

CHRISTOPHER ASH

*The*  
**PSALMS**

*A Christ-Centered  
Commentary*



VOLUME 3  
Psalms 51–100

“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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**Joel R. Beeke**, Chancellor and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Modern readers often gravitate toward the Psalms because in them they see a mirror for themselves and their own emotions. This is not wrong, but as Christopher Ash reminds us, it is insufficient. The writers of the New Testament and many throughout church history read the Psalms because in them they found Christ. Ash provides a comprehensive help to the church to read the Psalms afresh from that Christ-centered perspective, in a way that not only exercises our minds but feeds our souls.”

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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 3  
PSALMS 51–100

Christopher Ash

 **CROSSWAY®**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS



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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 *yiqtol*. 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.

### Psalms 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
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
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983.
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”
FC	Fathers of the Church
HALOT	<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.
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , “that is”
JBL	<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
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
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
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SSBT	Short Studies in Biblical Theology
SSL	Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics
s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> , “under the word”
THOTC	Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
trans.	translator, translated by
Vg.	Vulgate (Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Welwyn Commentary Series

*Commentary on*  
PSALMS 51–100



## BOOK 2 (CONTINUED)

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BOOK 2 OF THE PSALTER runs from Psalm 42 to Psalm 72. Unlike almost all of book 1, Psalms 42–50 do not have David’s name in the superscription. Psalms 42–49 are “of the sons of Korah” (except Ps. 43; see vol. 2), and Psalm 50 is “of Asaph.” From Psalm 51 onward, “of David” is usually present again. At the end of the book, we read, “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended” (Ps. 72:20), signaling (it is usually thought) the end of the earliest “David collection.” This may mean that Psalms 42–49 were also composed by David and performed by the sons of Korah and by Asaph; this was the most common view among the ancient writers but is less popular today.

Book 2 also begins a group of psalms (Pss. 42–83) with a marked preference for the general word “God” (אֱל, *El*, or אֱלֹהִים, *Elohim*) rather than “the LORD.”<sup>1</sup> The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the virtual repetition of Psalm 14 in Psalm 53 but with the change of divine name. We do not know the reason for the preference for “God” in these psalms.<sup>2</sup>

1 Pss. 42–83 are sometimes referred to as the so-called Elohistic Psalter. The difference in divine names is quite striking. In these psalms, יהוה appears 45 times and the general terms 210 times. In the rest of the Psalter, יהוה appears 584 times and the general terms only 94 times. Mitchell Dahood (1922–1982), *Psalms*, 3 vols., AB (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 1:256.

2 For further discussion, see Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 185n62.



*Listen to [David] crying out, and cry with him; listen to him groaning, and groan too; listen to him weeping, and add your tears to his; listen to him corrected, and share his joy. . . . The prophet Nathan was sent to that man; and notice how humble the king was. He did not brush his mentor's words aside, nor did he demand, "How dare you speak to me like this? I am the king!" King in his majesty though he was, he listened to the prophet; now let Christ's lowly people listen to Christ.*

AUGUSTINE  
*Expositions of the Psalms*

*This is the most deeply affecting of all the Psalms,  
and I am sure the one most applicable to me.*

THOMAS CHALMERS  
In Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*

*Each solitary sin, the more it is perceived in its fundamental character, and, as it were, microscopically discerned, all the more does it appear as a manifold and entangled skein of sins, and stands forth in a still more intimate and terrible relation, as of cause and effect, to the whole corrupt and degenerated condition of which the sinner finds himself.*

FRANZ DELITZSCH  
*Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*

# PSALM 51

## ORIENTATION

Jesus teaches that we ought to confess our sins in the manner of Psalm 51. When the prodigal son addresses his father with the words, “Father, I have sinned against heaven. . . . I am no longer worthy” (Luke 15:21), he follows the pattern of the psalm: he acknowledges his guilt fully, he confesses his sin clearly, he is forgiven and cleansed completely, and the story ends with a meal that restores to him the joy of his salvation.<sup>1</sup> When the tax collector beats his breast and says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13), his prayer is “in effect the opening words of Psalm 51.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is the glorious solution to the desperate predicament of this psalm. He is the sacrifice whose propitiation makes forgiveness assured for each believer who prays these words. Paul quotes Psalm 51:4b in Romans 3:4. Just as Psalm 51:4b expresses David’s admission that he fully deserves whatever punishment he may receive, so in Romans 3:4 Paul teaches that humankind fully deserves God’s punishment. Only the propitiatory death of Christ, which he goes on to expound (Rom. 3:21–26), can give us hope.

Further, we observe that in its first praying, this is a prayer of the king. The prayer for Zion (the people of God) in Psalm 51:18–19 suggests that this is important.<sup>3</sup> The singer is not any old individual sinner but the king; this is why his restoration is the key to the rebuilding of the walls of

<sup>1</sup> Frank Lothar Hossfeld (1942–2015) and Erich Zenger (1939–2010), *Psalms*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Klaus Baltzer, 3 vols., Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005–2011), 2:24–25.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Mays (1921–2015), *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 199.

<sup>3</sup> This is rightly noted by John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., BCOTWP (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006–2008), 2:125.

Jerusalem, for “the people stood and fell with [the king].”<sup>4</sup> This may point to a connection at a deeper level between David the sinful king and Jesus our sinless King. What if Jesus Christ actually prays Psalm 51?

I have argued that this is the most plausible reading of Psalms 6, 32, and 38, all of them psalms of repentance.<sup>5</sup> But Psalm 51 is a peculiarly intense case, including as it does repentance from original sin (51:5); this leads many to feel that Jesus cannot possibly pray this psalm of repentance, even if he may pray the others.<sup>6</sup> But we need to ponder the very depths of his atoning sacrifice, in which he was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). Every facet and character of our sin (and David’s sin) was taken by Jesus on himself, including original sin (our sin in our sinful origins). All this he made his own for us; had it not been so, his atoning death would have been insufficient for our righteousness. Jesus Christ, who was himself without sin (Heb. 4:15), took on himself even David’s cry “I was brought forth in iniquity.” It may be, therefore, that we should read even Psalm 51 as a prayer of Jesus as he enters into the misery of our sins for us.

Not all will be persuaded that this is so. If we are, it is important to be clear that Jesus does not repent in our place,<sup>7</sup> for we must repent and pray the psalm for ourselves. Nevertheless, in Psalm 51 Jesus demonstrates a horror at sin and a resolute turning from sin that together constitute a perfect repentance. Neither we nor David repents perfectly. The turning of the sinless Jesus from our sin as it envelops him is a most wonderful facet of the active obedience of Jesus Christ in his earthly life. We are saved by his sin-bearing death; we are not saved by his repentance.

4 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), 2:183.

5 In this paragraph and the next I am indebted to Garry Williams and Philip Eveson (through personal correspondence), whose different perspectives have helped me clarify in my mind the theological issues involved here.

6 E.g., Andrew A. Bonar (1810–1892), *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms* (London: J. Nisbet, 1859), 160.

7 It seems that Richard Belcher comes close to saying this when he writes, “Christ vicariously confessed and repented in our behalf” Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Messiah and the Psalms: Preaching Christ from All the Psalms* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006), 87. Ferguson rightly states that “the NT knows no such category as the perfect vicarious repentance of Christ.” Sinclair B. Ferguson, “‘Blessèd Assurance, Jesus Is Mine’? Definite Atonement and the Cure of Souls,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 621.

Nevertheless, he does not simply instruct us to pray Psalm 51; perhaps he leads us in praying it.

Psalm 51 is linked to Psalm 50 by the motif of sacrifice and the question of what sacrifices are acceptable to God (50:9–14; 51:16–19).<sup>8</sup> Psalm 50:23 mentions both sacrifice and the right ordering of one's moral way; both of these lead naturally to Psalm 51.<sup>9</sup> The theme of instruction (51:13–15) links back to Psalm 49.

This is the fourth of the seven traditional penitential psalms.<sup>10</sup> The connection between Psalms 32 and 51 may be that Psalm 51 is David's first (heartfelt) confession and that Psalm 32 later fulfills the pledge of Psalm 51:13 to teach transgressors his ways.

In the Davidic psalms of book 2 (most of those from Pss. 51 to 71), there is perhaps a deliberate and suggestive inclusio. Psalm 51 is David's repentance after going in to Bathsheba. Psalm 72 celebrates the peaceful messianic reign connected to Bathsheba's son Solomon.<sup>11</sup> Here is a cameo of amazing grace.

## THE TEXT

### Structure

Several structures have been suggested, each with some justification.<sup>12</sup> To my mind, the most persuasive may be as follows: Psalm 51:1–9 focuses mainly on prayer for forgiveness (bracketed by “blot out”);<sup>13</sup> 51:10–17 shifts the focus toward prayer for personal renewal (bracketed by a clean heart and right spirit and by a broken spirit and broken and contrite heart),

<sup>8</sup> “It is as though the warning of judgment in Psalm 50 prompts the sincere repentance in Psalm 51. Psalm 50:18 denounced adulterers, and the wider context of Psalm 50 presents the Lord coming in judgment (cf. 50:1–6). The terrible prospect of judgment crushes David's rebellion and puts him on his knees in Psalm 51, crying out for mercy from the one whose righteousness his sin offended.” James M. Hamilton Jr., *Psalms*, 2 vols., EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021), 1:506.

<sup>9</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms: Foundations for Expository Sermons in the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 241.

<sup>10</sup> The traditional penitential psalms are Pss. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

<sup>11</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:18.

<sup>12</sup> See the useful discussions of structure in Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 248–50; Belcher, *Messiah and the Psalms*, 252n62. The many repetitions of words are noted in Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:124.

<sup>13</sup> Goldingay suggests a chiasmic structure within Ps. 51:1–9. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:130–31.

leading naturally in to 51:18–19, which is a prayer for the renewal of the people of God.

Within this structure we may also note that (1) 51:13–15 has a theme of the King speaking to others; (2) 51:16–19 shares a theme of sacrifice; and (3) some of 51:1–9 anticipates renewal (e.g., 51:6, 8), while some of 51:10–17 returns to the motif of forgiveness (esp. 51:14a).

## Superscription

- <sup>s</sup> To the choirmaster.<sup>14</sup> A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.<sup>15</sup>

Although this psalm is suitable “for the loneliness of individual penitence,” the designation **To the choirmaster** suggests that “this matchless Psalm is equally well adapted for the assembly of the poor in spirit.”<sup>16</sup> It is a remarkable testimony to God’s grace in David that he should make his intensely personal repentance so public, for true repentance is a deeply humbling work of grace; it both instructs us and provokes us to a like repentance.<sup>17</sup>

If, as has been suggested, Psalm 51:18–19 refers to the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the exile,<sup>18</sup> then these verses may be a later Spirit-inspired editorial addition. But there is no reason why David himself, as a prophet, should not have prayed them, and it is better to suppose that he did.

The drama **when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba**, is recorded in 2 Samuel 12:1–15. The Hebrew for **went to** and **gone in to** is identical:<sup>19</sup> David went in to Bathsheba (he lay with her), and as a result, the prophet Nathan went in to David (with words of rebuke), the sinful pleasure of the one balanced by the painful mercy of the

<sup>14</sup> See on Ps. 4.

<sup>15</sup> The other historical superscriptions are for Pss. 3, 7, 18, 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142. In Hebrew the superscription is verses 1–2; subsequent verse numbers are increased by two.

<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–1892), *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), 1.2:401.

<sup>17</sup> Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 2:189.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., A. F. Kirkpatrick (1849–1940), *The Book of Psalms: With Introduction and Notes*, 3 vols., CBSC 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), 2:285.

<sup>19</sup> בָּאָה אֵלָיו.

other. There are verbal connections between this incident and the psalm, including the phrase “evil in [God’s] sight” (2 Sam. 12:9; Ps. 51:4) and the language of sin against God (2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 51:4).<sup>20</sup> David’s response to Nathan is remarkable, for “no other king of his time would have felt any compunction for having acted as he did.”<sup>21</sup>

### 51:1–9 Prayer for Forgiveness

- <sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- <sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!

Three words for comprehensive sin and three words for abundant cleansing begin David’s passionate prayer. **Transgression** means active rebellion against God;<sup>22</sup> **iniquity** indicates a twisting, perversion, or depravity from the straight and right way; and **sin** denotes a wandering or missing of the moral mark.<sup>23</sup> Together they speak of sin in all its ugly fullness, for “the pollution of sin goes through the whole powers of the soul and body, . . . through mind, will, affections, senses, bodily and all.”<sup>24</sup> The verbs for cleansing are **blot out** (also Ps. 51:9), the erasure or cancellation of a debt in God’s book (e.g., Isa. 43:25; 44:22; cf. Acts 3:19; Col. 2:14) or the removal of dirt (e.g., from a bowl, 2 Kings 21:13); **wash**, used of the vigorous washing of very dirty clothes (cf. Isa. 1:16; Jer. 2:22; 4:14)<sup>25</sup> and often of ritual

<sup>20</sup> These and others are noted in Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 242.

<sup>21</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.2:401.

<sup>22</sup> Dahood, *Psalms*, 2:2–3. Eveson has “wilful defiance.” Philip Eveson, *Psalms: From Suffering to Glory*, 2 vols., WCS (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2014–2015), 1:324.

<sup>23</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:288; Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols., KEL (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011), 2:187n25. These three nouns appear in Ex. 34:7 in the context of covenant mercy (cf. Ps. 32:1–2).

<sup>24</sup> David Dickson (1583–1663), *A Commentary on the Psalms* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 1:304.

<sup>25</sup> Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890) suggests “deeply ingrained dirt.” F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton, CFTL, 4th ser., vols. 29–31 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), 2:135.

purification (e.g., Ex. 19:10); and **cleans**, also associated with ritual cleansing, particularly of lepers (e.g., Lev. 13:6).<sup>26</sup> A comparably deep cleansing is prophesied in Isaiah 4:4.

In Psalm 51:1b the word translated **mercy** conveys compassion (used of Joseph in Gen. 43:30, fulfilled when Jesus is moved with compassion). There is a play on abundance: **abundant** and **thoroughly** have the same root. We might translate it “According to your abundant kindness . . . wash me abundantly.” The focus is on God (**O God . . . your steadfast love . . . your abundant mercy**) before it is on David and his sin. He begins with God, in the fullness of his covenantal attributes, before speaking of his sin. Martin Luther (1483–1546) vividly contrasts “God in general or absolute terms,” from whom we must flee, with God here “as He is dressed and clothed in His Word and promises, so that from the name ‘God’ we cannot exclude Christ.”<sup>27</sup>

3     For I know my transgressions,  
          and my sin is ever before me.

To **know** here means not simply “to be cognizant of” or even “to acknowledge” but to be deeply aware. There is a connection here with Romans 3, which quotes Psalm 51:4b, for true knowledge begins with “knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20), as this psalm demonstrates.<sup>28</sup> Here is a man who knows in experience “the intolerable burden of the wrath of God,” for he “is oppressed by his conscience and tossed to and fro, not knowing where to turn.”<sup>29</sup> Psalm 32:3–4 is almost a commentary on this verse. The second line intensifies the first with the phrase **before me** (both “in my consciousness” and “opposite me, against me” as my accuser)<sup>30</sup> and the word **ever**, for until he is cleansed, he cannot put these sins behind him.

26 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:288; Ross, *Psalms*, 2:188n26.

27 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 12:312; 14:166.

28 The profound connection between Ps. 51 and Rom. 1:18–3:31 is persuasively argued in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:25; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 46–51.

29 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:310.

30 Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:12. Linking this phrase to Nathan's parable (2 Sam. 12:1–4), Augustine says that the prophet “brought the sin out from behind David's back and held it before

- <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that<sup>31</sup> you may be justified in your words  
and blameless in your judgment.

The emphasis of 51:4a is in the words **you, you only**, and **in your sight**. Far from denying that David has committed an offense against Bathsheba and Uriah, the point is that sin is, in its essence, an offense against God. A classic expression of this is in Leviticus 6:2, in which an offense against a neighbor is described as a “sin” and “a breach of faith against the Lord.” It is this that renders injustice and immorality so serious. Far from minimizing the harm done to others, this confession admits that it matters more than the unbeliever can ever grasp. The phrase **in your sight** presses this home to the conscience, for “where there is grace in the soul it reflects a fearful guilt upon every evil act, when we remember that the God whom we offend was present when the trespass was committed.”<sup>32</sup> There is no light relief from “an accusing conscience and an offended God.”<sup>33</sup>

Paul quotes Psalm 51:4b in Romans 3:4. Psalm 51:4a sets up 51:4b. Precisely because David admits his sin (51:4a), he can go on to place himself in the hands of God, admitting in advance that whatever God chooses to say and do (his **words**, that is, any verdict he passes, his **judgment**) will be right (**justified**).<sup>34</sup> The verb “prevail” in Greek (Rom. 3:4; “be . . . blameless” in Ps. 51:4) translates a Hebrew verb that means “to be clean in a moral sense”<sup>35</sup> and therefore to prevail if tried in court. God is entirely justified when he judges.<sup>36</sup> To admit this, with no claim of extenuating circumstances, is a mark of true

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his eyes.” Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, ed. John E. Rotelle and Boniface Ramsey, 6 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000), 2:415.

<sup>31</sup> Most take ὅπως in the LXX to indicate purpose, although some have argued that it conveys simply consequence. E.g., Ben Witherington III, *Psalms Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 141; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:122.

<sup>32</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.2:403.

<sup>33</sup> John Calvin (1509–1564), *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, in *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 2:285–86.

<sup>34</sup> This is what the penitent thief did (Luke 23:41). Derek Kidner (1913–2008), *Psalms*, 2 vols., TOTC (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 1:190.

<sup>35</sup> See BDB, s.v. זכה; HALOT, s.v. זכה.

<sup>36</sup> For a persuasive discussion of this quotation and its use in Romans, see the clear arguments of Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 147–52.



repentance. As Luther puts it, “Judgment of self is in substance justification of God; . . . justification of self is in substance judgment of God.”<sup>37</sup>

5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.<sup>38</sup>

**Behold** emphasizes what follows. David speaks of his birth<sup>39</sup> and then, pressing back to the roots of his existence, of his conception.<sup>40</sup> The parallelism makes clear that his sinfulness is not related to a supposed sinfulness in his parents’ act of conception<sup>41</sup> since it is he who is a sinner (51:5a). Rather, he says that even in his earliest moments of existence he is shaped by **iniquity** and **sin**. Taken alongside Romans 5:12, this verse presents to us the doctrine of original sin, or sin in our human origins.<sup>42</sup> David

wraps up all of human nature in one bundle and says, “I was conceived in sin.” . . . I am a sinner, not because I have committed adultery, nor because I have had Uriah murdered. But I have committed adultery and murder because I was born, indeed conceived and formed in the womb, as a sinner.<sup>43</sup>

David “is not saying he is a sinner because he sinned; rather, he is saying he sinned because he is a sinner.”<sup>44</sup> As Derek Kidner notes, “This crime, David now sees, was no freak event: it was in character; an extreme expression of the warped creature he had always been, and of the faulty stock he sprang from.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:238.

<sup>38</sup> Witherington suggests that the abuse directed at the man born blind in John 9:34 may echo this verse. Witherington, *Psalms Old and New*, 139. If so, the particular application to one man misses the point that it applies to all people.

<sup>39</sup> The verb “brought forth,” from the root “to twist, writhe,” speaks vividly of the labor of childbirth.

<sup>40</sup> For a similar reference to these two roots of human existence, see Job 3:3.

<sup>41</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus (393–ca. 466) robustly says that some have “stupidly maintained” this idea. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Psalms*, trans. Robert C. Hill, 2 vols., FC 101–102 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 1:297.

<sup>42</sup> See Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:290–91.

<sup>43</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 12:347–48.

<sup>44</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 2:190.

<sup>45</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:190.

There is also a corporate sense in which this is true of the people of God, for right back at Mount Sinai, in the episode of the golden calf, their sinfulness was apparent (cf. the similar theme in Ezek. 16; 20; 23). But the fundamental meaning of the confession is individual. Each man and woman inherits the sin of Adam; Israel's corporate sinfulness is the expression of this universal human sinfulness.

6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

**Behold** (emphatic) builds on the “behold” in the previous verse: if a person is deeply sinful, then God must work deeply in the heart to do his work of grace. In the midst of a passionate prayer for forgiveness, this verse anticipates the renewal that dominates from Psalm 51:10 onward. Although there are uncertainties in the words translated **inward being**<sup>46</sup> and **secret heart**,<sup>47</sup> together they clearly indicate the depths of human personhood, the roots of our desires, affections, imaginations, and decisions. There is a movement from God's **delight** (which is the counterpoint to God's righteous anger) to God's gracious action (**You teach me**); **truth** (perfect sincerity, utter purity, and genuineness) is parallel to **wisdom**, of which the fear of the Lord is the root.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

To **purge** means to purify from uncleanness.<sup>48</sup> **Hyssop**, a plant that can grow out of a wall (1 Kings 4:33), was used for ritual sprinkling, with the blood of the Passover lamb (Ex. 12:22) and with the blood of a sacrificed bird in the ceremony for the cleansing of a leper (Lev. 14:4–6). It was also used with water for ceremonial cleansing after contact with death

46 The only other use is in Job 38:36. Gerald H. Wilson (1945–2005), *Psalms*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 1:778n15. Probably this indicates “the human internal organs (kidneys, entrails), which were regarded as the seat of feelings and decisions (‘conscience’).” Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:13.

47 BDB: “the closed (chamber of the breast)”; s.v. סֵתֶר. Wilson argues that the “secret heart” suggests a willful hiding of parts of our lives from God. Wilson, *Psalms*, 1:778–79.

48 “Unsin me.” Dahood, *Psalms*, 2:5. The root is שָׁחַ.

(Num. 19:16–19). The dominant use is with sacrificial blood. David “appeals to God Himself to perform the office of the priest and cleanse him from his defilement”<sup>49</sup>—finally by the blood of Christ (Heb. 9:25–28). Indeed, writes John Calvin, “It is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit to sprinkle our consciences inwardly with the blood of Christ, and, by removing the sense of guilt, to secure our access into the presence of God.”<sup>50</sup> Only when God himself washes us with the blood of Christ will we **be whiter than snow** (cf. Isa. 1:18) and walk before God with white garments to symbolize cleansed hearts (e.g., Rev. 3:4–5; 4:4). Considering what this meant for David and old covenant believers, Luther writes that David “asks to be sprinkled with the Word of faith in the coming Christ, who will sprinkle His church with His blood”; what matters is that “you believe in the validity of no satisfaction, no work, no Law, no righteousness in the sight of God except this single sprinkling.”<sup>51</sup>

8     Let me hear joy and gladness;  
       let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

The outcast returns to **hear** audible songs of **joy and gladness** (cf. in the sanctuary, Ps. 42:4), for there is joy in heaven (Luke 15:7, 10, 23–25) and joy in the heart of God (Zeph. 3:17) over every sinner who repents. He himself shares this joy as the **bones that you have broken** (lit., “crushed”; cf. the dry bones of Ezek. 37:1–14) in righteous judgment **rejoice**. Writing from his own vivid experience, Luther says,

In spite of all efforts and good works the timid, frightened, and terrified conscience remains until Thou sprinklest and washest me with grace and thus createst in me a good conscience, so that I hear that mysterious prompting, “Your sins are forgiven” (Matt. 9:2). No one notices, sees, or understands this except him who hears it. It can be heard, and the hearing produces a calm and joyful conscience, and confidence in God.<sup>52</sup>

49 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:291.

50 Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:295.

51 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:363–64.

52 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 14:170.

- <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

Usually the hiding of God's face is a sign of his displeasure (e.g., Ps. 44:24). But when our sins are uncovered in his sight (90:8; cf. 32:1), nothing matters more than that they be hidden from him. Linking this perceptively with 51:3, Augustine says, "Switch your sin to a position before your face, if you want God to turn his face away from it."<sup>53</sup> Either I see and confess my sin so that God will not look on it, or I cover up my sin and it is ever before God's holy face in anger. The verb **blot out** ties this verse to 51:1, perhaps bookending 51:1–9.

### 51:10–17 Prayer for Renewal

The emphasis now begins to shift from the removal of sins to the renewal of the sinner. Luther suggests that the next section "seems to me to pertain to the gifts of the Spirit that follow the forgiveness of sins."<sup>54</sup>

- <sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.

A **clean heart** (in which God delights, Ps. 51:6) can happen only by a work of God that is deeper than the furthest depths of sin. The verb **create** (בָּרָא, *bara*) always has God as its subject and indicates "bringing into being what did not exist before,"<sup>55</sup> for "nothing less than a miracle could effect his reformation."<sup>56</sup> Here is a work "which borroweth nothing from the creature,"<sup>57</sup> for it must be a new and sovereign work of God, creating a clean heart not by a measure of assistance in cleaning up an indifferent heart (which just needs a little bit of divine help for its self-improvement) but by a work of sovereign grace *ex nihilo*.

Although the verb **renew** can refer to the restoration of something existing (e.g., "repair," Isa. 61:4), here the parallel with **create** necessitates that it

<sup>53</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 2:423.

<sup>54</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:376.

<sup>55</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:292.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:298.

<sup>57</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:309.

carry its meaning of “make new.” The **right**<sup>58</sup> **spirit** means a human spirit that is morally fixed, steadfast, and resolute in its loyalty to God.<sup>59</sup>

This prayer anticipates—and believes—the promised new covenant (e.g., Jer. 24:7; 32:39; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26), for it involves a new creation, a “new self” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 4:24).

- <sup>11</sup> Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

**Cast me not** is emphatic: “Do not fling me.”<sup>60</sup> God removed his **Holy Spirit** from King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14); David fears this more than anything else. This language was used later about the whole people (the verb “cast out” in, e.g., 2 Kings 17:20; 24:20); the two are connected, for if this happens to the Davidic king, it will happen to his people. Only a Messiah-King with the Holy Spirit can bring his people into the presence of God.

- <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

The **joy** of God’s **salvation** is found only in Christ. David “is pointing to Christ, in the contemplation of whom he was joyful even in his very tears.”<sup>61</sup> The adjective **willing** speaks of a new human **spirit** to whom doing right is free, glad, generous, even spontaneous (cf. Ex. 35:22). Such a God-given spirit, possible only by the indwelling Holy Spirit (Ps. 51:11), is a miracle of grace.

- <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.

<sup>58</sup> This word (niphal participle of כָּחַץ) “is often associated with God’s creative activity” (e.g., “established,” Ps. 24:2). Allan Harman, *Psalms*, 2 vols., MC (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2011), 1:402.

<sup>59</sup> Here, as elsewhere, Luther speaks of the natural human spirit as *incurvatus in se*. Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:241; 25:291, etc.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 182.

<sup>61</sup> Cassiodorus (ca. 485–ca. 585), *Explanation of the Psalms*, trans. and ed. P. G. Walsh, 3 vols., ACW 51–53 (New York: Paulist, 1990–1991), 1:504.

The forgiven transgressor-king (51:1, 3) turns to **teach transgressors** the moral **ways** of God, for these ways can be walked only by those who **return** in the repentance of this psalm and experience the new covenant renewal in Christ to which this psalm points. This psalm, together with Psalm 32, does precisely this. In them our King teaches us that we must repent and shows us how to repent.

<sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

**Bloodguiltiness** usually means guilt from shedding human blood<sup>62</sup> (as David has done to Uriah), although it can mean guilt more generally, as it is often used for Israel corporately (e.g., Isa. 4:4; Hos. 12:14).<sup>63</sup> In this verse the movement is from deliverance and **salvation** to a singing aloud of God's covenant **righteousness**, by which he righteously pardons his penitent people (cf. 1 John 1:9), even as he righteously punishes the impenitent.

<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.

Psalm 51:13–15 is summed up by this prayer, that the **lips** of the forgiven penitent will be opened, that his **mouth** can **declare** the **praise** of the God of salvation in Christ.

<sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;<sup>64</sup>  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

**For** hints at a logical development from what precedes; perhaps the logic is that David offers his penitent heart *because* this is what God wants. The verb **delight** (here and in 51:6, 19) gives a window into the heart of God. This is not an absolute rejection of the sacrificial system, given by God

<sup>62</sup> Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:13nq.

<sup>63</sup> Eveson follows John Stott (1921–2011) in suggesting that here it refers to being guilty of the blood of sinners he has failed to warn about judgment (e.g., Ezek. 33:1–9). Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:329.

<sup>64</sup> Alternative translations have been suggested for the phrase “or I would give it.” See Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:123.

under the old covenant; rather, it speaks against the shallow abuse of that system (as 51:19 confirms). The context makes this clear, with its radical emphasis on heart repentance and a work of God's sovereign grace deep in the human spirit. There is a strikingly similar sentiment in Psalm 40:6, which we know to be fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, for, as Augustine says, "Those former sacrifices were symbolic; they prefigured the one saving sacrifice."<sup>65</sup> Calvin writes memorably that the old covenant sacrifices were "borrowing from Christ the necessary purchase-money of redemption."<sup>66</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 51:17 is the counterpart to 51:16. **The sacrifices of God**<sup>67</sup> means those with which God is pleased. As in 51:10, the **heart** and the **spirit** are combined to convey the whole human person. The words **broken** ("shattered") and **contrite** (lit., "crushed," as in "broken," 51:8) both convey the effect of deep repentance on a person; when we see our sins in anything approaching their true horror, we are utterly crushed and devastated by the sight.<sup>68</sup>

### 51:18–19 Prayer for the Renewal of the People of God

<sup>18</sup> Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem;

**Zion** now comes into focus, for the right standing of the King before God is the sine qua non of the prosperity of God's people. J. Alec Motyer (1924–2016) explains, "David, as king, could not sin simply as a private individual: his sin threatened the fabric of public life. Consequently, he would be as anxious for the building up of Jerusalem (Ps. 51:18) as for his own restoration."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 2:427.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:305.

<sup>67</sup> There is no manuscript evidence to support the emended vocalization behind "My sacrifice, O God" in the NIV. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:13; Harman, *Psalms*, 1:404.

<sup>68</sup> Luther speaks (from his own experience) of "one that almost dies of despair." Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:405.

<sup>69</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Psalms*, in *New Bible Commentary*, 21st century ed., ed. G. J. Wenham, J. A. Motyer, D. A. Carson, and R. T. France (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 518.

As David considers the city that lies at the heart of the people, and as a later generation will use these words in prayer for restoration from exile (cf. 102:13, 16), so this is also “a further prophecy [of] the new Sion . . . the heavenly Jerusalem to be built on earth” (cf. Gal. 4:26; Rev. 21).<sup>70</sup> Here is a prayer “that the Lord might build His church.”<sup>71</sup> David prays for God to “hasten Zion’s final glory, and then shall there be no more scandals to give the enemy cause to blaspheme, no more backslidings, no more falls; then shalt thou be fully honoured as the God of atonement.”<sup>72</sup>

It may be that the **walls** suggest a clear distinction between the church and the world, so that the church is in the world but the world is not in the church.<sup>73</sup>

- <sup>19</sup> then will you delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

The phrase **right sacrifices** (cf. Deut. 33:19; Ps. 4:5) indicates, in this context, sacrifices offered in a right spirit, the spirit of penitence exemplified by this psalm. **Burnt offerings** translates the usual word focusing on their ascending in smoke and flame.<sup>74</sup> **Whole burnt offerings** translates an adjective that emphasizes the entirety of what is offered. Together they speak of “the entire self-dedication of the worshipper.”<sup>75</sup>

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. Our major response ought, very simply, to be to make the psalm our own, both in heartfelt individual repentance and also as we join in congregational repentance.

2. David’s repentance took place a year or so after his sin (evidenced by the birth and death of the son then conceived). By David’s response to Nathan’s rebuke, we too learn to comply humbly “with the calls to repentance,

<sup>70</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms*, 1:302.

<sup>71</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 12:410.

<sup>72</sup> Bonar, *Psalms*, 162–63.

<sup>73</sup> So Thomas Alexander (fl. 1850–1865), in Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.2:423.

<sup>74</sup> עֹלָה. Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:295.

<sup>75</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:295.



which may be addressed to [us] by his servants, instead of remaining under sin till [we] be surprised by the final vengeance of Heaven.”<sup>76</sup> David Dickson notes “how faithful ministers ought to be in their proper charges, reproofing sin, even in the greatest personages, when God calleth them unto it, and how acceptable their reproof should be to the honest heart.”<sup>77</sup>

3. Augustine writes, “We have read about what we must shun [i.e., in the superscription]; now let us listen to what we must imitate if we have slipped into sin, for there are many who are very willing to fall with David, but unwilling to rise again with him.” Cautioning against the glee with which we may watch the fall of a great saint, he goes on to say that these falls should cause us to tremble: “Let all who have not fallen listen, to ensure they do not fall; and let all who have fallen listen, so that they may learn to get up again.” He preaches especially to those who “have fallen already, and study the words of this psalm with some evil thing on their consciences,” and he exhorts them that “they must indeed be aware of the gravity of their wounds, but not despair of our noble physician.”<sup>78</sup>

4. Commenting on Psalm 51:3, Luther observes that “sham saints . . . pervert this psalm and say: ‘I perceive the sins of others, and the sins of others are always before me.’”<sup>79</sup>

5. It is worth meditating on the fact that pardon itself (pledged to us in Christ) may precede by some time our experiential grasp of it. As Dickson observes, “The dividing of the grant of pardon from the effectual intimation thereof unto the conscience, is done in God’s wisdom and mercy towards his child for good; for here it ripeneth repentance, and bringeth forth this deep confession.”<sup>80</sup>

6. Luther writes with eloquent and passionate conviction about this psalm. He scorns the “fine and pleasing theologians!” who offer life and joy without conviction of sin. Rather, he notes,

God is the kind of God who does nothing for any other purpose than to regard and love the contrite, vexed, and troubled, and . . . He is a God of

<sup>76</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:281–82.

<sup>77</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:302.

<sup>78</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 2:411, 413.

<sup>79</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 14:167.

<sup>80</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:304–5.

the humble and the troubled. If anyone could grasp this definition with his heart, he would be a theologian. . . .

We have to learn that a Christian should walk in the midst of death, in the remorse and trembling of his conscience, in the midst of the devil's teeth and of hell, and yet should keep the Word of grace, so that in such trembling we say, "Thou, O Lord, dost look on me with favor."<sup>81</sup>

7. While the instruction of others (51:13–15) is the particular responsibility of Christian leaders, it is a wholesome discipline for each Christian to share with others the joy of cleansing and the health of repentance.

8. Although the prayer for the upbuilding of the church (51:18–19) is primarily the prayer of the King, it is good for us also to conclude our penitence with the prayer that the repentance God has granted to us will also be vouchsafed to his whole church.

<sup>81</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works*, 12:403, 405.

*And even if you suffer calumny from a wicked ruler,  
and you see the slanderer boasting, withdraw from  
that place and say also the things in [Psalm 52].*

ATHANASIUS  
*Letter to Marcellinus*

*A prayer of Jesus, who is attacked by wicked spiritual and  
human agents, but nevertheless puts his hope in God, and  
although he suffers death, is ultimately victorious.*

TREMPER LONGMAN III  
*Psalms*

*King Saul along with associates like Doeg are manifestations  
of the snake's offspring, the "brood of vipers" (Genesis 3:15;  
Matthew 3:7; Revelation 12:9), influenced by Satan.*

PHILIP EVESON  
*Psalms*

# PSALM 52

## ORIENTATION

In Psalm 52 there is a speaker, a context, an individual adversary, and a congregation. The speaker is David, who here foreshadows the Messiah.

The context (in 1 Sam. 21–22, especially 21:7; 22:9–10) is during that time when David has been anointed king (1 Sam. 16) but is not yet acclaimed and acknowledged as king (2 Sam. 2:4; 5:1–5). Several psalms in this part of the Psalter come from this general period (Pss. 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; note also Pss. 34 and 142 and perhaps Ps. 7).<sup>1</sup> It prefigures eloquently and vividly the present age, in which Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18) but has not yet returned for every knee to bow (Phil. 2:10–11). In this age Jesus, in the body of his church, suffers hostility and persecution (cf. Acts 9:4). Closely associated with David is the house (temple/tabernacle) of the priest Ahimelech, who is slain in this terrible episode. Christ is both king and priest, and his church, which is both royal and priestly in Christ, suffers with him.<sup>2</sup>

The adversary is usually thought to be Doeg, although some have suggested that Saul himself is in mind.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it doesn't much matter, for Doeg is clearly Saul's man. This individual has been seen as foreshadowing Judas Iscariot<sup>4</sup>

1 It is possible that others, such as Ps. 55, with its motif of betrayal, come from this period.

2 Argued persuasively in Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:13–15. Identifying the adversary as Doeg, he writes, "Let us recognize Doeg still with us today," as the world opposes the church.

3 E.g., Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 2:211–13; Harman, *Psalms*, 1:407. While this is a minority view, it makes much sense.

4 E.g., the Venerable Bede (673–735), 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), 2:181.

and ultimately the antichrist.<sup>5</sup> He represents hostility against Christ and his church today.

The congregation (Ps. 52:6–7, 9b) is Christ’s church. It has also been suggested that Ahimelech and his fellow priests foreshadow the church, both in their priestly calling and in their unjust sufferings.

This is one of many psalms in which words are used against the godly (e.g., Pss. 4; 12; 120; cf. the power of the tongue in James 3:1–12).

Psalm 52 shares with Psalm 51 the “steadfast love” (חֶסֶד, *khesed*) of God (51:1; 52:1, 8) and the tongue being used well (51:14; 52:9) or badly (52:2–4). After repentance in Psalm 51, much of Psalms 52–64 takes us into a world in which God’s King is under great pressure.<sup>6</sup>

## THE TEXT

### Structure

One way of structuring the psalm is in terms of the address:<sup>7</sup> Psalm 52:1–5 is addressed in the second person to the adversary; 52:6–7 speaks in the third person about the righteous and what they will say; in 52:8–9 the psalmist speaks of himself in the first person.

It also makes sense, however, to set off 52:2–4 as a description of hostility against the King; to group 52:5–7 together as a prophecy of judgment; and to follow that with 52:8–9, the response of the righteous to that judgment. It is beneficial as well to understand 52:1, in its two halves, as setting the theme of the whole psalm; indeed, “steadfast love” (52:1) is picked up in 52:8 (and the same root in “the godly” in 52:9).<sup>8</sup> (We will pause for reflection at the two occurrences of *Selah*, but they do not seem here to be structural markers.)<sup>9</sup>

Imagery of an uprooted tree (52:5) is balanced by a fruitful tree (52:8). Trust in riches (52:7) is contrasted with trust in God (52:8).

5 Cassiodorus, *Psalms*, 2:1.

6 Hamilton, *Psalms*, 1:514–15.

7 Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:27; Wilson, *Psalms*, 1:785.

8 Together with the bracketing of self-congratulatory speech (Ps. 52:1) with thanksgiving speech (52:9), this “great parenthesis” around the psalm is noted in Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:27.

9 The word for “God” is אֱלֹהִים in Ps. 52:1, 5, and אֱלֹהִים in 52:7–8. There does not seem to be any significance in this change.

## Superscription

- <sup>S</sup> To the choirmaster.<sup>10</sup> A Maskil<sup>11</sup> of David, when Doeg, the Edomite, came and told Saul, “David has come to the house of Ahimelech.”<sup>12</sup>

Psalms 52–55 are all described by the word **Maskil**, which may suggest that we ought to read them as a minicollection.

There may be an ironic comparison between **Doeg . . . came** and **David has come**, one coming of the enemy to the antiking, the other the true King to the house of God.<sup>13</sup>

It is sometimes objected that Doeg did not strictly lie when he told Saul where David had been (1 Sam. 22:9), and this is used as an argument against the historical connection between the superscription and the psalm.<sup>14</sup> But “although the facts he reported were true, he helped to confirm Saul in a false and cruel suspicion.”<sup>15</sup> By telling only a part of the truth, he deliberately deceived Saul and brought about a great injustice.

## 52:1 The Theme: Evil Boasting versus Steadfast Love

- <sup>1</sup> Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?  
The steadfast love of God endures all the day.

Whether or not the adversary is listening, Psalm 52:1–5, like the prophetic oracles to foreign nations, is a vivid way of conveying what he needs to hear. Psalm 52:1 sets before us “the essential matter of the whole Psalm, in brief, striking features.”<sup>16</sup> The question **Why?** expresses both astonished horror (that he not only does evil but boasts about it; cf. Rom. 1:32) and bewilderment at the stupidity<sup>17</sup> of what he is doing. The form of the verb **boast** expresses an

<sup>10</sup> See on Ps. 4.

<sup>11</sup> See on Ps. 32.

<sup>12</sup> The other historical superscriptions are for Pss. 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142. In Hebrew the superscription is verses 1–2; subsequent verse numbers are increased by two.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the two uses of the same verb (בִּיאַ) in the superscription to Ps. 51.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., Alter, *Psalms*, 184.

<sup>15</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:295.

<sup>16</sup> Hengstenberg, *Psalms*, 2:211.

<sup>17</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:143.

autonomous or self-glorifying boasting, as contrasted with boasting in God.<sup>18</sup>

**O mighty man** (mighty warrior, hero) is ironic since, whether this man exerts much power in the world (like Saul) or not (perhaps like Doeg), we will see in Psalm 52:5 that his power will come to nothing. Augustine eloquently points out that it takes very little real power to do a work of destruction (such as demolishing a house, setting fire to a crop, killing a child), but it requires real might to build a house, sow and cultivate a crop, beget and nurture a child. Even a poisonous toadstool can kill, so, Augustine asks, “Is all your power reduced to this—equality with a poisonous toadstool?”<sup>19</sup>

In his *First Lectures on the Psalms*, Martin Luther applies this first line directly to Christ, as if Christ said, “Do not think that you have it of yourself that you are mighty in iniquity over Me. I am only weak because I wish it, and you would have no power over Me unless it were given you from above (John 19:11).”<sup>20</sup>

The second line (translated literally from the MT by the ESV and CSB) is sometimes emended because it is thought to be abrupt.<sup>21</sup> But there is no need to do this. Indeed, “it is virtually the answer to the question of the first” line<sup>22</sup> and sets the theme for the psalm. As we join Christ in exposing the devil’s ploys, we do so utterly confident, as was he in his earthly life, of the covenant love of his Father, which is for **all the day**, whatever that day may bring.

## 52:2–4 Personified Hostility to Christ and His Church

- 2 Your tongue plots destruction,  
like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit.

18 Hithpael of לָלַךְ. 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), 441; A. A. Anderson (1924–2021), *The Book of Psalms*, 2 vols., NCB (London: Oliphants, 1972), 1:403.

19 Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:19.

20 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:244.

21 Three changes are sometimes made: (1) the MT לֵךְ אֱלֹהִים (the steadfast love of God) is transposed and altered to לֵךְ אֱלֹהִים (to/against the godly); (2) the LXX (ἀνομία) appears to read the Hebrew as רִצְחָה (violence) in place of רִצְחָה; and (3) the words “all the day” are placed differently. Some or all of these lie behind the REB, “You mighty man, why do you boast all the day / of your infamy against God’s loyal servant?”; the NRSV, “Why do you boast, O mighty one, / of mischief done against the godly?”; and—most loosely of all—the NIV, “Why do you boast of evil, you mighty hero? / Why do you boast all day long, / you who are a disgrace in the eyes of God?” But the MT, represented by the CSB and ESV, is powerful, appropriate, and more likely to be original.

22 Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:296.

- 3 You love evil more than good,  
and lying more than speaking what is right. *Selah*
- 4 You love all words that devour,  
O deceitful tongue.

Psalm 52:2–4 confronts and exposes the one who opposes God’s King and people and makes himself an instrument of the devil, the father of lies. There is a double focus, mainly on speaking (the **tongue** as the agent of 52:2 and the whole person being addressed as a **deceitful tongue** in 52:4, the **lying** and **speaking** of 52:3, and the **words** of 52:4) but also on motivation (the repeated **You love** in 52:3, 4), for the tongue that deceives speaks from the abundance of the heart that loves evil.<sup>23</sup> The word **destruction** (fronted for emphasis in Hebrew) may have the sense of “threats.”<sup>24</sup> The simile of a **sharp razor** (cf. 57:4; 64:3) reminds us that “death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prov. 18:21).<sup>25</sup> Psalm 101:7 picks up **worker of deceit** (“who practices deceit”), where David says this person will not dwell in the King’s house. The man being spoken about does not deceive just from time to time, as if it’s an aberration; he loves evil, and “evil never forsakes the man known to love the sin which he commits.”<sup>26</sup> **Words that devour** are words that swallow people up<sup>27</sup> and cause confusion.<sup>28</sup>

Commenting on *Selah*, Charles H. Spurgeon writes, “Let us pause and look at the proud, blustering liar. Doeg is gone, but other dogs bark at the Lord’s people.”<sup>29</sup> The people of Christ ought to expect that, as they walk in their King’s footsteps, they will be subject to lies.

### 52:5–7 The Adversary Is Judged, and the Righteous Respond

- 5 But God will break you down forever;  
he will snatch and tear you from your tent;  
he will uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah*

23 Mic. 3:2 illuminates the damage this does to God’s people.

24 *HALOT*, s.v. הָנָה.

25 Kirkpatrick quotes from William Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* 3.4 “’Tis slander, / Whose edge is sharper than the sword.”

26 Cassiodorus, *Psalms*, 2:3.

27 See BDB, s.v. בָּלַע.

28 See *HALOT*, s.v. בָּלַע.

29 Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.2:426.



**But** probably has an emphatic sense here (cf. NIV: “Surely”). The four verbs are “a pounding prediction of utter destruction.”<sup>30</sup> **Break you down** uses the image of the demolition of a building (cf. Judg. 8:9; Job 19:10; Ezek. 26:9); all he built ends in ruins. **Snatch** is a verb used of snatching away a coal from a fire (e.g., Prov. 6:27; 25:22; Isa. 30:14), being taken away from a place of warmth and belonging. **Tear you from your tent** suggests being torn from your home, your land, your family, so that you live “like a cast-away and vagabond” (cf. Deut. 28:63; Job 18:14).<sup>31</sup> **Uproot** means the final removal of a tree, so that not even its roots give hope of future restoration; **the land of the living**, in the new creation, will have no room for such a one, finally impenitent and hostile to Christ and his church.<sup>32</sup> This is not malice but sober prophecy, as Augustine points out:

In this psalm . . . there is neither prayer for the wicked nor prayer against the wicked; there is simply a prophecy of what will happen to the wicked. You must not think that the psalm is saying anything out of spite; what is said is uttered in the spirit of prophecy.<sup>33</sup>

6     The righteous shall see and fear,  
          and shall laugh at him, saying,

The response of **the righteous** (plural)—the church of Christ, when it sees this final judgment of antichrist and all antichrists—will be to **see and fear** (two verbs sounding very similar in Hebrew) **and . . . laugh at him**. When judgment afflicts a wicked person in this life, the proper response of the righteous is awe and reverence as we realize with fresh intensity that God really does act in his world (cf. what happens after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5:11). Luther mentions the proper fear of Gentile believers when they see the (temporary) rejection of the Jews (Rom. 11:20–21).<sup>34</sup> On the last day, that fear will be infinite in its depth of reverent wonder. Augustine points us to Psalm 2:11;

30 Ross, *Psalms*, 2:214. “Violent verbs jostle one another in verse 5 with increasingly radical effect.” Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:195.

31 VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 442.

32 Augustine refers to Eph. 3:14–19 to contrast this uprooting with the sure rootedness of the true believer in the love of God. Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:23.

33 Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:20.

34 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:245.

1 Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 6:1; and Philippians 2:12 for similar responses.<sup>35</sup> The verb **laugh** is not vindictive (forbidden in Prov. 24:17; cf. Job 31:29) but—akin to the laughter of God in Psalms 2:4 and 37:13—the delight that rightly greets the triumph of the justice of God (cf. Rev. 18:20; 19:1–5).

7 “See the man who would not make  
God his refuge,  
but trusted in the abundance of his riches  
and sought refuge in his own destruction!”

**See** (Behold!) points to this man for emphasis,<sup>36</sup> that we may learn from his condemnation, be warned not to follow him, and be comforted that we need not be frightened of him. Spurgeon calls it “the divine *in memoriam*.”<sup>37</sup> The word translated **man** is similar to that used for “mighty man” in Psalm 52:1.<sup>38</sup> However strong he thought he was—and pretended to be—this is his destiny. He is described by what he chose not to do (**make / God his refuge**, flee to God in faith) and by what he did (**trusted in the abundance of his riches**; cf. Ps. 49:6; Prov. 11:28; 1 Tim. 6:17–18).<sup>39</sup> It is not easy to know whether **sought refuge** in the final line ought to be translated “was strong.” There is a play on the words **refuge** (or fortress, מְצוּלָה, *maoz*) and “be strong” (יָצַח, *yaoz*).<sup>40</sup> Most likely he thinks his destructive behavior will make him strong (CSB: “taking refuge in his destructive behavior”).<sup>41</sup>

## 52:8–9 The Confidence of the Godly King in the Presence of His Godly People

8 But I am like a green olive tree  
in the house of God.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:24.

<sup>36</sup> “When *Behold* is said with hand extended, the unspeakable lot of the sinner is indicated.” Casiodorus, *Psalms*, 2:5.

<sup>37</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.2:427.

<sup>38</sup> In Ps. 52:1, מְצוּלָה; in 52:7, יָצַח.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine perceptively includes the covetous poor, whose values are the same and who think, “If only I were rich, then I would be safe.” Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:25–26.

<sup>40</sup> Alter, *Psalms*, 185.

<sup>41</sup> The NIV, “and grew strong by destroying others,” is less likely, not least because the Hebrew gives no indication of “others.”

I trust in the steadfast love of God  
forever and ever.

The move to an emphatic singular, **but I**, signals a finale in which the King expresses his **trust** in God's covenant **steadfast love** (תִּשְׁבָּע, *khesed*; cf. Ps. 52:1), in contrast to the false faith of his enemy. In so doing, he is the forerunner of all who will share his faith and walk in his footsteps.

The image of the **green olive tree / in the house of God** evocatively combines garden imagery, perhaps Edenic, with the temple. This may allude to the idea that the temple is a "garden of Eden" and that it will one day grow to encompass the whole new creation, with Christ at its center.<sup>42</sup> The image of a deeply rooted and ever-fruitful tree (contrast "uproot," 52:5) is used of the godly individual and of the whole people of God (e.g., Pss. 1:3; 92:12–15; Prov. 11:28, 30; Jer. 11:16; 17:7–8; Hos. 14:8).<sup>43</sup>

<sup>9</sup> I will thank you forever,  
because you have done it.  
I will wait for your name, for it is good,  
in the presence of the godly.

The verb **thank** means a public, audible thanksgiving, a declaration or confession about God, not very different from praise. The clause **because you have done it** is emphatic (cf. "that he has done it," Ps. 22:31, and "he will act," 37:5). In context it means he has acted in judgment on the one who opposes his King and acted to vindicate his King and his people.

That the King **will wait for the name** (the public revelation, here in judgment) of God means he trusts that judgment will come. Jesus did this in his earthly life, waiting and weeping in prayer (cf. 1 Pet. 2:23); we are to wait in Christ as we cry day and night to God the Judge (Luke 18:7), waiting for Jesus to come (Rev. 22:20), because "faith maketh a man as sure of what is

<sup>42</sup> For this wonderful Bible theme, see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> See on Ps. 1 for the argument that this image focuses most especially on Christ. Here in Ps. 52, Cassiodorus takes the same approach, for "this most blessed olive contributed such fruit as could make the whole human race, which was dried out with sins, grow fat with the generosity of His mercy." Cassiodorus, *Psalms*, 2:6.

to come, as if it were perfected, and filleth him with praise for the certain hope of the performance of promises.”<sup>44</sup>

To say that God’s **name . . . is good** is profound; only those who know in experience a taste of God’s sweet goodness will wait patiently for that name to be revealed in all its fullness when Jesus returns. Only the Holy Spirit can teach us this truth. Speaking of how the taste of God’s goodness gave courage to the martyrs, Augustine writes,

You may commend honey with all your might, you may exaggerate its delicious sweetness with the most expressive words you can find, but if you are talking to someone who does not know what honey is and has never tasted it, he will not know what you are talking about.<sup>45</sup>

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. It is good quietly to read 1 Samuel 21–22 and to reflect both on the evident malice of Doeg and Saul and on the terror of the story for Ahimelech and his party—and no doubt for the fugitive David. There is a sense in which the church of Christ is like the fugitive David or the slaughtered priests in every age until Jesus returns, assailed by venom and malice allied with power.

2. As we ponder the deceit and malice laid bare in Psalm 52:2–4, we train ourselves to keep in mind at all times the truth of 52:1b. It is healthy to do this in the experienced realities of deceit and hatred today, both from outside the visible church and also, most distressingly, from within.

3. It is no malice but rather a necessary comfort to dwell on the four verbs of Psalm 52:5 and to join the righteous in seeing (by faith), fearing (with awe and reverence), and even with anticipation looking forward to that godly laughter that will accompany the judgment of God (52:6–7). For these things are sure.

4. Nevertheless, even as we do this, we heed the pastoral words of Augustine, who wisely guards against the misunderstanding of this laughter. For now, when we see someone living a bad life, we

<sup>44</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:317.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:29.

have the urge to work with him and set him on a better course. At this present stage an unrighteous person may turn round and become righteous, just as a righteous one may go wrong and become unrighteous. This is why you must neither be presumptuous about your own case nor despair of his.<sup>46</sup>

5. As we make Psalm 52:8 our own individually, we do so in Christ, having before us in our hearts and minds the Lord Jesus as the King in David's line who most fully prayed these words before us. In him we too may be like green olive trees in the house of God, rooted, trusting in steadfast love, confident no matter what trials are sent to us.

6. Perhaps the verb "wait" in Psalm 52:9 comes as a surprise. It reminds us that this psalm is to be appropriated not only at the end of time, when Jesus returns, but when we most need it, which is now, in the time of patient waiting.

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:24–25.



*Should you hear people blaspheming against God's providence, do not share with them in their irreligion, but say [Psalms 14 and 53].*

ATHANASIUS  
*Letter to Marcellinus*

*These are the sort of people in whose company  
Christ's body suffers and groans.*

AUGUSTINE  
*Expositions of the Psalms*

*Because . . . this doctrine of our corrupt human nature is badly needed in the congregation of God, that it might be maintained forever, that we would recognize ourselves for what we are, . . . [that we] might not become proud or overconfident or trust in any merit or work of our own but live solely on the mere grace and mercy of God which he has shown us in his Son, therefore David, with diligence and at the suggestion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, recorded this psalm twice, so that he might hammer this doctrine into us who are otherwise proud, who coddle, adorn and enhance ourselves and do not want to be nothing but rather be something before God.*

NICOLAUS SELNECKER  
*The Whole Psalter*

# PSALM 53

## ORIENTATION

In his commentary, John Calvin comments on Psalm 53 that “this psalm being almost identical with the *fourteenth*, it has not been considered necessary to subjoin any distinct commentary.”<sup>1</sup> But it may be that Calvin went too far. For Psalm 53, though similar, is not identical with Psalm 14, and also it appears here as Psalm 53, in this particular place in the canonical Psalter. Charles Spurgeon observes, rightly, “It is not a copy of the fourteenth Psalm, emended and revised by a foreign hand; it is another edition by the same author, emphasized in certain parts, and re-written for another purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

## PSALM 14 AND PSALM 53

For most of the text of Psalm 53, see the commentary on Psalm 14. Here I summarize the differences and seek to comment on the significance of the psalm in book 2.

The differences may be stated simply. First, the superscription adds to that of Psalm 14 the following words:

1. “According to Mahalath.” The phrase “according to” may indicate instrumental accompaniment (as we might say, “with flutes”) or a musical setting, “Mahalath,” now unknown to us.<sup>3</sup> The word “Mahalath” appears also in the superscription of Psalm 88.

<sup>1</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:320.

<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.2:433.

<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that “Mahalath” may be the first word of a well-known song of the period, implying that the psalm be sung to that tune. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:35.



2. “A Maskil.”<sup>4</sup> The designation “Maskil” is shared with Psalms 52, 54, and 55, suggesting that these four form a minicollection, to be read together.<sup>5</sup> This is significant, for it encourages us to consider how Psalm 53 functions within this collection.

Second, the covenant name, “the LORD,” appears four times in Psalm 14 (14:2, 4, 6, 7). Three of these are changed to “God” (53:2, 4, 6), while the fourth disappears from Psalm 53 (see below on 53:5). This preference for *Elohim* is in line with much of Psalms 42–83 (the so-called Elohistc Psalter). No one knows why this was preferred here. It has been suggested that it may represent a conscious desire to communicate truth with a wider audience, who might not be so familiar with the covenant name; we cannot be sure.<sup>6</sup>

Third, there is a significant change from 14:5–6 to 53:5.

Psalm 14:5–6

<sup>5</sup> There they are in great terror,  
for God is with the generation of  
the righteous.  
<sup>6</sup> You would shame the plans of the poor,  
but the LORD is his refuge.

Psalm 53:5

<sup>5</sup> There they are, in great terror,  
where there is no terror!  
For God scatters the bones of him  
who encamps against you;  
you put them to shame,  
for God has rejected them.

After a shared first line (**There they are in great terror**), Psalm 14 emphasizes God’s protection (**refuge**) for **the generation of the righteous**, who are the oppressed **poor** (a distinctive emphasis in Pss. 9–14). But the emphasis in Psalm 53 is on God’s judgment of the oppressor (replacing **For God is with . . .** with **For God scatters the bones . . .**). We shift our gaze from those whom God accompanies to those whom God opposes.

The clause **where there is no terror** refers either to their becoming frightened even when there is no good reason to be frightened or, more likely, to the suddenness with which terror will come on them (i.e., there was no terror, and then suddenly there is). “The more secure a sinner is, and in

<sup>4</sup> See on Ps. 32.

<sup>5</sup> The word “Maskil” appears also in Ps. 53:2, “who understand” (hiphil participle of שָׁכַל, “be wise”).

<sup>6</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 95–102.

special a persecutor of God's people, the more terrible shall his wakening be, when God's judgment cometh on him."<sup>7</sup>

The remainder of 53:5 spells out vividly that while these have **encamped against** the people of God (besieged them), their **bones** will be **scattered**, and they are the ones who will be **put . . . to shame** because **God has rejected them**.

Finally, there are three minor changes that do not appear to have much significance:

1. The word **deeds** (14:1) is intensified to **iniquity** (53:1), perhaps in harmony with the emphasis of Psalm 53 on judgment.
2. The verb **turned aside** (14:3) is changed to **fallen away** (53:3).
3. The word **all** in 14:4 (**all the evildoers**) is omitted from 53:4.

In common with Psalm 51, Psalm 53 focuses on "Zion" as the place of messianic promise, built up around God's penitent people (51:18–19) and from which Messiah will come (53:6).

Psalm 52 laments deceitful words "that devour" (52:4); this leads naturally into the words "who eat up my people as they eat bread" (53:4). In both psalms the hostility that threatens to gobble up the people of God is described.

In Psalm 52 the focus is on David the messianic king under pressure from such relentless and deceitful hostility. In Psalm 53 the emphasis is on the whole people ("my people," 53:4).<sup>8</sup>

In each psalm there is a vigorous affirmation that judgment is coming on those who oppose both the Messiah (52:5–7) and his people (53:5). In expounding and appropriating Psalm 53, we ought to give due weight to this emphatic confidence in God's judgment on the enemies of God's Christ and his people. While this serves as a comfort to the persecuted church, it functions also as a warning to us all not to become, or to be, those who devour God's precious people.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:320.

<sup>8</sup> There is perhaps a parallel with the individual lament of Pss. 42–43 and the ensuing corporate lament of Ps. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Abusive pastors need to take careful note of this warning.

*When someone sings [Psalms 54, 56, 57, and 142], he considers not how someone else is persecuted, but how he, being the one who suffers, is affected. And these words, as his own, he chants to the Lord. And so, on the whole, each psalm is both spoken and composed by the Spirit so that in these same words . . . the stirrings of our souls might be grasped, and all of them be said concerning us, and the same issue from us as our own words, for a remembrance of the emotions in us, and a chastening of our life.*

ATHANASIUS  
*Letter to Marcellinus*

*[Psalm 54] is seen with greatest effect as a simple prophecy of Christ. Read thus, it is very plain and intelligible; requiring little more than the first idea to exhibit a perfect correspondence with the life and feelings of the Messiah.*

WILLIAM HILL TUCKER  
In Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*

# PSALM 54

## ORIENTATION

Psalm 54 is one of a number of psalms arising from the time when David had been anointed king but was yet hated and hunted by Saul. The psalm speaks for Christ in the days of his flesh, the true Messiah and yet despised and rejected. And in Christ it speaks for the whole church of Christ in this age of sharing in his sufferings so that we may come into his glory. It is a song of Christ and a song to be sung by the church of Christ, both corporately and individually.<sup>1</sup>

Psalms 52–55 are to be read together, as suggested by the common designation “A Maskil of David.” Psalm 54 shares a number of similarities with Psalm 52: both assert that the “name” of God is “good” (52:9; 54:6); in both David resolves to give thanks (52:9; 54:6); the “might” of God (54:1) is similar to the word for “mighty man” (52:1); both 52:7 (“make God”) and 54:3 (“set God”) use the same Hebrew verb;<sup>2</sup> both refer to “good” and “evil” (52:1, 3, 9; 54:5–6); and in both the righteous will “see” or “look” (the same verb) on their enemies (52:7; 54:7).<sup>3</sup> Links with Psalm 53 are fewer: one is the verb “return” or “restore” (53:6; 54:5); another is the theme of seeking after God (53:2), similar to setting God before themselves (54:3). All four psalms share the general background of God’s Christ and his people under pressure from a hostile world.

## THE TEXT

### Structure

The *Selah* at the end of Psalm 54:3 breaks up the psalm naturally enough. Psalm 54:1–3 includes a prayer (54:1–2) followed by the plight that

<sup>1</sup> “David prefigured Christ, or the body of Christ.” Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:41.

<sup>2</sup> שׁוּב.

<sup>3</sup> For more on these connections, see Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:48.

necessitates the prayer (54:3). Psalm 54:4–5 is a declaration of confidence that God will help and act in judgment. Psalm 54:6–7 promises joyful thanksgiving. The “name” of God brackets the psalm and helps set its theme (54:1, 6).

### Superscription

- <sup>s</sup> To the choirmaster:<sup>4</sup> with stringed instruments.<sup>5</sup> A Maskil<sup>6</sup> of David, when the Ziphites went and told Saul, “Is not David hiding among us?”<sup>7</sup>

This psalm arises from the terrifying situation of David in 1 Samuel 23:19–29 and quotes verbatim<sup>8</sup> from the words of the Ziphites in 1 Samuel 23:19 (something very similar is recorded in 1 Sam. 26:1). The phrase “to seek his life” in 1 Samuel 23:15 is echoed in Psalm 54:3 (“seek my life”). The trust expressed in the psalm aligns with the trust that Jonathan shares with David in 1 Samuel 23:16–17. Whereas 1 Samuel tells us how God rescued the king, Psalm 54 enables us to grasp the heart of David—and hence the heart of Christ—as he cries to the one who can save him from death (Heb. 5:7).

Far from ignoring this historical superscription (as modern commentators are sometimes wont to do), Augustine says that “from this title every verse that is sung derives its meaning”—that is, the historical context makes sense of the whole psalm. He plays on the word **hiding** and speaks of the Ziphites as representing the kind of people who are “hostile to the hidden one” (i.e., Christ) and to his people, whose lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). He says that these Ziphites, along with Doeg of Psalm 52, are “the flourishing children of this world,” and he challenges his hearers to “choose which you want to be.”<sup>9</sup> This psalm, he says, “must be the prayer of the Church hiding among the Ziphites. Let the body of Christians say

<sup>4</sup> See on Ps. 4.

<sup>5</sup> See on Ps. 4; cf. Pss. 6; 55; 61; 67; 76; Hab. 3:19.

<sup>6</sup> See on Ps. 32.

<sup>7</sup> The other historical superscriptions are for Pss. 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142. In Hebrew the superscription is verses 1–2; subsequent verse numbers are increased by two.

<sup>8</sup> The only difference is between a *holem* and a *holem vav*.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:41–43.

it, the body whose good way of life is cherished in secret.”<sup>10</sup> Although this may seem fanciful to us, his meditation on the hiddenness of Christ and his church is profound.

### 54:1–3 Pray the Prayer and Feel the Plight of God’s Messiah and His People

Psalm 54:1–2 invites us to join with God’s Messiah in urgent prayer for rescue.

- <sup>1</sup> O God, save me by your name,  
and vindicate me by your might.

The address **O God** is fronted for emphasis in 54:1 and again in 54:2. The **name** of God means God himself as he has revealed himself by covenant in all the glory of his attributes. David sets this in parallel with his **might** (a word that echoes the ironic “mighty man” of 52:1), for God is “a mighty one who will save” (Zeph. 3:17); God’s power is finally a power directed at salvation.<sup>11</sup> That **save** means to **vindicate** is a reminder that without justification there is no hope; God the Judge decides for Jesus his righteous King on the basis of his intrinsic righteousness and gives judgment for us only in him, as his righteousness is imputed to us.

- <sup>2</sup> O God, hear my prayer;  
give ear to the words of my mouth.

Psalm 54:2 adds urgency to the petition of 54:1.

- <sup>3</sup> For strangers have risen against me;  
ruthless men seek my life;  
they do not set God before themselves. *Selah*

Psalm 54:3 gives the reason for the Messiah’s prayer, that we too may feel his plight even as we suffer with him in this age (e.g., Rom. 8:17; cf.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:45.

<sup>11</sup> God’s “might” and “name” are linked also in Ps. 20:6–7; Jer. 10:6 (“Your name is great in might”); 16:21 (“I will make them know my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the LORD”).

Col. 1:24). The three lines of this tricolon build to a climax. First, the word **strangers**<sup>12</sup> (in the first line) speaks, in its original context, of these Ziphites, who were Israelite in ethnicity but foreign in their values. Not only have they **risen against me**, they are (in the second line) **ruthless men** (violent, terrifying) who—like Saul in 1 Samuel 23:15—**seek my life**. But the worst thing about them (in the third line) is the one that digs deepest into their motivation: **They do not set God before themselves**. That is, they neither follow God’s ways (as their guide) nor show any awareness of God’s watchful eye over their words and deeds (for their consciences are seared).

*Selah* invites us to pause and reflect that, as this was the condition of Christ among his foes, so it is the state of his church in the midst of a hostile world. If Christ needed urgently to pray “with loud cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7), so do we.

#### 54:4–5 Share the Confidence of God’s Messiah with His People

- 4 Behold, God is my helper;  
the Lord is the upholder of my life.

**Behold** signals a new section as the Messiah turns to any who will listen and declares his confidence in God his Father. It is as if he points with a finger toward heaven. Not only is God **my helper**, he is **the upholder of my life**, for it is **my life** (my soul) that is under threat.

Martin Luther comments,

On the basis of the fact that David was much persecuted and yet never captured by Saul, but always escaped, it is understood figuratively that Christ and the Christians, though they might suffer and be killed after the flesh, yet always escape with their soul unharmed and are never captured, as the Lord promised (Matt. 10:28).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Because the Ziphites were not literally foreigners and because Ps. 86:14 is very similar and uses the word “insolent” (זרים) in place of “strangers” (זרים), some manuscripts and the Targum replace “strangers” (foreigners) with “insolent men” here (e.g., NIV: “arrogant foes”; cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms*, 2:45). This makes for easier parallelism with the following line, but as Ross points out, it is hard to see how a scribe would change the easier “insolent men” to the harder “strangers” (and the LXX has ἀλλότριος). Ross, *Psalms*, 2:233n2. It is better to stay with the MT (as do the CSB and ESV main text).

<sup>13</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:251.

- <sup>5</sup> He will return the evil to my enemies;  
in your faithfulness put an end to them.

**He will return**<sup>14</sup> **the evil** speaks of evil as having a boomerang quality: once it is let loose, it must find a resting place somewhere, and in the justice of God, it will come back to rest on those who sent it out.<sup>15</sup> The reference to **the evil** makes the evil definite, this particular evil of seeking the life of God's Messiah and his people. The word translated **my enemies** often has the sense of those who watch with hostile intent or lie in wait (cf. Ps. 56:2; Jer. 5:26; Hos. 13:7 ["lurk"]; Mark 3:2).<sup>16</sup>

The prayer of the second line (cf. Ps. 143:12) arises from the truth of the first line (it is prayed in accordance with the will of God) and from the **faithfulness** (lit., "truth") of God to his covenant promises to his King and people. This is an integral part of what his "name" (54:1) means, that he keeps every promise. This prayer to **put an end to them**, to do to them just what they had planned to do to David (so that their evil will "return" to them), expresses not a personal malice or revenge but a longing that God will do what he has promised to do, to vindicate his King and rescue all the King's people from those who are finally impenitent (cf. 2:12).

#### 54:6–7 Join in the Thanks of God's Messiah with His People

- <sup>6</sup> With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you;  
I will give thanks to your name, O LORD, for it is good.

The verb **I will sacrifice** is emphatic as (probably) is **I will give thanks**.<sup>17</sup> The point about the **freewill offering** is, as the phrase indicates, that it is given voluntarily; it arises not from a desire to look pious or even to fulfill

<sup>14</sup> The kere of the verb is the hipil of שׁוּב, implying that God is the active agent, as he is. Ross, *Psalms*, 2:234n6. The kethib (what is written in the MT) has evil as the subject and can be read as a jussive: "Let evil return." While this is possible and makes for easier parallelism (so NIV), the kere "has the more common idiom" and is probably to be preferred. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:158.

<sup>15</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:160.

<sup>16</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:306; Ross, *Psalms*, 2:240.

<sup>17</sup> The first is explicitly cohortative; the second has no distinctly cohortative form but likely also bears this force. So Ross, *Psalms*, 2:241.



a vow but simply from a heart that is thankful. The verb **give thanks** indicates a public acknowledgment of what God has done (cf. Ps. 52:9). This is testimony to God's **name**, tying the psalm back to the prayer of 54:1: Christ prayed, and now his people pray, that God will work by his revealed promises and nature, and that is what he does. In the shadow of the cross, Jesus prays, "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me" (John 17:11). The use here of the covenant name, **LORD**, is unusual in Psalms 42–83 (the so-called Elohistic Psalter) and emphasizes the covenant context of the whole psalm.

The word **good** overflows with rich meaning, encompassing God's covenantal goodness in himself and all the blessings of that goodness poured out on the Messiah and all who are his. Martin Luther writes, "The name of the Lord does not give the saints anything good beyond what it is in itself, but it is in itself their good thing. And so He gives Himself, and He . . . is Himself the good and complete blessing of the saints." This "name of God is Christ Himself, the Son of God, the Word by which He verbalizes Himself and the name by which He calls Himself in eternity."<sup>18</sup>

7 For he has delivered me from every trouble,  
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies.

The two verbs **has delivered**<sup>19</sup> and **has looked** (which have been called "perfects of confidence")<sup>20</sup> convey what only the Spirit of God and the eye of faith can give to a believer: the assurance that what God has promised he will perform. Even in the midst of troubles, these may be spoken. The phrase **from every trouble** and the phrase **on my enemies** are fronted for emphasis in each line. **Looked in triumph** is literally just "looked," but the sense here is of a godly satisfaction in seeing God's enemies vanquished.<sup>21</sup> Guarding against the abuse of this kind of look, John Calvin writes, "If their satisfaction proceed in any measure from the gratification of a depraved

18 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 10:252–53.

19 The subject of "He has delivered" is either "the LORD" or the "name," that is, God as he has made himself known. The NIV—"You have delivered"—makes for smoother reading (avoiding the switch from the second person in 54:6) but is unnecessary and not supported by the MT.

20 Ross, *Psalms*, 2:242.

21 Goldingay points to "they stare" in Ps. 22:17 for a similar use of the verb "to see." Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:158.

feeling, it must be condemned; but there is certainly a pure and unblameable delight which we may feel in looking upon such illustrations of the divine justice.”<sup>22</sup>

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. We should ponder the circumstances that gave rise to this psalm. Calvin emphasizes the terrifying situation in which David found himself. The psalm is here “to teach us that we should never despair of divine help even in the worst situation. . . . It might have appeared just as credible that God could bring the dead out of the grave, as that he could preserve [David] in such circumstances.”<sup>23</sup>

2. We must never forget that, however deep our distress, we may pray for rescue using the words of this psalm, for “the godly can never be so surprised with trouble, but they may fly to God for delivery, as David doth here; and it is a rare virtue not to forget this relief in depth of distress.”<sup>24</sup>

3. Psalm 54:1 reminds us to pray not simply out of our distress but on the basis of the mighty covenantal revelation that the triune God has given us in Christ.

4. When pondering what it might mean for God to act for us by his “might” (54:1), we do well to heed Luther’s theology of the cross. “What is the strength of God by which he saves us?” he asks, and he answers, “It is that which is a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles. It is weakness, suffering, cross, persecution, etc. These are the weapons of God, these the strengths and powers by which He saves.”<sup>25</sup>

5. The third line of Psalm 54:3 prompts us never to forget that at the heart and root of all hostility to God’s people is a hostility to God, just as it was in the earthly days of Christ (e.g., John 15:18–19, 23).

6. Commenting on the word “faithfulness” in Psalm 54:5, Calvin writes that “nothing can support us in the hour of temptation, when the Divine deliverance may be long delayed, but a firm persuasion that God is true,

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:327.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:321.

<sup>24</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:322.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 10:250.

and that he cannot deceive us by his divine promises.” For “God could no more deny his word than deny himself.”<sup>26</sup>

7. Meditating on the love and beauty of God, Augustine (commenting on the freely offered thanks of 54:6 and the word “good”) emphasizes that our thanksgiving is freely given because it delights in freely given goodness. We thank him not because of what we hope he will give us but “for his own sake.”<sup>27</sup>

8. A good commentary on the response of Psalm 54:6–7 is Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:325–26.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:50.



*Though blessed David spoke this psalm when pursued by Saul, . . . at the same time he also forecasts the . . . plots against the Savior, and in himself foreshadows the Lord's sufferings, . . . and with the eyes of the Spirit he foresaw the Lord suffering the same thing, betrayed . . . and crucified.*

THEODORET OF CYRUS  
*Commentary on the Psalms*

*We may read these strains as expressing David's feelings in some peculiar seasons of distress, and as the experience of Christ's Church in every age. . . . Yet still it is in Jesus, the Man of Sorrows, that the Psalm finds its fullest illustration. His was the soul that was stirred to its lowest depth by scenes such as are described here.*

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

*The spiritual eye ever and anon sees the Son of David and Judas, and the chief priests appearing and disappearing upon the glowing canvas of the Psalm.*

CHARLES H. SPURGEON  
*The Treasury of David*

# PSALM 55

## ORIENTATION

It is hard to exaggerate the pain of betrayal. How did Jesus feel when Judas Iscariot betrayed him? The Gospels offer hints (e.g., John 13:21); Psalm 55 opens wide a window into Jesus's soul. The horror that the disciples felt over Judas's betrayal is evidenced by the remembrance of his treachery almost every time his name is mentioned (e.g., Matt. 10:4; 26:25; 27:3; Mark 14:44; John 6:71; 12:4; 18:2). No doubt Judas did many things; he is remembered for this alone.

Betrayal is the most striking feature of Psalm 55 (cf. 41:9). Many oppose King David, but one stands out, a traitor, and David speaks of him twice (55:12–15, 20–21). Perhaps this was Ahithophel during Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam. 15–17). But the psalm is the last of four designated “A Maskil” (Pss. 52–55), two of which are explicitly linked to the time when David was being hunted by Saul (Pss. 52, 54). So it may arise from some unknown episode during that period; we cannot be sure.

As so often, David the anointed king is a type of Jesus the Messiah. What David experienced is fulfilled in Jesus. When Jesus sang this psalm, he did so with an intensity of feeling we can scarcely imagine.

This fulfillment in Jesus was recognized early in Christian history. A manuscript of Jerome's (ca. 347–ca. 420) Latin version gives this psalm the title *Vox Christi adversus magnatos Judaeorum et Judam traditorem* (The voice of Christ against the leaders of the Jews and the betrayer Judas).<sup>1</sup> Just as Paul bore in his body the marks of Jesus (Gal. 6:17), so, says Theodoret of Cyrus, did David in an earlier age.<sup>2</sup> Christians today must expect the same,

<sup>1</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:308; Ross, *Psalms*, 2:251.

<sup>2</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Psalms*, 1:314.

for the Lord warns us that “brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. . . . And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household” (Matt. 10:21, 36; cf. 24:10). We need to sing this psalm not only because we may expect, in some measure, to experience this betrayal but also so that we will know how to respond with the faith of Psalm 55:22–23. It is no accident that 55:22 is clearly echoed by Peter when writing to Christians under great pressure (1 Pet. 5:7).<sup>3</sup>

There are several verbal and thematic links with Psalms 52, 53, and 54, including urgent prayer (54:1–2; 55:1), issues of life and death (54:3; 55:15), a feeling of terror or horror (53:5; 55:4–5), the judgment of God (52:5; 53:5; 54:5; 55:23), and trust in God (52:7–8; 55:23).

## THE TEXT

### Structure

The most natural divisions emerge when we note that Psalm 55:1–8 expresses sorrow, 55:9–15 indignation, and 55:16–23 assurance.<sup>4</sup>

### Superscription

<sup>5</sup> To the choirmaster:<sup>5</sup> with stringed instruments.<sup>6</sup> A Maskil<sup>7</sup> of David.<sup>8</sup>

These words are shared with part of the superscription to Psalm 54, suggesting that the psalms should be read each in the light of the other.

### 55:1–8 The Deep Sorrow of Christ and His Church

Christ here leads us, as he led David by his Spirit, in an urgent prayer (Ps. 55:1–2), explained by a reason (55:3), followed by a vivid description of

<sup>3</sup> 1 Pet. 5:7 and the LXX of Ps. 55:22 are the only occasions when the verb ἐπιτίπτω occurs with the noun μέμνη in the Greek Bible.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 2:156–61; Kirkpatrick, *Psalms*, 2:308; Hamilton, *Psalms*, 1:526.

<sup>5</sup> See on Ps. 4.

<sup>6</sup> See on Ps. 4; cf. Pss. 6; 54; 61; 67; 76; Hab. 3:19.

<sup>7</sup> See on Ps. 32.

<sup>8</sup> In Hebrew the superscription is verse 1; subsequent verse numbers are increased by one.

his and our misery (55:4–5) and of the depth of his and our longing to escape (55:6–8).

- <sup>1</sup> Give ear to my prayer, O God,  
and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!
- <sup>2</sup> Attend to me, and answer me;  
I am restless in my complaint and I moan,

The **plea for mercy** means an urgent “pleading for compassionate attention.”<sup>9</sup> **Hide not yourself** asks God not to do what he tells us not to do when we see someone in need (e.g., Deut. 22:1–4 [“ignore”]; Isa. 58:7). We pray for God to be like the good Samaritan to us (Luke 10:30–35), to **attend to** (pay attention to) us and **answer** our prayer. The **complaint** is not grumbling but rather a passionate “lament.”<sup>10</sup> The verbs translated **I am restless** and **I moan** are rare, and their meaning is contested. Restlessness is the most likely meaning of the first, although it may have the sense of being beaten down or brought low.<sup>11</sup> To **moan**<sup>12</sup> “similarly suggests wandering about in confusion”<sup>13</sup> with “the dull murmuring sounds of pain.”<sup>14</sup> Psalm 55:2 conveys intense distress.

- <sup>3</sup> because of the noise of the enemy,  
because of the oppression of the wicked.  
For they drop trouble upon me,  
and in anger they bear a grudge against me.

In four lines of increasing intensity, the King describes the reason for his distress.<sup>15</sup> First, **the noise** (lit., “voice,” either the sounds of their

<sup>9</sup> HALOT, s.v. הִתְחַנֵּן.

<sup>10</sup> HALOT, s.v. שִׁיחַ; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:163. The NIV—“my thoughts”—is too weak.

<sup>11</sup> The probable root is רָרַר (“to move oneself backwards and forwards, to be inwardly uneasy”; Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 2:157), although it may be דָּדַד (to beat down) or even יָרַד (to descend). See the discussions in, e.g., Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:167; Wilson, *Psalms*, 1:808n10; VanGemeren, *Psalms*, 451; Ross, *Psalms*, 2:246n3.

<sup>12</sup> Hiphil of הוּם. This is cohortative, perhaps expressive of a wholehearted giving of himself to distressed prayer.

<sup>13</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:167.

<sup>14</sup> Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 2:157.

<sup>15</sup> Alter translates vividly: “From the sound of the enemy, / from the crushing force of the wicked / when they bring mischief down upon me / and in fury harass me.” He describes Ps. 55:3–5



hostility or their actual words, probably the latter in the light of 55:21) of **the enemy** grates on him. Next comes their **oppression**, with the sense of “pressure” and the distress they cause; the noise presses close against the King. Third, as their pressure affects the King, they **drop trouble** (evil, harm) on him. “These are people who push [harm] to the edge of the roof so that it falls down on us as we stand below.”<sup>16</sup> And behind it all, making it so desperately grievous, is the **anger** with which they do this, not lashing out in occasional fury but plotting deliberately and continuously because **they bear a grudge against me** (cf. the long resentment of Esau, Gen. 27:41, and the evil fury experienced by Job, Job 16:9).<sup>17</sup> Such was the pressure on David, reaching its climax in the hostility to Jesus, overflowing in distress for his church.

- 4     My heart is in anguish within me;  
        the terrors of death have fallen upon me.  
 5     Fear and trembling come upon me,  
        and horror overwhelms me.

To be **in anguish** is used of a woman in labor. The book of Job is a study in **terror** (Job 9:34; 13:21; 41:14). **The terrors of death** horrify the King as the darkness descends. **Fear and trembling** intensify this sense, and the word **horror**, a rare strong word that makes us shudder (cf. Ezek. 7:18 in its context), together with the verb **overwhelms** only begins to convey what the Lord Jesus felt as he entered the shadow of the cross.

- 6     And I say, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove!  
        I would fly away and be at rest;  
 7     yes, I would wander far away;  
        I would lodge in the wilderness; *Selah*  
 8     I would hurry to find a shelter  
        from the raging wind and tempest.”

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entirely as a “riveting expression of terror . . . made all the more powerful by the fact that, in an unusual syntactic pattern, the catalog of disasters rolls on in a crescendo that is essentially one long sentence.” Alter, *Psalms*, 191.

<sup>16</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms*, 2:168.

<sup>17</sup> The verb is נִסָּח in all three places.

No wonder the Lord Jesus, like David before him and many believers since, longed deeply to be anywhere but here. The **wings of a dove** (cf. Jer. 48:9, 28) suggest a bird that can nest in safety in a rocky crag.<sup>18</sup> To **lodge** (a temporary stay) **in the wilderness** suggests desperate flight. It is striking that here (as in Ps. 55:19) *Selah* comes in the middle of the sentence. We are encouraged to pause even in the middle of the description. The desperate yearning for any kind of **shelter** in a **raging** storm helps us feel the intensity of the King's distress and the anguish we may expect sometimes to experience as we follow him. Only the deep conviction that "it must be so" could nerve Jesus to refrain from calling on his Father to send legions of angels (Matt. 26:53–54). Only the knowledge of his grace in times of trial will nerve us to stay at our posts, wherever our King may place us.

#### 55:9–15 The Righteous Indignation of Christ and His Church

Psalm 55:9 and 15 bracket this section with a prayer for God to act in judgment on the enemies of the Messiah. This is not inconsistent with the prayer of the Lord Jesus for God to forgive those who crucified him (Luke 23:34) or with our prayers that our enemies will be converted. It expresses what "Your kingdom come" means in the end for those who ultimately refuse to submit to God.

- <sup>9</sup> Destroy, O Lord, divide their tongues;  
for I see violence and strife in the city.
- <sup>10</sup> Day and night they go around it  
on its walls,  
and iniquity and trouble are within it;
- <sup>11</sup> ruin is in its midst;  
oppression and fraud  
do not depart from its marketplace.

Psalm 55:9–11 refers to an unnamed **city**. The allusion (**Divide their tongues**) is to Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), the epitome of godlessness (Babylon

<sup>18</sup> Eveson, *Psalms*, 1:347. Eveson wisely cautions against being misled by the very different tone of Felix Mendelssohn's (1809–1847) famous "O, for the Wings of a Dove!"

in the symbolic language of Revelation).<sup>19</sup> So the prayer to **destroy** (defeat, render futile; cf. “confound,” Isa. 19:3) is that God will do to the cultures that oppose the Messiah what he did to Babel. “It is thus that to this day he weakens the enemies of the Church, and splits them into factions, through the force of mutual animosities, rivalries, and disagreements in opinion.”<sup>20</sup>

The city has strange watchmen going **around it / on its walls**, characterized as **violence** (བཟླ, *khamas*) and **strife**;<sup>21</sup> these “guardians,” far from keeping the city safe, ensure that it is miserable. What John will call “the world” is a murderous place (cf. John 8:44).

If **violence and strife** “guard” the city, **iniquity and trouble** are within it, with the resulting **ruin, oppression, and fraud** that **do not depart from its marketplace**, so that every transaction (commercial and relational) is tainted by endemic deceit (**fraud**) and the abuse of power (**oppression**). This is the world in which Christ and his church in every age must live.

- <sup>12</sup> For it is not an enemy who taunts me—  
       then I could bear it;  
 it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—  
       then I could hide from him.
- <sup>13</sup> But it is you, a man, my equal,  
       my companion, my familiar friend.
- <sup>14</sup> We used to take sweet counsel together;  
       within God’s house we walked in the throng.

Suddenly and unexpectedly the King’s focus narrows to one man. He will return to the plural in Psalm 55:15, for this one is in league with many. But for the moment he alone is in focus. He is not **an enemy** or **an adversary**, that is, an open foe (e.g., the chief priests, scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees, Herodians). Now he **taunts** and **deals insolently** (lit., “makes great,” acts

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:65. Augustine includes here a brilliant riff on Babel and Pentecost: “If there are still pagans on the rampage today, it is just as well that they speak different languages. If they aspire to one common language, let them come to the Church, for here, though we differ in our natural tongues, there is but one language spoken by the faith of our hearts.”

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Psalms*, 2:333.

<sup>21</sup> This seems the most natural reading for the subject of the verb “go around.” See, e.g., Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, WBC 20 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 52; Alter, *Psalms*, 192.

big, throws his weight around), but the time was when he did not. Had he been a known enemy, the King could **bear it** because he **could hide from him**; he could take defensive measures.

**But**—and here the King speaks to him in the pathos of second-person rebuke—it is **you!** In 55:13 he describes him in four ways, as a **man** (the word—עָנוּשׁ, *enosh*—indicating an ordinary person), **my equal** (i.e., someone treated as an equal in the fellowship of the disciple band in which not even their Master will lord it over them),<sup>22</sup> **my companion** (a warm word,<sup>23</sup> the very opposite of hard-edged hostility—they used to greet one another with joyful hugs), and **my familiar friend**.

With this friend there have been treasured memories. **We used to take** rightly conveys the sense of habitual **sweet counsel**, the sharing of thoughts, hopes, and fears. This friendship was not only treasured; it was enjoyed in the context of joyful piety, **within God's house as we walked in the throng** (probably the happy pilgrim gatherings for the exuberant festivals of the covenant, similar in feel to Ps. 42:4).

<sup>15</sup> Let death steal over them;  
let them go down to Sheol alive;  
for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.

Since the betrayer is an agent of Satan (Luke 22:3), he is aligned with all the Messiah's enemies. It is therefore natural for David, and for Jesus, to move back to the plural **them**. The verb **steal over** probably has the sense of taking them by surprise;<sup>24</sup> they have plotted to take the Messiah's life, but unless they repent, they will discover to their horror that it is their lives that are forfeit. Like Korah and those with him (who rebelled against God's leader in their day, Num. 16), they will **go down to Sheol alive**, that is, in a sudden and fatal judgment.<sup>25</sup> Whether or not this happens in this life, it will

<sup>22</sup> "What heart-piercing significance this word ['my equal'] obtains when found in the mouth of the second David, who, although the Son of God and peerless King, nevertheless entered into the most intimate human relationship as the Son of man to His disciples, and among them to that Iscariot!" Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 2:160.

<sup>23</sup> Meaning "docile" and hence "familiar friend, trusted, intimate friend." Ross, *Psalms*, 2:247n18, 257.

<sup>24</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, 2:248n20.

<sup>25</sup> Here is the tragic end of Judas Iscariot's life. This "sudden destruction" is alluded to here "as the grand representation of the manner in which the bottomless pit shall one day shut her mouth for ever

happen. The final line makes clear that these are not occasional enemies, people who are good at heart; no, **evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart**. “Such as give entertainment and lodging unto wickedness, shall have hell for their lodging, where wickedness lodgeth.”<sup>26</sup>

### 55:16–23 The Steadfast Confidence of Christ and His Church

- <sup>16</sup> But I call to God,  
and the LORD will save me.
- <sup>17</sup> Evening and morning and at noon  
I utter my complaint and moan,  
and he hears my voice.
- <sup>18</sup> He redeems my soul in safety  
from the battle that I wage,  
for many are arrayed against me.

While Psalm 55:16–23 reprises some themes already voiced (notably, urgent prayer and painful betrayal), we have here a window into the life of faith and how assurance can rise from lament (55:1–8) and prayer (55:9–15). **But I** is emphatic;<sup>27</sup> assurance of answered prayer is the birthright of Christ (John 11:42) and is given, in his name, to David and all the church.<sup>28</sup> The use of the covenant name, **the LORD** (rare in this part of the Psalter), emphasizes the covenantal nature of this the King’s confidence.

The intense persistence (**evening and morning and at noon**) and the passion of his prayer are reiterated in the first two lines of Psalm 55:17. The verb **utter my complaint** is cognate with the noun “complaint” in 55:2. The verb **moan**, while different from that translated “moan” in 55:2, means much the same.

**He redeems my soul**, my whole life, **in safety**. The Messiah is in the midst of **battle**, spiritual warfare of a most intense form, with **many** . . .

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upon all the impenitent enemies of the true King of Israel, and great High Priest of our profession.”  
George Horne, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (London: Longman, Brown, 1843), 212.

<sup>26</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:330.

<sup>27</sup> נִשָּׂא without even a linking vav.

<sup>28</sup> With characteristic emphasis on Christ as the head of the church, Augustine writes of the singular here, that “the body of Christ . . . is crying out in its anguish, its weariness, its affliction, in the distress of its ordeal. It is . . . a unity grounded in an individual body, and in the distress of its soul it cries from the bounds of the earth.” Augustine, *Psalms*, 3:70.

**arrayed against** him (cf. 3:1–2, 6). Facing overwhelming odds (cf. Acts 4:27), both the Messiah and his church may be confident that the covenant God will redeem them. God has redeemed the incarnate Son, and in him, he will redeem all his people (cf. Rom. 8:23).

<sup>19</sup> God will give ear and humble them,  
       he who is enthroned from of old, *Selah*  
 because they do not change  
       and do not fear God.

In Psalm 55:19 the focus begins to shift from the confidence of the Messiah to the just judgment on which this confidence is based. **God will give ear** to the prayers of his Messiah, and therefore he will **humble** the adversaries.<sup>29</sup> As in 55:7, *Selah* comes in the middle of the sentence, inviting us to pause and meditate on what God will do, before the second part of the verse shows us why he will do it—**because they do not change**. Because of the parallel with **and do not fear God**, it seems that their not changing has the sense of being fixed in their godless ways, settled in their hostility to Christ and his people.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>20</sup> My companion stretched out his hand against his friends;  
       he violated his covenant.  
<sup>21</sup> His speech was smooth as butter,  
       yet war was in his heart;  
       his words were softer than oil,  
       yet they were drawn swords.

In 55:20–21 the Messiah speaks again, with pain in his voice, about his betrayer. **My companion** (unexpressed in Hebrew) is added by most translators to make clear that the subject of the verb must be the betrayer of 55:12–14. The word **friends** means those who were at peace with him

<sup>29</sup> The verb may be understood to mean “will answer (i.e., with the paradoxical answer of judgment)” or “will humble.” The general sense is much the same.

<sup>30</sup> The NIV radically reorders the Hebrew to put “who does not change” as a description of “God, who is enthroned from of old.” This makes for an easier reading but involves some violence to the Hebrew word order.

(so there was no possible justification for his treachery). To **violate a covenant** means to treat it as profane rather than sacred in the sight of God. A covenant of friendship bound the traitor to the King; he violated it.

What makes it worse—and this is so with any betrayal of trust—is that his words contradict his heart and actions. Deceit is a companion to malice, for words are often weaponized (cf. Ps. 52; John 8:44). Twice we are told about his language—**his speech** being **smooth as butter** and **his words** being **softer than oil**. What a smooth, soft, sweet talker he is, how persuasive, how seemingly gentle, nice, friendly, and warm! And yet because **in his heart** there is the deep hostility of **war** (he is opposed in principle to God's Messiah and his people), therefore his words, in their effect, are **drawn swords**, sharp, piercing, ready to harm. How frightening are smooth words from a hostile heart.

22     Cast your burden on the LORD,  
           and he will sustain you;  
           he will never permit  
           the righteous to be moved.

The sufferings of the King have bequeathed this precious promise to his church.<sup>31</sup> **Burden** means something allotted to someone, here with the sense of “the care, anxiety, etc. which are thy portion.”<sup>32</sup> And yet our Messiah here promises, as he himself experienced, not that the Father will simply remove the burden but that **he will sustain you** under it. The reason, a cause that reaches deep into the heart of God, is that **he will never**—never!—**permit / the righteous** (those who are righteous by faith) **to be moved**, to be shaken, to slip, to slide into destruction. This is true of the King and the individual believer (cf. Pss. 15:5; 21:7), and it is true of the Messiah's church as a whole (e.g., 46:5). The enduring reliability of this glorious promise, given to new covenant believers afresh in 1 Peter 5:7, rests on the unchangeable rock that the Father was as willing as he was able to sustain his Son and that the triune God is today as willing as God is able to hold fast every man and woman in Christ.

31 Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:202.

32 BDB, s.v. נָשָׂא.

23 But you, O God, will cast them down  
 into the pit of destruction;  
 men of blood and treachery  
 shall not live out half their days.  
 But I will trust in you.

While we might prefer the psalm to end with Psalm 55:22, the final verse (55:23) is necessary. **But you, O God** is emphatic, just as “I” was emphatic at the start of 55:16. The necessary counterpart to God’s upholding of his Messiah and his church is that he must and **will cast . . . down** his finally impenitent foes. The **pit of destruction** (“the pit of the abyss”) means not simply death but ultimately hell. These are **men of blood** (cf. “violence,” 55:9), who live by harming others, and they are **men of . . . treachery**, who operate by deceit, with a desperate discord between their words and hearts. They are children of the original liar and murderer (John 8:44). On some, like Saul of Tarsus, God had mercy. But some will never repent. These, in the vivid language of the verse, **shall not live out half their days**. While this may be true of some evildoers because they die an early death (cf. Acts 5:1–11), it is not true of all. Many of the righteous do not live out half the earthly life they might expect; Jesus himself died young. The verse teaches not that all evildoers literally die young but that an untimely death in this life is a picture and warning of the terrible eternal judgment that will come to all who do not repent (cf. Luke 13:1–5).

It is only because of the assurance of this final judgment that we may pray, as Jesus prayed, the final words with confidence: **But I** (emphatic) **will trust in you**.

## REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

1. Before making these words our prayer, both individually and corporately in Christ, it is seemly for us to meditate on what they must have meant for Jesus in his earthly trials and especially in the sharp pain of his betrayal. For even though he knew that he must be betrayed and that Judas would be the traitor (John 13:21–30), the pain to his sinless heart must have been every bit as intense as this psalm conveys.



2. As we pray Psalm 55:1–5 as men and women in Christ, we must allow ourselves to feel the misery of sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Meditating on the intense distress of 55:1–2, David Dickson writes, “Though a child of God were ever so stout-hearted naturally, yet when God exerciseth his spirit with trouble, he shall be made to weep before God as a child, and must not be ashamed to be thus humbled before him.” Commenting on 55:4–5, he writes, “It is not a thing inconsistent with godliness to be much moved with fear in time of danger; natural affections are not taken away in conversion, but sanctified and moderated.”<sup>33</sup>

3. Psalm 55:6–8 helps us vocalize our natural and sometimes desperate longings to escape the miseries of this age. We express them; we feel them; and then, with Christ the Savior, who prayed in Gethsemane, we resolve afresh that we will walk in Jesus’s footsteps and not succumb to them.

4. Psalm 55:9–11 assists us in gaining a true perspective on Babylon, “the world,” and to see behind its deceptive facade (cf. 1 John 2:15–17). For the cultures in which we must live are deeply marked by violence (people harming people), strife (people fighting people), iniquity and trouble (people causing misery for people), ruin (people destroying beauty and goodness), oppression (people using power for their own ends), and fraud (people deceiving people).

5. When we sing of the enemies of our King and his people, we remember that we do not know the future. Some, like Saul of Tarsus, will prove to be brothers or sisters in Christ in days to come. We pray for our enemies even as we pray for the victory of God’s Messiah.

6. Commenting on the description of the betrayer in Psalm 55:12–14, Derek Kidner astutely observes that such a betrayal is exactly what David himself had done to “one of his staunchest friends,” Uriah the Hittite (cf. 2 Sam. 23:39).<sup>34</sup> Before the psalm helps nerve us to face the pain of being betrayed by a professing brother or sister in the visible church, we need first to repent of our own unfaithfulness and resolve not to prove traitors ourselves.

7. “In driving God’s servant to prayer,” writes Kidner perceptively, “the enemy has already overreached himself; a fact worth remembering.”<sup>35</sup> By

<sup>33</sup> Dickson, *Psalms*, 1:326–27.

<sup>34</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:200.

<sup>35</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 1:201.

the time we finish praying Psalm 55:16–23, we hope that the Holy Spirit will work in us to feel and know afresh this covenantal confidence of our King as we face whatever trials are given us as our “lot.” Psalm 55:22 is a precious promise. Picking up the idea of an allotted burden, Charles Spurgeon writes, “He cast thy lot for thee, cast thy lot on him. He gives thee thy portion of suffering, accept it with cheerful resignation, and then take it back to him by thine assured confidence.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 1.2:451.

*When you are being pursued and certain ones are perpetrating slander . . . do not succumb to weariness, but being confident in the Lord and hymning him, recite the things in [Psalms 54 and 56].*

ATHANASIUS  
*Letter to Marcellinus*

*Whatever pressure the saints may endure, let them turn their thoughts to this psalm and recognize themselves in it.*

AUGUSTINE  
*Expositions of the Psalms*

*[Jesus's] every tear was precious, his every step was marked; the book of remembrance has a record of these so vast, and ample and full, that, were it published here, "I suppose the world itself could not contain the volumes that could be written."*

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