

CHRISTOPHER ASH

*The*  
**PSALMS**

*A Christ-Centered  
Commentary*



VOLUME 2  
Psalms 1–50

“These wonderful volumes on the Psalms place the whole church of Christ in their author’s debt. To have carried to completion the vision of such a project is a breathtaking accomplishment. And to have done it with the author’s characteristically loving and careful approach to the text of Scripture, coupled with richness of exposition, humility of spirit, and wise personal and pastoral application, stimulates our admiration and gratitude. In an era when the evangelical church in the West has, by and large, turned its back on the wisdom of two millennia of Christian praise dominated by the Psalms, these four magnificent volumes provide both the equipment and the inspiration needed to discover what our Lord and Savior himself experienced. They deserve to become—indeed, are surely destined to be—the go-to resource for multitudes of preachers, teachers, and students for decades to come. We are richer because of their publication.”

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“Since the Enlightenment, it has become fashionable to hypercontextualize the Psalms, thereby repudiating eighteen centuries of Christ-centered preaching, teaching, and scholarship. In this magisterial commentary, Christopher Ash returns to the old paths by displaying Christ and his glory in all 150 psalms. The Reformers and the Puritans would have loved this warm, devotional, and accessible work, for herein Ash provides the kind of experiential, practical, and Christ-saturated exegesis that they so dearly treasured. With careful historical-theological reflection and a tender pastoral heart, Ash guides the people of God as they seek to better read, sing, meditate on, study, and preach the Psalms. This commentary will no doubt become a staple in the pastor’s library for many years to come.”

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**Simon Manchester**, Former Rector, St. Thomas’ Anglican Church, North Sydney, Australia

“In this four-volume work, Christopher Ash casts a vision of the Psalter that is theologically centered on Christ, typologically related to Christ, and ultimately fulfilled in Christ—a book of the Old Testament that reveals, in type and shadow, through image of king and priest, prophet and teacher, supplicant and sufferer, the divinity and humanity of Christ, who in his humanity perfectly expressed the full range of human emotions and affections in the vicissitudes of his earthly humiliation as he awaited his heavenly exaltation. Therefore, he is the true and better singer of the Psalter, the one through whom and in union with whom the Christian and the church today can sing ‘the Psalms of Jesus’ with eyes unveiled. Encyclopedic in scope, enlightening in content, enthusing in purpose—this magnum opus ought to find a place in every pastor’s library, in every student’s book budget, and on every Christian’s bedside table. These volumes will hopefully change the way we read—and sing!—the Psalms for years to come.”

**Jonathan Gibson**, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

“This is a landmark commentary that belongs in the library of every Bible teacher and scholar. Grounded in wide-ranging research, warmed by sincere devotion, and crafted with unusual elegance, this work offers the reader an exegetical and theological feast for both heart and mind. Any believer who has studied and taught the Psalms knows the challenge of handling them in faithfulness as truly Christian Scripture. In these pages Ash has pursued the compelling thesis that the Psalms are emphatically Christ centered from beginning to end, having Christ as their true subject and object. For those who wish to understand how and why this is so, this study is both a treasure and a delight.”

**Jonathan Griffiths**, Lead Pastor, The Metropolitan Bible Church, Ottawa, Canada

“How pleasing it is to find a modern, scholarly commentary that unashamedly leads us to Jesus the Messiah! The case for this Christ-centered work is carefully argued and applied to each psalm without ignoring original contexts or their relevance to believers. More controversially, Christopher Ash provides the most compelling defense to date for accepting every penitential and imprecatory line in the Psalter as appropriate on the lips of the sinless Savior, the Christian’s covenant head. Helpful quotations from early Christian writers, the Reformers, and contemporary authors add to the commentary’s appeal. I warmly recommend it.”

**Philip H. Eveson**, Former Principal and Old Testament Tutor, London Seminary; author, *Psalms: From Suffering to Glory*

“To simply call this resource a commentary seems too mundane. What Christopher Ash presents us with here is an extensive and detailed exploration of the verdant theological landscape of the Psalter, with Jesus the Messiah as the lodestar. These remarkable volumes are weighty but not burdensome, erudite but not arid. Ash’s pastoral insights into the Psalms reflect a maturity and wisdom that can be cultivated only over a lifetime spent in the full counsel of Scripture and ministry in the church. What a tremendous achievement this is, what a blessing it is sure to be to the church, and what a testament to the beauty and transforming power of the true and final King, Jesus Christ.”

**William A. Ross**, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“With historical breadth, exegetical finesse, rhetorical care, and a deeply doxological thrust, Christopher Ash’s commentary brings the Psalms closer to the center of Christian devotion—and Jesus Christ to the very center of the Psalter. These wonderful volumes have helped me grasp, more deeply than ever before, just why Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms an ‘incomparable treasure.’ More than that, they have revealed the incomparable treasure himself who sings in every psalm yet whose voice we so often fail to hear.”

**Scott Hubbard**, Editor, *Desiring God*; Pastor, All Peoples Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

“This new commentary—in which ‘the person of Christ is central to the meaning and force of every psalm’—is theologically rich, spiritually refreshing, and carefully assembled to understand Old and New Testament themes in the light of Christ. Here is a commentary that will be rewarding in the study as the minister prepares to teach the Psalms or, indeed, the many New Testament passages that reference them. This is also great material for personal devotions. Thank you, Christopher Ash, for such a rich resource to help us know Christ.”

**Nat Schluter**, Principal, Johannesburg Bible College

“A masterful balance of being thoughtfully Christ centered and warmly devotional at the same time. A blessing for my personal quiet time and my sermon preparation.”

**Denesh Divyanathan**, Senior Pastor, The Crossing Church, Singapore; Chairman, Evangelical Theological College of Asia; President, Project Timothy Singapore



# *The Psalms*

*A Christ-Centered Commentary*

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# The Psalms

*A Christ-Centered Commentary*

VOLUME 2  
PSALMS 1–50

Christopher Ash

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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To Tyndale House, Cambridge,  
a fellowship of delight  
in the Scriptures (Ps. 1:2).

*Jesus, my shepherd, brother, friend,  
my prophet, priest, and king,  
my Lord, my life, my way, my end,  
accept the praise I bring.*

JOHN NEWTON

“How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds”

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# PREFACE

## **The Nature and Purpose of This Commentary**

I am persuaded that the Psalms belong to Jesus Christ. I believe that the Psalms themselves point to a fulfillment only possible in the divine-human person of Christ. Through its quotations and echoes of the Psalms, the New Testament bears witness to a textured understanding in which Christ is central. For the larger part of church history, this has broadly been the way Christians have read the Psalms. This commentary is therefore a Christ-centered commentary, in which I seek to see Christ front and center when reading the Psalms. I have attempted to explain and argue my case in volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*.

Since the so-called “Enlightenment” in the eighteenth century, Christ has been eclipsed in much Psalms scholarship and preaching. With a few notable exceptions, recent commentaries tend either to omit Christ from many or all of the Psalms or mention him as little more than an afterthought. But I have become persuaded that Jesus Christ is the subject and object of the Psalms, that his majestic divine-human person is woven into the warp and woof of the Psalter, and that he is the preeminent singer of psalms, the focus of the Psalter, and the one without whom the Psalms cannot be understood aright. I therefore want to place Christ in the foreground of our reading of every psalm and to do so in ways that are shaped by the New Testament. I want to set before us what the Psalms might look and feel like if in truth they do belong to Christ.

There is much you will not find in this commentary. My background is that of a preacher and pastor rather than a trained biblical scholar. I have sought to interact with a representative sample of writers across the centuries (surveyed in volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*) but

have not, for the most part, attempted to interact with the voluminous and ever-growing secondary literature. I hope I am sufficiently aware of the more significant debates, but for a full study of these things, readers should consult one or more of the recent technical commentaries. I have worked from the Hebrew text but have no particular expertise in the language, especially as regards Hebrew poetry, translation of tense forms, and poetic parallelism. Much scholarly debate surrounds theories of the dating, possible contexts of origins, and putative redaction histories of various psalms. Too often it seems to me that scholars construct theories on the basis of inadequate evidence; furthermore, I am not persuaded that these debates are always useful to Christian disciples seeking to weave the Psalms into their lives of prayer and praise.

This commentary is not, therefore, a substitute for technical, scholarly commentaries. What you will find here, I hope, is the Psalms read with the breadth of a whole-Bible perspective allied with the depth of a clear focus on Christ, the center of history and the fulcrum of the Bible story. I thus hope to do four things:

1. To help you understand the lyrics of these songs, what the words mean and what the poetry signifies
2. To assist us in feeling the “tune,” that is, the affectional and emotional dimensions of these songs
3. To point to the volitional commitment that is asked of disciples when we join in the Psalms—for to say the Psalms means moving from the audience, where we listen without commitment, to the choir, where commitment is expected
4. To motivate you to take that step and actively to make the Psalms a part of your lives of prayer and praise

I hope this commentary will prove useful to all kinds of Christian people—and especially to those who preach, teach, or lead studies on the Psalms.

### **How Each Psalm Is Treated**

After one or more chapter epigraphs of quotations from other writers, each psalm is considered in three sections.

The *orientation* section involves consideration of how we ought to view the psalm in the light of Jesus Christ. This includes reference to New Testament quotations and echoes and to the context of the psalm in history (if known) and in its canonical context, especially with reference to nearby psalms. I hope that setting this section first helps the reader engage in a manner that places Christ at the center, rather than on the periphery.

The *text* section begins with consideration of the structure. Since there is an extraordinarily wide variation in perceived structures, I have sought to be cautious and tentative except where the structure seems very clear. The *text* section continues with verse-by-verse commentary, taking into account the *orientation* section and seeking to make clear the meaning of the words and lines as well as the flow of the poetry.

The *reflection and response* section points to what a Christian response might look like when appropriating this psalm.

### Three Questions in Psalms Interpretation

Three questions are often asked when reading the Psalms that merit even concise mention at the outset of this commentary. For a fuller discussion, please see volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*. These questions, with my very brief conclusions, are listed below.

1. Who are “the righteous”? A careful analysis of the Psalms gives us a portrait of those who delight in the covenant God and find assurance of final vindication in him. This assurance is rooted in the righteousness of their covenant head. Because neither David nor his successors lived with perfect righteousness, they clearly foreshadow another covenant head who will. “The righteous” in the Psalms, then, are righteous by faith in the covenant God.
2. Can Jesus Christ be considered to be praying the Psalms when the psalmists confess their sins and plead for forgiveness? My conclusion is that he does so as the covenant head of a sinful people, just as he submitted to John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance. The shadow of the cross fell on him, who had no sin, as he prayed these psalms and our sin was imputed to him.
3. How are we to understand the prayers for God to punish the wicked in the Psalms? A study of the New Testament supports the

conclusion that Jesus Christ prays these prayers from a pure heart, and so we pray them—cautiously and with trembling—in him. Every time we pray, “Your kingdom come,” in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray for this punishment on the *finally* impenitent, even as we pray for many to repent before it is too late.

### **The Superscriptions and the Shape of the Psalter**

Much scholarly attention has focused in recent years on the canonical order of the Psalms and the ways in which the five books of the Psalms and the superscriptions may help us understand the significance of this order. I am persuaded that the canonical order is as much the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s direction as is the composition of the Psalms themselves. But I have sought to be cautious in making claims about discerning the meaning of this structure in detail. At the start of each book of the Psalter, I have included a very brief introduction to that book.

I accept the reliability of the superscriptions, while recognizing that we do not understand all the terms used in them. I have commented briefly on these terms (and the word *Selah*) the first time each appears. In particular, I accept that “of David” and similar expressions indicate authorship, and I have sought to argue this position (a minority among scholars) in volume 1, *Introduction: Christ and the Psalms*.

### **Texts and Translations**

I have followed the normal Jewish and Christian understanding that the Masoretic Text is the most reliable witness to the original form of the texts. Some modern translations give considerable weight to the Greek translations (and sometimes also to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the ancient Versions), but I have erred on the side of caution, except where there are overwhelming reasons for rejecting the Masoretic Text. I have indicated where there is significant uncertainty.

When quoting Hebrew or Greek, I provide both the original forms and the transliteration in the main text. In footnotes I provide only the original Hebrew or Greek.

I have used the English Standard Version (ESV) as my base text (though I have at times taken liberty to break stanzas differently from the ESV). I have found this an admirable translation for the purposes of

detailed study. Where there are significant differences, I have sometimes referred to the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), the King James Version (KJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the New International Version (NIV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the Revised English Bible (REB).

### Hebrew Tense Forms

Scholars vary in the terminology they use for the two tense forms in Hebrew. One form may be called the perfect, the perfective, the suffix conjugation, or the *qatal*. The other may be called the imperfect, the imperfective, the prefix conjugation, or the *yaqtol*. For simplicity I use the traditional terminology *perfect* and *imperfect*, even though these do not translate simply into English perfect or imperfect tenses, especially in poetry. In general, it may be true that an imperfect form conveys an action that is continuing (typically but not always future), while a perfect form indicates an action that is completed (typically but not always past). But there are many exceptions (especially when following the *vav consecutive*).

### The Divine Name “the LORD”

The Hebrew name יהוה, or *YHWH*, often written *Yahweh* and sometimes called the tetragrammaton (after its four consonants), is written “LORD” in quotations from the biblical text (in line with the usual convention for English translations). Outside quotations, I prefer to use the phrases *covenant Lord* or *covenant God*, rather than the word *Yahweh*, partly because we do not know for sure how it was pronounced but mainly because it captures the strong Old Testament context of covenantal lordship.

### The Davidic King

When speaking of the Davidic king/King, I have generally capitalized *King* to encourage the reader to think toward the fulfillment of Davidic kingship in Christ, the final King. I have typically used the lowercase *king* when referring exclusively to an old covenant king, whether David or one of his successors.

### Psalm Numbering

I have numbered the Psalms according to the Masoretic Text and all English translations throughout. Most patristic writers followed the Psalm chapter

numbering in, or derived from, the Greek translations. This numbering differs from the Hebrew numbering as shown in table 1. So, for example, when commenting on what our English Bibles call Psalm 107, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) refers to it as Psalm 106. But even when referring to the Septuagint or Vulgate, I have translated into the Masoretic Text numbering.

Table 1 Psalm Numbering in English and Greek Versions

Psalm Number in English Versions	Psalm Number in Greek Versions
Pss. 1–8	Unchanged: Pss. 1–8
Pss. 9–10	Combined into Ps. 9
Pss. 11–113	One less: Pss. 10–112
Pss. 114–115	Combined into Ps. 113
Ps. 116	Split into Pss. 114 and 115
Pss. 117–146	One less: Pss. 116–145
Ps. 147	Split into Pss. 146 and 147
Pss. 148–150	Unchanged: Pss. 148–150

### Verse Numbering

I have used English verse numbering throughout, with superscriptions labeled *S*. Where a psalm has more than a very short superscription, the Masoretic Text usually designates the superscription verse 1, increasing all subsequent verse numbers by one. Otherwise, the superscription forms the start of verse 1. I have noted this feature when commenting on each superscription.

# ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AcBib	Academia Biblica
ACCS	<i>Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture</i> . Edited by Thomas C. Oden. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998–2010.
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AD	<i>anno Domini</i> , “in the year of the Lord,” often called the Common Era, CE
BC	before Christ, sometimes called before the Common Era, BCE
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ca.	<i>circa</i> , “approximately”
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CC	Continental Commentaries
CFTL	Clark’s Foreign Theological Library
chap(s).	chapter(s)
CNTOT	<i>Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.
CSC	Crossway Short Classics
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
EBTC	Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , “for example”
esp.	especially

etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , “and so forth”
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
<i>HALOT</i>	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–1999.
HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , “that is”
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KEL	Kregel Exegetical Library
lit.	literally
LXX	Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures)
MC	A Mentor Commentary
MT	Masoretic Text
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
OWC	Oxford World’s Classics
PG	<i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca</i> . Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. Paris, 1857–1866.
PTW	Preaching the Word
RCS	<i>Reformation Commentary on Scripture</i> . Edited by Timothy George and Scott M. Manetsch. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011–.

SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SSLL	Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , “under the word”
TBST	The Bible Speaks Today
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
Vg.	Vulgate (Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible)
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBBC	Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Welwyn Commentary Series
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>



*Commentary on*  
PSALMS 1–50



# BOOK 1

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BOOK 1 OF THE PSALMS comprises Psalms 1–41. After Psalms 1 and 2, almost all the psalms in book 1 are ascribed to David. There are only two exceptions, each of which is closely connected with the preceding “of David” psalm (see on Pss. 10 and 33). Most of the psalms are individual and often intensely so. Alongside this resolute focus on the anointed King (foreshadowing the Messiah), there is an almost equally strong motif of the hostility of “the wicked” to the King and his people. The conflict between “the righteous” (both singular and plural) and “the wicked” is pronounced.

*This statement [“Blessed is the man”] should be understood of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

AUGUSTINE  
*Expositions of the Psalms*

*The first psalm speaks literally concerning Christ thus: Blessed is the man. He is the only blessed One and the only Man from whose fullness they have all received (John 1:16) that they might be blessed . . . [because Jesus is] the firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29).*

MARTIN LUTHER  
*First Lectures on the Psalms*

# PSALM 1

## ORIENTATION

“I would love to be like her.” “I wish I could live like him.” The Psalter begins with one who is doing life right. But who can this be? That is the critical question of Psalm 1.

Psalm 1 is, alongside Psalm 2, “the text upon which the whole of the Psalms make up a divine sermon.”<sup>1</sup>

There are suggestive links to Psalm 2:

1. Neither has a superscription.<sup>2</sup>
2. “Blessed” (אֲשֶׁר, *ashre*) forms an inclusio (1:1; 2:12).
3. Each ends with a “way” that “perishes” (1:6; 2:12).
4. “Meditates” (1:2) and “plot” (2:1) translate the same Hebrew verb (הָגָה, *hagah*).
5. The godly man of Psalm 1 prospers in all he does (1:3); the anointed King of Psalm 2 conquers the world (2:8–9).

It seems that the final editor has deliberately juxtaposed these psalms—which stand in “a symbiotic relationship”<sup>3</sup>—at the start of the Psalter.

1 Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892), *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), 1.1:1.

2 Pss. 1 and 2 are unique in this respect. Only four others in books 1 and 2 have no superscription. Each is closely tied to an adjacent psalm with a superscription (Pss. 10 with 9; 33 with 32; 43 with 42; and 71 with 70).

3 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 54. See also Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy’s Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms*, AcBib 17 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004); J. L. Mays (1921–2015), “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,” *JBL* 106,

God promises Joshua success if he meditates on—and obeys—God’s word (Josh. 1:7–9); Moses exhorts future kings in similar terms (Deut. 17:14–20). Both these passages are echoed by Psalm 1. The kingly promises of Psalm 2 can be inherited only by a Psalm 1 man. This is seen later in the history of the kings, both positively (e.g., 2 Kings 18:6–7; 22–23) and negatively (e.g., Jer. 36).<sup>4</sup> David says the same to Solomon (1 Kings 2:2–4). Psalms 1 and 2 will be fulfilled together when the ultimate Psalm 2 King is the flawless Psalm 1 believer.

Psalm 1 draws on the great Old Testament themes of covenant and wisdom. Success and perishing echo the blessings and curses of the covenant (e.g., Lev. 26; Deut. 27–28). The Wisdom Literature often sets before us two “ways” with opposite destinations (e.g., Prov. 9).

As we begin the Psalms, then, we seek the Psalm 2 King who will be the righteous man of Psalm 1, the covenant-keeping King who lives a life of wisdom. This King will be to his people their wisdom, their righteousness, and the guarantor of covenant blessing.

This connection with Psalm 2 guards us against three errors in reading Psalm 1. The first is a pharisaical self-righteousness, that hypocritical assurance that can say, “I thank you, God, that I am a Psalm 1 person, not like those terrible sinners over there.” Psalm 1 sets a higher standard than this, and superficial righteousness will not suffice (cf. Matt. 5:20). The second is the fleshly determination of the religious zealot utterly committed to becoming a Psalm 1 person by his or her own strength, for in this we always fail. The third is despair; I recognize that I will never attain the godliness of Psalm 1 and can therefore never hope to enjoy the success therein promised. This is true, but Psalm 2 directs my hopes to another who will do this on my behalf.

In the first three-quarters or more of Christian history, a prominent answer given to the question “Who is the Psalm 1 man?” is that it is Jesus of Nazareth. The psalm declares a blessing on *anyone* who fulfills Psalm 1:1–2 (in this sense the singular is generic, as Jer. 17:7–8 confirms). Indeed, in Psalm 1:5 there is a whole “congregation” of such. We are all exhorted to be

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no. 1 (1987): 8; Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter*, HBM 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), chap. 1; Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary*, with Erika Moore (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 145–46; Philip Eveson, *Psalms: From Suffering to Glory*, 2 vols., WCS (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2014–2015), 1:34–35.

<sup>4</sup> Grant, *King as Exemplar*.

such people. And yet only one man has fulfilled the conditions without spot or blemish. We need not suppose that the anonymous prophet who wrote Psalm 1 knew it would be Jesus of Nazareth or spoke in some conscious way of the Christ to come, for there is no immediate indication within the psalm of conscious messianic intent. Nevertheless, when the New Testament tells us of one who is our wisdom and our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30) and who fulfills the covenant for us by his obedience (Rom. 5:12–21), we rightly discern the filling out of the sketched-out figure of Psalm 1.

If Jesus Christ is the man of Psalm 1, then who makes up “the congregation of the righteous” (1:5)? This is the overflow of both godliness and blessing from the anointed King to his people, who inherit the blessings he won (Eph. 1:3), are righteous by faith in him, learn wisdom by his indwelling Spirit, and become Psalm 1 men and women by grace. In Christ we hear Psalm 1 not as a manifesto for self-righteousness or as a sentence of miserable moralism but rather as glorious gospel.

## THE TEXT

### Structure

Although there is no agreement on the most natural divisions,<sup>5</sup> I consider the psalm in three couplets.

### 1:1–2 Descriptions: What the Blessed Man Is and Is Not

- <sup>1</sup> Blessed is the man  
     who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
 nor stands in the way of sinners,  
     nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

**Blessed** is a cheerful exclamation: “*This* is the best way to live!”<sup>6</sup> There will be sadness (e.g., Matt. 5:4; 2 Cor. 6:10)—and thus “happy” as a translation

<sup>5</sup> The CSB and NIV divide the psalm into three different sections: Ps. 1:1–3 (the blessed man), 1:4–5 (the wicked), and 1:6 (conclusion).

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus (1918–2000), *Psalms*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, 2 vols., CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1:115; Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, vol. 5 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 78.

must be used with care—but here is one who enjoys the favor of God.<sup>7</sup> The grammatical masculine **man** (יִישׁ, *ish*) can include any human being, male or female. Nevertheless, the singular ought to be kept in translation, not only because it guards the rhetorical picture of one righteous man surrounded by many wicked but also because it leaves open the possibility that one particular man will fulfill this portrait.

Three emphatic negatives paint the picture.

1. He **walks not** (his way of life) **in the counsel of the wicked** (plural), a word that refers to people who are outside the covenant, not believers.<sup>8</sup> Nearly half the Psalm references to the **wicked** are in book 1; they show a passionate restlessness (cf. the troubled sea in Isa. 57:20), tossed to and fro by violent desires.<sup>9</sup> They proffer **counsel**, with the appearance of wisdom. They are persuasive, persistent, and plural. This blessed man is bombarded with their messages, as—with relentless intensity—was Jesus of Nazareth. They fill the air we breathe today, telling Christ’s disciples what is plausible, “normal,” acceptable.<sup>10</sup>

2. The verb **stands** may imply something more rooted than a “walk.” This is “where I *stand*, my identity” (as in identity politics). Here is “a stiff neck . . . a more incorrigible godlessness.”<sup>11</sup> This broad **way** is full of **sinners**, all sure of where they “stand.”<sup>12</sup> The word **sinners** puts the spotlight on their evil actions: “The intensive form of the Hebrew word may indicate that their straying from the right path has become a habit and is no longer an accidental error.”<sup>13</sup>

7 יִישׁ comes twice here at the start of book 1, twice at the end (Pss. 40:4; 41:1), and in other, possibly significant, places. See VanGemenen, *Psalms*, 81.

8 For the meaning of “wicked,” see Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols., KEL (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 1:185n14.

9 E. W. Hengstenberg (1802–1869), *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. P. Fairbairn and J. Thomson, 3 vols., CFTL 1–2, 12 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1845), 1:9; F. Delitzsch (1813–1819), *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton, CFTL, 4th ser., vols. 29–31 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), 1:110.

10 The word מַעֲצָוֹת may sometimes also have the sense of a “council,” a group gathered with authority to give “counsel,” linking what they say to the peer pressure they exert. See the discussion in Peter C. Craigie (1938–1985), *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 57; John H. Eaton, *Psalms of the Way and the Kingdom: A Conference with Commentators*, JSOTSup 199 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 41.

11 Martin Luther (1483–1546), *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 14:289.

12 The verb “to sin” (אָפּוּט) means to miss the mark or way, that is, God’s standard. See Ross, *Psalms*, 1:186n15.

13 A. A. Anderson (1924–2021), *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols., NCB (London: Oliphants, 1972), 1:59.

3. First they walk; then they stand; finally they sit. A **seat** also means a dwelling or a “session” or “assembly.”<sup>14</sup> Here is somewhere to belong, for this is no solitary seat. This Righteous One is invited to join what C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) famously called “the Inner Ring.”<sup>15</sup> Being seated may have connotations of authority (e.g., Ruth 4),<sup>16</sup> and especially teaching authority (e.g., Matt. 5:1; 23:2; Luke 4:20). In “a dark parody of the gathering of the elders at the city gate,”<sup>17</sup> they invite him to join them. From there they mock, for this is the seat of **scoffers**. They are very sure they are right. It makes them feel better about their sin.<sup>18</sup> This man becomes the object of their scorn, as do his disciples after him (1 Pet. 4:4; 2 Pet. 3:3).

As covenant loyalty involves a loyal walking and sitting (Deut. 6:7), surrender to evil entails the opposite.<sup>19</sup> Just as there is probably a crescendo in the verbs (**walk, stand, sit**), so there may be an intensification in the nouns: **counsel**, shaping an evil mindset; the **way**, a sinful lifestyle; and **scoffing**, the final degradation. For while “the seat of the scoffer may be very lofty, . . . it is very near to the gate of hell”; now they “have taken their degrees in vice, and as true Doctors of Damnation they are installed, and are looked up to by others as Masters in Belial.”<sup>20</sup> Some may even hold academic chairs.

The power of evil is irresistible—or so it seems. And yet Psalm 1:2 shows us the only way by which it may be repelled. We might expect three simple opposites: he walks in the counsel of the wise, stands in the way of the righteous, sits in the seat of those who fear God. But godliness must arise from the heart, to which 1:2 turns our attention.

2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *Psalms*, 1:59.

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, “The Inner Ring,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 141–57. Given as his Memorial Lecture at King’s College, University of London, 1944.

<sup>16</sup> See Christopher Ash, *Teaching Ruth and Esther: From Text to Message* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2018), 114.

<sup>17</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006–2008), 1:82.

<sup>18</sup> Fourteen out of sixteen occurrences of the word “scoffers” (לְצַיִם) come in Proverbs to indicate those whose pride makes them very sure they are right and who despise those who will not agree with them (e.g., Prov. 1:22; 3:34; 9:7–8).

<sup>19</sup> Gunnel André, “‘Walk,’ ‘Stand,’ and ‘Sit’ in Psalm 1:1–2,” *VT* 32, no. 3 (1982): 327. For a king who did the opposite, see 2 Chron. 22:3–5.

<sup>20</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.1:2.

His **delight** is what he most deeply desires. The **law** is fronted for emphasis in both lines (1:2a reads, lit., “and in the *law* of the LORD [is] his delight”). Only torah can keep him from the dangers of 1:1 (cf. Pss. 19; 119).<sup>21</sup> Primarily referring to the law of Moses (as in Josh. 1:7–8), this torah extends to the whole scriptural instruction of God (and just possibly to the Psalter itself).<sup>22</sup> All this is the revealed character of the covenant God he loves. On this law he **meditates**, a word that suggests a low audible reading;<sup>23</sup> this includes memorization, consideration (to develop understanding), responsive prayer, and self-exhortation.<sup>24</sup> He does this **day and night**; it is the background music of his life. Here is both the nourishment and the outflow of the **delight** of his heart.

Here is a precious window into the soul of a man in whom there is unshuffled **delight** in the law of God. We have to wait until the coming of Jesus Christ to see this King in his perfection. As Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg writes, “Perfect delight in the law presupposes perfect union of the human with the divine will, . . . perfect holiness.”<sup>25</sup> It is striking that both “blessed” (אֲשֶׁרֶ, *ashre*) and the verbal root of the word “delight” (קִפַּחַ, *khaphats*) appear also in Psalm 40:6 and 8 (NIV: “I desire”), in a psalm explicitly applied to Christ in Hebrews 10:5–7.<sup>26</sup> He came to do not his own will but the will of him who sent him (John 6:38).

### 1:3–4 Comparisons: What the Blessed Man and the Wicked Are Like

Psalm 1:3–4 moves from the portrait of this blessed one to two comparisons: what he is **like** (1:3) and what the wicked (of 1:1) are **like** (1:4).

21 I am grateful to James Hely Hutchinson for this observation.

22 See Michael LeFebvre, “Torah-Meditation and the Psalms: The Invitation of Psalm 1,” in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 213–17. See the discussion in R. N. Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*, JSOTSup 222 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 38–42; Geoffrey W. Grogan (1925–2011), *Psalms*, THOTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 42n2. For the meaning of *t Torah*, see Ross, *Psalms*, 1:188n18.

23 LeFebvre, “Torah-Meditation”; Whybray, *Reading the Psalms*, 38–39; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 58; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:112.

24 Ross, *Psalms*, 1:189.

25 Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:12.

26 Noted by Patrick D. Miller, “The Beginning of the Psalter,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann Jr., JSOTSup 159 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 86.

3 He is like a tree  
 planted by streams of water  
 that yields its fruit in its season,  
 and its leaf does not wither.  
 In all that he does, he prospers.

This Righteous One is given four rich lines of comparison. Imagery of a **tree** is widespread in Scripture, beginning with Genesis 2–3 and culminating in Revelation 22:2 (cf. Jer. 17:8; Ezek. 47:12); it speaks of vibrant and resilient life. The tree is sometimes associated with a king (e.g., Ezek. 31:3–9), and that may be a particular focus here.<sup>27</sup> This tree is **planted by streams of water**, that is, irrigation channels supplying fresh water all year round (cf. Isa. 32:2).<sup>28</sup> It **yields its fruit**, a metaphor of righteousness (e.g., Isa. 5:7; Gal. 5:16–26), **in its season**, each virtue evident at the appropriate time (cf. Prov. 15:23; Eccl. 3:11). Unlike the wicked (cf. Ps. 37:2, using the same word), it **does not wither**. This blessed one is stable, constant, and beautiful. From roots in God’s life grows fruit to bless the world.

The climax comes in the last line: **In all that he does, he prospers**. The prosperity of the wicked (e.g., Job 21; Ps. 73) will not last (e.g., Pss. 10:5; 37:7). In an Ecclesiastes world full of frustrations, he achieves all he purposes. Counter to our intuitions, the Bible teaches that lasting prosperity comes through suffering because suffering shapes a person in godliness (even for the sinless Jesus, who was made “perfect through suffering,” Heb. 2:10).

In contrast with these four lines, the wicked get just one short line of comparison after they are introduced:

4 The wicked are not so,  
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

How much is compressed in those words **not so!**<sup>29</sup> The **wicked**, who were so weighty, so numerous, so plausible, and so scornful (Ps. 1:1)—the poet

<sup>27</sup> E.g., Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; Zech. 3:8; 6:12. “In both biblical and ancient Near Eastern tradition, . . . the individual most typically identified with a tree is a person of royalty.” William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 69.

<sup>28</sup> VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> The LXX, followed by the Vg., doubles this for emphasis: “Not so, not so!” (οὐχ οὕτως . . . οὐχ οὕτως).

can scarcely bother to describe them! Not lasting, not fruitful, not beautiful. Nothing. The comparison is almost brutally brief. They are not even given the dignity of being the subject of a verb: **like chaff** (cf. Ps. 35:5; Isa. 17:13; Luke 3:17),<sup>30</sup> **the wind** (רוּחַ, *ruakh*, the word also used for the Spirit of God) **drives them away**. They are unstable and erratic, blown around by their conflicting desires.<sup>31</sup> From rooted to rootless, from organic to disintegrated, the contrast could not be more stark.

The powerful imbalance between these comparisons further motivates us to desire the blessing of the blessed one.

### 1:5–6 Expectations: What the Blessed and the Wicked May Expect

<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

**Therefore** (in consequence of Ps. 1:4) **the wicked** (who “stood” so confidently in 1:1) **will not stand** where it matters, **in the judgment**. While it is possible that **the judgment** means “in a place where they can *give* judgment over others” (i.e., as leaders in the congregation), as indeed they will not,<sup>32</sup> the reference to perishing in 1:6 suggests that **judgment** means judgment by God; they may think their place is in the judge’s seat (namely, scoffers), but they find themselves in the dock. Climactically, this points to final judgment but probably includes the interim judgments of God throughout history.

The **congregation of the righteous** is the assembly or church of God, righteous by faith.<sup>33</sup> The blessed one (1:1–3) is not alone. If this blessed man points to the King of Psalm 2, then he is not simply a generic or representative member of the **congregation of the righteous** but rather its leader. In this great gathering in the age to come, there will be no impenitent **sinners**.

<sup>6</sup> for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

<sup>30</sup> There is a play on words between “tree” (עֵץ) and “chaff” (רֵבֵב).

<sup>31</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 143–46.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle and Boniface Ramsey, 6 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000), 1:70; William H. Brownlee, “Psalms 1–2 as a Coronation Liturgy,” *Biblica* 52, no. 3 (1971): 328–29; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> הַקְּהִלָּה (Vg. *congregatione*) is more or less synonymous with הַקְּהִלָּה.

For—in the most significant line of the psalm, we are given the climactic reason why both sides of this psalm are true—the **LORD knows the way of the righteous**, those who have entered the covenant by faith (e.g., Gen. 15:6) and live out that faith with righteous deeds.<sup>34</sup> To **know** here must refer to something more than cognitive knowledge, for God is omniscient, cognizant of all things and all people. It must mean something like a personal knowledge and care, a watchful knowledge (hence CSB, NIV, NRSV: “watches over”); it is a knowledge that saves, the opposite of perishing (cf. Luke 13:27; John 10:14).<sup>35</sup> Most famously, the verb is used in Genesis 4:1 of Adam’s union with Eve. The covenant God who gave his law as a gift of grace to his people now watches over those who trust him so that they walk this way under his protection and with his guidance.

By terrible contrast, **the way of the wicked** comes to a short end and **will perish**.

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. This psalm preaches to us. As we say it, we add our *Amen!* The truth it declares is counterintuitive and deeply countercultural. And yet this really is the best way to live, for the law of God is rooted in the very structure of the created order.

2. Psalm 1:1 helps us feel the power of all-pervasive wickedness. The wicked were and are many, plausible, and mocking. “Who can refute a sneer?”<sup>36</sup> There is a “wide” gate and an “easy” way that leads to destruction, and “those who enter by it are many.” But “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt. 7:13–14). From the school playground to the senior-living home, we instinctively want to say the same things as the wicked, to laugh at the same jokes, to share the same values, to make the same life decisions.

3. We flee afresh with urgency to Christ, our only hope. If wickedness can be resisted only when our heart *delights* in God’s law, we have an insuperable problem. For we cannot control the affections of our

<sup>34</sup> For the meaning of “righteous” in the Psalms, see Ross, *Psalms*, 1:193n26.

<sup>35</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:115; Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:120; Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 145; Ross, *Psalms*, 1:192.

<sup>36</sup> Graham A. Cole, “Who Can Refute a Sneer?” *TynBul* 49, no. 1 (1998): 57–58.

hearts.<sup>37</sup> We may try to live rightly, but we cannot help *wanting* to walk with sinners, and we fear the mockery of scoffers. Outside faith in Christ, writes Luther, “you . . . should tremble at these words.”<sup>38</sup> Once we belong to Christ, there is no condemnation (cf. Rom. 8:1; 1 John 4:18). And yet still there should be within us the stirrings of a fresh desperation for Christ, an urgent desire for the salvation only he can bring. Psalm 1 drives us to Christ.

4. We ought to be thrilled as the darkness of works religion is swept away by the light of the gospel. Jesus is the blessed man of Psalm 1. In him all blessedness is ours, for the God who has given us Jesus gives us with him all things we can ever need for life and godliness (cf. Eph. 1:3; 2 Pet. 1:3). Old covenant believers trusted in the Christ to come, for they knew that they could never have within themselves the resources to fulfill Psalm 1.

5. In Christ the desires and delights of this psalm become ours, not as an unattainable works religion (“I must stir myself up to try to be more like the good person and less like the wicked”) but as the fruit of the Spirit. From being “under the law,” we become glad walkers in God’s ways.<sup>39</sup> As we sing Psalm 1:1, Christ gives us a godly determination to reject the persuasive counsel of wickedness in our culture, not to align our identity (where we stand) with any way that contradicts the law of God and never either to teach others in wrong ways or mock those who persist in piety. And then, as we sing Psalm 1:2, a heart delight for God’s beautiful character expressed in his perfect law wells up in our hearts. This delight will lead to daily and nightly meditation on that word of instruction, and in its turn, these healthy habits of meditation will nourish the delight of our hearts.

Our response as we sing Psalm 1 in Christ will therefore be a fragrant gospel blend of at least two tunes. We rejoice that Jesus Christ is the blessed one and wonder at his marvelous righteousness. And then, stirred by the Spirit of Christ within us, we resolve, under grace and with joy, to walk with him in the way of Psalm 1.

37 Luther (following Augustine) expounded this truth with peculiar force in *The Bondage of the Will*.

38 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 14:305.

39 Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:67–68.



*The Holy Spirit . . . teaches and consoles us in this psalm so that we cling bravely to this King and think of Him much more than the tumults. . . . For it is a condition of His kingdom that it cannot exist without tumults . . . because Satan and the godless world cannot tolerate this King.*

MARTIN LUTHER  
Lecture in 1532

# PSALM 2

## ORIENTATION

We live in a dangerous world. The paradox of Psalm 2 is that safety and blessing are to be found (paradoxically) by surrendering my autonomy to the gracious authority of Jesus the Messiah.

Where there is life, there is power. I may not have any formal position of authority, but I have agency. I make decisions, and the choices I make impact others. Whether I am a president, a prime minister, a local leader, a celebrity, a blogger, a school principal, a manager, a parent, or simply a living being, I make a difference in the world. There is a power that comes from position, a power from good looks, a power from a magnetic personality, a power entrusted to pastoral leaders, even paradoxically a strange power of victimhood.

The question is this: Will I use my power for what I desire or submit to God and his Messiah? Psalm 2 counsels me that to Jesus Christ is given all authority (cf. Matt. 28:18). If I am wise, I will bow the knee to him. If I am threatened by those who choose what they want, Psalm 2 comforts me; if I want to choose what I want, it warns me.

We should read Psalm 2 alongside Psalm 1, for the Psalm 2 Messiah will be the blessed man of Psalm 1.<sup>1</sup> Although Psalm 2 has no superscription, Acts 4:25–26 ascribes it to David speaking as a prophet (Acts 2:30) by the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of Christ. We do not know when he wrote it, but it reflects the covenant of 2 Samuel 7:4–17.<sup>2</sup> In his “last words,” David calls this “an everlasting covenant, ordered in all

<sup>1</sup> See the *orientation* section under Ps. 1 above.

<sup>2</sup> John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come*, PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 207–20.

things and secure,” in which God will “cause to prosper” all that he desires (2 Sam. 23:1, 5).<sup>3</sup>

Psalm 2 may have been used at coronations or other festivals for David’s successors; we cannot know. There are many echoes of this covenant in the Old Testament (notably Pss. 89:1–37; 132:11–12; cf. 2 Kings 11:12; 1 Chron. 22:10; 28:6–7).

The New Testament teaches that the anointed King here spoken of will finally be Jesus Christ, with echoes at his baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), his transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35), and elsewhere (Acts 4:25–27; 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5; Rev. 12:5; 19:15, 19—and probably also 2 Pet. 1:17).<sup>4</sup> Psalm 2 is the only Old Testament scripture in which the three titles “Son of God,” “Messiah” (or “anointed one”), and “God’s King” appear together. The historical kingdom of David was “merely a shadow” of that of Christ.<sup>5</sup> The victory of this Messiah overflows to his followers (Rev. 2:26–27).

## THE TEXT

### Structure

Psalm 2 includes four groups of three verses each (albeit of slightly differing lengths), with a concluding line of blessing (2:12d). Apart from the final line, there is a dramatic symmetry. The kings of the earth speak at the start (2:1–3) and are spoken to at the end (2:10–12c); while they speak vanity, what they hear is wisdom. In the middle we hear the words of God in heaven (2:4–6) and what he has said to his Messiah on earth (2:7–9).<sup>6</sup>

3 The word “desire” in 2 Sam. 23:5 is the same word as “delight” in Ps. 1:2 (רָצִיתִי).

4 John 1:49 (“You are the Son of God”), Rom. 1:4 (“declared”), and Heb. 1:2 (“heir of all things”) may also allude to Ps. 2.

5 John Calvin (1509–1564), *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, in *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 1:9–11. Calvin’s approach respects the original context better than some of the church fathers. For example, Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428) simply says, “David in his inspired composition narrates everything carried out by the Jews at the time of the Lord’s passion.” Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Psalms 1–81*, trans. Robert C. Hill, WGRW 5 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006), 15.

6 Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:97n6; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 89; Pierre Auffret, *The Literary Structure of Psalm 2*, JSOTSup 3 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1977); Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), 154–56.

### 2:1–3 One Pointless Riot

After the calm certainties of Psalm 1, Psalm 2 begins with a dramatic uproar that summarizes human history in seven vivid lines. And yet the first verse begins and ends with words that calm our fears.

<sup>1</sup> Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?

Why? Why do you bother? It is **in vain** (empty/emptiness),<sup>7</sup> bound to fail. These “two little words” calm the fears aroused by the terrifying uproar of 2:1–3.<sup>8</sup> When Christ fulfills Psalm 1, whatever he does will most certainly prosper (1:3).<sup>9</sup>

And yet the rebellion is frightening, driven by a passionate, shared desire for “freedom.” In all humankind **the nations . . . and the peoples** are filled with **rage**, the word suggesting the restless commotion of a worldwide hostile crowd (Acts 19:23–24 catches the feel of the scene).<sup>10</sup> The verb **plot** (הָגַהּ, *hagah*) is translated “meditate” in Psalm 1:2. In an ironic twist, the meditation here is on rebellion rather than submission.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,

The camera closes in on the ringleaders, **kings** (not merely **kings** but emphatically **kings of the earth**) and **rulers**, people who carry weight.<sup>12</sup> These are “influencers,” whether through political or military force or through the all-pervasive power of culture; they set the agenda for public

<sup>7</sup> קִיָּה.

<sup>8</sup> Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:23.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, 14:315.

<sup>10</sup> VanGemen, *Psalms*, 93. ESV mg. “noisily assemble.” The cognate noun הָגָה appears in Pss. 55:14 and 64:2, where it means a “throng.” This probably has the sense of a tumultuous mob conspiring. The LXX (quoted in Acts 4:25) uses the active voice of the verb φρουάσσω. Elsewhere, this Greek verb is always used in the middle voice to mean “to snort,” and hence figuratively “to be arrogant, haughty, insolent.”

<sup>11</sup> VanGemen, *Psalms*, 92; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:97.

<sup>12</sup> The word “rulers” is a participle from the verb meaning “to be weighty, judicious, commanding.” BDB, s.v. הָגַהּ.

discourse, and they determine—perhaps through literature, blogs, movies, or newsfeeds—the “defender beliefs” of a culture. They include, to some degree, any man or woman who can make a difference to the world. These **set themselves**: they take their stand (probably like marshaling forces for battle; cf. 1 Sam. 17:16; Jer. 46:4).<sup>13</sup> They are determined to make their own choices and will fight to ensure they can.<sup>14</sup> And they **take counsel together**, like a powerful conclave, secure and strong. “The rapid lively rhythm” here “suggests the stir and tumult of the gathering host.”<sup>15</sup>

All this is **against the LORD and against his Anointed**. The anointed King (מָשִׁיחַ, *mashiakh*; χριστός, *christos*)<sup>16</sup> is so closely identified with his covenant Lord that hostility to him is enmity to God (cf. John 15:23). This is later vividly illustrated by the words “Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king” (1 Chron. 29:23).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us.”

Psalms 2:3 makes explicit the goal of this rebellion: it purports to be a freedom movement. They long to **burst . . . apart** (snap) and **cast away the bonds and cords** by which God’s Messiah claims the right to direct their wills.<sup>18</sup> The goal of this noisy, restless worldwide rebellion is autonomy: “I want to be a king, and having become a king, I want to exercise my power as I choose. If I have little power, I long for power; if I have power, I want to hold on to it. The one thing I will not do is bow the knee to God’s anointed King” (cf. Luke 19:14). The more power we have, the more we want to be free of God’s Christ. Normally, those with power are in rivalry with one another; the strange paradox is that the one thing that unites them is their shared refusal to bow to God’s Messiah (cf. Luke 23:12; Acts 4:27).

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *Psalms*, 1:66.

<sup>14</sup> Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:124.

<sup>15</sup> A. F. Kirkpatrick (1849–1940), *The Book of Psalms: With Introduction and Notes*, 3 vols., CBSC 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), 1:9.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 1 Sam. 2:10; 16:12; 2 Sam. 12:7; 22:51; 2 Kings 11:12; Pss. 18:50; 20:6; 28:8; 45:7; 84:9; 89:20, 38, 51; 132:10, 17. The plural in Ps. 105:15 suggests that the “messiahhood” of the King overflows to his people (cf. 1 John 2:27).

<sup>17</sup> O. Palmer Robertson calls this “the merger of Yahweh’s throne with David’s throne.” Robertson, *Flow of the Psalms*, 60.

<sup>18</sup> In an opposite context, “burst” and “bonds” feature in Ps. 107:14.

Every human being is by nature a participant in this great riot of human rebellion. Thus it will be to the very end of time (e.g., Rev. 19:19). But frightening though this is, it will come to nothing. There is a play on the upcoming reversal in the Hebrew suffix “(of) them.” They say, literally, “Let us burst apart the bonds of *them* and cast away the cords of *them* [i.e., the LORD and his Anointed]” (Ps. 2:3). But the Lord “holds *them* in derision, . . . will speak to *them* . . . and terrify *them* [i.e., the rebels]” (2:4–5).

### 2:4–6 One Perfect King

<sup>4</sup> He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord holds them in derision.

The camera moves up from the riot on earth to **the heavens**, where God **sits** enthroned beyond the reach of rebels. In a vivid anthropomorphism, he **laughs** (a word that usually indicates contempt; cf. Pss. 37:13; 59:8) . . . **in derision** (cf. 59:8). They will often scorn (1:1) and deride (e.g., 22:7; 35:16; 44:13; 59:8; 79:4; 80:6; 123:4—all using this verb), but the last laugh will be on them.

<sup>5</sup> Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,

The heart of God always issues in the actions of God. So now he **will speak to and terrify them**. The **wrath** of God (the image is of flared nostrils) always refers to his righteous anger (e.g., Pss. 6:1; 7:6; 18:8; 21:9; 30:5; 95:11); his **fury** is burning anger. God is impassible and unchanging, so this language is accommodated to our ability to understand; we are meant to cower in visceral terror before God’s holy, settled fury against all who refuse to submit to his Christ.

Just as 2:3 was the climax of the rebellion, so 2:6 is the height of God’s anger.

<sup>6</sup> “As for me, I have set my King  
on Zion, my holy hill.”

As for me is emphatic.<sup>19</sup> I have set, installed on the throne, my King. This is nonnegotiable. Zion, my holy hill, is of great significance in the Psalms. Originally the citadel conquered by David (2 Sam. 5:7), Zion became “a profoundly evocative term” that spoke of God’s promises to David.<sup>20</sup> Although it is “a modest mountain on the crest of which sits a modest fortified town, the capital of a rather small kingdom, surrounded by vast empires,” it is prophesied to become “queen of nations.”<sup>21</sup>

To the objection that Psalm 2:4–6 simply replaces one bad government by the horrible power of religion, we remember Psalm 1. The only messiah who can rightly claim the authority of Psalm 2 is the law-delighting figure of Psalm 1. David abused his power (e.g., 2 Sam. 11), as did all his successors until Jesus the Messiah, who perfectly fulfilled Psalm 1 and therefore validly claims Psalm 2. His rule alone is flawless and wholly good.

### 2:7–9 One Praying Son

Now the Messiah speaks. Just as the blessed man of Psalm 1 prospers despite the multitude of wicked who surround him, so the anointed King of Psalm 2 conquers no matter how many kings oppose him. Just as in creation a man was to govern God’s world, so now a man is appointed to rule; for not only will the Messiah be a greater David, he will be the second Adam.<sup>22</sup> The sonship of the Davidic kings is linked to the sonship of Adam, created in the image of God to govern God’s world.

<sup>7</sup> I will tell of the decree:  
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.

I will tell, declares the Messiah, of the decree. A decree is sure and unchangeable.<sup>23</sup> This may have been a document certifying the Davidic covenant (cf. “the testimony” given to Joash in 2 Kings 11:12); more likely David speaks of the surety of God’s unchangeable word.

<sup>19</sup> מִיָּמִי.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Pss. 3:4; 9:11; 15:1; 43:3; 48:1–2, 11; 74:2; 78:68–69; 87:1; 99:9. Woodhouse, *2 Samuel*, 157.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:38. We see this more fully in Ps. 8.

<sup>23</sup> חֹק is often translated “statute.”

The decree begins with relationship: “**You are my Son; / today I have begotten you.**” God is Father to the King. Promised to David and his successors in 2 Samuel 7:14, this relationship was the highly treasured root of the covenant, from which all the covenant blessings sprang (cf. Ps. 89:26). The King embodied the sonship of Israel (Ex. 4:22; Hos. 11:1) in his covenant headship of the people, as Christ does today.

Kings were often given the title “son of god” in the ancient Near East.<sup>24</sup> But the worldwide scope of the promises point to a depth of relationship here of which other ancient Near Eastern kingships—and even the historical kingship of David and his heirs—can be at best a shadow.<sup>25</sup> This relationship awaits one who is God’s Son by nature from all eternity (Heb. 1:5).

But if this is fulfilled in Jesus, what does **today** mean? For David and his heirs, **today** spoke of God’s adoption (a kind of legal begetting or new birth)<sup>26</sup> of the king as God’s son on the day of his anointing. But Jesus Christ has always been God the Son; he did not *become* the Son of God either at his conception (the incarnation) or at the beginning of his public ministry (his baptism). Adoptionism is an old heresy, dating back at least to the days of Arius (ca. 250–336). Augustine (followed by Thomas Aquinas [1225–1274] and Martin Luther, among others) argued that, since there is no time in eternity, it is always “today,” and therefore this is to be understood as a reference to the Father’s eternal begetting of the Son.<sup>27</sup>

While this is theologically true, the New Testament suggests that the declaration in Psalm 2 finds its fulfillment in the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus. In Acts 13:32–33 Paul indicates that God’s resurrection of Jesus fulfills this verse—“What God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children *by raising Jesus*”—and he then goes on to quote Psalm 2:7. If “declared” in Romans 1:4 echoes this verse, that too points to

24 F. Charles Fensham, “Father and Son as Terminology for Treaty and Covenant,” in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. Hans Goedicke (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 121–35; Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, trans. Timothy J. Hallett (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 247–68; Gerald Cooke, “The Israelite King as Son of God,” *ZAW* 73, no. 2 (1961): 202–25; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:100.

25 Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:31.

26 The verb 777 refers to begetting.

27 Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:73; cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, OWC (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), book 11; Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 12:53.

the resurrection, when Jesus was “declared” (or even “constituted”) “Son of God in *power*.” The verb “appointed” in Hebrews 1:2, preceding the quotation of Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 1:5, may have the same sense. The context of the quotation of Psalm 2:7 in Hebrews 5:5 suggests that the verse finds its fulfillment after “the days of his flesh,” when Jesus has been “made perfect” through his sufferings and become “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb. 5:7, 9).<sup>28</sup> In the light of these New Testament controls, we might paraphrase Psalm 2:7 as follows: “Today, in your bodily resurrection and ascension to my right hand, I declare and constitute you, who have been Son of God by nature from all eternity, now to be Son of God in power” (cf. Matt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9–11).

<sup>8</sup> Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.

Whatever prayers David and his (few) godly successors prayed, this invitation, by the Father to the Son, to **ask of me** (echoed in Ps. 21:4) points to a deep truth: the asking of the Son of God on earth and the answering of the Father in heaven connects in some way with the asking of the Son and the answering of the Father in eternity. If ruling speaks of his kingly office, asking pertains to his work as priest.<sup>29</sup> All who belong to the Son do so because the Son has asked (cf. John 17:20) and the Father has answered (cf. John 6:44). The Son will ask, and be granted, **the nations** (the same rebels as Ps. 2:1) as his **heritage**, his “promised land.”<sup>30</sup> The Son is heir to God’s vineyard (Mark 12:6–7). He enters into the Abrahamic promise to inherit the world (Rom. 4:13). There will be no limit to his inheritance.

All this comes through the worldwide preaching of the gospel of the cross (John 12:32).<sup>31</sup> The Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–19) is “the Christian version of the grant to the Old Testament messianic king,”<sup>32</sup> for this Messiah is “the heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). Through him, all who are in Christ are

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Calvin, *Psalms*, 1:18; Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:32; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:118.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Charnock (1628–1680), in Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.1:17.

<sup>30</sup> הַגִּבּוֹרִים often refers to all or a portion of the promised land (e.g., Pss. 37:18; 47:4; 68:9; 69:36; 74:2; 78:62, 71; 79:1; 94:5, 14; 105:11; 106:5, 40).

<sup>31</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 12:55; Calvin, *Psalms*, 1:19; Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:40.

<sup>32</sup> J. L. Mays, *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 51. Cf. Derek Kidner (1913–2008), *Psalms*, 2 vols., TOTC (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 1:51.

heirs of the new creation (Gal. 4:7). Second Corinthians 10:3–6 expresses, in terms of spiritual warfare through the gospel, the role of the apostolic church in bringing about this worldwide inheritance.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>9</sup> You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

Depending how we vocalize the Hebrew consonants, we may read either **break** (MT) or “rule/shepherd” (assumed by the LXX).<sup>34</sup> The echoes of this verse in Revelation 2:26–27 and 19:15 follow the Septuagint, and so it is better to read “rule/shepherd.” The Father has entrusted all judgment to this Son (John 5:22); he is given authority to **dash . . . in pieces** impenitent rebels like a piece of pottery.

While both halves of Psalm 2:9 may refer to destructive judgment, it is likely that the first line offers a bracing but positive alternative, a breaking in order to mend and remake. The **rod** (שֵׁבֶט, *shebet*) is used in Psalm 23:4 of the shepherd’s rod that brings “comfort.” The New Testament confirms that there is a breaking of grace as well as a dashing to pieces of final judgment. The rod of this shepherd is irresistible (**iron**), but its force is gospel power to break a heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh (cf. 2 Cor. 10:4–6).<sup>35</sup> It is the scepter of his kingdom (Ps. 45:6), which “crushes and crumbles, subdues and shapes everything. . . . So the Gospel puts the misshapen in order, that is, it disciplines the undisciplined, it crushes the great (that is, it humbles the proud).”<sup>36</sup>

If Psalm 2:9 implies a choice, in the light of the declarations of 2:4–9, then 2:10–12 spells out the decision that is to be made.

## 2:10–12c One Great Decision

<sup>10</sup> Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:52.

<sup>34</sup> The MT has תִּרְעַם from the root רעע (break). The LXX has ποιμανεῖς, which assumes the Hebrew תִּרְעַם from the root רעה (shepherd, rule).

<sup>35</sup> E.g., Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:73.

<sup>36</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:36; 12:64–65; 14:336.

**Now therefore** often signals an exhortation to wisdom.<sup>37</sup> **O kings!** is fronted (before the imperative) for emphasis (in Hebrew as in the ESV). What follows is like a parent speaking to a child (cf. Prov. 1:8):<sup>38</sup> “Now then, little ones, be sure to pay attention!” And yet these are **kings!** Were it not for Psalm 2:4–9, this warning would be “presumptuous.”<sup>39</sup> Psalm 2:4–9 has changed every power relationship on earth. The heady rebellion of 2:1–3 is folly.

The imperative **Be wise** here means to “be sensible”<sup>40</sup> and overlaps with the meaning “to enjoy success” (e.g., Josh. 1:7),<sup>41</sup> for wise action will lead to success. This hints at another thematic link with Psalm 1: to submit to the Messiah is the pathway to the success and blessing that is found in the Messiah alone. The parallel imperative **Be warned** has the sense of allowing oneself to be admonished, chastened, and disciplined; it is used of the chastening discipline of God, whether heeded (Jer. 31:18) or not (Lev. 26:23).

Psalm 2:11 and 2:12a–b tell all who exercise power on earth what being wise and being warned will mean:

11     Serve the LORD with fear,  
          and rejoice with trembling.

All who exercise power on earth are summoned to **serve** the covenant Lord against whom they rebelled (2:2) and to do so with **fear** (CSB: “reverential awe”), echoing the refrain of the Wisdom Literature that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (e.g., Prov. 9:10).

But why the oxymoron **Rejoice<sup>42</sup> with trembling?** How is it possible at the same time to rejoice and to tremble?<sup>43</sup> A shallow cheering untempered

37 הַעַתָּה (e.g., Prov. 5:7; 7:24; 8:32). VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 97.

38 Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:102.

39 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:66; cf. 14:340.

40 Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:102. The hiphil of כָּלַל occurs ironically in Gen. 3:6 (“to make one wise”) and elsewhere in the Psalms meaning “to ponder, to consider, to learn prudence and wisdom” (Pss. 14:2; 32:8; 36:3; 41:1; 64:9; 94:8; 101:2; 106:7; 119:99).

41 Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 63n44.

42 Although BDB suggests that the meaning of רָגַז here is “to tremble,” the verb clearly means “to rejoice” elsewhere in the Psalms (Pss. 16:9; 32:11; 45:15; 65:12; 96:11; 97:8). See Ross, *Psalms*, 1:369n14.

43 In Ps. 48:6 this noun, רָגַז, is associated with a woman in labor; in Ps. 55:5 the cognate noun (רָגַז) connotes anguish, terrors, and horror; in Ex. 15:15 it describes the dismayed response of God's enemies when they see the redemption of his people. We find a similar tension in Pss. 95:1–2, 6; 97:1, 4; 100:1–2. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:102.

by awed reverence is not true worship, while trembling unmixed with joy is the mark of one under conviction of sin who has not yet taken refuge in the Messiah. Deep joy that the covenant Lord rules by his Messiah will be shot through with trembling before the power declared in Psalm 2:9 (cf. 1 Cor. 2:3; Eph. 6:5; Phil. 2:12).<sup>44</sup> Augustine comments:

Most appropriately is “rejoice” added, in case the exhortation, *serve the Lord in reverence* might induce gloom; but then, to ensure that such an invitation does not itself lead the hearers into rashness, the psalm adds, *with awe* to urge caution and the careful preservation of holiness.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

**Kiss** here must mean “give homage” (CSB: “pay homage to,” rather like our custom of kissing the ring of a monarch).<sup>46</sup> **The Son** uses the Aramaic word for “son” (ܒܪ, *bar*) rather than the usual Hebrew (בן, *ben*) used in Psalm 2:7. Although this is unusual and has occasioned much debate, it seems to be correct.<sup>47</sup>

Persistent refusal to give homage will make the Son rightly **angry**, for his wonderful patience has a limit. When judgment comes, **you** in your rebellious way, like the wicked in their way (1:6), will **perish**.<sup>48</sup> That **his wrath** (cf. 2:5) is **quickly kindled** (a fire blazing fiercely) does not contradict the repeated truth that the Lord is “slow to anger” (Ex. 34:6). God is very patient (2 Pet. 3:9), but when judgment does come, it will come so quickly, there will be no escape. The chaff (Ps. 1:4) he will burn with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Andrew A. Bonar (1810–1892), *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms* (London: J. Nisbet, 1859), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:74.

<sup>46</sup> This is an unusual meaning of the verb but is found also in 1 Sam. 10:1; 1 Kings 19:18; Hos. 13:2. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 68; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 97.

<sup>47</sup> See the concise and balanced discussion in Ross, *Psalms*, 1:198n6. See also Charles Augustus Briggs (1841–1913) and Emilie Grace Briggs (1867–1944), *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906), 1:17; Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:124; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 64; Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:12; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> Note the play on words: either you serve (עבד, 12:11) or you perish (אבד, 12:12). Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:103.

<sup>49</sup> Bonar, *Psalms*, 8.

## 2:12d A Blessing and a Place of Safety

Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Psalm 1 began and Psalm 2 ends with **blessed** (אַשְׁרֵי, *ashre*). The warnings are severe, but the last word is given to the offer of blessing. Not only is the godly King blessed, he has around him a great congregation of the righteous (1:5–6) **who take refuge in him**. Refuge will be a leading image to describe faith, especially in books 1 and 2 of the Psalms.<sup>50</sup> None can find refuge from him; it may only be found in him. In some ways the psalm answers the question “Is there any safe place in a dangerous world?” There is—but only one.

### REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. In Psalm 2:1–3 we feel the overwhelming power of wickedness—similar to what we see in 1:1 but here in the call for so-called freedom. This is shouted to us by a culture that is tumultuous, many-sided, and insistent. “Believe in yourself,” “Make your own decisions,” “Find yourself”—but do so by not being constrained by God’s Christ. It reaches its climax in the crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah and overflows in the persecution of his church (Acts 4:25–26).

2. Psalm 2 is not a claim to religious tyranny, for the King here crowned must be the godly man of Psalm 1. The Father is “well pleased” (Matt. 3:17) in this Son. His rule—and his alone—will give to humanity flawless leadership.

3. We may summarize our main responses with the call to *be sure, be warned, be cheered*.

- a. Be sure that God the Father will do what he has promised. He will most certainly bring about the worldwide dominion of his Christ in the new creation.
- b. Be warned. We must heed the warning of Psalm 2:10–12. Every power of body, mind, and heart is to submit daily to Jesus Christ. Anything else is folly.

<sup>50</sup> The verb אָסַף occurs thirty-five times in the Psalms, twenty-five of these in books 1 and 2.

c. Be cheered. Psalm 2 gives assurance to believers under pressure. It shapes the prayers of persecuted Christians (Acts 4:25–26), who meditate on “Why . . . in vain?” (Ps. 2:1) and the incontrovertible declarations of 2:4–9. For centuries it would have felt absurd for Old Testament believers to go on singing this psalm—and yet they did. Maybe some of the first disciples even sang it between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, for it is the expression of faith and the source of comfort. We may sing it when we feel “buried by the multitude and magnitude of the world’s majesties” and may even join in God’s laughter, for our powerful detractors are trying to knock down a strong tower with a twig!<sup>51</sup> Our confidence lies not in a powerful worldwide church but in this sure psalm of prophecy.

4. Revelation 2:26 (echoing Ps. 2:8–9) promises us that we will share with our Messiah in his worldwide rule. Today the future greatness entrusted to the humblest child of God is hidden under a veil of weakness; one day that veil will be removed, and the universe will marvel at the authority given to each man and woman in Christ.

5. We pray for Jesus to return. He is the “male child . . . who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” and who has been “caught up to God and to his throne” (Rev. 12:5). All authority has been given to him (Matt. 28:18). One day “he will rule them with a rod of iron” and “tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (Rev. 19:15), but that day has not yet come. And so we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20). Then we will join the chorus, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

<sup>51</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 12:22–25.

*When someone sings the 3rd Psalm, recognizing his own afflictions he will treat the words of the Psalm as his own as well. . . . If you are suffering persecution from your own people, and you have many assembled against you, recite the 3rd Psalm.*

ATHANASIUS  
*Letter to Marcellinus*

*When waves of sorrow and calamity are dashing over the ship of the Church, it may borrow from this Psalm [a] ground of hope. . . . Every member of Christ may use it; and we can easily see how the Head himself could adopt it as his own. . . . Now every believer can say, "My Head once used this Psalm; and while I use its strains, his human heart will recall the day of his humiliation, when himself was comforted thereby." A believer can take up every clause, and sing it all in sympathy with his Head; hated by the same world that hated him; loved and kept by the same Father that lifted up his head; heard and answered and sustained as he was, and entering [in] with him final victory in the latter day.*

ANDREW BONAR  
*Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms*

# PSALM 3

## ORIENTATION

Few things militate against peaceful sleep more than overwhelming pressure that invades our days and haunts our dreams. David's faith under pressure foreshadows the trust of Jesus and overflows to us in Christ.

Psalm 3 plunges us into the world of the Messiah, surrounded by the wicked of Psalm 1 and threatened by the rebels of Psalm 2. It moves us from the objective declarations of Psalms 1 and 2 into the subjective world of prayer and praise, which characterizes so many of the subsequent psalms.

There are significant links between Psalms 3 and 4. I discuss these in the *orientation* section of Psalm 4.

Two themes or repetitions in Psalm 3 are to be noted:

1. The repeated "many" of 3:1–2 reappears in 3:6.
2. "Salvation" (3:2, 7, 8) is arguably the dominant theological theme.

Psalm 3 is prompted by Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 15–18). Many of David's troubles came on him as a punishment for his sin (2 Sam. 11; see the judgment of 2 Sam. 12:10–12). And yet by now he is (it would seem) a forgiven man and still the anointed king (in contrast with what happened to Saul). While there are no clear New Testament echoes, the study of New Testament patterns encourages us to see in David's psalm the foreshadowing of the prayer and testimony of Jesus, who bore our sins. It may even be true that "there is here, and in very many other Psalms, far more of David's Lord than of David himself."<sup>1</sup>

The psalm foreshadows the prayer life of Jesus. This is a good time to ask what it could mean for the incarnate and eternal Son of God to pray.

<sup>1</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.1:23.

What might “O LORD” mean on the lips of Jesus? For Jesus it must mean “Father,” for it was to the Father he consistently prayed. David prayed to God his Father (Ps. 2:8), who is Father of Israel (e.g., Ex. 4:23) and Father to the king as the covenant head of Israel. There is mystery here, for “the LORD” is the one God we know to be the triune God. And yet there is—and has always been—a “shape” to prayer. Prayer has always been by the ministry of God the Holy Spirit, who causes true prayer to rise in the hearts of believers, and prayer has always and only ever been possible through the atoning death of God the Son (whether anticipated under the old covenant or seen clearly under the new). In the prayer of Jesus the Son to God the Father are somehow carried all the prayers of believers throughout history.

Psalms 3:8 is the key to seeing how the salvation of the King (the theme of 3:1–7) overflows in the blessing of his people.<sup>2</sup> In his greatest contribution to understanding the Psalms, Augustine suggests that we attend here not simply to Christ our head but to “the whole Christ,” both head and members (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:15–16).<sup>3</sup> What is true of Jesus overflows into the pressures, the promises, the peace, and the salvation of his church. For “Christ is the Head of all saints,” and therefore the words of the Psalms extend to “the saints by way of participation.”<sup>4</sup> “In every affliction as believers,” we too may pray this psalm.<sup>5</sup>

## THE TEXT

### Structure

Three couplets (Ps. 3:1–2, 3–4, 5–6) are followed by a concluding prayer (3:7) and the overflow of the King’s salvation to his people (3:8).

### Superscription

<sup>s</sup> A Psalm<sup>6</sup> of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This is rightly noted by Robertson, *Flow of the Psalms*, 64 (cf. Pss. 20:5; 25:20, 22).

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:84–85.

<sup>4</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:52.

<sup>5</sup> Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:46.

<sup>6</sup> The word “Psalm” implies that this was arranged for music. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:131.

<sup>7</sup> The other historical superscriptions are for Pss. 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142. In Hebrew the superscription is verse 1; subsequent verse numbers are increased by one.

This is the first of thirteen psalms of David with a historical context, here when he fled from Absalom his son (2 Sam. 15:14–17). As David flees from a pretender, he foreshadows the final King under pressure from those who hate to be ruled by him (cf. Herod in Matt. 2:1–18). This psalm—as so many—gives us a window into the subjective experience of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

### 3:1–2 We Must Expect the King’s Pressures in Christ

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, how many are my foes!  
Many are rising against me;

David’s first word is a cry to the covenant LORD (cf. 3:3, 7, 8). He experiences a crescendo of pressure, with a threefold **many**.<sup>9</sup>

His **foes** (those who pressure him) **are** (or “have become”) **many**. The picture is frightening but static. They are simply there. This is not the last time a lonely king will be surrounded and squeezed by foes. Hezekiah knew this (2 Kings 18–19), and supremely, Jesus did as well (e.g., Luke 11:53–54). His church in every age feels the loneliness of having the world on every side. Here is Psalm 2:1–3 lived out in the history of God’s King and his people.

**Many are rising**, no longer static but active in revolt. This was what happened to David in Absalom’s rebellion.<sup>10</sup> Jesus felt the rising pressure of hostility from early in his three years of earthly ministry (e.g., Mark 3:6), growing until almost all were against him (cf. Acts 4:27). Time and again, his persecuted church experiences the overflow of this uprising.

<sup>2</sup> many are saying of my soul,  
“There is no salvation for him in God.” *Selah*

The climax is what they **are saying**. The words of (or perhaps “to”) **my soul** (נַפְשִׁי, *nepesh*) probably mean more than just “of me” and suggest that these words penetrate to the core of his being.<sup>11</sup> Their words strike at

<sup>8</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 54; Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:143; Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:146. Jesus also crossed the brook Kidron to ascend the Mount of Olives (2 Sam. 15:23, 30), as early Christian interpreters noted.

<sup>9</sup> The first is a verb; the second and third are adjectives.

<sup>10</sup> The same verb “rise up” is used in 2 Sam. 18:31–32.

<sup>11</sup> For the meaning of נַפְשִׁי, see Ross, *Psalms*, 1:345–46n18.

the roots of hope: “**There is no salvation for him in God.**” In contrast to distress (a cramped narrowness), **salvation** may derive from the idea of a free spaciousness. “God will not set him free,” they say. They taunted Jesus like this (Matt. 27:43) and sought to sow a seed of doubt in his trusting soul.<sup>12</sup>

This taunt is more deadly to David than arrows, more painful to Jesus than the nails, more grievous to his followers than martyrdom. The church of Christ ought to expect this unrelenting pressure from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Whether we live in a land dominated by another religion or in a secular culture, those around us do not believe that the God and Father of Jesus will help us. Children growing up in Christian homes soon learn this from the skepticism of those in their schools or neighborhoods. But is this taunt true?

### Note on *Selah*

The word *Selah* appears here for the first of seventy-one times in thirty-nine psalms (also in Hab. 3:3, 9, 13). We do not know what it means.<sup>13</sup> Most likely it indicates (musically, semantically, or both) a pause, perhaps a pause for reflection.<sup>14</sup> Even if it doesn’t, Luther’s suggestion that we take it as a prompt to meditate cannot do any harm.

### 3:3–4 We Can Claim the King’s Promises in Christ

<sup>3</sup> But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,  
my glory, and the lifter of my head.

**But you, O LORD** is emphatic: the King does not answer his foes; he prays. The covenant Lord is to the King

1. **A shield.** Although this is usually a round shield to protect the upper body,<sup>15</sup> the phrase **about me** suggests that this shield shuts

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:77; Bonar, *Psalms*, 10–11; Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:139; Waltke and Houston, *Worship*, 200.

<sup>13</sup> See the discussions in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (hereafter cited as ACCS), ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998–2010), 7:20; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 76–77; Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:27–29; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:599; Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:47; Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:44; Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:46–47.

<sup>14</sup> The LXX διάπαλαμα (and Vg. *semper*) may support this understanding.

<sup>15</sup> ἰσθμῶς. This becomes a frequent image in the Psalms (cf. Gen. 15:1). See Anderson, *Psalms*, 1:72.

the King into a place of safety. Jesus trusted that his Father would be a shield about him. Even when he drank to the dregs the cup of God's wrath, he did not drink it because his enemies forced him to; he drank it because his Father gave it to him and he consented to drink it (John 18:11).

2. **My glory.** The glorious Lord gives to his King by covenant a unique honor as Son of God.<sup>16</sup> He gave this glory supremely to Jesus Christ; his glory was veiled as he was dishonored, abused, and vilified. But now he is glorified and given the name that is above every name. In Christ his people are being transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18), and the whole creation waits on tiptoe for the sons of God to be revealed (Rom. 8:18–21). The unimpressive people of Jesus will one day have a visible glory that outshines the sun.
3. **The lifter of my head.** God will restore his kingly dignity.<sup>17</sup> More even than defeated David (cf. 2 Sam. 15:30), Jesus bowed his head in sadness and apparent defeat. And yet he knew that one day the Father would raise his head in victory. His victory is ours by faith, for we too will share in his government of the new creation (cf. Rev. 2:26, alluding to Ps. 2).

4 I cried aloud to the LORD,  
and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*

The King knows that he can pray and that God will answer (Ps. 2:8). This was the privilege of David in foreshadowing, of Jesus in fullness. **I cried aloud** conveys fervency.<sup>18</sup> The verb may be translated as a past tense (ESV) or a present tense (CSB, NIV, NRSV); both are true. And the Lord always answers **from his holy hill** (the place of the messianic covenant, 2:6; cf. 20:2).

What the covenant Lord was to David in shadow, he was in substance to Jesus Christ. Jesus could claim all that these verses express, confident that, as the covenant Son, his Father would answer (cf. John 11:42). His people now are shielded in Christ, are given a glorious dignity in Christ, and are

<sup>16</sup> The same sense of כבוד meaning “dignity” is found in Job 19:9; 29:20. In the Psalms (e.g., 4:2; 16:9; 21:5; 62:7) this is always with reference to the Davidic king.

<sup>17</sup> The idiom “to raise the head” indicates here the certainty of victory (e.g., Ps. 83:2).

<sup>18</sup> Lit., “My voice to the LORD I cried.”

able to anticipate the final lifting of our heads in victory in Christ. We too cry aloud in the name of Jesus; we too may be confident that God hears.<sup>19</sup>

Again, *Selah* prompts us to pause.

### 3:5–6 We Can Enjoy the King’s Rest in Christ

<sup>5</sup> I lay down and slept;  
I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.

Just as **you, O LORD** was emphatic in 3:3, so **I** is emphatic here; the focus changes from objective promises to subjective peace. **I lay down and slept; I woke again . . . sustained** may be translated by past tenses (so ESV: “This is what *happened* in this crisis”) or present tenses (so CSB, NIV, NRSV: “This is what *habitually* happens in every crisis”).<sup>20</sup> Both are true. The verb **sustained** (upheld) speaks of “unceasing, ever-active care.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>6</sup> I will not be afraid of many thousands of people  
who have set themselves against me all around.

Nothing has changed; the **many thousands**<sup>22</sup> . . . **have set themselves** (as in battle array)<sup>23</sup> **all around** him (intensifying the threat with encirclement—there is no way out).<sup>24</sup> And yet everything has changed. All around him is danger, and yet all around him is his Father’s shield. And so he sleeps, unafraid.

19 The believer “should take heed that his prayer go up to God through Christ” and should observe “how it is answered . . . also through Christ, represented by the ark in the tabernacle, pitched on the holy hill of Zion.” David Dickson (1583–1663), *A Commentary on the Psalms* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 1:12.

20 For the complex discussion of the translation of verbal forms in Hebrew poetry and in these verses in particular, see Elizabeth Robar, *The Verb and the Paragraph in Biblical Hebrew: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach*, SSSL 78 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 109–10, 141–46; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 104; Waltke and Houston, *Worship*, 192n41. These uncertainties mean that Ps. 3 cannot be confidently identified as either a morning or an evening psalm; see, e.g., Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:15; Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:51; Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:54.

21 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:15. Cf. Pss. 37:17, 24; 51:12; 119:116.

22 “Many thousands” is מַרְבֵּבוֹת from the noun רֶבֶבָה, “multitude, myriad, ten thousand” (BDB), intensifying the threefold “many” of 3:1–2.

23 The verb שָׁי is used in Isa. 22:7 in this sense of “battle array.” Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 1:25.

24 Cf. Ps. 27:3.

Consider Jesus, who slept night after night when his life was in danger and in a boat when all the forces of hell sought to destroy him (Mark 4:38). Morning by morning he awoke. For he trusted his Father's covenant love.

There are many reasons why sleep may be disturbed. Jesus spent whole nights in prayer (Luke 6:12). The apostle Paul knew what it was to have sleepless nights (2 Cor. 6:5). And yet, in the midst of pressures, there are times when we too enjoy surprising sleep given us in Christ.

But there is a meaning deeper yet. Falling asleep was a common way of describing death (e.g., 1 Kings 11:43). Although the Hebrew verb translated **woke again** in Psalm 3:5 usually just refers to waking from sleep, it is used in Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2 to mean bodily resurrection.<sup>25</sup> Jesus spoke like this (Mark 5:39; John 11:11–14), and the New Testament writers follow his lead (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:13; cf. Acts 7:60).<sup>26</sup> From the very earliest Christian days, Psalm 3:5 has been understood to find a greater fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah and the future resurrection of his people.<sup>27</sup> Jesus our King gave himself up to the final sleep of death for his people and woke again in bodily resurrection.<sup>28</sup> His people likewise may lie down and sleep even the sleep of death confident that each will wake on resurrection morning. Many a Christian gravestone says of a deceased believer, “Fell asleep in Jesus.” This is both beautiful and true.

### 3:7 We May Rejoice in the King's Rescue and Anticipate That Same Rescue in Christ

7 Arise, O LORD!  
 Save me, O my God!  
 For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
 you break the teeth of the wicked.

In two crisp prayers, the King cries, **Arise, O LORD!** and **Save me, O my God!** He claims the covenant with the cry associated with the ark in Numbers

<sup>25</sup> This is probably also the meaning in Ps. 17:15. Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 1:27.

<sup>26</sup> Our word “cemetery” derives from the Greek verb for sleeping.

<sup>27</sup> The earliest is probably 1 Clement 26.2. Among others, see also Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165), *First Apology*, 38.5; *Dialogue with Trypho*, 97.1, trans. Thomas B. Falls, rev. Thomas P. Halton, ed. Michael Slusser, FC 6 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2003); Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:78–79.

<sup>28</sup> Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:46.



**Salvation belongs to the LORD**, but at no point does it belong to us. In election, predestination, effective calling, justification, regeneration, sanctification, and perseverance, the author is God, and the glory goes to God.<sup>32</sup>

A final *Selah* invites us to reflect on the whole psalm.

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. When we reach Psalm 3:8, our first response is amazed gratitude at all that our Savior endured for us (3:1–2), at the certainty of the Father’s covenant promises given to his Messiah (3:3–4), at the steady faith of our Master in his trials (3:5–6), and at God’s magnificent answer to his urgent cry (3:7). All the blessings we enjoy are ours in Christ and in Christ alone (Eph. 1:3). As Philip Eveson notes, “Blessing comes to God’s people through the curse that the Anointed one endured (Galatians 3:13–14).”<sup>33</sup>

2. We feel the pain of the taunt of Psalm 3:2, which comes to us also with terrible force: Is there—is there really—salvation in God for such as *you*, a man or woman in Christ? That question continues to afflict his people, for whom it is a question not of imputed sin (our sin reckoned to Jesus) but rather of our own actual sin. Every memory of sin, each twinge of conscience, the voice of Satan our accuser—all conspire to make me doubt that God will rescue *me*. These voices “have an ally in every crevice of doubt, anxiety, and guilt in the heart. No reasoning or counsel . . . is a sure defense against it. One can either believe it or believe in God.”<sup>34</sup> The only sure defense is the gospel of which this psalm assures us.

3. In Christ we appropriate the King’s promises (3:3–4). God is a shield around us (cf. Rom. 8:35–39) as he was around Jesus. We are given dignity (e.g., the dignity of the sons of God revealed, Rom. 8:19) and are being transformed “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). In Christ we will know our heads lifted high in victory (cf. “the one who conquers” in Revelation, e.g., Rev. 2:26). As we cry aloud in urgent prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, we too may be assured that God will answer us (Ps. 3:4).

<sup>32</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.1:24.

<sup>33</sup> Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:46.

<sup>34</sup> Mays, *Psalms*, 52–53. Cf. Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:46.

4. We too may learn the King's trust (3:5–6). George Horne states,

Behold the Son of David composing himself to his rest upon the cross, that bed of sorrows; and commending his spirit into the Father's hands, in full confidence of a joyful resurrection, according to the promise, at the time appointed. Behold this, O Christian, and let faith teach thee how to sleep, and how to die; while it assures thee, that as sleep is a short death, so death is only a longer sleep; and that the same God watches over thee, in thy bed, and in thy grave.<sup>35</sup>

5. The cry "Arise, O LORD" (3:7) becomes for the Christian the prayer "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).

<sup>35</sup> George Horne, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (London: Longman, Brown, 1843), 9.



*To be free from all fear, and from the torment and vexation of care, is a blessing to be desired above all other things.*

JOHN CALVIN  
*Commentary on the Psalms*

*This is a Psalm with which the righteous may make their dwellings resound. . . . They may sing it too, in the happy confidence of faith and hope, when the evening of this world's day is coming, and may then fall asleep in the certainty of what shall greet their eyes on the Resurrection morning.*

ANDREW BONAR  
*Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms*

*They slumber sweetly whom faith rocks to sleep. No pillow so soft as a promise; no coverlet so warm as an assured interest in Christ.*

CHARLES H. SPURGEON  
*The Treasury of David*

# PSALM 4

## ORIENTATION

We all want to lie down and sleep in peace knowing we dwell in safety (Ps. 4:8). Psalm 4 shows us how David found that peace, how Jesus enjoyed that peace, and how we may discover it. It does so in the context of anger (4:4), which militates against peace.

There are some striking verbal links between Psalm 3 and Psalm 4:

1. “Foes” (רָצָה, *tsaray*, 3:1) is related to “distress” (רָצָה, *tsar*, 4:1).
2. “Many are saying” (3:2) is repeated verbatim in 4:6 (“many who say”).<sup>1</sup>
3. “Glory” (3:3) and “honor” (4:2) are the same Hebrew word.
4. “I lay down and slept” (3:5) and “I will lie down and sleep” (4:8) use the same Hebrew verbs. The noun “beds” in 4:4 also comes from the root for “lie down.”

Connecting words are often used to tie psalms together,<sup>2</sup> so this does not necessarily mean that Psalm 4 comes from the same time as Psalm 3 (Absalom’s rebellion). But it probably means the Spirit-led editors intend us to have Psalm 3 in mind as we read Psalm 4. These psalms speak into similar trials of God’s anointed King and people.

Psalm 4 also contains echoes of the blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33: “offer right sacrifices” (Ps. 4:5) from Deuteronomy 33:19; “grain and wine” (Ps. 4:7) and “dwell in safety” (4:8) from Deuteronomy 33:28.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is “an expression peculiar to these two Psalms.” Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:13.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 1:231n11.

<sup>3</sup> Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 1:29–30.

It is not easy to grasp the coherence of the psalm. How does what David says to God (Ps. 4:1 and then 4:7–8) relate to the rebuke and exhortation he gives to “men” (4:2–5)? The emotional axis from trouble to peace may be the key. Both for David and for the “men,” there are movements from trouble, distress, and anger to trust, joy, and peace. The path David has traveled he exhorts us to walk. If this insight is correct, it opens the way to hearing Jesus sing this psalm. In it he tells us how he found peace in distress, and when he addresses the “men,” we hear his voice rebuking us and exhorting us to walk in his footsteps.

We hear here “the words of [Christ] after the resurrection, or those of any member of the Church who believes and hopes in him,” writes Augustine.<sup>4</sup> “This whole psalm can be understood as if spoken in the person of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

The words “Be angry and do not sin” (Eph. 4:26) are taken verbatim from the Septuagint of Psalm 4:4. We hear here the apostle of Christ speaking to us the words we may hear also as Christ’s in the psalm.

## THE TEXT

### Structure

Psalm 4:1, 7, and 8 are addressed to the Lord. Psalm 4:2–5 is addressed, first as rebuke (4:2–3) and then as instruction (4:4–5), to some “men.” Psalm 4:6 is a statement that links most naturally to the prayer of 4:7. Although *Selah* falls between 4:2 and 3 and again between 4:4 and 5, it seems to signal a pause for thought rather than a section marker.

### Superscription

<sup>s</sup> To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of David.<sup>6</sup>

**To the choirmaster** may signal one of the earlier collections from which the final Psalter was compiled.<sup>7</sup> The word **choirmaster** means an overseer or

4 Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:85. See also this psalm’s influence on him in Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.8–9—mentioned by Waltke and Houston, *Worship*, 213.

5 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:54.

6 In Hebrew the superscription is verse 1; subsequent verse numbers are increased by one.

7 There are fifty-five such psalms (also Hab. 3:9).

leader and hence—in a musical context—the director of a choir. Andrew Bonar suggests that this chief musician was used by God “to represent to Israel Him who is to lead the praise of the great congregation,” that is, Jesus.<sup>8</sup> This may be a little fanciful, but it is an attractive and theologically suggestive fancy. The **stringed instruments** accompanying the psalm appear in seven psalms (Pss. 4; 6; 54; 55; 61; 67; 76; cf. Hab. 3:19). As with almost all of book 1, it is **of David**.

#### 4:1 The King’s Urgent Prayer: Take Your Distress to God First

<sup>1</sup> Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!  
 You have given me relief when I was in distress.  
 Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!

David anticipates Jesus by taking his distress to the Father God, as should we. Psalm 4 begins with two urgent lines bracketing one reassuring line. The King brings his whole person before the Lord.<sup>9</sup> Psalm 4:1 begins (**Answer me when I call**, lit., “In my cry answer me”) and ends (**Hear my prayer**) with petition. Nothing matters more to him than that God hears his prayers; this is his covenantal privilege and his only hope (4:3; cf. 2:8). The phrase **God of my righteousness** suggests that vindication is what the King most needs and that only God can give this to him.<sup>10</sup> Righteousness/vindication is given to the King by covenant and, in him, to his people (cf. 1:5, “the righteous”). In the third line he cries for undeserved favor,<sup>11</sup> which is intimately linked to the gift of righteousness.<sup>12</sup>

The second line is like a parenthesis, in which the King testifies that the Lord to whom he prays is the one who has given, and characteristically gives, **relief when he is in distress** (the word linked to the “foes” of 3:1). If **distress** speaks of pressure (being hemmed in, enemies closing in), **relief** means coming out into open space<sup>13</sup> (as the drama of 1 Sam.

<sup>8</sup> Bonar, *Psalms*, 13. Spurgeon comments that “in all the holy songs of his saints [Jesus] is the chief musician.” Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1:2:57.

<sup>9</sup> The first-person words “me . . . I . . . my . . . me . . . I . . . me . . . my” in Ps. 4:1 make this clear.

<sup>10</sup> “The righteousness, that [David] has, he has in Him, and the righteousness, that he looks for, he looks for from Him.” Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:146.

<sup>11</sup> Not “mercy” (NIV).

<sup>12</sup> For the meaning of the  $\eta\eta$  word family, see Ross, *Psalms*, 1:234n15.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Pss. 18:19; 31:8 (“a broad place”); 66:12 (“a place of abundance”); 118:5 (“set me free”).

23:26 illustrates).<sup>14</sup> The King prays to the God whose ways he knows and trusts. Jesus prayed from this same living experience of deliverance, and so may we in him.

#### 4:2–3 The King’s Stinging Rebuke: We Must Listen to What Our King Says to Angry People

<sup>2</sup> O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?  
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies? *Selah*

**O men** indicates highborn people.<sup>15</sup> The King turns to speak to the powerful men who are causing his distress, whether or not they are listening (cf. Ps. 6:8). Just as powerful people distressed David (led first by Saul, later by Absalom), so most of the powerful people of Jesus’s day distressed him. To this day the world, the flesh, and the devil distress Christ’s people.

By their hostility they are turning his **honor** (kingly dignity, the “glory” of 3:3) **into shame**.<sup>16</sup> They did this in Absalom’s rebellion; they always do (cf. the scoffers of 1:1 and the rebellious nations of 2:1–3). The cry **How long?** is infused with the faith that knows this cannot go on forever.<sup>17</sup> If the first line focuses on what they are doing to the King (whom they are *against*), the second shines the spotlight onto the **love** of their hearts, what they **seek** (what they are *for*); this rebuke reaches to the core of their affections, wherein lie **vain words** (the same word as “in vain” in 2:1) and **lies**. Most likely this speaks both of their methods (which are deceitful; cf. 2 Sam. 15:1–6) and the emptiness of their goal (which will disappoint).<sup>18</sup>

14 The NIV (“give me relief”) suggests that the verb in the second line is a “precativ perfect,” indicating another imperative. This is possible but far from certain. Ross comments that while “there is some evidence [for this category], sure cases are rare. . . . An imperative might make the verse harmonious, but it is not necessary.” Ross, *Psalms*, 1:233n14. Ross is supported by Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:145; Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 1:32–33; Gerald H. Wilson (1945–2005), *Psalms*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 1:151 (against Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:118–19); VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 109.

15 Lit., “sons of a man,” בני אדם (cf. Pss. 49:2; 62:9). Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:148; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 109; Ross, *Psalms*, 1:230; Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:59.

16 לְקַלְלוֹ means “insult, reproach, ignominy” (BDB). It appears often in the Prophets and in Pss. 35:26; 44:15; 69:7, 19; 71:13; 109:29.

17 Later this will be used by Israel in the context of exile (Pss. 74:9; 79:5; 89:46).

18 The NIV’s “seek false gods” is less likely. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 110.

All who oppose Christ—and whose hostility to Christ is shown in enmity to his people—seek to dishonor him and use deceitful means but reach an empty end.

Although the *Selah* stands in the middle of this strophe, it is an appropriate place to pause, between the rebuke and the exhortation.

The King now teaches such people something they need to know (Ps. 4:3) and what they need to do (4:4–5).

<sup>3</sup> But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself;  
the LORD hears when I call to him.

**But know** (an abrupt plural imperative—here is what we all need to know!) **that the LORD has set apart<sup>19</sup> the godly** (the  $\text{קִדְּוֶה}$ , *khasid*, singular) **for himself**. This means one who receives God’s covenant love ( $\text{חֶסֶד}$ , *khesed*) and therefore, as evidence that he has truly received it, shows it to others.<sup>20</sup> This one may be generic (anyone), but as in Psalm 1, it finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the one who receives the Father’s fullness of love and makes the Father known. This man—the Righteous One of Psalm 1, the covenant King of Psalm 2—is set apart in love to belong to God.<sup>21</sup> Therefore **the LORD hears when I call to him** (4:1; cf. 2:8; 3:4). Those who oppose him oppose God. Christ is this **godly** one by nature; David was this **godly** one by grace, as is each of Christ’s people today, **set apart** for devotion to God and for the privilege of heard prayer. To know this will disarm my anger.

#### 4:4–5 The King’s Urgent Appeal: We Can Overcome Anger by Following Our King

After one imperative in Psalm 4:3 (**know**), we hear six in 4:4–5 (**Be angry . . . do not sin . . . ponder . . . be silent. . . offer . . . put your trust in . . .**).

<sup>19</sup> For reasons to reject the rendering “Yahweh has made wonderful his love to me,” see Ross, *Psalms*, 1:230n5.

<sup>20</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:221–22.

<sup>21</sup> This ancient view is represented by the twelfth-century minister Gerhoh von Reichersberg (ca. 1093–1169): “*The man that is godly*: even that Man Who did no sin, neither was guilt found in His mouth. And it is because He is *chosen* to be our Intercessor, that, therefore, when we call upon the Lord, He will hear us.” In J. M. Neale (1818–1866) and R. F. Littledale (1833–1890), *A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Medieval Writers and from the Various Office-Books and Hymns of the Roman, Mozarabic, Ambrosian, Gallican, Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and Syriac Rites*, 2nd ed., 4 vols. (London: Joseph Masters, 1869–1874), 1:79, 112.

- 4 Be angry, and do not sin;  
ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. *Selah*

**Be angry** means to tremble or to be agitated, excited, or disturbed;<sup>22</sup> we might say “to be heated up.” The Septuagint (quoted in Eph. 4:26) translates the Hebrew with a clear anger verb.<sup>23</sup> This lies within the semantic range of the Hebrew verb; although it is unusual, it suits the context, for their restlessness is an angry rebellion (cf. the “fury” of Ps. 7:6). Although the verb is in an imperatival form, it seems to mean “When you get agitated, here is what to do.” They are not to **sin**, which is where their excitement will tend to lead them, as they seek to dishonor God’s King (like the riotous rebellion of 2:1–3). Instead, they are to **ponder** (lit., “say”) on their **beds**, where they can work on their **hearts**, and this in silence.<sup>24</sup> In Psalm 3 and later in this psalm, the King speaks of lying down (the verb is cognate with **beds** here) and sleeping, but for these angry men there is heart work to be done before they sleep (cf. Eph. 4:26). Rather as a parent says to an angry child, “Go and lie down quietly for a while, to calm down and think it over (and don’t take your phone with you),” so our King counsels us. We need to do this in our own hearts, on our own, undistracted by the voices of peer pressure, the cries of the (sometimes digital) crowds, the pressures of those around us. We need to settle the restless anger that rages against God’s Messiah. *Selah* prompts a timely pause.

- 5 Offer right sacrifices,  
and put your trust in the LORD.

They (and we) need to learn the **trust** in the covenant Lord that will lead to **right sacrifices**, finding peace in the death of a substitute, those offered to the true God (rather than false gods or idols) and in the right way (from a pure heart), to the “God of my *righteousness*” (Ps. 4:1). Our King does this—hence the **safety** he knows in 4:8. He instructs us to do the same.

David had to learn to heed the counsel he gives here. Even the sinless Lord Jesus, when the temptations came to an ungodly anger, followed the

22 וָזָז, qal, זָז, “be agitated, quiver, quake, be excited, perturbed” (BDB).

23 ὀργίζομαι.

24 “Be silent” is used (in a different verbal form) in Ps. 131:2 of the quieted soul (שָׁמַד, from the verb שָׁמַד).

counsel he now gives to us his people. Many times he took himself apart to ponder, to pray, to entrust himself afresh to his Father.

#### 4:6–7 The King’s Confident Joy: We May Learn the Joy of Our King

That Psalm 4:6 is to be taken with 4:7 is suggested by the expansion of **good** (4:6) into **grain and wine** (4:7).

6 There are many who say, “Who will show us some good?  
Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!”

**There are many who say**, just as many spoke in Psalm 3:2; perhaps they are the same people—certainly, they belong to the same spiritual family.<sup>25</sup> “**Who will show us some good?**” The word **good** in this context embraces all the blessings of the covenant, things like fruitful work, happy marriage, children, safety, prosperity. These people want the blessings without submitting to the Messiah. We want “so much in and of this world as will give rest and satisfaction unto our minds.”<sup>26</sup>

Either the second line continues what they say (ESV speech marks), or it expresses the King’s prayer (CSB, NIV). The words adapt the priestly blessing (Num. 6:24–26) into a prayer. If the **many** say it, they do not think that true blessing is to be found through loyalty to God’s King. Here is what Augustine calls “the chatter, the daily questioning of all foolish and unjust people [who] crave peace and tranquillity in this earthly life, yet do not find it.”<sup>27</sup> If the King says it, he prays it for his people truly.

7 You have put more joy in my heart  
than they have when their grain and wine abound.

As he reflects on what they are saying, the King turns his face back to the Lord. He is surrounded by people whose highest joy is **when . . . grain and wine abound** (another shorthand for all the blessings of the covenant),

<sup>25</sup> The echo is verbatim. These may be David’s enemies or his disillusioned friends threatening to desert him (cf. John 6:60–71).

<sup>26</sup> John Owen (1616–1683), *The Glory of Christ*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 1:312.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 1:89.

when this world gives them all they desire; here they hope to find joy, and in some measure, no doubt, they do. This is what their advertisers proclaim and their celebrities pretend.

But the King, distressed, constrained, and opposed, yet feels **more joy** in his **heart** than they can ever know. This is what trust in the covenant Lord does for the King—and will do for his people, then as now.<sup>28</sup> This is the joy of unbreakable covenant sonship (Ps. 2; cf. 63:3). Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit at a time of great pressure and discouragement (Luke 10:21). For us this greater good is none other than “the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> Jesus promises such joy to his people today (John 16:24).

When learning to pray Psalm 4, we must not jump straight to 4:7. The journey through the prayer of 4:1 and the rebuke and instruction of 4:2–5 shape our hearts to enjoy the conclusion.

#### 4:8 The King’s Peaceful Sleep: We Learn to Enjoy the King’s Peace

<sup>8</sup> In peace I will both lie down and sleep;  
for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.

In this “exquisite expression of absolute confidence, the rhythm of which in the original is as reposeful as the thought,”<sup>30</sup> the King closes with **peace** (another echo of the priestly blessing). The words **in peace** front the verse emphatically (in Hebrew as in English). **I will lie down and sleep** is also emphatic.<sup>31</sup> Psalm 4:8 is taken by many as an indication that this psalm is to be used in the evening.<sup>32</sup>

His confidence is not wishful thinking, **for** (here is the reason) **you** (emphatic) **alone** (emphatic), **O LORD** (the covenant Lord), **make me dwell in safety**. Since the Lord is for him (cf. Rom. 8:31), **safety** is sure.<sup>33</sup> As in

28 As with Ps. 4:1, the NIV translates “You have put” as a precative perfect, “Fill.” But in view of 4:8, it makes more sense to stay with the more usual meaning for the perfect form.

29 Owen, *Glory of Christ*, 1:312.

30 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:20.

31 The verbs have cohortative force.

32 Briggs and Briggs, *Psalms*, 1:29; Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 79. For background on the use of the psalm for evening worship, see Waltke and Houston, *Worship*, 215–16.

33  $\text{הַיָּשׁוּב}$  from the verb  $\text{שׁוּב}$  (to trust), used in Ps. 4:5. The phrase “dwell in safety” echoes Deut. 33:28.

Psalm 3, sleep becomes in the rest of Scripture a picture of the death of the believer, just as the King slept in the tomb and then awoke. Those asleep in Jesus do indeed rest in peace. Franz Delitzsch says that the final notes of the psalm “are like the last notes of a cradle-song, which die away softly and as if falling into slumber themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. We meditate on the peaceful trust of Jesus our King (Ps. 4:1, 7–8). Before taking this psalm on our own lips, we ponder what it meant on the lips of Jesus, in urgent prayer (4:1) and quiet trust (4:7–8), even as his honor is turned into shame at the cross by the lies of false witnesses and the hatred of angry men. We watch our Lord lie down and sleep, night after night, knowing that in the Father’s arms he finds safety. We watch him sleep the sleep of death, knowing even then that he can continue to entrust himself to the one who judges justly.

2. We are warned and reassured in godly living in Christ (4:2–3). We need to hear our King’s rebuke (4:4–5) when we dishonor Jesus, use deceitful words, or seek empty goals. We need to rest afresh in the set-apart safety of Christ our godly one and to make our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10).

3. We heed the warning not to sin in our anger but to trust in God (Ps. 4:4–5). We heed our King, speaking through his apostle (Eph. 4:25–26), exhorting us not to let the sun go down on our anger but to replace selfish anger with quiet trust.<sup>35</sup>

4. There is more joy in God through Jesus than anything this age can offer (Ps. 4:6–7). The joy of Jesus (Luke 10:21) is promised to us in him (e.g., John 15:11; Rom. 5:1–2; 14:17; 1 Pet. 1:6–8).<sup>36</sup>

5. In Christ we learn to lie down and sleep in peace and safety (Ps. 4:8). Jesus has given us a peace that the world cannot give (John 14:27; 16:33; cf. Phil. 4:4–7, which is almost a commentary on this psalm). This peace can take us even to the sleep of death. As Charles Spurgeon comments, “He that hath the wings of God above him needs no other curtain.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 1:154.

<sup>35</sup> For a full study of the Bible’s teaching about anger, see Christopher Ash and Steve Midgley, *The Heart of Anger: How the Bible Transforms Anger in Our Understanding and Experience* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:50.

<sup>37</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.1:37.

*The kingdom that I seek  
Is thine; so let the way  
That leads to it be thine,  
Else I must surely stray.*

HORATIUS BONAR  
“Thy Way, Not Mine, O Lord”

*David sings at the beginning that the Church  
wins the inheritance at the end.*

JEROME  
“Homily on Psalm 5”

# PSALM 5

## ORIENTATION

We hear the urgent quietness of morning prayer in Psalm 5. The anointed King prays, anticipating the intense calm of the dawn devotions of Jesus. Joining with Jesus, we learn to pray with the same trusting zeal.

There is an oscillation of focus between those who are good (5:1–3, 7–8, 11–12) and those who are bad (5:4–6, 9–10). We want to be identified with those who are good and to sit in comfortable (pharisaical) condemnation of those who are bad. But Paul quotes verbatim the Septuagint of 5:9 in Romans 3:13 and applies it to all human beings by nature, and as Romans 2:1 teaches, our condemnation of others has a boomerang quality—it returns to condemn us.

So how can David, and how can we, identify with the comforting parts of the psalm when the New Testament says we sit with the wicked? That question, as so often in the Psalms, means the psalm ultimately only makes sense in the light of Jesus Christ, who alone can pray it with a righteousness that is his by nature. Only he could pray Psalm 5 with simple trust that it precisely expresses who he is. The argument of Romans 3 needs to be borne in mind throughout; only when clothed in the righteousness of Christ, only when indwelt by the Holy Spirit of Christ working in us a righteousness of life, can we appropriate the blessings of this psalm.

The voice of prayer, the desire for God to hear, the presence of the deceitful and wicked enemies, the reference to “morning,” God’s steadfast love, the holy temple on the holy hill, the “way” of God—all these are among the many connections with Psalms 1–4. Perhaps this was David’s morning prayer following on from Psalm 4 and still at the time

of Absalom's rebellion. But whether or not there is a shared historical context, we are in the same spiritual world as Psalms 1–4. The righteous King is at prayer.

We read this psalm, then, much as we read Psalms 3 and 4, watching David foreshadow the prayers of Jesus Christ and joining in those prayers as those who are made righteous through faith in Christ.

## THE TEXT

### Structure

The body of the psalm is dominated by an alternation between a focus on the King (Ps. 5:1–3, 7–8) with his people (5:11–12) and a spotlight on the wicked (5:4–6, 9–10). I therefore divide the psalm as follows:<sup>1</sup> The covenant King prays (5:1–3) because he knows that God hates evildoers (5:4–6) and because he is the recipient of God's steadfast love (described in 5:7, prayed for in 5:8). The covenant King therefore prays for the banishment of the wicked (described in 5:9, prayed against in 5:10) and for the joyful safety of his righteous people (5:11–12). Because he is the recipient of God's covenant love, he prays for himself; because of God's care for the righteous and the threat of the wicked, he prays for the banishment of evildoers.

### Superscription

<sup>s</sup> To the choirmaster:<sup>2</sup> for the flutes. A Psalm of David.<sup>3</sup>

Only Psalm 5 has **flutes**, probably some kind of wind instrument accompaniment.

### 5:1–3 Prepare Your Prayers, as Your King Did before You

Psalm 5:1–3 focuses on the fact and character of, rather than the reasons for, the King's prayer.

1 There is no general agreement about the structure of the psalm. There seem to be as many structures as commentators.

2 See on Ps. 4.

3 In Hebrew the superscription is verse 1; subsequent verse numbers are increased by one.

- 1 Give ear to my words, O LORD;  
consider my groaning.
- 2 Give attention to the sound of my cry,  
my King and my God,  
for to you do I pray.

The King's words are intensified as **groaning**, a word that is related to the murmuring of Psalm 1:2 but with a troubled feeling (cf. Rom. 8:26–27).<sup>4</sup> The word **cry** conveys urgency. The anointed human King calls God **my King** (cf. Ps. 145:1), for the kingship of God (celebrated often in the Psalms, e.g., Pss. 93; 96; 97; 99) and the rule of his Messiah are inseparable (cf. 2:2).

- 3 O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;  
in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.

The repeated **in the morning** (cf. 88:13) is an appropriate sequel to 4:8 and speaks of priority and urgency (the first thing he does) and perhaps of fresh hope (cf. Lam. 3:22–23).<sup>5</sup> Morning by morning David prays; morning by morning Jesus prays, alone with the Father. The verbs **you hear** and **I prepare** suggest a habit.<sup>6</sup> **I prepare** has no direct object in the Hebrew (lit., “I prepare for you”). In this context the meaning of the verb<sup>7</sup> might be carefully to set in order a sacrifice (e.g., Gen. 22:9) or to prepare words (e.g., Job 32:14). Whether or not David was in a position to prepare a sacrifice, the emphasis is on setting his heart in order to speak the words of prayer that would accompany a sacrifice, were he to offer one. David, and later Jesus, morning by morning, took trouble over his prayers. And having prayed, the King keeps **watch**, with eager expectation and patient hope (cf. Mic. 7:7), like a watchman on the walls of a besieged city, craning his neck for the distant dust of rescue on the

4 Wilson, *Psalms*, 1:164; Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:75. The same word עָנָה occurs in Ps. 39:3 (“as I mused”), also in the context of distress. Dickson comments, “In time of trouble, the heart hath more to say to God, than words can utter; and what a man cannot express, the Lord will take knowledge of it, no less than of his words.” Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:19.

5 “While the dew is on the grass, let grace drop upon the soul” Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.1:46.

6 The imperfect form suggests this; e.g., Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:128.

7 עָנָה.

way (cf. Rom. 8:23, also in context of groaning). Hope elevates his heart to be a watchtower.<sup>8</sup>

#### 5:4–6 Be Sure That God Hates Evildoers, as Jesus Our King Was Sure

- <sup>4</sup> For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;  
evil may not dwell with you.  
<sup>5</sup> The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;  
you hate all evildoers.

**For** introduces the first ground of the King’s prayers, the holiness of his God (cf. Ps. 101). What he now says, he speaks, not because God doesn’t know but because David consciously and deeply acknowledges these truths.

The righteous King “delights” (1:2) in the God who **delights not in wickedness**. The words **with you** are fronted for emphasis; to **dwell** speaks of even the most fleeting visit.<sup>9</sup> **The boastful** uses a word from which we probably<sup>10</sup> get our word *hallelujah*, except that for them it is self-praise. To **stand before the eyes of God** means to be an accepted covenant servant (cf. 101:7).

- <sup>6</sup> You destroy those who speak lies;  
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.

The intensification grows: no **delight** (5:4a), no **dwelling** (5:4b), no **standing** (5:5a), God **hates** (5:5b). And now, the attitude of God issues in the actions of God: **You destroy** (cognate with “perish,” 1:6; 2:12) and **The LORD abhors** (from which we get “abomination,” reminding us of the terrifying language of holy war). The focus is on the **lies** of these people (cf. 4:2) and

8 Calvin, *Psalms*, 1:55. “Do we not miss very much of the sweetness and efficacy of prayer by a want of careful meditation before it, and of hopeful expectation after it?” Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.1:46.

9 גַּר. “The psalmist’s point is that God is so incompatible with evil that even the most temporary coexistence is utterly impossible.” Wilson, *Psalms*, 1:166.

10 הוֹדִיָּים, from the root הָלַל, used of wicked boastfulness in Pss. 10:3; 49:6; 52:1; 73:3; 75:4; 97:7; 102:8 (derision). Alternatively, it may be connected with wildness or madness; see Ross, *Psalms*, 1:242n3.

their **bloodthirsty and deceitful** character. These were “the Shimeis and Doegs and Ahithophels and Joabs of David’s time”;<sup>11</sup> we see them again as the false and murderous haters of Jesus and now of his church, for they take their character from their spiritual father the devil (cf. John 8:44).<sup>12</sup> Sadly, David himself sometimes did all this (e.g., 2 Sam. 11); only in Christ can he, or we, pray like this.

### 5:7–8 Trust in God’s Steadfast Love, and Pray to Walk in Righteousness, as Jesus Did

7 But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love,  
will enter your house.  
I will bow down toward your holy temple  
in the fear of you.

**But I** signals an emphatic contrast. The difference between the wicked and the righteous is that the righteous hate sin—in themselves as in others—and long to be free of it. God’s King speaks of his privilege, his access, and his heart. His privilege is the Lord’s **steadfast love** (תִּשְׁבַּח, *khesed*); the King is “the godly one” (תִּשְׁבַּח, *khasid*, Ps. 4:3) and receives this in **abundance**, a glorious overflow to set against the many foes (3:1–2; cf. 2:1–3) with their abundant earthly prosperity (4:7) and their abundant transgressions (5:10), for this is the only **abundance** that will count in eternity. It is the property of David in anticipation, of Jesus for all eternity, and of us in Christ. The access—in sharp contrast with the evildoers—is to God’s **house**—indeed, his **holy temple**—where only those set apart for himself (4:3) can dwell. The words **will enter** and **will bow down** express an emphatic decision.<sup>13</sup> Jesus our King dwells there by right of flawless holiness; we enter there only in him, in whom we have access to the Father by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18). His heart is full of **the fear of you**, that godly piety shown some of the time by David, in unbroken fullness by Jesus, and by us in him by his Spirit.

<sup>11</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:22.

<sup>12</sup> Jerome (ca. 347–ca. 420)—with other church fathers—applies this to heretics who “speak Christ and hide the anti-Christ.” Quoted in Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 22.

<sup>13</sup> The ESV reflects a cohortative, a glad determination.

- <sup>8</sup> Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness  
because of my enemies;  
make your way straight before me.

The prayer of Psalm 5:8 is the outflow of the heart of 5:7. The godly King prays, **O LORD** (the emphatic first word in Hebrew), **lead me** (as a shepherd; cf. 23:3; 27:11) **in your righteousness** (cf. 4:1). The God who is righteous will do the righteous thing, keeping his covenant promises to his King, by leading his King in ways of righteousness. The King prays this urgently **because of his enemies** (those who watch with hostile intent; cf. 27:11; 54:5; 56:2; 59:10; 92:11). He longs to walk in a way that is **straight**, that is, moral and upright (cf. the two ways of 1:1, 6; 2:12). The greatest danger is not that the enemies will make the King suffer but that they will cause him to sin. The only safe way is the holy way. Those who receive the abundance of God's steadfast love today in Christ our King will pray this with no less urgency. As David Dickson observes, "The deceitfulness of sin, the ignorance of what is expedient and lawful in a particular case, the mist of private affections, and the example of ill counsel of the world, are ready to make a man mistake the right way, except the Lord make clear what is his duty."<sup>14</sup>

#### 5:9–10 Be Horrified at Deathly Evil, and Turn from It, as Jesus Did

As the King spoke about himself (Ps. 5:7) before praying for himself (5:8), so he speaks about the wicked (5:9) before praying about them (5:10).

- <sup>9</sup> For there is no truth in their mouth;  
their inmost self is destruction;  
their throat is an open grave;  
they flatter with their tongue.

**For:** as in 5:7, he gives a reason for the prayer that follows. The theme of lies (5:6) expands into a terrifying portrait of all-consuming deceit, for here are the children of "the serpent in Eden."<sup>15</sup> The **mouth**, the **inmost**

<sup>14</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:22.

<sup>15</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:60.

**self**, the **throat**,<sup>16</sup> and the **tongue** speak of the whole person as revealed in one's words (cf. Luke 6:45). **Truth** means something secure or reliable.<sup>17</sup> Lies move us from solid existence toward vaporous unbeing: truth is solid; lies are empty. In the core of the being of the wicked, there is only **destruction**, a deep emptiness.<sup>18</sup> An **open grave** is a stench of putrefying flesh.<sup>19</sup> It threatens our health to be near it. The church fathers spoke of the dangers of heresy, which draw us in: "The mouths of heretics are forever gaping. . . . They mean one thing in their heart; they promise another with their lips. . . . They speak Christ and hide the Antichrist, for they know that they will never succeed with their seduction if they disclose the Antichrist."<sup>20</sup> Not all smell this odor of death, for **they flatter**, they speak smooth words (cf. Prov. 2:16; 28:23; Rom. 16:18). Sometimes they come as wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15).

And yet Romans 3:13 makes it clear that this is a portrait of "the whole human family by nature,"<sup>21</sup> every man, woman, and child—by nature a walking corpse (Eph. 2:1). After commenting on how these deceitful voices are "the world we know," C. S. Lewis comments that some of those voices are familiar: "One of them may be too familiar for recognition."<sup>22</sup> Indeed so.

This picture is so disgusting that the King rightly prays that such people be banished from the world (or perhaps the promised land, in the original Old Testament context). This is the first of many prayers in the Psalms that God will judge the wicked. It is important to feel the horror of Psalm 5:9 as we listen to the King's prayer in 5:10.

10     Make them bear their guilt, O God;  
           let them fall by their own counsels;  
        because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out,  
           for they have rebelled against you.

16 While this may suggest the danger that they will swallow up the righteous, more probably here it is the throat as the organ of speech (cf. Pss. 115:7; 149:6). Allan Harman, *Psalms*, 2 vols., MC (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2011), 1:119.

17 נִבְּיָהּ, niph'al participle from נָבָא (be established). Cf. Ross, *Psalms*, 1:252.

18 הָרָה.

19 "When graves are filled in they keep the stench within, but when opened they release the awful smell." Theodoret of Cyrus (393–ca. 466), *Commentary on the Psalms*, 5.7, in ACCS 7:44.

20 Jerome, *Homilies on the Psalms*, on Ps. 5, in ACCS 7:43.

21 Calvin, *Psalms*, 1:461.

22 C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Fount, 1977), 65.

The King pleads that these (who are finally impenitent) will rightly **bear their guilt**. Their **transgressions**<sup>23</sup> are not the occasional lapses of essentially righteous people; rather, their **abundance** exposes their transgressions as character markers of the soul. The root of their evil words and deeds is that **they have rebelled against you**. This is the most terrible fact of all; as rebels against God's King, they set themselves against God himself (cf. 2:1–3). They will **fall by their own counsels** (anticipating 7:14–16), for they will reap what they have sown (Gal. 6:7). They must necessarily be **cast . . . out**—out of the land in the Old Testament, out of the church today, out of the new creation at the end (Rev. 21:8), for otherwise, the righteous cannot be saved, and the new heavens and new earth can never be free from sin and death.<sup>24</sup> Here is no spirit of vengefulness but rather a godly yearning for the glory of the holy God in a cleansed earth. The King who finally prays this does so knowing that he will bear the guilt of all who will come to him for refuge.

#### 5:11–12 Take Refuge in God and Rejoice, as Jesus Did

- <sup>11</sup> But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;  
 let them ever sing for joy,  
 and spread your protection over them,  
 that those who love your name may exult in you.

The scope of the King's prayer now broadens to the people for whom he cares and whom he leads, **all** of them. They are described as those **who take refuge** in God (cf. Pss. 2:12; 7:1; 11:1; and often in the Psalms). To be righteous is not to be self-righteous but to be one who has fled for refuge to God in Christ. The King prays for us to **rejoice** and **sing for joy** because of what the King has prayed for himself and for his people. We will sing **forever** because of what our King has won for us and prayed for us. The King who can enter the presence of the Father (5:7) does so for his people. When his people avail themselves of the access he wins for them, they find that God has **spread his protection over them**. They are known

<sup>23</sup> The word for "transgressions" comes from the root נִשְׁבָּ (to rebel). It is a strong and terrible word. Kraus, *Psalms*, 1:157.

<sup>24</sup> When David is expelled from Jerusalem in Absalom's revolt, this prayer has a special poignancy.

because they **love his name**, the revelation of his nature, his covenant, his promises, his purposes. And so they **exult** in him. In this **all**, we find “a plurality concealed in unity,”<sup>25</sup> or—as Augustine would say—the body of which Christ is the head.

<sup>12</sup> For you bless the righteous, O LORD;  
you cover him with favor as with a shield.

**For you** (emphatic) **bless the righteous** (singular), **O LORD**. In the light of biblical theology, this is Jesus Christ, the covenant head of his people (Gal. 3:16). Each man, woman, or child who is righteous by faith is in Christ, the Righteous One, and blessed in him (Gal. 3:26–29). God will **cover** each one; the only other time the word is used is of Saul’s men “closing in” on David (1 Sam. 23:26); here it has the opposite sense, a closing in of safety, **as with a shield** (a large shield that covers the whole body).

And so this psalm—like Psalm 4—closes on a note of joyful confidence.

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. We reflect on our own ugly hearts. Before rejoicing, we do well to reflect (from Rom. 3:13) that the wickedness here portrayed describes the inward being and the mouth of each of us by nature. For we are boastful (Ps. 5:5), directing toward ourselves the “hallels” (praises) belonging to God in that terrible exchange of glory described in Romans 1:22–23. We too speak lies and harbor malice. In the absence of grace, there is in our inmost being a gaping chasm of death (Eph. 2:1).

2. We ponder the perfection of the morning prayer of Jesus. Philip Eveson observes,

David’s praying is not only an example to the Christian but also prefigures his greater son, Jesus the Messiah, who often withdrew alone to pray early in the morning and sometimes spent whole nights in prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 6:12).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 1:87.

<sup>26</sup> Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:53.

Surrounded by murderous lies, he groans as he carefully prepares his prayers, morning by morning. Watched by hostile eyes (e.g., Mark 3:2), he prays to walk in ways of righteousness and does so without spot or blemish.

Knowing that this world can never be healed until impenitent evil is banished, he must pray for the casting out of evil (Ps. 5:9–10), even as he prepares to be cast into outer darkness himself on behalf of many sinners. And finally (5:11–12), he expresses to the Father a deep desire that all who take refuge by faith in God will be filled with joy and covered with protecting favor like a crown and a shield. For we are on his heart in each long-distant morning as he prays.<sup>27</sup>

3. We too prepare our prayers morning by morning. This psalm “is an encouragement to us to be more orderly in our praying, especially in public.”<sup>28</sup> The King’s thoughtful preparation (5:3) is to be imitated by his prayerful people. In our prayers we will prepare with attentiveness, thinking about how the character of God, the state of the world, and the prayers of Jesus will shape our prayers.

Following in the footsteps of our Master, we will pray Psalm 5:8 day by day, longing not to live a life without difficulties but to walk in a morally straight and righteous path: “Lead us not into temptation.”<sup>29</sup> And having prayed, we will then “watch” with eager anticipation, fully expecting that God will act in answer to our cries.

4. With fear and trembling, we pray for the final banishment of evil from the world. As we pray, “Your kingdom come,” we join our King in praying Psalm 5:10. We are praying for what God has promised (e.g., Matt. 7:23; 25:41; echoed in Ps. 6:8). We do not know who will by then be plucked as brands from the burning, but we rejoice that there will be no evil in the new creation (cf. Rev. 19:1–5).

5. We rejoice at all the blessings that are ours in Christ. The quotation from this psalm in Romans 3 reminds us that the gospel expounded in Romans is the key to a proper appropriation of the blessings of this psalm. Only when the righteousness of Jesus our King is imputed to us by grace and appropriated by us through faith may we pray this psalm with Jesus;

27 VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 113. “David . . . pictures Christ and his concern for all whom the Father had given him (John 17).” Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:53.

28 Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:53–54.

29 Psalm 5:8 is “the main object and central thought of the psalm.” Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 1:23.

only then can it become to us a source of comfort.<sup>30</sup> Without the atoning death of Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26), this psalm seals our condemnation; with that death, it speaks hope to our hearts.

Further, we rejoice that the Spirit who breathed through Jesus of Nazareth as he prayed dwells in our hearts by faith. And so we may pray this psalm confidently from our hearts with Jesus.

Finally, with Psalm 5:11–12, we take refuge in God our Father with Jesus our King. For this is what faith is, a running for safety in a world filled with seductive flattery and yet ugly evil. As we run into the arms of our Father, we find Jesus there and rejoice that he has prayed these verses for us. Whatever troubles may afflict us in this age, the protection of our holy Father is spread over us in Christ, and he covers us with his favor as with full body armor, so that not a hair on our heads will perish. The shield protects us in this life and crowns us in the next. Our joy will be everlasting, secure, and complete.

<sup>30</sup> “The one who calls on the Lord must have true righteousness. Since Christ is righteous, the just person, the partaker of righteousness, must be a partaker of Christ.” Origen, *Selections from the Psalms*, 4.1, in *ACCS* 7:27.

*It is possible, that a true believer, who had been oftentimes refreshed with the sense of God's favour, may, by some sad exercise have his conscience so wakened to the sense of sin, as he can feel nothing but wrath, and fear of cutting off.*

DAVID DICKSON  
*A Commentary on the Psalms*

*David may have been led . . . to write [this psalm] when in anguish of soul, as well as suffering of body. . . . But surely he meant to tell of the One greater than David,—“the Man of sorrows.” Perhaps David had some seasons of anguish in his wanderings in the wilderness of Judah that furnished a shadow of the grief of Him who was to come, “bearing our griefs and carrying our sorrows.” Awakened souls experience horror of soul and alarming apprehensions of divine indignation, such as this Psalm expresses. . . . Still, it is chiefly of the true David that this is written. We may suppose every word used by Him in some of those nights which He passed in desert places, or in the garden of Gethsemane.*

ANDREW BONAR  
*Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms*