolatry was capital punishment, and if we perceive that by obeying the terms of this covenant (to which the people had pledged themselves) Phinehas saved countless thousands of lives by turning aside the plague, his action appears more principled than barbaric. Certainly this judgment, as severe as it is, is nothing compared with the judgment to come.

But I shall focus on two further observations.

First, Moab had found a way to destroy Israel by enticing the people to perform actions that would draw the judgment of God. Israel was strong only because God is strong. If God abandoned the nation, the people would be capable of little. According to Balaam’s oracles, the Israelites were to be “a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations” (23:9). The evil in this occurrence of covenant-breaking is that they now wish to be indifferntiable from the pagan nations.

What temptations entice the church in the West to conduct that will inevitably draw the angry judgment of God upon us?

Second, later passages disclose that these developments were not casual “boy-meets-girl” larks, but official policy *arising from Balaam’s advice* (31:16; cf. 2 Peter 2:16; Rev. 2:14). We are treated to the wretched spectacle of a compromised prophet who preserves fidelity on formal occasions and on the side offers vile advice, especially if there is hope of personal gain.




AT ONE LEVEL, **Psalm 69** finds David pouring his heart out to God, begging for help as he faces extraordinary pressures and opponents. We may not be able to reconstruct all the circumstances that are presented here in poetic form, but David has been betrayed by people close to him, and his anguish is palpable.

At another level, this psalm is a rich repository of texts quoted or paraphrased by New Testament writers: “Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head” (69:4; see John 15:25); “I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother’s sons” (69:8; cf. John 7:5); “for zeal for your house consumes me” (69:9; see John 2:17); “and the insults of those who insult you fall on me” (69:9; see Rom. 15:3); “but I pray to you, O LORD, in the time of your favor; in your great love, O God, answer me with your sure salvation” (69:13; cf. Isa. 49:8; 2 Cor. 6:2); “they put gall in my food and gave me vinegar” (69:21; see Matt. 27:48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36); “they . . . gave me vinegar *for my thirst*” (69:21; see Matt. 27:34; Mark 15:23; John 19:28-30); “may their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents” (69:25; see Matt. 23:38; Acts 1:20); “may they be blotted out of the book of life” (69:28; cf. Luke 10:20).

For the sheer concentration of such citations and allusions in one chapter, this psalm is remarkable. Of course, they are not all of the same sort, and this brief meditation cannot possibly probe them all. But several of them fall into one important pattern. This is a psalm written by David. (There is no good reason to doubt this attribution from the superscription.) David is not only the head of the dynasty that issues in “great David’s greater Son” (as the hymn writer puts it), but in many ways he becomes a model for the king who is to come, a pattern for him—a type, if you will.

That is the reasoning of the New Testament authors. It is easy enough to demonstrate that the reasoning is well grounded. Here it is enough to glimpse something of the result. If King David could endure scorn for God’s sake (69:7), how much more the ultimate King—who certainly also suffers rejection by his brothers for God’s sake (69:8). If David is zealous for the house of the Lord, how could Jesus’ disciples possibly fail to see in his cleansing of the temple and related utterances something of his own zeal (John 2:17)? Indeed, in the minds of the New Testament authors, such passages link with the “Suffering Servant” theme that surfaces in Isaiah 53—and is here tied to King David and his ultimate heir and Lord.





MOST CHRISTIANS HAVE listened to testimonies that relate how some man or woman lived a life of fruitlessness and open degradation, or at least of quiet desperation, before becoming a Christian. Genuine faith in the Lord Christ brought about a personal revolution: old habits destroyed, new friends and commitments established, a new direction to give meaning and orientation. Where there was despair, there is now joy; where there was turmoil, there is now peace; where there was anxiety, there is now some measure of serenity. And some of us who were reared in Christian homes have secretly wondered if perhaps it might have been better if we had been converted out of some rotten background.

That is not the psalmist's view. "For you have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb" (Ps. 71:5-6). "Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds" (71:17). Indeed, because of this background, the psalmist calmly looks over the intervening years and petitions God for persevering grace into old age: "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone" (71:9). "But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more" (71:14). "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come" (71:18).

Doubtless particular circumstances were used by God to elicit these words from the psalmist's pen. Nevertheless, the stance itself is invaluable. The most thoughtful of those who are converted later in life wish they had not wasted so many of their early years. Now that they have found the pearl of great price, their only regret is that they did not find it sooner. More importantly, those who are reared in godly Christian homes are steeped in Scripture from their youth. There is plenty in Scripture and in personal experience to disclose to them the perversity of their own hearts; they do not have to be sociopaths to discover what depravity means. They will be sufficiently ashamed of the sins they *have* committed, despite their backgrounds, that instead of wishing they could have had a worse background (!), they sometimes hang their head in shame that they have done so little with their advantages, and frankly recognize that apart from the grace of God, there is no crime and sin to which they could not sink.

It is best, by far, to be grateful for a godly heritage and to petition God himself for grace that will see you through old age.



ONE OF THE FEATURES OF THE PSALMS that describe the enthronement of a Davidic king, or the reign of a Davidic king, is how often the language goes “over the top.” This feature combines with the built-in Davidic typology to give these psalms a twin focus. On the one hand, they can be read as somewhat extravagant descriptions of one of the Davidic kings (in this case Solomon, according to the super-description); on the other, they invite the reader to anticipate something more than a David or a Solomon or a Josiah.

So it is in **Psalm 72**. On the one hand, the Davidic monarch was to rule in justice, and it is entirely appropriate that so much of the psalm is devoted to this theme. In particular, he is to take the part of the afflicted, “the children of the needy” (Ps. 72:4), those “who have no one to help” (72:12). He is to oppose the oppressor and the victimizer, establishing justice and stability, and rescuing those who would otherwise suffer oppression and violence (72:14). His reign is to be characterized by prosperity, which is itself “the fruit of righteousness” (72:3—a point the West is rapidly forgetting). Gold will flow into the country; the people will pray for their monarch; grain will abound throughout the land (72:15-16).

On the other hand, some of the language is wonderfully extravagant. Some of this is in line with the way other ancient Near Eastern kings were extolled. Nevertheless, combined with the Davidic typology and the rising messianic expectation, it is difficult not to overhear something more specific. “He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations” (72:5)—which may be true of the dynasty, or may be an extravagant wish for some purely human Davidic king, but is literally true of only one Davidic king. “He will rule from sea to sea and from the River [i.e., the Euphrates] to the ends of the earth” (72:8)—which contains a lovely ambiguity. Are the “seas” no more than the Mediterranean and Galilee? Should the Hebrew be translated (as it might be) more conservatively to read “the end of the land”? But surely not. For not only will “the desert tribes” (i.e., from adjacent lands) bow before him, but the kings of Tarshish—Spain!—and of other distant lands will bring tribute to him (72:9-10). Moreover: “All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him” (72:11). “All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed” (72:17)—as clear an echo of the Abrahamic covenant as one can imagine (Gen. 12:2-3).

One greater than Solomon has come (Matt. 12:42).



FEW PSALMS HAVE PROVIDED greater succor to people who are troubled by the frequent, transparent prosperity of the wicked than **Psalm 73**.

Asaph begins with a provocative pair of lines: “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” Does the parallelism hint that the people of Israel *are* the pure in heart? Scarcely; that accords neither with history nor with this psalm. The second line, then, must be a restriction on the first. Should those who are *not* pure in heart be equated with the wicked so richly described in this psalm? Well, perhaps, but what is striking is that the next lines depict not the evil of the wicked but the sin of Asaph’s own heart. His own heart was not pure as he contemplated “the prosperity of the wicked” (73:3). He envied them. Apparently this envy ate at him until he was in danger of losing his entire moral and religious balance: his “feet had almost slipped” (73:2).

What attracted Asaph to the wicked was the way so many of them seem to be the very picture of serenity, good health, and happiness (73:4-12). Even their arrogance has its attractions: it seems to place them above others. Their wealth and power make them popular. At their worst, they ignore God with apparent total immunity from fear. They seem “always carefree, they increase in wealth” (73:12).

So perhaps righteousness doesn’t pay: “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence” (73:13). Asaph could not quite bring himself to this step: he recognized that it would have meant a terrible betrayal of “your children” (73:15)—apparently the people of God to whom Asaph felt loyalty and for whom, as a leader, he sensed a burden of responsibility. But all his reflections were “oppressive” to him (73:16), until three profound realizations dawned on him.

First, on the long haul the wicked will be swept away. As Asaph entered the sanctuary, he reflected on the “final destiny” (73:17-19, 27) of those he had begun to envy, and he envied them no more.

Second, Asaph himself, in concert with all who truly know God and walk in submission to him, possesses so much more than the wicked—both in this life and in the life to come. “I am always with you,” Asaph exults; “you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory” (73:23-24).

Third, Asaph now sees his bitterness for the ugly sin it is (73:21-22), and resolves instead to draw near to God and to make known all God’s deeds (73:28).



A FEW YEARS AGO I spent some time in a certain so-called “third world” country, well known for its abject poverty. What struck me most forcibly about the culture of that country, however, was not its poverty, nor the gap between the very wealthy and the very poor—I had read up enough on these points that I was not surprised, and I had witnessed similar tragedies elsewhere—but its ubiquitous, endemic corruption.

Here in the West, we are not well placed to wag a finger. Doubtless we have less overt bribery; doubtless we have published prices for many government services that make bribes and kickbacks a little more difficult to institutionalize; doubtless there is still enough Christian heritage that at least on paper we avow that honesty is a good thing, that a man or woman’s word should be his or her bond, that greed is evil—though very often such values are nowadays honored rather more in the breach than in reality. Even so, we are by far the most litigious nation in the world. We produce far more lawyers than engineers (the reverse of Japan). The simplest agreement nowadays must be surrounded by mounds of legalese protecting the participants. A fair bit of this stems from the fact that many individuals and companies will not keep their word, will not try to do the right thing, and will try to rip off the other party if they can get away with it. A lie is embarrassing only if you are caught. Promises and pledges become devices to get what you want, rather than commitments to truth. Solemn marriage vows are discarded on a whim, or dissolved in the heat of lust. And of course, if we easily abandon marriage covenants, business covenants, and personal covenants, it is equally easy to abandon the covenant with God.

Telling the truth and keeping one’s promises in one domain of life spill over into other domains; conversely, infidelity in one arena commonly spills over into other arenas. So, nestled within the Mosaic covenant are these words: “This is what the LORD commands: When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said” (*Num. 30:1-2*). The rest of the chapter recognizes that such oaths by individuals may not be merely individual matters; there may be spousal or family entailments. So for the right ordering of the culture, God himself sets forth who, under this covenant, is permitted to ratify or set aside a pledge; that pattern says something about headship and responsibility in the family. But the fundamental issue is one of truth-telling and fidelity.





ONE OF THE IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS of corporate worship is recital, that is, a “re-telling” of the wonderful things that God has done. Hence Psalm 78:2-4: “I will utter hidden things, things from of old—what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.” Similarly, if more briefly, Psalm 75:1: “We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks, for your Name is near; men tell of your wonderful deeds.” In fact, the *New English Bible* is a little closer to the Hebrew: “Thy name is brought very near to us in the story of thy wonderful deeds.” God’s “name” is part of his gracious self-disclosure. It is a revelation of who he is (Ex. 3:14; 34:5-7, 14). God’s “name,” then, is brought very near us in the story of his wonderful deeds: that is, who God is is disclosed in the accounts of what he has done.

Thus the recital of what God has done is a means of grace to bring God near to his people. Believers who spend no time reviewing and pondering in their minds what God has done, whether they are alone and reading their Bibles or joining with other believers in corporate adoration, should not be surprised if they rarely sense that God is near.

The emphasis this psalm makes regarding God is that he is the sovereign disposer, the “disposer supreme” (as one commentator puts it). It is wonderfully stabilizing to us to rest in such a God. He declares, “I choose the appointed time; it is I who judge uprightly” (75:2). It is hard to imagine a category more suggestive of God’s firm control than “the appointed time.” Yet mere control without justice would be fatalism. This God, however, not only sets the appointed times, but judges uprightly (75:2). Further, in this broken world there are cataclysmic events that seem to threaten the entire social order. Elsewhere David ponders, “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (11:3). But here we are reassured, for God himself declares, “When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm” (75:3). So the arrogant who may think themselves to be the pillars of society are duly warned: “Boast no more” (75:4). To the wicked, God says, “Do not lift your horns against heaven [like a ram tossing its head about in bold confidence]; do not speak with outstretched neck” (75:5).

Retell God’s wonderful deeds and bring near his name.





ASAPH MUST HAVE GIVEN A LOT of thought to the question of what believers should remember. Psalm 75, we saw yesterday, commends the power of godly “recital”—a retelling of what God has done so as to bring near God’s “name.” The importance of remembering and retelling is at the heart of Psalm 78. And here in **Psalm 77**, Asaph highlights yet another element in this theme.

Asaph finds himself in great distress (77:1). Its causes we do not know, but most of us have passed through “dark nights of the soul” when it seems that either God is dead or he does not care. Asaph was so despondent he could not sleep; indeed, he charges God with keeping him from sleep (77:4). Memories of other times when circumstances were so bright that he sang with joy in the night hours (77:6) serve only to depress him further. Bitterness tinges his list of rhetorical questions: “Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?” (77:7-9).

What Asaph resolves to focus on is all the ways God has disclosed himself in power in the past. He writes: “To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High” (77:10)—in other words, he appeals to all the displays of strength, of the deeds of God’s “right hand,” across the years. “I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds” (77:11-12). So in the rest of the psalm, Asaph switches to the second person, addressing God directly, remembering some of the countless deeds of grace and power that have characterized God’s dealings with the covenant people of God. He remembers the plagues, the Exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea, the way God led his people “by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (77:13-20).

Christians have all the more to remember. As Asaph “remembered” the Exodus by reading Scripture, so we have even more Scripture. We remember not only all that Asaph remembered, but things he did not know: the Exile, the return from exile, the long years of waiting for the coming of the Messiah. We remember the Incarnation, the years of Jesus’ life and ministry, his words and mighty deeds. Above all, we remember his death and resurrection, and the powerful work of the Spirit at Pentecost and beyond.

And as we remember, our faith is strengthened, our vision of God is renewed, and the despair lifts.



THE OPENING FEW VERSES OF **Psalm 78** initially elicit a little puzzlement. Asaph invites his readers (and if this is sung, his hearers) to hear his teaching, to listen to the words of his mouth (78:1). Then he announces, “I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old” (78:2). Anticipation builds; it sounds as if we shall hear brand-new things that have been hidden before Asaph came on the scene. Then he further describes these “hidden things, things from of old”: they are “what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us” (78:3). So, is he embarking on some new revelation, previously hidden, or is he simply reviewing the common heritage of the Israelites? And why add at this point that at least part of his purpose is to disclose these things to the new generation that is coming along (78:4)?

Three observations:

First, the word rendered “parables” has a wide range of meaning. It can refer to narrative parables, wisdom sayings, aphorisms, and several other forms. Here, Asaph seems to mean no more than that he will say what he has to say in the poetic structures and wise comparisons that characterize this psalm.

Second, the content of this psalm is both old—“what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us”—and new, “hidden things.” This psalm is one of a group of “historical psalms,” that is, psalms that review some of the experiences of the people of God with their God. For most of its length its chief focus is the Exodus and the events that surrounded it, including the plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the provision of manna, and so forth. The psalm brings us down to the reign of David (which, incidentally, shows that Asaph himself lived in David’s day or later). Yet this psalm is not a mere review of the bare facts of that history. The recital is designed to draw certain lessons from that history, lessons that might be missed if attention were not drawn to them. These lessons include the sorry patterns of rebellion, God’s self-restraint in his rising anger, his graciousness in saving them again and again, and more. These lessons are “hidden” in the bare text, but they are there, and Asaph brings them out.

Third, Asaph understands (1) that deep knowledge of Scripture and of the ways of God means more than knowing facts, but also grasping the unfolding patterns to see what God is doing; (2) that at any time the covenant people of God are never more than one generation from extinction, so it is utterly vital to pass on this accumulating insight to the next generation.



“HOW OFTEN THEY REBELLED against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland! Again and again they put God to the test; they vexed the Holy One of Israel” (Ps. 78:40-41). Thus Asaph pauses in the course of his recital to summarize one of his main points in this psalm. In fact, one could outline some of the dramatic points Asaph makes as follows:

(1) The repeated rebellion of the people of God is presented not merely as disobedience, but as putting God to the test. That is one of the elements in rebellion that is so gross, so odious. A heavy dose of “in your face” marks this rebellion, an ugly pattern of unbelief that implicitly charges God with powerlessness, with cruelty, with selfishness, with thoughtlessness, with foolishness. Chronic and repeated unbelief “with attitude” always has this element of putting God to the test. What will God do about it? Small wonder that the apostle Paul identifies the same pattern in the conduct of the people during the wilderness years and warns Christians in his day, “We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us” (1 Cor. 10:9-11).

(2) Although the first part of the chapter notes God’s wrath replying to the pattern of the people’s rebellion, it also insists that time after time God “restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath” (78:38). But the pattern now becomes grimmer. Eventually the idolatry was so gross that God “was very angry; he rejected Israel completely” (78:59). The context shows that what Asaph has in mind is the judgment of God on the people when he permitted the ark of the Lord to be captured by the Philistines: “He sent the ark of his might into captivity, his splendor into the hands of the enemy” (78:61; cf. 1 Sam. 4:5-11), with the entailment that the people faced terrible destruction at the hand of their enemies.

(3) The closing verses (78:65-72) focus on the gracious choice of Judah and of David as God’s answer to the wretched years of the wilderness, of the judges, of the reign of Saul. “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them” (78:72). Living this side of the Incarnation, Christians are especially grateful for David’s line.

(4) Christians know how the storyline of Psalm 78 develops. David’s dynasty descends into corruption; God’s wrath is greater yet, and the Exile ensues. But worse wrath, and more glorious love, were yet to be displayed in the cross.





WHEN PLANS WERE BEING LAID to parcel out the Promised Land to the twelve tribes, Levi was excluded. The Levites were told that God was their inheritance: they would not receive tribal territory, but would be supported by the tithes collected from the rest of the Israelites (Num. 18:20-26). Even so, they needed somewhere to live. So God ordained that each tribe would set aside some towns for the Levites, along with the surrounding pasturelands for their livestock (Num. 35:1-5). Since the Levites were to teach the people the law of God, in addition to their tabernacle duties, these land arrangements had the added advantage of scattering the Levites among the people where they could do the most good. Moreover, their scattered lands were never to pass out of Levitical hands (Lev. 25:32-34).

The other peculiar land arrangement established in this chapter is the designation of six “cities of refuge” (35:6-34). These were to be drawn from the forty-eight towns allotted to the Levites, three on one side of the Jordan, and three on the other. A person who killed another, whether intentionally or accidentally, could flee to one of those cities and be preserved against the wrath of family avengers. At a time when blood feuds were not unknown, this had the effect of cooling the atmosphere until the official justice system could establish the guilt or innocence of the killer. If found guilty on compelling evidence (35:30), the murderer was to be executed. One recalls the principle laid down in Genesis 9:6: those who murder human beings, who are made in the image of God, have done something so vile that the ultimate sanction is mandated. The logic is not one of deterrence, but of values (cf. Num. 35:31-33).

On the other hand, if the killing was accidental and the killer therefore innocent of murder, he cannot simply be discharged and sent home, but must remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest (35:25-28). Only at that point could the killer return to his ancestral property and resume a normal life. Waiting for the high priest to die could be a matter of days or of decades. If the time was substantial, it might serve to cool down the avengers from the victim’s family. But no such rationale is provided in the text.

Probably two reasons account for this stipulation that the slayer must remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. (1) His death marked the end of an era, the beginning of another. (2) More importantly, it may be his death symbolized that someone had to die to pay for the death of one of God’s image-bearers. Christians know where that reasoning leads.



WE ARE FIRST INTRODUCED TO Zelophehad and his daughters in Numbers 27:1-11. Normally inheritance descended through the sons. But Zelophehad had no sons, only five daughters named Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Zelophehad belonged to the generation that passed away in the desert. Why, the daughters asked Moses, should his family line be prohibited from inheriting just because his progeny were all female? Moses, we are told, “brought their case before the LORD” (27:5). The Lord not only ruled in favor of the daughters’ petition, but provided a statute that regularized this decision for similar cases throughout Israel (27:8-11).


But a new wrinkle on this ruling turns up in Numbers 36. The family heads of Manasseh, to which the Zelophehad family belongs, ask what will happen if the daughters marry Israelites outside their tribe. They bring their inheritance with them to the marriage, and it would get passed on to *their* sons, but their sons would belong to the tribe of their father—and so over the centuries there could be massive redistribution of tribal lands, and potentially major inequities among the tribes. On this point, too, the Lord himself rules (36:5). “No inheritance may pass from tribe to tribe, for each Israelite tribe is to keep the land it inherits” (36:9). The way forward, then, was for the Zelophehad daughters to marry men from their own tribe—a ruling with which the Zelophehad daughters happily comply (36:10-12).

If this offends our sensibilities, we ought to consider why.

(1) Pragmatically, even we *cannot* marry *anyone*: we almost always marry within our own highly limited circles of friends and acquaintances. So in Israel: most people would *want* to marry within their tribes.

(2) More importantly, we have inherited Western biases in favor of individualism (“I’ll marry whomever I please”) and of falling in love (“We couldn’t help it; it just happened, and we fell in love”). Doubtless there are advantages to these social conventions, but that is what they are: mere social conventions. For the majority of the world’s people, marriages are either arranged by the parents or, more likely, at very least worked out with far more family approval operating than in the West. At what point does our love of freedom dissolve into individualistic self-centeredness, with little concern for the extended family and culture—or in this case for God’s gracious covenantal structure that provided equitable distribution of land?

We live in our own culture, of course, and under a new covenant. And we, too, have biblical restrictions imposed on whom we marry (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:39). More importantly, we must eschew the abominable idolatry of thinking that the universe must dance to our tune.



“OPEN WIDE YOUR MOUTH and I will fill it” (Ps. 81:10): the symbolism is transparent. God is perfectly willing and able to satisfy all our deepest needs and longings. Implicitly, the problem is that we will not even open our mouths to enjoy the food he provides. The symbolism returns in the last verse: while the wicked will face punishment that lasts forever, “you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you” (81:16).


Of course, God is talking about more than physical food (though scarcely less). The setting is a common one both in the Psalms and in the narrative parts of the Pentateuch. God graciously and spectacularly rescued the people from their slavery in Egypt, responding to their own cries of distress. “I removed the burden from their shoulders,” God says. “In your distress you called and I rescued you” (81:6-7). Then comes the passage that leads to the line quoted at the beginning of this meditation:

*Hear, O my people, and I will warn you—
if you would but listen to me, O Israel!
You shall have no foreign god among you;
you shall not bow down to an alien god.
I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt.
Open wide your mouth and I will fill it (81:8-10).*

Historically, of course, the response of the people was disappointing: “my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me” (81:11). In that case, they were not promised the satisfaction symbolized by full mouths. Far from it. God says, “So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices” (81:12).

Of course, the nature of the idolatry changes from age to age. I recently read some lines from John Piper: “The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18-20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable” (*A Hunger for God* [Wheaton: Crossway, 1997], 14).

“Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.”



“FOR THE LORD GOD is a sun and a shield: the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you” (Ps. 84:11-12).


Much of this psalm exults in the sheer privilege and delight of abiding in the presence of God, which for the children of the old covenant meant living in the shadow of the temple. “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (84:2). To have a place “near your altar” is to have a home, in exactly the same way that a sparrow finds a home or a swallow builds a nest (84:3). “Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you” (84:4; see also the meditation for April 17).

But what about the last two verses of this psalm? Don't they go over the top, promising too much? The psalmist insists that God withholds “no good thing” from those whose walk is blameless. Well, since we all sin, I suppose there is an escape clause: who is blameless? Isn't it obvious that God withholds lots of good things from lots of people whose walk is about as blameless as walks can get, this side of the new heaven and the new earth?


Consider Eric Liddell, the famous Scottish Olympian celebrated in the film *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell became a missionary in China. For ten years he taught in a school, and then went farther inland to do frontline evangelism. The work was not only challenging but dangerous, not the least because the Japanese were making increasing inroads. Eventually he was interned with many other Westerners. In the squalid camp, Liddell was a shining light of service and good cheer, a lodestar for the many children there who had not seen their parents for years, a self-sacrificing leader. But a few months before they were released, Liddell died of a brain tumor. He was forty-three. In this life he never saw the youngest of his three daughters: his wife and children had returned to Canada before the Japanese sweep that rounded up the foreigners. Didn't the Lord withhold from him a long life, years of fruitful service, the joy of rearing his own children?

Perhaps the best response lies in Liddell's favorite hymn:

*Be still, my soul! the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul! thy best, thy heav'nly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*



Deuteronomy 3; Psalm 85; Isaiah 31; Revelation 1




IT IS A WONDERFUL PAIRING: “Love and faithfulness meet together.” Then another pairing: “righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10). Older readers may remember the first of these two lines in the King James Version: “Mercy and truth” meet together.

In English, “mercy and truth” are pretty distinguishable from the NIV’s “love and faithfulness.” But the underlying Hebrew, a very common pairing (as in 86:15 or Ex. 34:6—see the meditation for March 23), could be rendered either way. The first word commonly refers to God’s covenantal love, his covenantal mercy—his sheer covenantal goodness or grace, poured out on his undeserving people. The second word varies in its English translation, depending on what is being referred to. When the Queen of Sheba tells Solomon that all that she had heard of him was “true,” literally “the truth” (1 Kings 10)—that is, that the propositional reports corresponded to reality—she uses the word here rendered “faithfulness.” A “true” report is a “faithful” report; when truth is embodied in character, it is faithfulness.

As deployed in this psalm, the categories are used evocatively. When you read the first pairing, “Love and faithfulness meet together,” it is natural to read them as descriptions of God: God is the God of covenantal grace or love and of utterly reliable fidelity. The second pairing might be taken the same way: God is both unqualifiedly righteous and the well of all well-being. In him, righteousness and peace kiss each other. But in the next verse, the second word from the first pairing and the first word from the second pairing are picked up and put together to introduce a new thought: “*Faithfulness* springs forth from the earth, and *righteousness* looks down from heaven” (85:11). In the context of the whole psalm, the people’s faithfulness is apparently being linked with the Lord’s righteousness: the former springs from the earth, while the latter looks down from heaven. It is not absolutely necessary to take things that way, but the psalmist implicitly recognizes the links earlier in his poem: “You forgave the iniquity of your people. . . . Restore us again, O God our Savior. . . . Show us your unfailing love, O LORD . . . he promises peace to his people, his saints—*but let them not return to folly*” (85:2-8, italics added).

However we align these pairings, it is vital to remember that love and faithfulness both belong to God, that righteousness and peace meet and kiss in him. Because of this, God can be both just and the One who justifies the ungodly by graciously giving his Son (Rom. 3:25-26). Should it be surprising to discover that among his image-bearers, love and faithfulness and righteousness and peace go hand in hand, standing together or falling together?



THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF Deuteronomy has many detailed parallels with ancient covenants or treaties that regional powers made with their vassal states. One of the components of such treaties was a kind of historical prolegomenon—a brief and selective recapitulation of the historical circumstances that had brought both parties to this point. That is the kind of thing one finds in Deuteronomy 1—3. As the covenant people of God make their second approach to the Promised Land, forty years after the Exodus itself (1:3) and with an entire generation gone, Moses urgently impresses upon the assembly the nature of the covenant, the greatness of the rescue that was now their heritage, the sorry history of rebellion, and above all the sheer majesty and glory of the God with whom they are linked in this spectacularly generous covenantal relationship.

The three chapters of selective history prepare the way for **Deuteronomy 4**. Here the historical survey is largely over; now the primary lessons from that history are driven home. Always review and remember what God has done. God does not owe you this amazing salvation. Far from it: “Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength” (4:37). But there are entailments. “You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other” (4:35). “Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other” (4:39). “Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (4:23-24). In other words, they are to serve God; but he alone is God. Every generation of believers must reckon with this truth, or face God’s wrath.

Of the many lessons that spring from this historical recital, one relatively minor point—painful to Moses and important for us—quietly emerges. Moses repeatedly reminds the people that he himself will not be permitted to enter the land. He is referring to the time he struck the rock instead of speaking to it (Num. 20; see also the meditation for May 9). But now he points out, truthfully, that his sin and punishment took place, he says, “because of you” (Deut. 1:37; 3:23-27; 4:21-22). Of course, Moses was responsible for his own action. But he would not have been tempted had the people been godly. Their persistent unbelief and whining wore him down.

Meditate on a New Testament articulation of this principle: Hebrews 13:17.

WHAT IS MOST STRIKING ABOUT **Psalm 88** is that there is no relief. Heman begins the psalm by crying to the Lord, disclosing his discouragement in various ways, and he ends in gloom and despair. Most psalms that deal with discouragement and despair begin in gloom and end in light. This one begins in gloom and ends in deeper gloom.

When Heman begins, although he cries to the Lord, “the God who saves me” (the only note of hope in the entire poem), he plaintively observes that he cries out before God “day and night” (88:1). He frankly feels he is not being heard (88:2, 14). He is not only in difficulty but feels he is near death: “For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave” (88:3). Indeed, Heman insists that others treat him as if he is doomed (88:4-5). The only explanation is that he is under divine wrath: “Your wrath lies heavily upon me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves” (88:7; cf. 88:16). Not the least of his miseries is the loss of all his friends (88:8).

Worse yet, Heman is convinced his whole life has been lived under the shadow of death: “From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death,” he writes (88:15). Did he, perhaps, suffer from one of the many ugly, chronic, progressive diseases? “I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me” (88:15-17).

But what makes the psalm utterly grim is the closing line. Not only does Heman charge God with taking away his companions and loved ones, but in the last analysis, “the darkness is my closest friend” (88:18). Not God; the darkness.

One of the few attractive features of this psalm is its sheer honesty. It is never wise to be dishonest with God, of course; he knows exactly what we think anyway, and would rather hear our honest cries of hurt, outrage, and accusation than false cries of praise. Of course, better yet that we learn to understand, reflect, and sympathize with his own perspective. But in any case it is always the course of wisdom to be honest with God.

That brings up the most important element in this psalm. The cries and hurts penned here are not the cheap and thoughtless rage of people who use their darker moments to denounce God from afar, the smug critique of supercilious agnosticism or arrogant atheism. These cries actively engage with God, fully aware of the only real source of help.

WE HAVE COME ACROSS other passages dealing with the importance of passing on the heritage of biblical truth to the next generation. That theme lies at the heart of **Deuteronomy 6**. Fresh points that are especially underlined include:

(1) The ancient Israelites were to teach the next generation *to fear* the God of the covenant. Moses teaches the people “so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live” (6:2). When in the future a son asks his father what the laws mean, the father is to explain the background, the Exodus, and the covenant: “The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today” (6:24). We might well ask ourselves what steps we take to teach our children *to fear* the Lord our God, not with the cringing terror that is frightened of whimsical malice but with the profound conviction that this God is perfectly just and does not play around with sin.

(2) Moses underscores *the constancy* with which the next generation is to be taught. The commandments Moses passes on are to remain on the “hearts” of the people (6:6; we would probably say *minds*). Out of this abundance, the next words follow: “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (6:7). Even what they wore and how they decorated their houses should serve as reminders of the law of God (6:8-9). We might well ask ourselves how constantly we teach our children the content of Scripture. In ancient Israel children usually learned their vocational skills from their parents, spending countless hours with them, which provided many opportunities to pass on the blessings of the covenant. Our more fragmented culture means we must *make* opportunities.

(3) Above all, the older generation was *to model* utter loyalty to God (6:13-19). This consistent modeling was to include an utter repudiation of idolatry, obedience to the demands of the covenant, revering the name of the Lord God, doing “what is right and good in the LORD’s sight” (6:18). How faithfully have we, by our own living, commended serious God-centeredness to our children?

(4) There must be a sensitive awareness of the opportunities *to answer questions* our children raise (6:20-25). Never bluff. If you do not know the answer, find out, or find someone who does. We must ask ourselves if we make maximum use of the questions our children raise.


SEVERAL COMPLEX THEMES intertwine in **Deuteronomy 7**. Here I want to reflect on two of them.

The *first* is the emphasis on election. “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (7:6). Why so? Was it on the ground of some intrinsic superiority, some greater intelligence, some moral superiority, or some military prowess that the Lord made his choice? Not so. “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (7:7-8).

Three observations: (1) In the Bible, God’s utter sovereignty does not diminish human responsibility; conversely, human beings are moral agents who choose, believe, obey, disbelieve, and disobey, and this fact does not make God’s sovereignty finally contingent. That is clear from the way God’s sovereignty manifests itself in this chapter, that is, in election, even while the chapter bristles with the responsibilities laid on the people. People who do not believe both truths—that God is sovereign and human beings are responsible—sooner or later introduce some intolerable wobbles into the structure of their faith. (2) Here God’s love is selective. God chooses Israel because he sets his affection on them, and not for anything in themselves. The thought recurs elsewhere (e.g., Mal. 1:2-3). But this is not the only way that the Bible speaks of the love of God (e.g., John 3:16).

The *second* theme is the encouragement God gives his people not to fear the people they will have to fight as they take over the Promised Land (7:17-22). The reason is the Exodus. Any God that could produce the plagues, divide the Red Sea, and free his people from a regional superpower like Egypt is not the kind of God who is going to have trouble with a few pagan and immoral Canaanites. Fear is the opposite of faith. The Israelites are encouraged not to be afraid, not because they are stronger or better, but because they are the people of God, and God is unbeatable.

These two themes—and several others—intertwine in this chapter. The God who chooses people is strong enough to accomplish all his purposes in them; the people chosen by God ought to respond not only with grateful obedience, but with unshakable trust.



DEUTERONOMY 8 PROVIDES AN important theological perspective on the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Because God is a personal God, one can tell the story of those years in terms of the interaction between God and his people: he meets their need, they rebel, he responds in judgment, they repent—and then the cycle repeats itself. On the other hand, one can look at the whole account from the perspective of God’s transcendent and faithful sovereignty. He remains in charge. That is the vantage offered here.

Of course, God *could have* given them everything they wanted before they had even bothered to articulate their desires. He *could have* spoiled them rotten. Instead, his intention was to humble them, to test them, even to let them hunger before eventually feeding them with manna (8:2-3). The purpose of this latter exercise, Moses insists, was that God might teach them “that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (8:3). More generally: “Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you” (8:5).

Why all this discipline? The sad reality is that fallen people like you and me readily fixate on God’s gifts and ignore their Giver. At some point, this degenerates into worshiping the created thing rather than the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:25). God knows that is Israel’s danger. He is bringing them into a land with agricultural promise, adequate water, and mineral wealth (8:6-9). What likelihood would there be *at that point* of learning that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”?

Even after these forty years of discipline, the dangers will prove enormous. So Moses spells the lessons out to them. Once the people have settled in the Promised Land and are enjoying its considerable wealth, the dangers will begin. “Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees” (8:11). With wealth will come the temptation to arrogance, prompting the people to forget the Lord who brought them out of slavery (8:12-14). In the end, not only will they value the wealth above the words of God, they may even justify themselves, proudly declaiming, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me” (8:17)—conveniently forgetting that even the ability to produce wealth is a gracious gift from God (8:18).


In what ways does your life show you cherish every word that comes from the mouth of God, above all the blessings and even the necessities of this life?

IF DEUTERONOMY 8 REMINDS THE Israelites that God is the One who gave them all their material blessings, not least the ability to work and produce wealth, **Deuteronomy 9** insists he is also the One who will enable them to take over the Promised Land and vanquish their opponents. Before the struggle, the Israelites are still fighting their fears. God graciously reassures them: “But be assured today that the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you” (9:3). But *after* the struggle, the temptation of the Israelites will be quite different. Then they will be tempted to think that, whatever their fears before the event, it was their own intrinsic superiority that enabled them to accomplish the feat. So Moses warns them:

After the Lord your God has driven them out before you do not say to yourself, “The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations . . . to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. (9:4-6)

And the evidence for this last point? Moses reminds them of their sorry rebellions during the wilderness years, starting from the wretched incident of the golden calf (9:4-29).

What shall we learn? (1) Although the annihilation of the Canaanites fills us with embarrassed horror, there is a sense in which (dare I say it?) we had better get used to it. It is of a piece with the Flood, with the destruction of several empires, with hell itself. The proper response is Luke 13:1-5: unless we repent, we shall all likewise perish. (2) It may be true to say that the Israelites won because the Canaanites were so evil. It does not follow that the Canaanites lost because the Israelites were so good. God was working to improve the Israelites out of his own covenantal faithfulness. But they were extremely foolish if they thought, after the event, that they had earned their triumph. (3) Our temptations, like Israel’s, vary with our circumstances: faithless fear in one circumstance, arrogant pride in another. Only the closest walk with God affords us the self-criticism that abominates both.



INTERSPERSED WITH THE HISTORICAL RECITAL that makes up much of the early chapters of Deuteronomy are bursts of exhortation. One of the most moving is found in **Deuteronomy 10:12-22**. Its magnificent themes include:

(1) A sheer God-centeredness that embraces both *fearing* God and *loving* God (10:12-13). In our confused and blinded world, fearing God without loving him will dissolve into terror, and thence into taboos, magic, incantations, rites; loving God without obeying him will dissolve into sentimentalism without strong affection, pretensions of godliness without moral vigor, unbridled lust for power without any sense of impropriety, nostalgic yearnings for relationships without any passion for holiness. Neither pattern squares with what the Bible says: “And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him . . . ?” (10:12).

(2) A sheer God-centeredness that pictures election as a gracious act. God owns the whole show—“the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it” (10:14). He can do with it as he wishes. What he has in fact done is “set his affection” on the patriarchs, loving them, and in turn choosing their descendants (10:15; cf. 4:37).

(3) A sheer God-centeredness that is never satisfied with the mere rites and show of religion: it demands the heart (10:16). That is why physical circumcision could never be seen as an end in itself, not even in the Old Testament. It symbolized something deeper: circumcision of the heart. What God wants is not merely an outward sign that certain people belong to him, but an inward disposition of heart and mind that orient us to God continually.

(4) A sheer God-centeredness that recognizes his impartiality, and therefore his justice—and acts accordingly (10:17-20). He is “God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome” (10:17). Small wonder then that he accepts no bribes and shows no partiality. (Never confuse election with partiality. Partiality is favoritism that is corrupted by a willingness to pervert justice for the sake of the favored few; election chooses certain people out of God’s free decision and nothing else, and even then justice is not perverted: hence the cross.) And he expects his people to conduct themselves accordingly.

(5) A sheer God-centeredness that is displayed in his people’s praise (10:20-22). “He is your praise; he is your God” (10:21). Those who focus much on God have much for which to praise. Those whose vision is merely terrestrial or self-centered dry up inside like desiccated prunes. God is your praise!



MY PARENTS WERE RATHER POOR—not with the poverty one finds in the worst of the world’s slums, but poor by North American standards. My Dad was a pastor. Before I was born, still at the end of the Great Depression, Dad took around a little wagon of food that had been collected one Christmas for the poor, and then came home to the flat my parents rented, where the only food for Christmas dinner was a can of beans. My parents gave thanks to God for that—and then even as they were doing so, they were invited out for a meal. I can remember many instances, as I was growing up, when our family prayed that God would meet our needs—huge medical bills when we could afford no insurance, for example—and he always did. When I left home to go to university, my parents scrimped and saved; that year they sent me ten dollars. For them it was a lot of money; for myself, I was financially on my own, and worked and studied. Many times I went two or three days without food, drinking lots of water to keep my stomach from rumbling, asking the Lord to meet my needs, fearful I would have to put the studies aside. God always met them, sometimes in simple ways, sometimes in astonishing displays.

Today I look at my children, and recognize that although they face new sets of trials and temptations, so far they have never had to face anything resembling deprivation (not getting everything they want doesn’t count!). Then I read **Deuteronomy 11**, where Moses makes a generational distinction: “Remember today that your children were not the ones who saw and experienced the discipline of the LORD your God: his majesty, his mighty hand, his outstretched arm; the signs he performed and the things he did in the heart of Egypt, both to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his whole country” (11:2-3; see 11:5). No, it wasn’t the children. “But it was your own eyes that saw all these great things the LORD has done” (11:7).

What then does Moses infer from this generational distinction? (1) The older generation should be quick to obey, because of all that they have had the opportunity to learn (11:8). Here I am, wondering about my children’s limited experience, when the first thing God says is that I am the one with no excuse. (2) The older generation must systematically pass on what they have learned to their children (11:19-21); again, the prime responsibility is mine, not theirs. (3) More broadly, God’s provision to the people of the blessings of the covenant, here focused on the land and its bounty, depends on the first two points.



ALTHOUGH THE BOOK OF Deuteronomy constantly looks backward to the Exodus and years of wilderness wanderings, it also looks forward: the people are about to enter the Promised Land, and certain things will change. In times of transition, one must grasp the distinction between what should change and what should not.

Yesterday's chapter includes the word *today*: "Remember *today* that your children were not the ones . . ." (Deut. 11:2). That word is important throughout this book. A proper grasp of the past prepares the way for the changes *today*, on the verge of entry into the Promised Land. In **Deuteronomy 12**, the biggest change that is envisaged is the establishment within the land of a place where God will choose "to put his Name" and establish his dwelling (12:5, 11). In other words, the chapter anticipates the time when neither independent sacrifices offered wherever the worshiper happens to be (12:8), nor the mobile tabernacle of the years of pilgrimage, will be acceptable; rather, God will establish a stable center in the land. "To that place you must go; there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts. . . . There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you" (12:5-7). In due course the tabernacle was situated at Shiloh, Bethel, and finally at Jerusalem, where it was replaced by the temple in the days of Solomon.

The changed circumstances bring points of both continuity and discontinuity. Moses insists that then, as now, there will be no tolerance for the pagan worship practices of the surrounding nations and of those they purge from the land (12:29-31). But the sheer distance that most people will live from the central sanctuary means that they cannot be expected to have all meat slaughtered in its precincts, nor to observe the fine distinctions between what is the priest's part and what is their part. Now it will be entirely appropriate to slaughter their animals and eat them as they would wild game killed in the field (12:15-22). Even so, three points continue in full force. (1) They must not forget to provide for the Levites (many of whom depended on the service of the tabernacle/temple for their sustenance—12:19); (2) they must not eat the blood of the animals they slaughter (12:23-25); (3) they are still expected to offer the consecrated sacrifices at the central shrine on the high feast days, when every family is expected to present itself to the Lord (12:26-28).

Other transitions follow in the history of redemption and demand our thoughtful meditation (e.g., Ps. 95:7-11; Mark 7:19; John 16:5-11; Heb. 3:7—4:11).



THREE QUESTIONS:

(1) *How can you spot a false prophet?* The Bible offers several complementary criteria. For instance, in Deuteronomy 18:22 we are told that if an ostensible prophet predicts something and that thing does not take place, the prophet is false. Of course, that criterion does not help very much if what the prophet has predicted is far into the future. Moreover, here in **Deuteronomy 13** we are warned that the inverse does not prove the prophet is trustworthy. If what the ostensible prophet predicts takes place, or if he manages to perform some sort of miraculous sign or wonder, another criterion must be brought to bear. Is this prophet's message enticing people to worship some god other than the Lord who brought the people out of Egypt?

What this criterion presupposes is a thorough grasp of antecedent revelation. You have to know what God *has* revealed about himself before you can determine whether or not the prophet is leading you to a false god. For the false god may still be given the biblical names of God (as in, say, Mormonism, or the christology of Jehovah's Witnesses). John's first epistle offers this same criterion: if what an ostensible prophet (1 John 4:1-6) teaches cannot be squared with what the believers have heard "from the beginning" (1 John 2:7; 2 John 9), it is not of God (so also Paul in Gal. 1:8-9).

(2) *Why are false prophets dangerous?* Apart from the obvious reason, viz. that they teach false doctrine that leads people astray from the living God and therefore ultimately attracts his judgment, there are two reasons. *First*, their very description—"false prophet"—discloses the core problem. They profess to speak the word of God, and this can be seductive. If they came along and said, "Let us sin disgustingly," most would not be attracted. The seduction of false prophecy is its ostensible spirituality and truthfulness. *Second*, although false prophets may enter a community from outside (e.g., Acts 20:29—and if it is the "right" outside, this makes them very attractive), they may arise from *within* the community (e.g., Acts 20:30), as here—for example, a family member (13:6). I know of more than one Christian institution that went bad doctrinally because of nepotism.

(3) *What should be done about them?* Three things. *First*, recognize that these testing events do not escape the bounds of God's sovereignty. Allegiance is all the more called for (13:3-4). *Second*, learn the truth, learn it well, or you will always lack discernment. *Third*, purge the community of false prophets (a process that takes a different form under the new covenant: e.g., 2 Cor. 10—13; 1 John 4:1-6), or they will gradually win credence and do enormous damage.





ONE OF THE STRIKING features of the many passages in Deuteronomy that describe what life should be like once the people enter the Promised Land is a tension between what is held out as the ideal and what will in fact prove the reality.

Thus, on the one hand, the people are told that “there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today” (Deut. 15:4-5). On the other hand, the same chapter frankly acknowledges, “There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (15:11).

The former passage, that “there should be no poor among you,” is grounded in two things: the sheer abundance of the land (a sign of covenantal blessing), and the civil laws God wants imposed so as to avoid any form of the wretched “poverty trap.” The latter include the canceling of debts every seven years—a shocking proposal to our ears (15:1-11). There is even a warning about harboring the “wicked thought,” once the seventh year was impending, of planning stinginess (15:8-10).

The extent to which these idealistic statutes were ever enacted is disputed. There is very little evidence that they became widely observed public law in the Promised Land. Thus the second passage, that “there will always be poor people in the land,” is inevitable. It reflects the grim reality that *no* economic system can guarantee the abolition of poverty, because human beings operate it, human beings are greedy, human beings will keep tweaking and eventually perverting the system for personal advantage. This is not to suggest that all economic systems are equally good or equally bad: transparently, that is not so. Nor is it to suggest that legislators should not constantly work to correct a system and fill loopholes that encourage corruption. But it is to suggest that the Bible is painfully realistic about the impossibility of any utopia, economic or otherwise, in this fallen world. Moreover, on occasion the Israelites would become so corrupt, both within the economic arena and beyond it, that God would withhold his blessing from the land; for instance, the rain might be withheld (as in the days of Elijah). And then the land itself would not be able to support all the people living there.

Thus the insistence that there will always be poor people (a point Jesus reiterates, Matt. 26:11) is not a surreptitious fatalism, but an appeal for openhanded generosity.



IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE a lovelier psalm than **Psalm 103**. When our children were growing up, the price they “paid” for their first leather-bound Bibles was memorizing Psalm 103. Across the centuries, countless believers have turned to these lines to find their spirits lifted, a renewed commitment to praise and gratitude, an incentive to prayer, a restoration of a God-centered worldview. This psalm could easily claim our meditations for the rest of the month, for the rest of the year. Instead, we focus on three of its features.

(1) The psalm is bracketed by exhortations to praise. At the front end, David exhorts himself, and, by his example, his readers: “Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name” (103:1). Implicitly David recognizes that it is distressingly easy to preserve the externals of praise, with nothing erupting from within the heart of God’s image-bearers. This will not do: “*all my inmost being, praise his holy name.*” By the end of the psalm, however honest and profound this individual’s worship, the framework for praising such a God is too small, for after all, God’s kingdom rules over all (103:19): “Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise the LORD, all his works, everywhere in his dominion. Praise the LORD, O my soul” (103:20-22). Now the psalmist’s praise is one with the praise of heaven, with the praise of the entire created order.

(2) When David starts to enumerate “all his benefits” (103:2), he begins with the forgiveness of sins (103:3). Here is a man who understands what is of greatest importance. If we have everything but God’s forgiveness, we have nothing of worth; if we have God’s forgiveness, everything else of value is also promised (cf. Rom. 8:32).

(3) David soon moves from the blessings he enjoys as an individual believer to the Lord’s public justice (103:6), to his gracious self-disclosure to Moses and the Israelites (103:7-18). Here he stays the longest time, turning over and over in his mind the greatest blessings the Lord has granted to his people. Above all, he focuses once again on the sheer privilege of having sins forgiven, removed, forgotten. All of this, David perceives, stems from the character of God. “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (103:8). He deals with our sin—but compassionately, fully bearing in mind our weak frames. We may be creatures of time, but “from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him” (103:17).



MOSES ENVISAGES A TIME when the Israelite nation will choose a king (Deut. 17:14-20). He could not know that centuries later, when the Israelites would first ask for a king, they would do so for all the wrong motives—primarily so that they could be like the pagan nations around them. The result was Saul. But that is another story.

If the people are to have a king, what sort of king should he be? (1) He must be the Lord's own choice (17:15). (2) He must be an Israelite, drawn "from among your own brothers" (17:15), not some foreigner. (3) He must not acquire for himself great numbers of horses, i.e., amass great personal wealth and military might, and especially not if it means some sort of alliance with a power such as Egypt (17:16). (4) He must not take many wives (17:17). The issue was not simply polygamy. In the ancient Near East, the more powerful the king the more wives he had. This prohibition is therefore simultaneously a limit on the king's power, and a warning that many wives will likely lead his heart astray (17:17). This is not because wives are intrinsically evil; rather, a king on the hunt for many wives is likely to marry princesses and nobility from surrounding countries, and they will bring their paganism with them. Within that framework, the king's heart will be led astray. That is exactly what happened to Solomon. (5) Upon accession to the throne, the first thing the king must do is write out for himself, in Hebrew, a copy of "this law"—whether the book of Deuteronomy or the entire Pentateuch. Then he is to read it every day for the rest of his life (17:18-20). The multiple purposes of this task are explicit: that he may revere the Lord his God, carefully follow all his words, and in consequence not consider himself better than his fellow citizens, and not turn aside from the law. The result will be a long-lasting dynasty.

It is not difficult to imagine how the entire history of Israel would have been radically different if these five criteria had been adopted by each king who came to the throne of David. It would be almost a millennium and a half before there would arise in Israel a king who would be the Lord's chosen servant, someone "made like his brothers in every way" (Heb. 2:17), a mere craftsman without wealth or power, a man not seduced by beauty or power or paganism (despite the devil's most virulent assaults), a man steeped in the Scriptures from his youth and who carefully followed all the words of God. How we need that king!



THE PROPHECY OF THE COMING of a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-18) must first of all be understood within its own context. Four observations bring this passage to sharp focus.

First, the preceding verses (18:9-13) condemn the religious practices of the nations the Israelites are displacing, especially those religious practices used for guidance: divination, sorcery, interpretation of omens, witchcraft, casting of spells, spiritism, and necromancy. These “detestable practices” (18:12) constitute part of the reason why these nations were driven out—a lesson many in the West have not learned, to our great danger. Such practices implicitly deny God’s sovereignty, and encourage people to rely for their safety and well-being on either superstitious nonsense or demonic power. In the transition verse (18:14), Moses contrasts the Israelites: “But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so.” Far from it: as the Lord gave his word through the prophet Moses, so after Moses’ death God will raise up a prophet like Moses. “You must listen to him” (18:15). God’s people are to be led by the word of God faithfully delivered by his prophets, not by religious superstition.

Second, that raises the question as to who is a true prophet (18:20-22), a theme Moses had already discussed (Deut. 13; see the June 9 meditation) but which is here briefly reintroduced. For if people will know the Word of God through God’s prophets, it is important to reiterate some of the criteria by which one may distinguish true prophets from false.

Third, Moses reminds the Israelites of the essentially mediatorial role of the prophet (18:16-17). Of course, this is true at a fairly trite level: genuine prophets reveal words from God that would otherwise be unknown, and thus mediate between God and people. But Moses refers to something more profound. When God displayed himself at Sinai, the people were so terrified that they knew they dared not approach this holy God: they would be destroyed (Ex. 20:18-19). The people *wanted* Moses to be the mediator of the revelation from God. God praises them for this judgment, this right-minded fear of God (Deut. 18:17). In the same way, God will raise up another prophet who will exercise the same mediating function.

Fourth, at some level this promise was fulfilled in every genuine prophet God sent. But the language of this promise is so generous it is difficult not to see that some special prophet is finally in view: he will not only tell everything that God commands him, but if anyone does not listen to God’s words spoken in God’s name, God himself will hold him to account. Meditate not only on Acts 3:22-23; 7:37, but on John 5:16-30.


THE JUSTICE ENVISAGED IN **Deuteronomy 19** seems to stand a considerable distance from the views that prevail in Western nations today.

With part of this text's emphasis, most of us will find ourselves in substantial sympathy: the courts must not convict a person on meager evidence. In the days before powerful forensic tools, this almost always meant that multiple witnesses should be required (19:15). Today the kind of evidence thought to be sufficient has expanded: fingerprints, blood-typing, and so forth. Most of us recognize that this is a good thing. But enough reports have circulated of evidence that has been tampered with that the concern of our text is scarcely out of date. Procedures and policies must be put in place that make it difficult to corrupt the court or convict an innocent person.

But the rest of the chapter (19:16-21) seems, at first, somewhat alien to us, for three reasons. (1) If careful judges determine that some witness has perjured himself, then the judges are to impose on that person the penalty that would have been imposed on the defendant wrongfully charged: you are to "do to him as he intended to do to his brother" (19:19). (2) The aim is "to purge the evil from among you" (19:20). (3) Once again, the *lex talionis* (the "eye for an eye" statute) is repeated (19:21; cf. Ex. 21:24, and the meditation for March 11).

All three points are looked at very differently in Western courts. (1) Punishment for malicious perjury is usually negligible. But this means there is little official effort to fan the flame of social passion for public justice. You lie if you can get away with it; the shame is only in getting caught. (2) Our penal theorists think incarceration serves to make society a safer place, or provides a venue for reform (therapeutic or otherwise), or ensures that an offender "pays his debt to society." So much effort goes into analyzing the social conditions that play a contributing role in shaping a criminal that everywhere there is widespread reluctance to speak of the *evil* of a person or an act. Perhaps that is why revenge movies have to depict really astoundingly horrendous cruelty in one-dimensional monsters before the revenge can be justified. The Bible's stance is truly radical (i.e., it goes to the *radix*, the root): judicially, the courts must purge out the *evil* among you. (3) We incarcerate; we rarely think about the justice of making a punishment "fit" the crime. But that was one of the functions of the *lex talionis*.

When one focuses on justice and personal accountability, it is our own judicial and penal system that seems increasingly misguided and alien.





HISTORICALLY, REVIVAL REFERRED TO a time of God-sent blessing beyond the ordinary. Ministers of the Word went about their work, praying, preaching, catechizing, counseling, whether in times of persecution, or in times of relative quiet and steady growth. But if the Lord God visited his people with *revival*, it was immediately evident in an extraordinary sense of the presence of God, in deep-seated repentance and a renewed passion for holiness, and ultimately in the sound and indisputable conversion of many people. It could be relatively disciplined, or it might be mixed with the spurious.

Although “revival” still has this sense in some circles, in others it refers to a meeting or series of meetings where preachers speak on personal holiness or give evangelistic messages. It is assumed that if the preacher is gifted there will be obvious fruit. In some circles in the southern part of the United States, one hears expressions like “holding a revival” or “preaching a revival.” It would aid clarity of thought if instead they spoke of “holding a Bible conference” or “preaching an evangelistic series.”

Psalm 107 lists a diverse array of circumstances in which people find themselves in great danger or under horrible oppression, usually because of their own sin. In each case, God comes to the rescue. Those who wandered in desert wastelands cried to the Lord, and were delivered from their thirst and hunger (107:4-9). Others sat in chains, prisoners, “for they had rebelled against the words of God” (107:11), and the Lord freed them (107:13-14). Still others became so corroded by their folly that they loathed life. But when they cried to the Lord, “he sent forth his word and healed them” (107:20). Others found themselves in mortal peril on the seas, and here, too, the Lord responded to their cries and saved them (107:23-32). Indeed, this God humbles the haughty, and for the sake of the needy and afflicted he turns the desert into fertile fields (107:33-42).

Lest we misunderstand the psalmist’s point, he makes it clear for us in two ways. First, in most of the sections, when he describes those who have been saved, he prescribes, “Let them give thanks to the LORD *for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men*” (107:8, 15, 21, 31). Second, the opening of the psalm reminds us that God is good, and *his love endures forever* (107:1), while the closing insists, “Whoever is wise, let him heed these things *and consider the great love of the LORD*” (107:43). This, and this alone, is the ultimate source of God’s blessings—not the least being revival. And the last verse goes further, and provides the sanction for studying revivals among the blessings of God.





PSALM 108 IS RATHER DISTINCTIVE in the book of Psalms. Apart from minor changes, it is made up of parts of two other psalms. Psalm 108:1-5 follows 57:7-11; Psalm 108:6-13 follows 60:5-12. Nevertheless the “feel” of the result is startlingly different.

Both Psalms 57 and 60 find David under enormous pressure. In the former, the superscription places David in flight from King Saul, and hiding in a cave; in the latter, David and his troops have been defeated. In both cases, however, the psalm ends in praise and confidence—and the respective sections on praise and confidence from these two psalms are now joined together to make Psalm 108. Although Psalm 108 still hints at a stressful situation that includes some chastening by God (108:11), the tone of the whole slips away from the dark moods of the early parts of the other two psalms, and in comparison is flooded with adoration and confidence.

That simple fact forces us to recognize something very important. The earlier two psalms (57 and 60) will doubtless seem especially appropriate to us when we face peril—individual or corporate—or suffer some kind of humiliating defeat. The present psalm will ring in our ears when we pause to look back on the manifold goodness of God, reminding ourselves of the sweep of his sovereignty and his utter worthiness to receive our praise. It might prove especially useful when we are about to venture on some new initiative for which our faith demands fresh grounding. This perspective of changed application occurs *because the same words are now placed in a new context*. And that is the point.

For although all of Scripture is true and important, deserving study, reflection, and carefully applied thought, the Lord God in his wisdom did not give us a Bible of abstract principles, but highly diverse texts woven into highly diverse situations. Despite the diversity, of course, there is still only one sweeping storyline, and only one Mind ultimately behind it. But the rich tapestry of varied human experience reflected in the different biblical books and passages—not least in the different psalms—enables the Bible to speak to us with peculiar force and power when the “fit” between the experience of the human author and our experience is especially intimate.

For this astonishing wealth, God deserves reverent praise. What mind but his, what compass of understanding but his, what providential oversight over the production of Scripture but his, could produce a work so unified yet so profoundly diverse? Here, too, is reason to join our “Amen” to the words of 108:5: “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, and let your glory be over all the earth.”



THE OLD TESTAMENT CHAPTER quoted most often in the New Testament is **Psalm 110**. It is an *oracular psalm*: i.e., it does not so much disclose the experience of its writer as set forth words that the writer has received by direct and immediate revelation—as an “oracle” from God. Perhaps there are even parts of it the psalmist himself did not fathom too well (just as Daniel did not understand the meaning of all that he saw in his visions and was required to record for the benefit of a later generation [Dan. 12:4, 8-10]).

In the psalm, the LORD, Yahweh, speaks to someone whom David himself addresses as “my Lord.” This element, as much as any other, has convinced countless interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, that this is explicitly a messianic psalm, and that the person whom David addresses is the anticipated Messiah.

I shall focus on verse 4: “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’” Granted that *Yahweh* here addresses the Messiah, what do his words mean? Two elements attract attention:

First, Melchizedek himself—this is only the second mention of him in the Bible. The first is Genesis 14:18-20: after the defeat of the kings, Abraham meets this strange priest-king and pays him a tithe of the spoils. Various things can be inferred from the brief account (see meditation for January 13), but then Melchizedek drops from view until this psalm, written almost a millennium later.

Second, by this time much has taken place in the history of Israel. The people had endured slavery in Egypt, had been rescued at the Exodus, had received the Law of God at Sinai, had entered the Promised Land, and had lived through the period of the judges to reach this point of the beginning of the Davidic dynasty. Above all, Sinai had prescribed a tabernacle and the associated rites, all to be administered by Levites and by high priests drawn from that tribe. The Mosaic Law made it abundantly clear that Levites alone could discharge these priestly functions. Yet here is an oracle from God insisting that God himself will raise up another priest-king with very different links. Yahweh will extend this king’s mighty scepter from Zion: i.e., his kingly power is connected with Zion, with Jerusalem, and thus with the fledgling Davidic dynasty. And as priest, he will be aligned, not with the order of Levi, but with the order of Melchizedek.

Small wonder the writer to the Hebrews understands that this is an announcement of the obsolescence of the Mosaic Covenant (Heb. 7:11-12). We needed a better priesthood; and we have one.





EVERY SO OFTEN IN THE Pentateuch there is a chapter of miscellaneous laws and statutes. One such is **Deuteronomy 23**. It goes beyond these brief meditations to reflect on each topic for which a statute is laid down, or even on the ordering principle of some of these lists. Transparently some of the legislation is based on the historical experience of the Israelites (e.g., 23:3-8). Other parts turn on symbol-laden cleanliness (e.g., 23:9-14). Still others focus on the urgency to keep the covenant people separate from the abominable practices of ancient Canaanite paganism (23:17-18), on progressive steps of social justice (23:15-16), on fiscal principles to enhance both the identity and the well-being of the covenant community (23:19-20), and on keeping one's word, especially in a vow offered to the living God (23:21-23). But today I shall reflect on 23:24-25: "If you enter your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket. If you enter your neighbor's grain field, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain."

There is profound wisdom to these simple statutes. A merely communitarian stance would either let people take what they want, whenever they want, as much as they want; or, alternatively, it would say that since all the produce belongs to the community (or the state), no individual is allowed to take any of it without explicit sanction from the leaders of the community. A merely capitalistic stance (or, more precisely, a stance that put all the emphasis on private property) would view every instance of taking a grape from a neighbor's field as a matter of theft, every instance of chewing on a few kernels of grain as you follow the footpath through your neighbor's field as a punishable offense. But by allowing people to eat what they want while actually in the field of a neighbor, this statute fosters a kind of community-wide interdependence, a vision of a shared heritage. The walls and fences erected by zealous private ownership are softened. Moreover, the really poor could at least find something to eat. This would not be a terrible burden on any one landowner if the statute were observed by all the landowners. On the other hand, the stipulation that no one is allowed to carry any produce away, if observed, serves not only to combat theft and laziness, but preserves private property and the incentives to industry and disciplined labor associated with it.

Many, many statues from the Mosaic Law, rightly probed, reflect a godly balance of complementary interests.





IT IS STRIKING HOW THE Mosaic Law provides for the poor.

Consider **Deuteronomy 24**. Here God forbids taking a pair of millstones, or “even the upper one” (i.e., the more movable one), as security for a debt (24:6). It would be like taking a mechanic’s tools as security, or a software writer’s computer. That would take away the means of earning a living, and would therefore not only compound the poverty but would make repayment a practical impossibility.

In 24:10-12, two further stipulations are laid down with respect to security for loans. (1) If you make a loan to a neighbor, do not go into his home to get the pledge. Stay outside; let him bring it out to you. Such restrained conduct allows the neighbor to preserve a little dignity, and curtails the tendency of some rich people to throw their weight around and treat the poor as if they are dirt. (2) Do not keep as security what the poor man needs for basic warmth and shelter.

In 24:14-15, employers are told to pay their workers daily. In a poor and agrarian society where as much as 70% or 80% of income went on food, this was ensuring that the hired hand and his family had enough to eat every day. Withholding wages not only imposed a hardship, but was unjust. Still broader considerations of justice are expressed in 24:17-18: orphans and aliens, i.e., those without protectors or who do not really understand a particular culture’s “ropes,” are to be treated with justice and never abused or taken advantage of.

Finally, in 24:19-22, farmers are warned not to pick up every scrap of produce from their field in order to get a better return. Far better to leave some “for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.” (See also the meditation for August 9.)

Two observations: *First*, these sorts of provisions for the poor will work best in a nontechnological society where labor and land are tied together, and help is provided by locals for locals. There is no massive bureaucratic scheme. On the other hand, without some sort of structured organization it is difficult to imagine how to foster similar help for the poor in, say, the south side of Chicago, where there are few farmers to leave scraps of produce. *Second*, the incentive in every case is to act rightly under the gaze of God, especially remembering the years the people themselves spent in Egypt (24:13-22). These verses demand close reading. Where people live in the fear, love, and knowledge of God, social compassion and practical generosity are entailed; where God fades into the mists of sentimentalism, robust compassion also withers—bringing down the biting denunciation of prophets like Amos.



SOMETIMES TRANSLATION DIFFICULTIES prompt Bible translators to include footnotes that preserve alternative possibilities. Sometimes no alternative is included, and something important is lost. One instance of each kind is found in **Psalm 116**, and both deserve thoughtful reflection.

(1) The NIV reads, “I believed; *therefore* I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted.’ And in my dismay I said, ‘All men are liars.’” (116:10-11, italics added). The *Revised Standard Version* renders the first line, “I kept my faith, *even when* I said. . . .” The latter is a perfectly possible rendering of the Hebrew, and most modern translations have followed it. Paul quotes from the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew, commonly called the Septuagint (or LXX), which preserves the meaning found in the NIV of Psalm 116:10-11 (see 2 Cor. 4:13).

But in this case, surprisingly little is at stake. Perhaps the NIV rendering is a trifle stronger: the *reason why* the psalmist said he was greatly afflicted was that he believed (“I believed; *therefore* I said”). In other words, it was nothing other than his faith in God—and the entire relationship with God that such faith presupposes—that enabled him to see that when he faced terrible suffering it was nothing other than the affliction meted out by God. But more importantly, both the NIV and the RSV make a point frequently illustrated in the Psalms, and particularly illustrated in Job: when someone feels crushed (116:10) or utterly disillusioned (116:11), *and says so*, it does not follow that he or she has abandoned faith. Rather, the unguarded accents of pain, offered up to God, give evidence of both life and faith.

(2) The NIV’s “precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (116:15) is often cited at funerals, and doubtless it expresses an important truth. But there is good reason to think that the word rendered “precious” should be rendered “costly” or the like: hence *Jerusalem Bible*’s “The death of the devout costs Yahweh dear.” The psalmist’s rescue from the borders of death (116:3, 8) makes that rendering more likely. Certainly Jesus recognizes how costly is the death of one human being (Matt. 10:29-31).


If that is the case, it is vitally important to see that although God in his sovereignty rules over everything, including all deaths, this reign for him is not some cold piece of accounting. He knows better than we do the sheer ugliness and abnormality of death, how it is irrefragably tied to our rebellion and the curse we have attracted. It is immensely comforting to perceive that the death of the devout costs Yahweh dear. Still more wonderful is the price he was willing to pay to supplant death by resurrection.

WHEN I WAS A BOY, a plaque in our home was inscribed with the words “This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Apart from the change from “hath” to “has,” similar words are preserved in the NIV of Psalm 118:24.

My father gently applied this text to his children when we whined or complained about little nothings. Was the weather too hot and sticky? “This is the day which the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Were the skies pelting rain, so we could not go out to play? “This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” What a boring day (or place, or holiday, or visit to relatives)! “This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Sometimes the words were repeated with significant emphasis: “This is the day the LORD has made; we *will* rejoice and be glad in it.”

It is not that Dad would not listen to serious complaints; it is not that Scripture does not have other things to say. But every generation of Christians has to learn that whining is an affront against God’s sovereignty and goodness.

But the text must first be read in its context. Earlier the psalmist expresses his commitment to trust in God and not in any merely human help (118:8-9), even though he is surrounded by foes (118:10). Now he also discloses that his foes include “the builders” (118:22)—people with power within Israel. These builders were quite capable of rejecting certain “stones” while they built their walls—and in this case the very stone the builders rejected has become the capstone. In the first instance this stone, this capstone, is almost certainly a reference to a Davidic king, perhaps to David himself. The men of power rejected him, but he became the capstone. Moreover, this result was not achieved by brilliant machination or clever manipulation. Far from it: “the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (118:23). In his own day Isaiah portrays people who make a lie their refuge while rejecting God’s cornerstone (Isa. 28:15-16). The ultimate instance of this pattern is found in Jesus Christ, rejected by his own creatures, yet chosen of God, the ultimate building-stone, and precious (Matt. 21:42; Rom. 9:32-33; Eph. 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6-8)—a “stone” disclosed in all his true worth by his resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:10-11). Whether in David’s day or in the ultimate fulfillment, this marvelous triumph by God calls forth our praise: *This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it* (Ps. 118:24).





HERE THE PAIR OF ITALICIZED passages converge.

The setting envisaged by **Deuteronomy 27—28** is spectacular. When the Israelites enter the Promised Land, they are to perform a solemn act of national commitment. They are to divide themselves into two vast companies, each hundreds of thousands strong. Six tribes are to stand on the slopes of Mount Gerizim. Across the valley, the other six tribes are to stand on the slopes of Mount Ebal. The two vast crowds are to call back and forth in antiphonal responses. For some parts of this ceremony, the Levites, standing with others on Gerizim, are to pronounce prescribed sentences, and the entire host shout its “Amen!” In other parts, the crowd on Gerizim would shout the blessings of obedience, and the crowd on Ebal would shout the curses of disobedience. The sheer dramatic impact of this event, when it was actually carried out (Josh. 8:30-33), must have been astounding. The aim of the entire exercise was to impress on the people the utter seriousness with which the Word of God must be taken if the blessing of God is to be enjoyed, and the terrible tragedy that flows from disobedience, which secures only God’s curse.

Psalm 119 is formally very different, but here too there is an extraordinary emphasis on the Word of God. It is almost as if this longest of all biblical chapters is devoted to unpacking what the second verse in the book of Psalms means: “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” (1:2; see also the April 1 meditation). Psalm 119 is an acrostic poem: each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet is given its turn to serve as the opening letter of each of eight verses on the subject of the Word of God. Throughout this poem, eight near synonyms are used to refer to Scripture: *law* (which perhaps might better be rendered “instruction,” and has overtones of revelation), *statutes* (which speak of the binding force of Scripture), *precepts* (connected with God’s superintending oversight, as of one who cares for the details of his charge), *decrees* (the decisions of the supreme and all-wise Judge), *word* (the most comprehensive term, perhaps, embracing all of God’s self-disclosed truth, whether in a promise, story, statute, or command), *commands* (predicated on God’s authority to tell his creatures what to do), *promise* (a word derived from the verb *to say*, but often used in contexts that make us think of the English word *promise*), and *testimonies*. (God’s bold action of bearing “witness” or “testimony” to the truth and against all that is false; the Hebrew word is sometimes rendered “statute” in NIV, e.g., lit. “I delight in your testimonies.”)



THERE ARE NOT MANY PASSAGES in the Bible more fearsome than **Deuteronomy 28:20-68**. What the text depicts is the judgments that will befall the people of God if they disobey the terms of the covenant and rebel against God, if they “do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name—the LORD your God” (28:58).

There are many striking elements about these judgments. Two occupy our attention here.

First, all the judgments depicted could be interpreted by the secular mind as the accidents of changing political and social circumstance, or, within a pagan worldview, as the outworking of various malign gods. On the face of it, the judgments all take place in the “natural” world: wasting disease, drought, famine, military defeat, boils, poverty, vassal status under a superior power, devastating swarms of locusts, economic misfortunes, captivity, slavery, the horrible ravages of prolonged sieges, decrease in numbers, dispersal once again among the nations. In other words, there is no judgment that sounds like some obviously supernatural “Zap!” from heaven. So those who have given up on listening to God’s words are in the horrible position of suffering the punishments they do not believe come from him. That is part of the judgment they face: they endure judgment, but so hardened is their unbelief that even such judgment they cannot assess for what it is. The blessings they had enjoyed had been granted by God’s gracious pleasure, and they failed to receive them as gifts from God; the curses they now endure are imposed by God’s righteous pleasure (28:63), and still they fail to recognize them as judgments from God. The blindness is systemic, consistent, humanly incurable.

Second, God’s judgments extend beyond externally imposed tragedies to minds that are unhinged—in part by the sheer scale of the loss, but in any case by God himself. The Lord will give these people “an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life” (28:65-66). This God not only controls the externals of history, but also the minds and emotions of those who fall under his judgment.

Before such a God, it is unimaginable folly to try to hide or outwit him. What we must do is repent and cast ourselves on his mercy, asking him for the grace to follow in honest obedience, quick to perceive the sheer horror of rebellion, with eyes open to take in both God’s providential goodness and his providential judgment. We must see God’s hand; we must weigh everything with an unswerving God-centeredness in our interpretive focus.



“THE SECRET THINGS belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). The two principal points bear reflection.

First, the responsibility of the covenant community in this matter is to focus on the things that God has revealed. They not only belong “to us and to our children forever,” but were given to us *in order* “that we may follow all the words of this law.” That is the fundamental purpose of placing this text at the end of a long chapter on covenant renewal. True, we cannot know many hidden things. But what *has* been revealed to us—in this context, the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, with all their vast potential for blessing and judgment—is what must capture our interest and devoted obedience.

Second, we must frankly admit that some things are hidden from our eyes. We really do not understand, for instance, the relationships between time and eternity, nor do we have much of an idea how the God who inhabits eternity discloses himself to us in our finite, space/time history. It is revealed that he does; we have various words to describe certain elements of this disclosure (e.g., *Incarnation, accommodation*). But we do not know how. We do not know how God can be both personal and sovereign/transcendent; we do not know how the one God can be triune.

Yet in none of these cases is this a subtle appeal to ignorance, or an irresponsible hiding behind the irrational or the mystical. When we admit—indeed, insist—that there are mysteries about these matters, we do not admit they are nonsensical or self-contradictory. Rather, we are saying that we do not know enough, and we admit our ignorance. What God has not disclosed of himself we cannot know. The secret things belong to God.

Indeed, because of the contrast in the text, the implication is that it would be presumptuous to claim we do know, or even to spend too much time trying to find out—lest we should be presuming on God’s exclusive terrain. Some things may be temporarily hidden to induce us to search: Proverbs 25:2 tells us it is the glory of God to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings to search a matter out, to get to the bottom of things. But that is not a universal rule: the very first sin involved trying to know some hidden things and thus be like God. In such cases, the path of wisdom is reverent worship of him who knows all things, and careful adherence to what he has graciously disclosed.



IN ITS UNFOLDING REFLECTIONS on God and his revelation, Psalm 119 is unsurpassed. Here I shall focus on three themes that surface in **Psalm 119:89-96**.

(1) God's revelatory word, that word that has been *inscripturated* (i.e., written down to become Scripture) is not something that God made up as he went along, as if he did not understand or could not predict exactly how things were going to pan out. Far from it: "Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" (119:89). It was always there, eternal, in his mind. That is one of the reasons why he can be trusted absolutely: he is never caught out, never surprised. Because God's word stands firm in the heaven, the psalmist can add, "Your faithfulness continues through all generations" (119:90).

(2) There is a connection between the word of revelation and the word of creation and of providence. Thus the first line of verse 90, "Your faithfulness continues through all generations," is tied both to what precedes (end of v. 89) and to what succeeds (end of v. 90). God's faithfulness through all generations is grounded, as we have seen, in the fact that God's word stands firm in the heavens, but it is also grounded in God's creative and providential work: "you established the earth, and it endures. Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you" (119:90-91). The same omniscient, ordering, reflective mind stands behind both creation and revelation.

(3) Far from being oppressive and limiting, the instruction of God is freeing and illuminating. "To all perfection I see a limit," the psalmist writes; "but your commands are boundless" (119:96). All human, earthly enterprises face limits. There are limitations on resources, on time, on the expanse of life that we may devote to such enterprises. Only so much time can be devoted to even the most sublime exercise. The limits themselves become frustrating barriers. More than one commentator has noted that this verse is almost a two-line summary of Ecclesiastes. There, every enterprise "under the sun" runs its race and expires, or proves unsatisfying and transient. In our experience there is but one exception: "your commands are boundless" (119:96).

This includes more than the well-known paradox: slavery to God is perfect freedom. For a start, freedom must be defined. If our steps are directed to God's word, there is freedom from sin (cf. 119:133); observance of God's "precepts" is tied to walking about in "freedom" (119:45). Moreover, reflection on and conformity with God's words generates not narrow-minded bigotry, but a largeness of spirit that potentially stretches outward to the farthest dimensions of the mind of God; for "your commands are boundless."



REFLECT FOR A MOMENT on the rich and diverse means that God granted to Israel to help them remember what he had done to deliver them, and the nature of the covenant they had pledged themselves to obey.

There was the tabernacle itself (later the temple), with its carefully prescribed rites and feasts: the covenant was not an abstract philosophical system, but was reflected in regular religious ritual. The nation was constituted in such a way that the Levites were distributed amongst the other tribes, and the Levites had the task of teaching the Law to the rest of the people. The three principal high feasts were designed to gather the people to the central tabernacle or temple, where both the ritual and the actual reading of the Law were to serve as powerful reminders (*Deut. 31:11*). From time to time God sent specially endowed judges and prophets, who called the people back to the covenant. Families were carefully taught how to pass on the inherited history to their children, so that new generations that had never seen the miraculous display of God's power at the time of the Exodus would nevertheless be fully informed of it and own it as theirs. Moreover, blessings from God would attend obedience, and judgment from God would attend disobedience, so that the actual circumstances of the community were supposed to elicit reflection and self-examination. Legislation was passed to foster a sense of separateness in the fledgling nation, erecting certain barriers so that the people would not easily become contaminated by the surrounding paganism. Unique events, like the antiphonal shouting at Mounts Gerizim and Ebal at the time of entering the land (see June 22 meditation), were supposed to foster covenant fidelity in the national memory.

But now God adds one more device. Precisely because God knows that in due course the people will rebel anyway, he instructs Moses to write a song of telling power that will become a national treasure—and a sung testimony against themselves (*31:19-22*). Someone has said, “Let me write the songs of a nation, and I care not who writes its laws.” The aphorism is overstated, of course, but insightful nonetheless. That is the purpose of the next chapter, Deuteronomy 32. The Israelites will learn, as it were, a national anthem that will speak against them if they shut down all the other God-given calls to remember and obey.

What devices, in both Scripture and history, has God graciously given to help the heirs of the new covenant remember and obey? Meditate on them. How have you used them? What songs do we sing to put this principle into practice, that *teach* the people of God matters of irrevocable substance beyond mere sentimentalism?





ONE OF THE GREAT THEMES OF SCRIPTURE, and one that surfaces with special frequency in **Psalm 119**, is that the unfolding of God's words gives light; "it gives understanding to the simple" (119:130) in at least two senses.

First, the "simple" can refer to people who are foolish, "simpletons"—those who know nothing of how to live in the light of God's gracious revelation. The unfolding of God's words gives light to such people. It teaches them how to live, and gives them a depth and a grasp of moral and spiritual issues they had never before displayed.

Second, God's words expand entire horizons. A few paragraphs earlier the psalmist wrote, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts" (119:97-100). The psalmist is not saying that he has a higher IQ than that of his teachers, or that he is intrinsically smarter than his enemies or brighter than all the elders. Rather, he is claiming that constant meditation on God's instruction (his "law") and a deep-seated commitment to obey God's precepts provide him with a framework and a depth of insight that are unavailable to merely brilliant scholars and well-trained political leaders.

One of my students may serve as illustration. He barely staggered out of high school. He had never been to church. When he asked his father about God, his dad told him not to talk about subjects like that. He joined the United States Army as a lowly GI, and lived a pretty rough life. At various times he was high on LSD. Eventually he joined the Eighty-second Airborne, and started carrying his Gideon Bible as a good-luck charm to ward off disaster when he was jumping out of airplanes. Eventually he started to read it—slowly at first, for he was not a good reader. He read it right through and was converted. He went to one of the local chaplains and said, "Padre, I've been saved." The padre told him, "Not yet, you're not"—and inducted him into some catechism. Eventually he found a church that taught the Bible. He came off drugs (and six months later many of his army drug pals were busted), eventually left the army, squeaked into a college, grew mightily, and is now in the "A" stream of Greek in the divinity school.

He was absorbing the words of God. It transformed his life, and gave him more insight than many of his teachers. The unfolding of God's words "gives understanding to the simple."





HOW DOES THE PENTATEUCH end (**Deut. 34**)?

At a certain level, perhaps one might speak of hope, or at least of anticipation. Even if Moses himself is not permitted to enter the Promised Land, the Israelites are on the verge of going in. The “land flowing with milk and honey” is about to become theirs. Joshua son of Nun, a man “filled with the spirit of wisdom” (34:9), has been appointed. Even the blessing of Moses on the twelve tribes (Deut. 33) might be read as bringing a fitting closure to this chapter of Israel’s history.

Nevertheless, such a reading is too optimistic. Converging emphases leave the thoughtful reader with quite a pessimistic expectation of the immediate future. After all, for forty years the people have made promises and broken them, and have repeatedly been called back to covenantal faithfulness by the harsh means of judgment. In Deuteronomy 31, God himself predicts that the people will “soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them” (31:16). Moses, this incredibly courageous and persevering leader, does not enter the Promised Land because on one occasion he failed to honor God before the people. In this respect, he serves as a negative foil to the great Hebrew at the beginning of this story of Israel: Abraham dies as a pilgrim in a strange land not yet his, but at least he dies with honor and dignity, while Moses dies as a pilgrim forbidden to enter the land promised to him and his people, in lonely isolation and shame. We do not know how much time elapsed after Moses’ death before this last chapter of Deuteronomy was penned, but it must have been substantial, for verse 10 reads, “Since then [i.e., since Moses’ death], no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses.” One can scarcely fail to hear overtones of the prophecy of the coming of a prophet like Moses (18:15-18). By the time of writing, other leaders had arisen, some of them faithful and stalwart. But none like Moses had arisen—and this is what had been promised.

These strands make the reader appreciate certain points, especially if the Pentateuch is placed within the storyline of the whole Bible. (1) The law-covenant simply did not have the power to transform the covenant people of God. (2) We should not be surprised by more instances of catastrophic decline. (3) The major hope lies in the coming of a prophet like Moses. (4) Somehow this is tied to the promises at the front end of the story: we wait for someone of Abraham’s seed through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.



THE FIFTEEN SHORT PSALMS (Pss. 120—134) immediately succeeding Psalm 119 are grouped together as *songs of ascent*: that is, each carries this heading. The most likely explanation is that these psalms were sung by pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem and its temple for the great feasts: people “ascended” to Jerusalem from every point of the compass, just as in England one “goes up” to London from every point of the compass. This is not to say that each of the fifteen psalms was necessarily composed for this purpose. Some may have been written in some other context, and then judged appropriate for inclusion in this collection. Thus **Psalm 120** seems to reflect personal experience, but could easily be sung with great empathy by pilgrims who felt their alienation as they lived in a land surrounded by pagan neighbors—an important theme as the pilgrims approached Jerusalem and felt they were coming “home.” Indeed, the series of fifteen psalms more or less moves from a distant land to Jerusalem itself (Ps. 122) and finally, in the last of these psalms, to the ark of the covenant, the priests, and the temple “servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD” (134:1).

It is into this matrix that **Psalm 121** falls. The first line, “I lift up my eyes to the hills,” is often stripped out of its context to justify some form of nature mysticism, or at very least an interpretation that suggests hills and mountains serve to remind us of God’s grandeur and therefore draw us to him and set our hearts at rest. In fact, the hills are enigmatic. Do they function symbolically like the mountain in Psalm 11:1, a place of refuge for those who are threatened and afraid? Are they havens for marauding thugs, so that the first line of verse 1 raises the problem that the rest of the psalm addresses? Or—perhaps more likely, since this is a song of ascents—does the pilgrim lift his eyes upward to the hills of Jerusalem, the hills evoking not nature mysticism but the place of the Davidic king, the place of the temple? If this is the right interpretation, then it is as if the psalmist finds these particular hills a call to meditate on the God who made them (“the Maker of heaven and earth,” 121:2), the God who “watches over Israel” (121:4) as the covenant Redeemer.

The last verses of the psalm exult in the sheer comprehensiveness of God’s care over “you” (in the singular, as if the individual pilgrim is addressed by other pilgrims). “The LORD watches over *you*” (121:5)—day and night (121:6), your whole life (121:7), in all you do (“your coming and going,” 121:8), “both now and forevermore” (121:8).