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meditations–psalms
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edition: April 13, 2024

table of contents

Introduction to the book of psalms

Meditation 1— canonical approach

Looking back at antiquity, individual psalms can be understood within principally three settings. First is their original, "historical" setting, or sitz-im-leben. Second is their temple setting. Third is their setting within the Book of Psalm as it has come to us.

It seems likely that for the most part individual psalms, whether near or far in their present order within the Psalter, were originally as independent, unique, time and circumstance conditioned, and unrelated to one another as are, say, the anguished prayer of a young mother who has lost a child, the confused prayer of a teenager lost in teenage angst, the innocent prayer of a child who seeks help in finding a lost toy, the grateful prayer of a grandfather during a cherished family gathering, the pastor's concluding prayer at the end of a worship service, or the musings of a theologian on the nature of God, or good, or evil. Just as it is reasonable, perhaps necessary, to study each of these prayers or musings in light of these original settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc., in order to fully comprehend their meaning and significance, it is reasonable, perhaps necessary, to translate and study individual psalms of the Hebrew Psalter in light of their original settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc.

We appreciate and applaud those who attempt this type of translation and explication of individual psalms. We learn much from them. At the same time, we are all too aware of the limitations in our ability to identify the original settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc., of psalms composed millennia ago. We often simply lack the information from outside the Book of Psalms itself necessary to accomplish the desired task. Such translation and explication of individual psalms often becomes speculative and subjective. This is not intended as criticism, as even such speculative and subjective observations can be informative, inspiring, and thought provoking such as to lead to further understanding of the human condition and theological possibilities as understood through the eyes of the Psalmist.

Generally speaking, I eschew attempts to define *original* settings, forms, functions, composers, audiences, needs, uncertainties, appreciations, etc. in this present translation and explication of the Book of Psalms, though I do occasionally give a nod to such considerations. In part, I eschew such attempts because of what I feel has been the uneven and unsatisfactory nature of others attempts. We simply lack the necessary data for firm, confident, and enduring conclusions on such matters. To be honest, I also eschew such attempts because I lack the intellectual wherewithal to pull off such a daunting task. So, I'll leave it to others, braver and smarter than I.

It is almost universally agreed that whatever the original settings of individual psalms found in the Book of Psalms, many of them were used in Israel's ancient temples. While it is possible that some few psalms might have originally been written specifically for temple use, most so used were adapted and adopted for temple use from whatever other original settings and usages might previously have been.

Examining the possible temple settings for individual psalms can be fascinating and rewarding. I again value and applaud the work of so many in this effort of establishing possible temple settings for individual psalms. I have often found my own temple experience inside LDS temples to have been amplified because of insights found in such investigations. Again, however, we lack sufficient knowledge

about Israel's temple from outside the Book of Psalms to be definitive about the temple setting of individual psalms. As heroic as the effort has been, it has been highly speculative and subjective, producing a plethora of differing and competing views. If providence allows me sufficient life longevity, I would love to explore in detail this aspect of many an individual psalm. But, though I will, again, offer the occasional nod toward the question of psalm use in Israel's temple worship, it will by no means be a guiding star of any kind in my translation or explication of the psalms.

Whatever the original settings of individual psalms—temple or not—someone, likely, many someones, gathered, compiled, edited, and ordered the psalms into the Book of Psalms as we have it today. The ordering of the psalms, the placement of individual psalms with disparate original settings next to one another in that ordering, and the collection of the psalms into five books[1] were imposed upon the individual psalms. It seems unlikely that the psalms were collected and then strung together haphazardly. Rather, it seems likely that the ordering of the psalms possessed reason, meaning, and purpose to those who so ordered them.

Establishing the significance of the ordering and the potential relationships between conjoining psalms and psalms belonging to the same book is a significant effort. Like the effort of ferreting out original or temple settings for individual psalms, the effort to establish possible significance of ordering or reason for conjoining individual psalms is subjective. Welcome to being human. However, this approach has the advantage of not being dependent upon any outside information. One has only the material at hand to consider.

The ordering of the psalms as we have them in the Book of Psalms, the relationship between conjoining psalms, and the relationships within smaller collections of psalms within the greater whole will play a significant role in my translation and explication of each individual psalm. Some might call this holistic approach "canonical." But this approach is not science—as if science is the only legitimate means by which one subjects their inherited world to investigation. There is no doubt whatsoever that others can and have found other explanations for the canonical structure of the Book of Psalms. Some might be more learned and reasoned than mine. No doubt, one is benefited by multiple perspectives. There is little room for dogmatism over such matters.

All any of us can do, certainly all *I* can do is interact with the Book as it speaks *to* me and as it speaks *of* me; for, as the writer of the New Testament's Book of Hebrews recognized, scripture is better at reading an earnest reader us than an earnest reader is at reading it.

> "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is *a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (Heb. 4.[12]).

This scriptural discernment of the individual earnest reader is, I believe, central to scripture's divine mission. It is of incalculable importance and benefit. At least, that is how it seems to me. The translation and explication of the Book of Psalms that is found in this work is a direct and unavoidable result of this scriptural mission. There is no reason for anyone to apologize for such grace. Certainly, I will not apologize for the grace God has given me as I have opened myself to the discerning power of this most incredible of Books—the Book of Psalms.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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[1] The five books are 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, 107–150. Or, if one considers Psalms 1 and 2 as a kind of introduction to the entire Psalmer and Psalm 150 as a doxology to the entire Psalter, then the five books are 3-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, and 107-149.

(edition: december 10, 2023)

psalm 1

meditation 1— introductory

Psalms 1 and 2 have long been viewed by many exegetes as intimately connected. It has even been suggested that they were at one time a single psalm. Too much water has passed under the bridge for us to be certain about the second contention, but a close reading today does persuade the careful reader that the two Psalms do, at the very least, play off and complement one another. Many have pointed out that Psalm 2 ends on the same note with which Psalm 1 began: *'ašrê*, which we translated as "truly fulfilled" in Psalm 1 and "enduring" in Psalm 2. Both psalms, then, have an acute interest in establishing of what the truly "happy," "fulfilled," "enduring," and "progressive" life consists.

Psalm 1 teaches that a life of advancement and fulfillment consists of rooting oneself deeply in the guidance and values that God provides in scripture, and in striving to live according to that guidance (1.[2]). At the same time, the life of advancement and fulfilment consists of rejecting the guidance of the malevolently immoral, whose guilty behavior is antithetical to a healthy and enduring society (1.[1]), and in rejecting their often boisterous demands for influence and power in society (1.[5-6]). Through metaphor, it recapitulates the state of those who do and do not follow God's guidance as found in his word (1.[3-4]).

Psalm 2 speaks to the proliferating and dominating nature of this world's rebellion against God. Here, the counsel of Psalm 1 has gone unheeded. The rebellious have been given a place in governance, "in a place of decision making." They have become kings and rulers. And these world leaders are in open rebellion against God and him whom God calls as His servant/ son: Messiah (2.[1-3]). In its original context, this Messiah was Judah's monarch. For Christianity, Messiah became Jesus of Nazareth—the one who truly took God's guidance to heart and lived it throughout his too-short life.

As Messiah and those who follow him abide in the word of God, they live a fulfilling and enduring life in which they overcome the destructive influences and power of those who rebel against God (2.[8-9]). Those who rebel against God know no such joy. They are defeated in their rebellion against God and, if they do not repent, find their advancement stymied and their lives cut short (2.[10-12]).

It would be hard to overestimate, then, the importance and pertinence of these two psalms in today's world. Here, both individuals and nations can find much to guide them in their attitudes and behaviors. The two paths, advancement and endurance, or damnation and annihilation, are clearly set forth. All are free to choose their path, but not the consequences of their choice. Each path contains within its course, its own inevitable destination.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

meditation 2— introductory

There is extraordinarily wide agreement that the Book of Psalms represents ancient Israel's hymnbook and that many, perhaps most of the psalms were used in Israel's ancient temple—some perhaps written specifically for various temple uses and others only adopted second-handedly for use in the temple. Prayers directed to God dominate the Book.

Yet, we note that the very first two Psalms are not prayers. As mentioned in the previous meditation, many think of these first two Psalms almost as one and feel that they represent an appropriate introduction to the Book of Psalms as a whole. If we think of these two psalms as introductory, then we are not surprised that they do not adopt the form of prayer. Have a look at any modern hymnal, often called "Prayer Book," and one will find an introduction that does not take the form of prayer but serves as introduction to the hymns/ prayers found in the collection.

Still, if these two psalms can be thought of as introductory, they still strike me as having an odd starting point. What do I find odd? Let me explain.

A religious book of hymns and prayers, it seems, has God as its principal focus. I am struck, then, by the fact that in Psalm 1 God is not mentioned first. He is not found in the first verse. We meet Him in the second verse, but only obliquely, through the direction He provides in Tôrâ. O.K. maybe I am making a mountain out of a mole hill.

Still.

After this rather oblique mention of God in verse 2, He gets no more press until the final verse, where we learn that He is a sustaining influence in the lives of those who strive to do right as He identifies "right" in Tôrâ.

Still.

If we slide right on into Psalm 2, we are made to wait until verse four before anything of consequence is said about God directly. Yes, we are informed that God has those who oppose Him, but that hardly constitutes a saying about God Himself. With verse four and then to the end of the Psalm, God finally is a or the prime actor.

Maybe such observations are meaningless.

And yet.

I can't help myself. I can't help but note that those who are "malevolently immoral," those who are "wrongdoers," those who are "contemptuously antisocial" get first billing in Psalm 1, being mentioned before God. These individuals stand in opposition to God and offer life directions that oppose His Tôrâ teachings. Then again, I can't help noticing that the Psalm concludes with the "malevolently immoral" and the ruin they bring to themselves by their life choices.

Maybe it's nothing.

Or, maybe it's something.

When we slide on over to Psalm 2, we are greeted, again, by national leaders who oppose God. God's opposers get top billing here, just as they did in Psalm 1, being mentioned before God.

And it makes me wonder. Is there a message in this strange and unexpected pattern?

Maybe.

I remember how many years ago I was startled by Genesis' introductory story about mortal human beings. Genesis introduced us to the post-garden-of-Eden version of humanity with a murder. A murder, of all things! Why start the story of humankind on earth with a violent story of homicide, fratricide, even?

Did it mean something, this way of introducing humankind? Was it trying to tell us something? Something about ourselves?

After many years of studying and examining not only this introduction of post-garden humans but the structure of Genesis as a whole, I concluded that there was genius to Genesis' mad introduction of humankind. The introduction's message is repeated over and over again in the course of Genesis' fifty chapters. The writers and editors of Genesis concluded pretty quickly that human beings are a violent breed of creature. Violence and violent killing is in their DNA. It is as good a summary of human disposition and character as any. And, indeed, it didn't take God long to figure it out either. "The earth," He lamented, "is filled with violence through them" (Gen. 6.[13]). Speaking to Enoch, God lamented further,

> "And unto thy brethren have I said, and also given commandment, that they should love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father; but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood" (Moses 7.[33]).

But, back to Psalms. What, if anything, am I supposed to make of the fact that in both introductory Psalms, Psalms 1 and 2, those who oppose God—the malevolently immoral, wrongdoers, the contemptuously antisocial, and national leaders who dominate human affairs—these all get first and top billing? What am I to think as I proceed to read the remaining 148 Psalms over and over again and find these same individuals and classes everywhere? Over. And. Over. Again.

Well, I don't know about you, but I conclude that I need to be aware that there are many who oppose God. They are dominant. Yes, God will, eventually, have the upper hand on them. This hope keeps me from falling into the abyss. But in the meantime, the many who oppose God are going to pollute the planet with their noxious and poisonous brew of violence, hatred, rape, pillage, and violent death. Billions upon billions have and will die a violent death. Billions upon billions have and will violently oppose God and tempt me to do likewise—upon threat of death myself if I remain stubbornly noncompliant to their warped and twisted principles. Billions of billions have and will be cowed into complicit silence or outright collaboration.

Yes, the Psalmists seem to say to me, "It's a mad, mad world you live in."

> "…The heart of the sons of men
> is full of evil,
> and madness is in their heart
> while they live…" (Eccl. 9.[3])

"I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord…" (Ps. 27.[13]).

But God be praised. For "by thy word is thy servant warned" (Ps. 19.[11]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

meditation 3— psalm 1.[1–2]

[1]How truly fulfilled is one who
does not walk as directed by the malevolently immoral,

does not stand in the path of wrongdoers,
and does not sit in gatherings with the contemptuously antisocial!
[2]Rather, their preference is for YHWH's Tôrâ,
and they consult his Tôrâ at all times (author's translation).

The Book of Psalms begins with a macarism, or statement of happiness, fulfillment, and advancement. The statement begins with a warning about those attitudes, behaviors, and individuals that are to be avoided, as they are detrimental to happiness. Just as in the verse's structure—one progresses from walking to standing (more permanent) to sitting (more permanent still)—these attitudes, behaviors, and individuals have a way of devolving and metastasizing. One begins by only listening and hearing with interest. This degenerates to agreeing, following, and adopting as one's own the immoral values of people of questionably character. This devolves into joining and engaging in full-scall collaboration with characters of immoral values to undermine the welfare of other individuals and society in general. Before one knows what is happening, the transformation is complete so that one becomes, themselves, malevolently immoral, guilty of wrongdoing, and contemptuously antisocial. This is the path of unhappiness.

Opposed to this is the way of happiness. This way rejects the ways of the malevolently immoral, the wrongdoer, and the contemptuously antisocial, and centers its attention and interest on God and the wise direction He provides. This direction cannot be understood, appreciated, and internalized through casual observation. This quest for understanding, appreciation, and internalization requires full-time attention. It must become life's first priority. The barrage of this world's impiety is unrelenting. Our quest to understand and live by God's directions must be equally unrelenting. Only then can we hope to be translated, rescued from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 1.[1–2]

How truly fulfilled

The Book of Psalms begins with a macarism, or statement of happiness, fulfillment, and advancement. Those who wrote and edited the Book of Psalms were not modest in their intentions. They had big hopes for their work. They hoped and intended that it should, could, and would provide clear signs and signals leading to the godly happiness, fulfillment, and advancement of its readers.

The Hebrew word, *'ašrê*, translated here as "fulfilled," is variously translated, most often as "happy" or "blessed." I am persuaded by proposals that the Hebrew word likely comes from the root, *ʾšr*, meaning, "to go straight," or "to advance." To be *'ašrê* is to be advancing toward one's intended destination. The happy or blessed or fulfilled individual is the one who is advancing. The advance may be slow and halting. It is certainly flawed and imperfect. But the important thing is to be moving forward. There is joy in progress and advancement: in moving forward, however meager the advancement may be.

If one thinks about it, the English word, "blessed," implies advancement and progress. We speak, for example, of "giving or receiving a blessing" to one who is sick or in some way debilitated or weakened. What we really seek in such blessings is "improvement" of health and functionality. As another example, we "ask a blessing" upon our food. In this, we ask that our food be somehow impacted so that we are bettered by having partaken of it. And we ask God to "bless" sacramental bread and water so that it become something more than what meets the eye and imbue us with spiritual improvement and capacity beyond our natural abilities.

So, everything points to the idea of Hebrew, *'ašrê,* and English "blessedness" being bound up with advancement, progress, improvement, betterment, etc. The first word of the Book of Psalms informs the reader of the Book's principal aim. The Book of Psalms aims to direct and propel one's forward movement and progress. It is meant to improve and better the lives and character of individuals and the nature and character of societies. The Book is, then, inspired by the same aim as the Being who inspired it: "This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1.[39])

As one reads the Psalms, one is presented with signs. These signs direct the sojourner forward, advancing them toward their destination: the city of God, where they not only find "his image in [their] countenances" (See Al. 7.[14]), and where they mingle with others so imaged, but where they see the very face of God and behold "the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27.[4]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: December 11, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm 1.[1–2]

does not walk as directed by the malevolently immoral,
does not stand in the path of wrongdoers,
and does not sit in gatherings with the contemptuously antisocial!

The Book of Psalms telegraphs its aims by beginning with a macarism, or statement of happiness, fulfillment, and advancement. It aims to provide direction and motivation for moving forward. It aims to aid in the advancement of the individual and society. The final destination is godliness and, indeed, God, Himself.

The poet's choice for his place of departure might seem odd. Rather than signaling what to do, he begins with warning signs about what not to do. There are dangers along the way. There are forces that stand in opposition to God and those who love and seek to follow Him. In order to advance, one must avoid these dangers and resist these forces. One must avoid attitudes, behaviors, and individuals that are detrimental to progress and the happiness that infuses such advancement. There is a course that leads to God. But there are many courses that lead away from him. These courses have their own logic and perverse versions of "progress."

In the structure of the second, third, and fourth lines of the Book's first verse, we are presented with one perverse version of "progress." In these lines, one "progresses" from walking to the less advancing "standing" to the even less advancing "sitting." By the third line, advancement is stalled. But, what, exactly is it that stalled progress?

Our journey along the path begins to stall when we listen with interest to individuals of questionable character, "the malevolently immoral," who are all too happy to walk along with us and provide

directions for our journey. Soon enough, we find ourselves on their path.

Our advancement stalls further when we stop walking altogether and stand still with them on the path. We give them a hearing. Begin to agree, follow, and adopt the malevolent and immoral values of people of questionably character who do wrong. Soon their values become our values.

Before we know it, our progress degenerates further as we actually sit down with them. We join them. We engage in full-scale collaboration with individuals, those who are "contemptuously antisocial," whose values undermine not only our journey but the welfare of others and of society as a whole. Before we know it, our transformation is complete. We devolve, metastasize into one who is malevolently immoral, guilty of wrongdoing, and contemptuously antisocial. Our life is one of disruption. We are on the path of unhappiness: our progress and advancement toward God halted.

Before it begins its extensive directions for advancing along the path of happiness, the Book of Psalms warns us about the dangers present along the path that would thwart our advance. It warns us—as it will do many, many times in the course of its 150 Psalms—of those who are "malevolently immoral," "wrongdoers," and "contemptuously antisocial." These individuals and their twisted values are all too real. All too dangerous. And all too damning. And all too common. They thwart advancement and destroy happiness, not only of individuals but of societies.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 15, 2023)

meditation 6— psalm 1.[1-2]

does not walk as directed by those who are malevolently immoral

As its first word telegraphs, the Book of Psalms aims to direct the individual and society in their path in and to happiness, fulfillment, and advancement. Before the Book begins to raise its many signs leading the way, the first psalm warns that there will be some who will seek to lead us off the path and stop our advancement. These are the "malevolently immoral," those who do wrong," and the "contemptuously antisocial." We should consider each of these in turn.

God is the principal figure in Psalms. The Book is mostly about Him—what kind of Being He is, and how He impacts our lives. We are the next most important figure in Psalms—who we are, what we are without God, what we can do and be with God in our lives, and how we draw a willing God into our lives? Perhaps the next most important figure in Psalms is the enemy. They appear in about two-thirds of the Psalms. The enemies found in the Psalms go by many names. One of their common names is, "the malevolently immoral." This is my translation of Hebrew, *rāšāʿ*.

As this is the first time that we meet this word and the important, if infamous group it represents, we should take a moment to explore the word. A wide variety of translators and translation committees have traditionally and most often translated *rāšāʿ* as "wicked." "Ungodly" is a distant second. The word seems to reflect attitudes and behaviors that are wrong and bring a sentence of guilt. Such individuals' attitudes and behaviors are contrary to both divine and societal norms. These attitudes and behaviors are not simply indicative of a character flaw in the individuals called *rāšāʿ*. Just as importantly, such individuals are *rāšāʿ* because they engage in willful and purposeful public thoughts and behaviors that they fully recognize as likely being wrong and harmful to others and to society as a whole.

As we will observe about the word, *ḥesed*—our, "unwavering devotion"— Hebrew, *rāšāʿ*. feels too big

for a single English word translation. Our “malevolently immoral” attempts to get at this multifaceted word. “Malevolence,” is no accident. It suggests that which is intentional and purposeful. It also reflects a willingness and desire to harm others. “Immoral” gets at the idea of going against norms—divine and societal. All but the antisocial would agree that the “malevolently immoral” are guilty and subject to the threat of sanction.

On might wonder, why not simply “immoral.” Two reasons. First, Hebrew, *rāšāʿ*, is always intentional and, more importantly, harmful to others. The second reason has to do with my own sense of what “immoral” has come to mean in my LDS culture. Immorality is almost exclusively seen in terms of sexuality. Behavior identified as *rāšāʿ*, goes well outside of and beyond sex. It includes all types of human interaction, but is especially suited to economic matters and how we treat one another in relation to economic class.

Anyway, the ”malevolently immoral” will make many appearances in the Book of Psalms. There may, in fact, be nowhere in scripture where we find better and more detailed descriptions of what it means to be malevolently immoral, wicked, or ungodly. In this first psalm, we learn that the malevolently immoral purposefully live a life contrary to the directions of Tôrâ. This means that they not only live contrary to God’s expectations of humanity, but contrary to the very nature of God.

The Book of Psalms will portray and identify the malevolently immoral in a thousand ways. But, as here, that identification is not intended merely to judge or condemn them. Rather, the Psalms identifies them so that we might know how to avoid them, their suggestions, and the sort of life that makes a fulfilled, secure, happy, and advancing life impossible. There is no fulfillment, no security, no happiness, no advancement in the life identified as “malevolently immoral.”

It was fashionable for a time to ask, “What would Jesus do?” WWJD. This is the same as, “What would God do,” WWGD, because, according to the Gospel witness, Jesus of Nazareth was, first and foremost, sent by God to reveal the true nature of God.

Now, we cannot always think and speak and do as Jesus. We are imperfect. The Psalmists were imperfect, as they so often and boldly confess. But we can STDWJD, “Strive to do what Jesus did.” We can announce it as our goal and make it clear that we are working toward accomplishing it more consistently. The “malevolently immoral” are those who do not do what Jesus would do. Worse, they do not *strive* to do what Jesus would do. They very purposefully do those things that Jesus would never do.

For those who do as this first psalm encourages—consult the word of God at all times and in all things—the malevolently immoral are as easy to discern as a murderer standing in a line-up covered in the victim’s blood. We can “associate” with the malevolently immoral only enough to invite them to repentance. In word and deed, we can serve as a warning to them. But they are not to be listened to. They are not to be agreed with. They are not to be collaborated with. By such avoidance, we go far toward experiencing true fulfillment, and continuing our advancement toward God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

meditation 7— psalm 1.1-2

does not stand in the path of wrongdoers.

Hebrew poetry is best known for its parallel line structure. Sometimes that parallelism is synthetic in

which ideas from one line are repeated, or, perhaps more accurately, expanded or amplified in the next. The example I always use is:

> 1st line: "I went to the store."
> 2nd line: "I went to Costco."

Both say, essentially, the same thing, and yet, not quite the same thing. The 2nd, 3rd, and 4th lines of Psalm 1.[1]. are synthetically parallel, each relaying a similar idea, yet not quite the same idea. "How truly fulfilled is one who

> "does not walk as directed by the malevolently immoral,
> does not stand in the path of wrongdoers,
> and does not sit in gatherings with the contemptuously antisocial!"

In our previous meditation, we considered the nature of the "malevolently immoral." They are individuals whose thoughts, words, and deeds are contrary to both divine and societal norms. Their attitudes and behaviors are not only indicative of deep, private character flaws, but of purposeful intent to wrong and harm others and society as a whole. They are distinctly ungodlike.

With the next line's "wrongdoers"—parallel to "malevolently immoral"—the Psalmist offers another way of viewing the malevolently immoral. The malevolently immoral and wrongdoers are not to be thought of as separate entities or classes or people. They are the same. The malevolently immoral is one who does wrong. Malevolent immorality is not simply an existential state. The malevolently immoral put their inner thoughts and desires into action. The word we translation as "wrongdoer" (Hebrew, *ḥaṭṭāʾ*), deals with concrete and habitual behavior in relation to those with whom we have relationship. It is reflective of disloyalty within and an abuse of those personal relationships. Wrongdoers violate the rights and dignity of others.

The traditional translation of *ḥaṭṭāʾ* is "sin." I find this translation unsatisfactory. In today's world, we view "sin" in strictly religious terms. We do not use it in relation to what we think of as secular. Yet, Hebrew *ḥaṭṭāʾ* includes behaviors that we think of as secular today. For example, if a lawmaker is found to be corrupt in some way, or if they help in the passing of hurtful legislation, we do not speak of them as having committed "sin." Yet, such behavior would come under the rubric of *ḥaṭṭāʾ* in Hebrew.

As you can see, there is a good degree of overlap between "the malevolently immoral" and the "wrongdoer."

For those who do as this first psalm encourages—consult the word of God at all times and in all things—malevolently immoral wrongdoers are as easy to discern as a murderer standing in a line-up covered in the victim's blood. We can "associate" with malevolently immoral wrongdoers only so far as inviting them to repentance. In word and deed, we can serve as a warning to them. But their counsel is not to be listened to or agreed with. Their behavior is not to be imitated. They are not to be collaborated with. By such avoidance, we experience true fulfillment, and continue our advancement toward God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 8— psalm 1.1-2

and does not sit in gatherings with the contemptuously antisocial!

This fourth line of Psalm 1 is in synthetic parallelism with the two previous lines. It warns us against collaboration with the "contemptuously antisocial." It does more than suggest a relationship between the "malevolently immoral" and "wrongdoers" of the previous two lines. It expands on the very nature of the class of people called "malevolently immoral" and "wrongdoers." For a number of reasons, we find the traditional translation of Hebrew, *lyṣ*, as "scornful" wanting, at least here. It seems that the Septuagint translators might agree with me as they translate Hebrew, *lyṣ*, with *loimós*, "plague," "pestilence," "an individual dangerous to others."

When we think of scorn, often think only in terms of the attitude and speech of the offending individual. They are in their personal feelings and attitudes contemptuous of people, things, institutions, norms, etc. They make this contempt known in word and action. They actively belittle the people, things, institutions, and norms around them. But the contemptuously antisocial are more than simply personally contemptuous and belittling. As the Septuagint captures with its translation, their attitudes and conduct are positively dangerous to society. They are like a societal plague. They are a sickness in society that is contagious. Their disregard and contempt for people, norms, and institutions cause actual harm to a healthy, functioning, and enduring society.

We might have translated simply, "contemptuous." We almost did. It might be safer, less controversial, and more "orthodox" than our "contemptuously antisocial." But "contemptuous" does not bring together all the elements that seem present in *lyṣ*. We were also tempted by "cynics" and "sociopaths." But, for various reasons we decided against them. Yet, as used today, both contain within them ideas found in Hebrew *lyṣ*: 1) contempt for and mockery of all that is good and heathy; 2) the flaunting of norms; and 3) the idea of societal harm, danger, plague, and sickness.

"Contemptuously antisocial" attitudes and behaviors exists along a spectrum. When we so translation, we are referring to those who think and act in ways, big or small, that are contrary to the welfare of other individuals and the stability of the larger society. There is an abundance of undiagnosed "sociopathy" evident in our society today. Or so it seems to me. It seems to be spreading. It is found from the pool halls to the halls of government. It is a pestilence that is unraveling our society and nation.

The Psalmists write with purpose. They wish to guide their readers in the way of happiness, fulfillment, and advancement. They know that in order to experience true fulfillment and advancement in life, we must reject the direction of malevolently immoral. We must not enter into agreement with wrongdoers. And we must never, ever collaborate with those whose attitudes and actions are, like a plague, detrimental and destructive to the welfare of other individuals and even of entire societies. To walk the path from listening to, to agreeing with, to participating in the life and lifestyle of the malevolently immoral leads, as the final words of this psalm warn, to ruin, for the individual so involved and, ultimately, the society in which they live.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 9— psalm 1.[1-2]

Rather, they choose YHWH's Tôrâ,
and consult his Tôrâ at all times.

In his desire to lead the reader to a life of fulfillment and advancement, the Psalmist began with a warning. The world is full of those whose direction leads away from the fulfilled life. There are those whose values one must not accept as their own. There are those with whom collaboration leads to personal and societal ruin. These are the malevolently immoral, wrongdoers, and the contemptuously antisocial.

Into this world of danger—a "lone and dreary world," according to the LDS temple, and a "dark and dreary waste," according to the sojourner, Lehi (1 Ne. 8.[7])—God, in his mercy, has sent a ray of light to provide travelers with direction and guidance toward a fulfilling and progressive life. But this guidance is not forced upon travelers. They may, if they choose, be guided by the opposing proposals and values of the malevolently immoral. To be guided by God's direction is a conscious choice that demonstrates the traveler's true priorities.

The direction God provides cannot be understood, appreciated, and internalized through casual observation. This quest for understanding, appreciation, and internalization requires concentrated and full-time attention. It must become life's first priority. The barrage of this world's dark depravity is unrelenting. Our quest to understand and live by God's directions must be equally unrelenting. Only then can we find enduring fulfillment and advancement.

For the Psalmist, God's guidance is found in *Tôrâ* which is, first and foremost, the Pentateuch. In its expanded meaning it is the entire Hebrew Bible, including, of course, the Book of Psalms that begins with this admonition. For the Christian, God's guidance is found most easily in the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments combined. For the LDS, God's guidance is found most easily in the four standard works—Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price. Personal revelation, more difficult to obtain and more susceptible to personal whim, can also serve as guidance in life.

Beyond all of this, really, is Jesus. He is the clearest of God's words (see Jn. 1.[1]). His life represents the best articulated and illustrated divine guidance that God could and can provide humankind. Jesus himself reminds us, "I am the way, the truth, and the life…" (Jn. 14.[6]). If we would live the happy, fulfilled, and progressive life, we must make a point of carefully examining his life as it is recorded in the New Testament Gospels and then seeking to imitate the life that we find there. The importance, then, of the New Testament Gospels in our search for a fulfilled and progressive life can hardly be overstated.

God's word is more than crucial if we would be happy and fulfilled and progressive in our lives. It is absolutely mandatory. The degree to which we find happiness and fulfillment and advancement in life will depend upon the diligence and faithful expectations with which we consult the word of God and the degree to which we strive to follow the guidance that God so mercifully provides in it. As we strive to live this life, we can do no better than study and imitate the life of God's very own Son, indeed, of God, Himself.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 10— psalm 1.3–4

[3] They are like a tree
that is planted near multiple water sources—
a tree that produces its fruit at the proper time
and whose leaves never wither.
So, they are fruitful in all that they do.
[4]The malevolently immoral are not so,
but are like chaff that is blown away in the wind (author's translation).

The Psalmist has already described the sort of individual who can be described as happy, fulfilled, and progressive. They are those who take Yahweh's instructions about what constitutes a fulfilling life as a guide, and live consistent with those principles. They do this in defiance of the direction that this world relentlessly peddles; direction that is malevolent, immoral, wrong, contemptuous, and antisocial; direction that is destructive to a healthy and enduring individual existence, and destructive to a healthy and enduring society.

In hopes of deepening the understanding and impact of his own counsel, the Psalmist leaves the real world behind and enters a world of metaphor. He invites us to consider a tree with an unending supply of water. Those who prioritize learning and living God's teachings are like that tree which is in possession of water sources that never fail. Principles found in God's teachings cover every contingency. Those who give heed to them endure and pass every test of character. As much as acquiring nourishment from God's word, those who prioritize God's word become a source of nourishment to others.

On the other hand, the malevolently immoral—those who ignore and reject God's life-giving teachings for the pestilential teachings of this world—having never grown to anything more or better than a few blades of grass, dry up, shrivel, and, finally, are sent driven by the wind into the air where they disperse into nothingness. Theirs is a pathetic life, not only devoid of happiness or security, but unable to offer happiness or security to anyone else either.

Thankfully, we are free to choose. And we are free to choose because into the desert of this world's false ideals and instructions, God has sent his word, living water in the desolate wilderness, a shaft of light into the darkness. With his beginning to the Book of Psalms, we can see, anew, how vital God's word is to our existence and happiness. We see, anew, our clear priority: inquire of, learn, and apply God's living water to our otherwise parched lives.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 11— psalm 1.3–4

They are like a tree
that is planted near multiple water sources—

"A picture," they say, "is worth a thousand words." So, the Psalmist resorts to a picture: a metaphor to represent the individual who rejects *the world's* value system, carefully examines *God's* value system, and diligently strives to follow the directions that God has provided in scripture.

It is almost too trifling to remind the reader that plants, trees need water: that without it they wither and die. But perhaps it is not too trifling to remind the reader that in the land in which the Psalmist lived and wrote, water rarely came from the sky—certainly not enough to keep a tree alive. Even in Israel today, wherever one sees a tree, there is some source of ground water—a spring, a creek, a river, etc. Where such sources of water are absent, so are trees.

Those who choose to explore and attempt to live by the word of God are like trees with a dependable water source. Actually, no, they are like trees with abundant and multiple water sources. This is an incredible testimony of scripture. Scripture never runs dry and never quits giving. Truth and encouragement and power flow endlessly. Though Isaiah's metaphor is slightly different, his testimony of scripture is the same.

> "For as the rain cometh down,
> and the snow from heaven,
> and returneth not thither,
> but watereth the earth,
> and maketh it bring forth and bud,
> that it may give seed to the sower,
> and bread to the eater:
>
> So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth:
> it shall not return unto me void,
> but it shall accomplish that which I please,
> and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Is. 55.[10-11]).

It is simply impossible to exaggerate the divine grace that is manifest in God's gift of scripture, and the ennobling direction and guidance He provides in it.

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 12— psalm 1.[3-4]

a tree that produces its fruit at the proper time
and whose leaves never wither.
So, they are fruitful in all that they do.

Just as trees with dependable and redundant water sources luxuriate and bear fruit, so too the individual who consults and applies the word of God finds fulfillment and advancement. They are fruitful. Now, when we think of spiritual fulfilment, advancement, and fruitfulness, we often think of our own works and the benefits that accrue to ourselves because of them. But, we would have the reader consider the tree.

While the fruit of a tree does make possible the multiplication of fruit trees, the tree that bears fruit does not, in fact, accrue any of its God-given benefits to itself. It does not enjoy the sight of the fruit, does not partake of the fruit's sweetness, and does not obtain any nourishment from its own fruit. The tree was not made to benefit itself, but others. It was God who so ordained it.

> "'ĕlōhîm also said, 'I give to you all grains that are on the earth as well as all seed bearing fruits of fruit trees. This will be your food" (Gen. 1.[29]; author's translation).

This was the "blessing" that God bestowed upon the tree: to provide for others. In like manner, in giving us the nourishment of His word, God did not intend for us to become fruitful for our own benefit. God seems to make this clear when he called Abraham as his servant. God would turn Abraham into "a great nation." He would "make [his] name great." Abraham would find a blessing in this, or, rather, he would "be a blessing." Indeed, his blessedness was to be found in the fact that "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12.[2-3]).

This attitude toward "blessedness" and "fruitfulness" is consistent with the very nature and character of God Himself. His work, as we all know, is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1.[39]). It is also his "glory." We should probably understand that His labors in advancing others is both what brings Him joy—that in which He glories—and is what glorifies and advances Him and allows all creation to see and know His gloriousness. His glory is bound up with the glory of others.

Jesus, being "the express image" of his Father (Heb. 1.[1]), thought and acted just like Him. As we have often observed, it is unthinkable that as Jesus suffered the final ordeals of his mortal life, he thought anything like, "Wow, this is really going to earn me some major rewards." Rather, he considered how what he was doing would "be a blessing" to others.

To think and act and labor for the advancement of others, to be nourishing to others, is the nature of God. It is the nature of godliness. It is what it means to be "godly." To think and act and labor for one's personal advancement is to be "ungodly." To become "fruitful" so as to be nourishing to others is the sort of fruitfulness that is to move us and after which we are to seek.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 16, 2023)

meditation 13— psalm 1.[3-4]

The malevolently immoral are not so,
but are like husk that is blown away in the wind.

Psalm 1 is one of great contrasts. We are warned against being guided by and acting upon the guidance of individuals and groups of questionable character—guidance that endangers the health and very existence of society. In contrast, we are invited to be guided by and to act upon the guidance that God offers in scripture—guidance that aids in the continuance and progress of individuals and societies.

By way of metaphor, we were invited to consider a fruitful tree with multiple water sources as a representation of those who accept the invitation to consider and act upon God's wise guidance as found in scripture. In today's reading, by contrast, we are invited to consider the husk of wheat as a representation of the malevolently immoral and, in association with them, their guidance and all those who follow their guidance.

We are all familiar with the scenario. It is wheat harvest. The harvested wheat is gathered and then tossed into the air. The light and useless husks, being of no economic interest and bereft of nutritional value, are picked up by the wind and carried off and away from the heavier wheat grain which falls to the ground for collection.

The malevolently immoral, their guidance, and their values, like husks, are of no use or benefit to anyone. Anyone who attempts to live on their fare will die of malnutrition. So, those who seek fulfillment and

advancement know to toss them, their direction, and their values aside. By tossing aside the worthless and the deadly, and by accepting the life-giving nourishment of God's word, the godly become fruitful and beneficial in directing a world that that has grown accustomed to empty and even deadly calories away from those worthless calories and toward the nourishing and nurturing word of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 14— psalm 1.[5–6]

[5]Therefore, the malevolently immoral should not participate in a place of decision making,
or wrongdoers have place in a just assembly.
[6]For, YHWH sustains the actions of those who do right,
but the actions of the malevolently immoral bring ruin (author's translation).

"Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment…"

That's the King James translation of verse five's first line.

"Judgment." For many, the King James Version's "*the* judgment," conjures up eschatological visions. It conjures up a demanding judge and final judgment in the end times. It conjuries up an ordeal that is imposed upon all. It conjuries up dire consequences, also imposed. It conjures up all sorts of speculations based upon the minutest information. But, to my mind, it is uncertain that the Psalmist had a final judgement in mind when he penned the word, *mišpāt* that the King James translators then rendered "judgment," which was then highjacked for almost exclusively eschatological purposes.

Obviously, my translation understands *mišpāt* differently. At its most basic level this Hebrew root has to do with governing—both human and divine. Today we think of "judges," "judgement," and "judging" in strictly a forensic sense. Such English words belong almost exclusively to courtrooms and trials. Israel's ancient judges (*šōp̲eṭ*, which comes from the same root as our *mišpāt*) however, clearly did more than preside in legal settings. They led armies in battle. They made economic and legislative decisions within the tribal structure of early Israel. We should, then, think of Hebrew *šāp̲aṭ* in terms of governance. The noun, *mišpāt*, with its prefixed ma- can refer to the location or setting in which governance takes place.

From its very first word, *'ašrê*, this psalm claims to know and willingly presents the way to happiness and a fulfilling life. It presents this way in two parts. In verse 1 it warns of that which is to be avoided, and in verse 2 it invites into that which is to be embraced. According to verse 1, to achieve a life of fulfillment and advancement we must avoid the directions and values presented by the malevolently immoral who are known by their own unethical behaviors that corrupt individuals and undermine a healthy and functioning society. According to verse 2, to achieve a life of fulfillment and advancement we must accept, embrace, and act upon the values and directions that come from God through the word He so graciously reveals.

Verses 3 and 4, illustrate and expand upon the fulfilled and unfulfilled life through metaphor. With verses 5 and 6, we leave the world of metaphor behind and return to the malevolently immoral with whom the psalm began. There, we were not to listen to (walk), associate (stand) with, or collaborate (sit) with them. Here, in verse 5, our rejection of the malevolently immoral is expanded.

The malevolently immoral are not to have any influence in decision making bodies—secular or sacred—

that establish and maintain societal laws and norms. Their very presence in any such body removes the possibility of that body any longer being considered a "righteous," or "legitimate/ just" body. The manner of life in which the malevolently immoral engage and the actions they undertake are destructive and lead to ruin—their own and those who come under their influence. Thus, the inclusion of the malevolently immoral in any governing body can only serve to defile that body, bring further harm to individuals, and cause devolution in society at large. Most tragic, their inclusion in governance is destructive to the fulfilling life into which this psalm so earnestly desires to bring its readers.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 15— psalm 1.5–6

> *Therefore, the malevolently immoral should not participate in a place of decision making, or wrongdoers have place in a just assembly.*

Psalm 1 offers a clear warning to those who wish to live a fulfilling and progressive life. They must not listen to the suggestions and directions of the malevolently immoral, with their twisted and anti-social attitudes, values, and behaviors. Those who wish to live a fulfilling and progressive life must not adopt the attitudes, values, and behaviors of the malevolently immoral as their own. They must not collaborate with the malevolently immoral.

But the Psalm does not end there. Its warning extends beyond individual and personal relationships. Those who wish to live a fulfilling and progressive life must not do anything that would encourage or permit twisted and malevolently immoral individuals to have part in governing bodies of any sort—governmental, religious, economic, etc. It is one thing to be malevolently immoral and to act in a twisted and anti-social way as individuals. It is a whole other ball game to be placed in a position of influence and governance where one may enact policy and act in such ways as to make immorality and anti-social behavior legal and socially acceptable and prevalent.

Thus, the malevolently immoral are to have no place in bodies that establish and maintain the mores of an organization, institution, group, or nation. If and when they infiltrate such bodies, those bodies cease to be "just" governing bodies. If governing bodies are not cleansed of such anti-social individuals, those bodies and those they were meant to serve have no promise of fulfillment and advancement. Damnation and annihilation are their final ends.

Psalm 1, then, should send a shudder through any believing reader who resides in present day America. It has not been long since the nation's White House was occupied for four years by a man who is a profoundly and demonstratively sociopath. Millions today long for and work toward his return, often adopting criminal and unconstitutional means to reach their ends. Many dozens of seats within the nation's lower house of congress are occupied by likeminded in their malevolent immorality—individuals whose attitudes, values, and activities are profoundly anti-social. The malevolently immoral occupy numerous seats in the upper chamber. Even the judiciary, from top to bottom, has been infiltrated by those of malevolent, immoral, and anti-social attitudes, values, and behavior.

Now, to be clear, we are not talking about individuals who sin and are beset by personal character weakness. All sin. No one is perfect. We must live, and compassionately so, with such human leaders. As we proceed through the Book of Psalms, though, it will become clear that the malevolently immoral of whom the Psalmist speaks are those who do harm to others, especially those vulnerable in any number of ways to them. The malevolently immoral are those who stifle, impede the advancement of the vulnerable,

the poor, the powerless, the "righteous." And, as we have said, when such malevolently immoral individuals are unwisely and wickedly given a seat in governing bodies, it is amen to those bodies and the society that permitted them space to act upon their nefarious values and desires. Yes, America should daily shudder from sea to shining sea.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 16— psalm 1.5–6

For, YHWH sustains the actions of those who do right,
but the actions of the malevolently immoral bring ruin.

Psalm 1 began with a warning about following the guidance and the mores and actions of the malevolently immoral, wrongdoers, and the contemptuously antisocial. Following such guidance and living by such mores and actions, and then collaborating with those who hold them leads one to become unprofitable and harmful to society. The Psalm ends on the same note as it began, the note of malevolent immorality. It is God's hope and intention that the norms and actions of the malevolently immoral, if not the individuals themselves, be eliminated from human society.

Perhaps, as most traditional readings understand, it is God, Himself, that brings an apocalyptic end to the malevolently immoral and their perverted values. On the other hand, perhaps God thinks to bring about the end of the malevolently immoral and their twisted ways through the power and working of His word—a word that resists and delegitimizes such twisted ways. Then again, perhaps God thinks to enlist those who live by His word as partners in the long journey away from the ways of the malevolently immoral and toward the community that God wishes to create here on earth in preparation for a more enduring existence. Or, then again, perhaps it is the destructive mores and actions of the malevolently immoral themselves that bring dissolution.

My translation leaves the cause and source of the elimination of the malevolently immoral intentionally uncertain. It is true, however, that while God is depicted in the first line as actively engaged in sustaining those who do right, He is utterly absent in the second line. One is led to believe that the mores and actions of the malevolently immoral carry within themselves the seeds of death and destruction.

But, however and by whomsoever it is ultimately accomplished, God would have each of us eliminate the mores, the values, the activities of wickedness from our lives. Whether or not we will respond to the call He issues through His word is the real uncertainty of life. Those who meet the challenge, take God's word as their guide, adopt God's mores and values, and collaborate with God in the great work of human advancement will find acceptance with God and advancement beyond their imagination.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

psalm 2

meditation 1— introductory

We begin our meditations on Psalm 2 with a reminder that the ancient editors and redactors of the Hebrew Bible seem to have placed Psalm 1 and 2 at the beginning of the Book of Psalms as a sort of dual and linked introduction to the entire Book. Based on Acts 13.[33], in which some traditions read "first psalm" rather than "second psalm," some have even suggested that perhaps the two psalms were once a single psalm. Short of this, some have thought that Psalm 1 and 2 have at times been read as one. There are reasons to do so. The two psalms do have many points of contact which we will discuss in the meditations below. In our meditations on Psalm 1, we commented on Israel's prayer book beginning with a non-prayer. Psalm 2, of course, is also a non-prayer.

Sometimes when I go shopping for music, I am presented with an "explicit" and "clean" version of a song. Like a modern pop song, Psalm 2 has what I call an "explicit" and a "clean" version. The explicit version reflects its apparent original historical context. Its "clean" version reflects its treatment by later interpreters, especially Christian. The "clean" version makes a Christian messianic reading palpable. My translation makes the original "explicit" reading clear. The King James Translation eases one's way to the "clean" version.

In the original and explicit version as I understand it, Judah's subjugated neighboring nations are revolting or have revolted against Judah's dominion over them (vss. 1-3). The nation is represented in the Psalm by its king, anointed one, or Messiah. Because it was God who enthroned Judah's king, Judah considers any rebellion against it and its king as rebellion against God. Dismissive of and even amused by the rebels' impotent attempt at freedom from Judah's subjugation, Judah's God brutally mocks the rebels for their foolishness (vs. 4). God's mood changes in the blink of eye from amusement to rage (vs. 5). He informs the rebellious nations of His commitment to Judah's king and threatens dire consequences if they do not immediately cease and desist from their vain rebellion (vss. 6-9). They do not have to like being subject to Judah and its God, but they must buck up and learn to endure it, however humiliating it may be (vss. 10-12c). The Psalm ends with an expression of confidence in God (vs. 12d).

While the occasion of a historical rebellion against Judah likely represents the original sitz-im-leben of the Psalm, it possibly found regular use in the temple during royal coronation and other royal ceremonies.

In this original setting, this "explicit" reading is political and belligerently nationalistic, or so it seems to me. It is entirely consistent with the attitude that Rehoboam and his arrogant bureaucrats possessed toward the northern tribes very legitimate rebellion at the death of Solomon. The reader might remember Rehoboam's sense of entitlement when he threatened the north that his little finger would be heavier than his father's thigh, thus signifying that however oppressive his father had been toward the north, the oppression would grow infinitely worse under his reign (See 1 Kings 12.[1-15]).

In the clean version, the nations of the earth foolishly rebel against God's rule as administrated by His Messiah. In Jewish interpretation this is an awaited righteous king. In Christian interpretation, this is Jesus of Nazareth. God is unconcerned about the rebellion, knowing it is vain and possess no threat to his dominion. At the same time, he is angered by the rebels' presumption. He reminds the nations of His inalterable decree that his Messiah (Jewish king/Jesus) will reign and rule the earth. He invites them to repent and yield to the righteous rule of Messiah lest they perish.

In this clean version, God is much less confrontational and more compassionate. This portrayal of God is not illegitimate. We will see God portrayed elsewhere in the Psalms as a caring and compassionate world ruler. Nevertheless, in my view it takes some translation acrobatics to arrive at this portrayal in this

second psalm.

To my mind, and as we will point out in meditations on specific portions of the text, it requires a softening, a blurring of the text to get to the "clean" version. For example, the "clean" version must blur God's utter contempt for the rebels and the fact that his initial response is one of mockery and poking fun. It must hide the fact that he is personally entertained by their attempted rebellion.

This is not to say that things cannot be learned from the "clean" version. Both versions, the "explicit" and the "clean" make their own points and share certain others. While they may not exactly agree as to the character of God, they do agree on the character of this world's nations and their leaders—leaders that should never, according to Psalm 2's companion Psalm, Psalm 1, have been given access to seats of governance. Rulers, citizenries, and nations all pay a heavy price for turning away from God, his guidance and rule, and replacing his wise guidance and rule with that of individuals of questionable character. Things will end badly for those who refuse to turn from the ungodly governance of rebels, and return to the rule of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

meditation 2— introductory

In our first introductory meditation on Psalm 2, we suggested that Psalm 2 could be read from an original, what we called "explicit" perspective and from a secondary, what we called "clean" perspective. In this meditation, we will detail the original or explicit version.

We understand the original sitz-im-leben of the Psalm to be a rebellion on the part of neighboring nations against their subjugation to the kingdom of Judah. The Psalm is, then, in the first instance as much a political document as a religious one—conceding that in the ancient world politics and religion were intimately and intricately bound together. As a piece of political and nationalistic propaganda, the psalm demonstrates, as nationalistic propaganda often does, a belligerent and threatening tone that likely conceals attitudes that were less self-assured than the rhetoric projects.

As nationalistic propaganda often does, the psalm appeals to a god who is claimed as the nation's patron deity—this is true even in so-called secular societies where the nation state itself is a sort of god, idolatrous as it is. Thus, the rebelling vasal states are condemned not only for their opposition to Judean subjugation, but to its god as well. The insurgents are warned against angering the god and are threatened with the god's full arsenal of power.

As is so common in such nationalistic writing, the belligerent condemnation of the insurgents found in Psalm 2 is condescending, intimidating, and disparaging. It begins in the very first verse.

> "Why do nations uproariously agitate,
> and countries plot what will come up empty?"

Here, the Psalmist avoids words that the Hebrew Bible normally uses for resistance, enmity, and rebellion. He chooses to depict the rebellion with Hebrew *rgš*—a root that only appears three times in the entire Hebrew Bible—and *hgh*. The first word seems to reflect sound that is noisy, tumultuous, agitated, and chaotic in nature. The second word is a true onomatopoeia—a word that represents a specific sound, such as English "Shh." The poet eschews the normal words for rebellion to signify that the rebellion is all noise, more "sound and fury" than legitimate threat, thus disparaging the enemy even in his selection of

vocabulary.

But this is not enough for the Judah's state department spokesman. In verse 4, the psalm further expresses the nation's arrogant contempt for the rebels by ascribing that contempt to the nation's god in a bit of radical anthropomorphism.

> "Enthroned in heaven, He is comically entertained.
> My Lord pokes fun at them."

Again, the rebellion is not to be taken seriously, or as a serious threat. Such false and dangerous anthropomorphism as is present here is all too common, even today. No way in hell would the true and living God respond in this fashion! An anthropomorphic weeping would be more believable. But no way would it be nearly as satisfying to the carnal mind, filled with hatred toward the despicable enemy.

This bit of anthropomorphism is followed by the report of a divine edict. It is God, himself, who placed Judah's king on the throne. Having been enthroned, the king is to be thought of and treated as a son of god. Again, the implication is that rebellion against Judah is rebellion against god. But it is important to note the tone in which the edict of Judah's god is presented.

> "Then, in a flash, He addresses them furiously.
> The intensity of His outburst should alarm them" (vs. 5).

Whatever the original setting in which god announced the edict of the king's divine sonship, it is now announced with a fury that is intended to alarm and intimidate the rebels. Just in case the rebels need an exclamation point put to the danger they face in rebelling against Judah, the Psalmist adds another element of the edict, also spoken, as indicated previously, with ferocity.

> "You will break them to pieces with an iron scepter.
> You will pulverize them as if they were merely clay vessels" (vs. 9).

Nations are to yield to Judah's king and, through him, to god. Those who do not yield, but resist and oppose Judah's god and king and country will discover just how insignificant and trivial they are. They will be shown to be as powerless as inanimate clay pots. Again, one senses the belittling intimidation that is taking place in this psalm.

Having shared god's edict with the rebelling vasal states and their political leaders, the Psalmist now addresses them directly. Again, the language is belligerent and intimidating. The rulers of the rebelling nations need to suck it up and content themselves with groveling at the feet of Judah's king. They must learn subservience, even to the point of kissing the king's feet. The kind of subjugation that is demanded of the political leaders of Judah's neighbors is that which Assyrian's Shalmaneser III demanded of Israel's king Jehu, as depicted on the famous "Black Obelisk."

Here is the Assyrian version of Psalm 2, as sculpted in stone. Here is King Shalmaneser III, son of god. Here is the patron god, Assur, soaring above the fray and distributing the warmth of his protective and triumphal rays. Here is the defeated and humiliated Israelite king, Jehu, kneeling at and kissing the feet of the victorious Assyrian king. Here is a classic example of art as political propaganda.

Well, there you have it, the original and explicit reading of Psalm 2. Those who adopted this psalm as part of Judah's temple worship and those who turned it into a Messianic foreshadowing of Jesus of Nazareth had to throw some major shade over a good deal of questionable anthropomorphism and ugly political rhetoric and propaganda. We do not mean to suggest that cleaning up an explicit version is illegitimate. There are many examples of forms being adapted and adopted for new and very different audiences, uses, and purposes which change the meaning and function of the form (Christian baptism and aspects of the LDS temple endowment, borrowed from Masonic ritual, would be just two examples).

Then too, we can learn much from the explicit version. We can, especially, it seems to me, learn what not to think, what not to do, how not to engage a hostile individuals and nations. Jesus of Nazareth, a very different kind of Messiah, king, and God showed us a more perfect way.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 28, 2023)

meditation 3— introductory

We cannot be certain about the use to which the psalms were put within in Judah's temple. But we can say with some certainty that they were used in and for various cultic purposes. The following is presented as one possible cultic drama for Psalm 2. For it, we structure Psalm 2 under seven voices. Each voice is that of a group or individual—including God, Himself—represented by "actors" or temple patrons participating in a temple ceremony, or sacred temple drama within ancient Judah's temple at Jerusalem.

The first voice in verses 1-2 is, perhaps, that of temple patrons. It might also be that of a temple priest or priests representing the patrons who are loyal to Yahweh and the sitting king. They complain about an insurrection on the part of previously subjugated nations, who, themselves, complain against Judah's domination. In the second voice, we hear a group of priests or temple patrons who represent the rebellions nations and give expression to the rebels' goals.

With the third voice, we hear once more from the temple patrons or a temple priest/s representing them. They report Yahweh's belittling dismissal of the rebels and their cause. In the third voice, we hear the words of God, Himself, as spoken by a temple priest representing Yahweh. In them, God reasserts his choice of Judah's king.

The fifth voice is that of the chosen king, or a priest representing him. He prepares his audience to hear the promise God personally made to him. The sixth voice, that of the king, represents a direct quotation of God's promise. Perhaps, for greater dramatic impact, the voice quoting God's promise is that of a priest representing Yahweh.

Finally, the seventh voice—that of temple patrons, a temple priest, or priests—addresses the rebellious kings, warning them to submit to Yahweh's rule as officiated through Judah's king or face divine retribution.

Again, we cannot be sure about this proposed temple scenario. But we offer it as an invitation to consider the uses to which psalms might have been put in Judah's temple. We also offer it as a reminder of the dramatic nature of the Psalms and the emotive impact they may have had on those who heard them sung/ performed in Judah's temple.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 25, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 2.[1–3]

first voice
[1]Why do nations uproariously agitate,
and countries plot what will come up empty?
[2]The world's kings offer resistance;
world leaders form a united front
against YHWH and against His Māšîaḥ.

second voice
[3]"We will break free of his restraints;
throw off his control" (author's translation).

As already discussed, I am persuaded that Psalm 2 originally represents ancient Judah's political response to the rebellion of one or more of its vasal states, only to be used later in other, likely royal, temple settings. Because Judah, like all nations, considered itself particularly favored by its God, rebellion against its political leaders was the same as rebellion against God. We see this in the surviving propagandistic writings from all over the ancient Near East—and into Medieval times. Indeed, many a modern nation, though secular in nature, possesses and expresses similar notions of national entitlement. The belittling of the rebels and the portraying of their rebellion as little more than empty sound and fury reads like a piece of nationalistic propaganda that might have been produced and shared by nearly any press secretary in any nation at any point in human history.

While I reject and refuse to engage in anything like the arrogant and self-indulgent belligerence found in the propaganda of this psalm, I nevertheless find the psalm useful in reminding us of larger principles.

For example, no matter the location or the time period, no nation, as those in this psalm, likes having their power constricted by another nation. There is, therefore, near universal contention and war between peoples. This constant national contention and war—the "wars and rumors of war" about which Nephi speaks as being a universal part of human occupation (See 1 Ne. 12.[2-3, 21]; 14.[15-16])—is a sign of human rebellion against God no matter what nations participate in such occupation. In creating humankind, God hoped "that they should love one another… but behold, they are without affection, and they hate their own blood" (Moses 7.[33]). Wars and rumors of war are, then, unquestionable acts of rebellion against God. Scripture is consistent about this: the kingdoms of this world are universally, and, at all times, in open rebellion against God as they throw off his restraints and "hate their own blood" in warfare.

The rebellion against God takes place on many fronts. The rebellion is both direct and indirect—direct in each nation's hostility to God Himself and indirect in each nation's hostility to each other and, often, its own citizenry. The indirect rebellion is spiritually deadening. The direct rebellion is pointless and futile, amounting to little more than sound and fury. Yet, hostility toward and rebellion against God is the one common cause upon which all nations seem to be able to agree.

In addressing this global habit of rebellion, Jesus most often spoke simply of "the world." One of Jesus' final acts before his death was to offer a priestly intercessory prayer on behalf of disciples—those present on that momentous evening and those present in all other periods and places. Over half the prayer focuses on the relationship between disciples and "the world"—the kingdoms and principles by which this world is governed and controlled. He could not pray that we be taken "out of the world." But he could and did pray that God "keep [us] from [its] evil" (Jn. 17.[15]). Disciples were to be no more part of "the world" than Jesus himself—"Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world" (Jn. 8.[23]).

In all places and in every period, Jesus' disciples would be wise to be cautious in their pledging allegiance to any one of the universally rebellious nations. Yet, the disciple boldly goes out into the world, sojourns in a strange land, in order to call out of the world those who have been ensnared in its wanton rebellion. In obedience to the covenants they make with God, those who devote themselves to Him unambiguously "renounce war and proclaim peace" (DC 98.[16]). Their voice is loud and clear, unfailing and uncompromising: "Go ye out from among the nations, even from Babylon" (DC 133.[14]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm 2.[1-3]

Psalm 2 begins with a question. This is not unusual. A number of psalms begin with a question.[1] These questions, often addressed to God, are frequently filled with a sense of pain and anguish and uncertainty.[2] Other questions, absent pain, sincerely seek understanding.[3] But in the opening question posed in Psalm 2, it is difficult to find any pain, uncertainty, or earnest seeking for understanding. The speaker is not confused. Given the language of the question itself (see below), it feels like a sarcastic and loaded question. More statement, really, than question. This feeling is strengthened when we compare the opening of the next psalm with this one, and when we consider the vocabulary used by the Psalmist in this psalm.

Psalms 2 and 3 begin similarly in that both reveal the presence of opposition—in Psalm 2 the opposition is against Judah and God and in Psalm 3, against the Psalmist. Both present the thoughts and perspective of the opposition (2.[3] and 3.[3b]), as well as that of the opposed (2.[1-2] and 3.[2-3a]). Here are the thoughts and perspective of the apposed (Judah) toward the opposition (Judah's enemies) in Psalm 2.

> "Why do nations uproariously agitate,
> and countries plot what will come up empty?"

Now, here are the thoughts and perspective of the opposed (the Psalmist) concerning the opposition (the Psalmist's enemies) in Psalm 3.

> "O YHWH, how my adversaries have multiplied!
> How numerous are those that rise against me!
> How many are talking about me, [saying]…" (3.[2-3])

[1] See 10, 13, 15, 22, 27, 52, 58, 74. We note that these largely belong to the so-called "1st division (1-41).
[2] See, for example, Psalm 10, 13, 22, and 74
[3] Psalm 15, for example.

I know that these things are quite subjective, but, while the two psalms begin similarly, the tone couldn't be more different. The complaint found in Psalm 3 is filled with anxiety and worry. The complaint found in Psalm 2 knows no anxiety or worry. Rather, the complaint found in Psalm 2 seems full of confidence and even bluster.

We can also sense the confident and blustery "tone" of Psalm 2 in the vocabulary marshaled in its complaint. The Psalmist has at his disposal an array of appropriate and common words that he could use to reference a opposition and rebellion that is being planned and carried out by foreign powers. For example, he might have used Hebrew *peša'*, the most common word for rebellion (often, "transgress/ transgression), as Amos did in describing the opposition and rebellion among Israel's neighboring nations (See Am. 1.[1].1-2.[8]).

But the Psalmist does not choose this or the array of other words for opposition and rebellion. In the first line, he resorts to Hebrew, *rgš*. While not explicitly onomatopoeic, it does at its most basic denote sound: noisy, tumultuous, agitated, chaotic in nature. In the second line, he resorts to *hgh*. At its most basic, this word is an onomatopoeia. It reflects a "murmur," "mumble," "moan," "groan," "low growl." However, such sounds become associated with activities such as "pondering," "meditating," "musing," etc. In Psalm 1, my "and *consult* his Tôrâ at all times," translates, *hgh* (vs. 2).

The nations are engaged in rebellion against God. They form a united front and single block in resisting God. They are "musing" amongst themselves how best to pull it off. The Psalmist even resorts to quotation, using their own words against them.

> "We will break free of his restraints;
> throw off his control."

The nations' agitated and agitating consultations are tumultuous. It is as if the whole enterprise is so ridiculous that the Psalmist can't bring himself to give it the common, if disrespectable, name, *peša',* "rebellion." All their rebellious machinations are nothing more than pointless sound and fury. "Half-humorously," Terrien writes, "the chorus borrows a tone of persiflage."[4] Clifford feels that the verse "contains a scornful taunt" and speaks of the question posed here as "contemptuous."[5]

I agree with this assessment and have tried to capture this contempt in my translation. If the Psalmist's choice of vocabulary left us any doubt as to the import and results of the rebellion, he settles the matter quickly in the second line. All their noisy agitation and plotting will "come up empty." Here, the Psalmist uses the Hebrew word, *rîq*., traditionally, "vain." We could, I suppose, understand this "vainness," in terms of reason—nations rebel against God with no good reason. This is likely true. But the sense of the word here is "empty." They will have nothing to show for their rebellion. Their rebellion is doomed to failure.

According to the Judean witness, then, the nations are involved in a good deal of sound and fury with little intelligence and nothing to show for it. We might say that the rebels are full of hot air; that they are all bark and no bite. Their rebellion is like the impotent huffing and puffing of the big bad wolf faced with the firmness of little pig's brick house.

Such, it seems to me, are the Psalmist's contemptuous feelings toward Judah's national enemies. This is as we would expect. In my lifetime, news casts have been inundated with this sort of nationalistic bravado thrown back and forth between enemy combatants. So, while we may not care for the pompous tone, and

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[4] "The Psalms; Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary," *Eerdmans Critical Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003.
[5] "Psalms 1-72," *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002.

while we most certainly do not attribute such feelings to God—as the text soon will—we cannot deny the all-too-common reality of such bluster. It is a bluster that the world would be better off without.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

meditation 6— psalm 2.[1–3]

In previous meditations, we have suggested that Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 have several points of contact; insomuch as to justify reading the two Psalms almost as if one. For example, Psalm 2 ends where Psalm 1 began: with a statement of happiness, security, fulfillment, advancement as found in Hebrew, *'ašrê*.

> "How truly *fulfilled* is one who…. (1.[1]).
>
> "*Secure* are all who…" (2.[12]).

With these first three verses of Psalm 2, we would like to mention a couple more points of contact between Psalm 1 and 2. We will begin with a vocabulary item: Hebrew, *hgh*. In Psalm 1, they are fulfilled, happy, secure, advancing who reject the direction and principles of the "malevolently immoral," "wrongdoers," and "contemptuously antisocial," but

> "choose YHWH's direction
> and *consult* his Tôrâ at all times" (vs. 2).

The word we translate, "consult" is Hebrew, *hgh*. This "consultation of Tôrâ is more than intellectual. It impacts behavior.

There is "consultation" going on in Psalm 2 as well.

> "Why do nations uproariously agitate,
> and countries *plot* what will come up empty?"

Here, the consultation is not positive. Whereas in Psalm 1, one "consults" God's directions in hopes of aligning their life with God and His principles, those who consult in Psalm 2 do so in opposition to God and His principles. Indeed, they hope and labor to "break free of His restraints" and throw off his control. Those who engage in the same conduct, *hgh*, "consult/ plot," do so with very different purposes.

This insight allows us to connect the "malevolently immoral," "wrongdoers," and "contemptuously antisocial" who oppose God and his Tôrâ in Psalm 1 with the "nations," "countries," "kings," and "world leaders" that oppose God in Psalm 2. This serves as reminder that while it is individuals who oppose God, those same individuals sometimes become influential, gain positions of governance, and lead entire peoples away from God and in direct opposition to him.

This brings us to a point of contact between the two Psalms that is far more consequential than a similar vocabulary item. Psalm 2 begins with a complaint against nations/ countries and the kings and political leaders that guide their attitudes and activities. Those who govern often lead their nations to oppose God, often without the populace's awareness. There are many examples of this found in scripture. The infamous King Noah of Book of Mormon fame is one such. "He did not," the record reports, "keep the commandments of God." As a result, " he did cause his people to commit sin and do that which was abominable in the sight of the Lord" (Mos. 11.[2]). So effective was Noah's "flattery," "propaganda," or

"political spin," that, when Abinadi confronted them with the same sort of dire warnings as the Psalmist later in the psalm offered those who opposed God (See vss. 10-12), they were unable to discern that they had gone wrong and acted in opposition to God and His principles.

"And now, O king, behold, we are guiltless, and thou, O king, hast not sinned… And behold, we are strong, we shall not come into bondage, or be taken captive by our enemies; yea, and thou hast prospered in the land, and thou shalt also prosper" (Mos. 12.[14-15]).

Here, we hear a false claim of *'ašrê*, "happiness," "security," "advancement," etc., to put it in the Psalmist terms.

All of this reminds us of the need for caution when determining whose direction we are going to follow. All of this reminds us of the need for caution when determining to whom we will yield the scepter and gavel of governance. And this brings us back to the end of Psalm 1, the companion piece to Psalm 2. There we were informed,

> "Therefore, the malevolently immoral should not participate in a place of decision making,
> or wrongdoers have place in a just assembly" (vs. 5).

In discussing this verse in previous meditations, we tried to ween the reader from a Christian type eschatological reading of a final judgment to which the King James translation can lead.

> "Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,
> nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous."

We argued that the *mišpāṭ* (a ma- formulated noun from the root *špṭ*, which has the basic meaning of governance), could indicate a place where decisions are made or where governance takes place. So, as I understand it, we went directly from a warning in Psalm 1 about the sort of people who should be given influence and governance in society to an illustration in Psalm 2 of kings and political leaders ("malevolently immoral" and "wrongdoing" individuals) who directed their nations and population in failed coups against God.

Whereas Psalm 1 had warned that the "actions of the malevolently immoral bring ruin" (vs. 6), Psalm 2 will later proclaim that a ruler who follows God would "break them to pieces with an iron scepter" and "pulverize them as if they were merely clay vessels" (vs. 9). More on that later.

For now, we wish to point out the symbiosis present in Psalms 1 and 2. Both warn in their own differing ways of the dangers in following those whose purpose it is to oppose and resist God. They warn against the dangers of allowing them influence and governance. Such individuals dangerous enough when they are simple individual. When they are one on one against us. But when they are given places of influence, of governance; when they become kings or presidents or prime ministers or senators or congressmen or governors or mayors or school board members, the danger they present multiplies exponentially. Before one knows it, the entire world is in commotion and agitation and open rebellion against God. Such are the warnings of the Psalmist. Such are the days in which we are now living.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

meditation 7— psalm 2.4–5

third voice

4Enthroned in heaven, He is comically entertained.
My Lord pokes fun at them.
5Then, in a flash, He addresses them furiously.
The intensity of His outburst should alarm them (author's translation).

In our meditation on verses 1-3, we have indicated our belief that this psalm was originally a piece of political propaganda offered at a time when a vassal nation or several vassal nations rebelled against Judah's domination of them. While there is a certain belligerence and bellicosity found in it—as there usually is in political propaganda—we nevertheless believe we can learn from the psalm.

No matter their location in time or space, nations do not like being subservient to other nations and having their freedom to self-rule restricted. Conflict and war that stem from one nation dominating another have been and continue to be a universal part of human history. Such war and conflict are acts of open rebellion against God. "The devil… is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away" (3 Ne. 11.29-30).

It is another near universal human propensity to create a god after our own hearts—one who feels like us, thinks like us, and acts like us.

> "Every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol…" (DC 1.16).

Nearly every nation claims a special place in God's heart. God is associated with one's side and stands in opposition to all others. We see this propaganda in this reading. On one hand, God is portrayed as being comically entertained by Judah's enemies and their puny, fruitless rebellion. He pokes fun at them. This is the sort of braggadocio we often hear and see in nations' response to each other's threats. And it is an example of the all-too-common human anthropomorphism of God. In yet more anthropomorphism, God is portrayed as turning angry on a dime, flying off in a rage against the chosen nation's aggressor.

I don't know about you, but I reject this portrayal of God. He does not have fun at others' expense, even when those others rebel against Him. He does not use ridicule to intimidate individuals or nations into submitting to Him. He is saddened, not entertained, by the rebellion that causes nations to engage in war and rumors of war; saddened, not entertained when nations oppose and resist Him. In addition, while it can happen, it is extraordinarily rare indeed for one nation or group of nations to be engaged in a just cause during war such that God takes their side in the conflict.

Having said all of that, I appreciate this psalm for the window it is into human nature and the warning it represents against adopting such preposterous and ungodly attitudes both toward God Himself, our enemies, and our own righteousness and innocence. I appreciate the window that it presents into the absurdities that arise from our creating gods who look, think, feel, and act just like us; gods who exist to serve us, rather than we serving Him. We would do well to remember Isaiah's witness. Though it is, in Isaiah, offered in relation to God's superior willingness and ability to forgive sin and offense, it can be likened to other aspects of His character.

> "For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
> neither are your ways my ways,
> saith the LORD.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is. 55.[8-9]).

May the nations and kingdoms of this world follow Him in His higher ways and higher thoughts. May they reject the bellicose, belligerent, and jingoistic propaganda that would have god take a kind of perverse pleasure in other peoples' and nations' rebellion against him for the opportunity it provides Him to put them in their place and strut his stuff. Let none of us engage in this sort of foolishness, a foolishness that is, itself, an act of rebellion against the One and True God. Having so said, let us nevertheless never be found opposed to God and His enduring principles, no matter His response.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

meditation 8— psalm 2.[6–9]

fourth voice

[6]"I have installed my chosen king
on Ṣîyôn, the mount I set apart for myself."

fifth voice

[7]Let me, then, rehearse YHWH's decree:
He said to me,

sixth voice

"You are my son;
I have, this very day, begotten you.
[8]Ask me, and I will give whole nations to you as an inheritance.
Your territory will extend to the ends of the earth.
[9]You will break their power with an iron scepter.
You will shatter them in pieces as if they were merely clay vessels" (author's translation).

We must, once more, consider this reading from the two perspectives, what I call the "explicit" and the "clean." The explicit version, the original, is that of ancient Judah in which the nation and its anointed king respond to a rebellion against its rule and thus, according to the nationalism of the day, against God. The clean version is the Christian reading in which Jesus reigns over a planet and its kingdoms which are in open rebellion against him.

One can be forgiven for finding in the original explicit version more than a hint of false doctrine and hypocrisy. The hypocrisy is easy to see. Judah's kings and citizenry were often no more moral or better followers of Yahweh than the kings and citizens of surrounding nations. Indeed, given that they possessed the greater knowledge about Yahweh and given that they had entered into a covenant relationship with Him—whereas the surrounding nations had not—one could argue that Judah was the more wicked and more accountable nation. Thus, Judah's complaint about the nations' rebellion against God is rather like the pot calling the kettle black.

As for the false doctrine, while it is a little more difficult to trace, it is no less condemning of Judah. All, or nearly all, ancient regimes—and even medieval ones—to one extent or another considered the monarch semi-divine to fully divine. This, of course, was false, but it added a layer of intimidation and compulsion

that was needed to maintain power. The degree to which Judah adopted this theology has been and still is endlessly debated. However, passages such as this one indicate that it was not entirely absent in Judah. Judah's kings came to power through rigid succession in which God had no say in who the new king would be—notwithstanding the Davidic propaganda of divinely sanctioned succession. They were most certainly neither simi nor fully divine. Many of them were complete scoundrels—and that's being kind—and acted contrary to Yahweh's expectations, demands, and desires for just governance.

Thus, as we have contended before, in its original context this psalm, including this specific reading, is little more than crass political propaganda intended to impress Judah's citizenry and, hopefully, intimidate Judah's enemies.

In Christianity's adoption of this psalm and its application to Jesus, all the hypocrisy and false doctrine was forgotten or ignored. Of course, the assertion of Jesus' divine sonship was true in a way that Judah's political propaganda never could be. Indeed, Jesus was not only the Son of God, he was God. Jesus was no hypocrite. In his private life, he was always faithful to his God and Father. In his public life, he treated all with equity—indeed, treating others as he himself would want to be treated—and exercised no compulsion or intimidation. He remained true to the principles of just governance as God outlined them in the Hebrew Bible.

This leaves us with the necessity of dealing with how Judah and Jesus respond to hostile and rebellious nations. To be sure, ancient Judah, like all the kingdoms of this world, maintained its place in international affairs through intimidation and violence. It regularly engaged in the sort of intimidating rhetoric that is found in this psalm and then, when that did not work, engaged in violent battle and warfare. As all war, it would have been an unholy and bloody mess.

Jesus' response is more difficult to gauge. It would appear over the past two thousand years that he has done little about the continuous and universal national rebellion against him but let nature take its course. Nations have fallen under the weight of their own wickedness and under violence that matched their own. The jury is still out, it seems, on whether he will at some point become more aggressive in dealing with the global rebellion that rages incessantly against him. There are scripture passages—and not a few of them—that many read as indicative of a coming active and personal divine and violent vengeance against a rebellious world. Others, seeing the world's wickedness and violence grow exponentially, assume that any coming catastrophe will be the natural consequence of this escalating human wickedness and violence. Whatever one decides, it seems best to avoid rebelling against God, and to avoid too intimate allegiance to any of the planet's myriad of rebellious kingdoms.

> "Put not your trust in princes,
> nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help" (Ps. 146.[3]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

meditation 9— psalm 2.[6–9]

seventh voice

[10] Now then, O kings, be prudent.
Learn your lesson, O rulers of the earth.
[11] Serve YHWH with deference.
Find contentment in groveling before him.

[12] Kiss the Son's feet
lest he become enraged, and you destroyed;
for his fury can flare up in a flash.

benediction/ assurance

Secure are all who seek refuge in him (author's translation).

Many may be touched and inspired by passages that speak of kissing Jesus' feet. We may read about the Nephites' experience of kissing Jesus' feet and long to be there; maybe even look forward to the day when we can do as they did.

> "And when they had all gone forth and had witnessed for themselves, they did cry out with one accord, saying: "Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God!" And they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him" (3 Ne. 11.[16-17]).

We might want to imagine the obeisance found in the kiss demanded in this Psalm in such touching and inspiring terms. But it is as near certain as certain can be that such a reading is untrue to the circumstances and context. By our understanding, this world's rulers to whom this Psalm addressed its warning were in open rebellion against Judah's king. If and when these rebellious kings were finally brought to heal and made to reaffirm their obeisance to the Jewish king, they most certainly would not have been happy. There is no chance in hell that any kiss they planted on the Jewish king's feet was worshipful or anything remotely similar to the kisses the Nephites lavished on Jesus' feet. They kiss would have been accompanied with humiliation and hatred not respect, gratitude, and love.

In our Christian romanticization of this passage, we sometimes look forward to the day when the rulers of this world will yield obeisance to Christ, imaging that their kissing of his feet will be willing, happy, and worshipful. I see no reason whatsoever to believe such romanticization. I see no reason to believe that if Jesus comes tomorrow, the world-wide, corrupt and power-hungry ruling elite of any nation will, today or tomorrow, willingly give up the desire for power, voluntarily give up the reins of power, or willingly concede power to Jesus. More likely, it seems to me, the potentates of this world will have to have the scepter ripped from their hands. I wish it were otherwise, but I have no hope in it. If Jesus is to reign on this planet, it will only come after many a brutal battle.

And, really, the romanticizing Christian need look no further than themselves for evidence. How many of those who look forward to kissing Jesus' feet yield real obeisance to him today? How many of us refuse to yield to his militant demands? How many of us, as but one of countless examples we might offer, understand and act upon the reality that true greatness and real power is evidenced and exercised only through self-sacrifice, however humiliating? How many of us use what abilities and powers we possess to gratify ourselves and our ambitions? To build up our own little kingdom? We need look no further than the behavior of millions of "Christians" during a pandemic. Then, they could not make the teeny, tiniest sacrifices in order to serve and protect others, but asserted their right to power (liberty, they called it)—to do as they pleased. It is difficult to image such a crowd willingly bowing the knee to Jesus, much less kiss the feet of one who demands self-sacrifice.

Sadly, many of us are as unlikely to kiss Jesus' feet willingly and happily as are the rulers of this world. We are likely to have to engage in brutal internal battles and to pass through fiery trials to get there. And even then, many will refuse and perish. This is not, of course, what we want to hear. So, we make up these other happy stories.

Those who do happily kiss Jesus' feet in the spirit of love and worship are those who, among other things, recognize, accept, follow, and live the life of attachment, connectedness, unity, and atonement that Jesus revealed when he walked on earth—not as an intimidating force but as a compassionate one. Like Jesus,

they yield their will to power. They give up the urge to dominate. They abandon the spirit of competition for the spirit of cooperation. This is the only way to an enduring life. The other way is the way of the ungodly and leads to destruction.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

psalm 3

meditation 1— introductory

Before jumping right into this third Psalm, we should offer a few introductory comments about our approach to it and the four psalms that follow it. Psalms 3-7 have traditionally been identified as belonging to the genre or form of "lament." Some have labeled such psalms, "Complaint." Each of these five psalms have an element of lament or complaint. However, as we will see, each contains expressions of trust in God even in the midst of complaint.

These five psalms have much in common. I will treat them almost as if they form a distinct collection within the Psalms, each psalm centered in the same or similar circumstances. As I understand them, each Psalm addresses attacks made against the Psalmist's character. These attacks take the form of accusation of wrongdoing against the Psalmist.

In this third Psalm, we sense accusation in the Psalmist's complaint concerning his enemies' assertion that "He'll get no help from 'ĕlohîm"! and then his confident confession that God is "defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing. The Psalmist complains about false attacks on his character again in Psalm 4.

> "How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?
> How long will you love falsehood
> and seek after deception?" (vs. 2)

Allusion to the false accusations of wrongdoing that his enemies level against him appear again in 5.[8-10] and 7.[3-4, 6-9]. Accusation of wrongdoing and attacks on the Psalmist's character, then, form a common theme through these five psalms.

As I understand them, these five psalms represent prayers of complaint, and confessions of trust in God, and request for divine assistance offered during the night in what some call an "incubation" ritual. This ritual is likely conducted at the temple (See 3.[4]; 5.[7]). We see indications of a nighttime setting in several passages.

> "I retire, sleep peacefully,
> and awake, knowing that YHWH supports me" (3.[5]).

> "Completely at peace, I will lie down and fall fast asleep;
> for only You, YHWH, allow me to rest securely" (4.[8]).

> "YHWH, You'll hear my voice in the morning.
> At first light, I'll present myself to You and anticipate Your response… (5.[3]).

> "All night long I inundate my bed with tears.
> I flood my bedchamber" (6.[6]).

There are other points of contact between these five Psalms including vocabulary as well as themes. Such concentration on the theme of accusation might seem strange to some. We will address this in following meditations focused on Psalm 3. But we end this meditation with another theme these five psalms share. Indeed, it is a theme that runs throughout the entire Book of Psalms no matter the situation or genre. That theme is one of trust and confidence. Trust and confidence in God. We hear expressions of trust in God and his willing and powerful assistance throughout Psalm 3 (vss. 3, 5-6, 8), in Psalm 4.[3, 7-8], in 5.[7, 11], and

in 7.[17] among others. Even in the darkest of the five psalms—Psalm 6, one of the seven traditional "penitential" psalms—the Psalmist expresses his trust in God and confidently confesses his expectation of divine assistance and deliverance.

> "Leave me alone, all you, who would do me harm,
> for YHWH has heard my weeping.
> YHWH has heard my cry for help.
> YHWH has accepted my prayer.
> All my enemies will be disappointed and greatly dismayed.
> They retreat. They are thwarted, in the blink of an eye (vss. 8-10).

Expressions of trust and confidence in God and His willing and powerful intervention in human suffering and trial is one of the Psalmists' great legacies. But even more, God's willing and powerful intervention in human suffering and trial is one of the great legacies of Israel's God, the great Yahweh, God Almighty. God grant that these great legacies become part of who and what we are.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 16, 2023)

meditation 2— introductory

My LDS faith tradition has little to do with the Psalms. Without a liturgical tradition, the Psalms are not utilized in LDS worship services—if, indeed, it can be said to have "worship services"—as they are in other Christian or Jewish services. They are not used to enhance group experiences in worshipping and praising God—if, indeed, they are inclined to praise God. The Psalms hardly register with individuals as they contemplate their relationship with God or with others—friend or foe. They are not used in public or private prayer or to strengthen either group or private prayer life. They play little, if any role in affirming or declaring group or personal beliefs or experiences—spiritual or temporal.

Everywhere I have gone and to whomsoever has lent me an ear, I have attempted to correct this unfortunate oversight—calling it an "oversight" is putting it mildly. As I have shared my own enthusiasm for the single most read and translated Book in Christian and, perhaps, human history—and one that has greatly influenced my own life and thought—I have been met with several objections to the Book.

By far the most common objection to the Book, and one that I have heard repeatedly, has to do with its alleged author, David. We cannot now go into detail concerning Psalm authorship. We will only make two points at this time. First, in my view, David's authorship of psalms is greatly exaggerated. This exaggeration is largely explained by the fact that so many Psalms possess a superscription with the designation, "*l^{e}Dāwid,* "of, to, for David," both alone and in conjunction with other terms such as "song," "hymn," etc.

As to this point, we should note that the superscriptions are likely secondary, added by redactors after a psalm's composition—perhaps well after its composition. These superscriptions may or may not represent the historical reality of a psalm's original setting. We should also note that while the prepositional prefix, l^{e}, can connote ownership that does not necessary connote authorship. The prefix may indicate that David owned a Psalm due to his being royalty and in charge of all things having to do with the temple—this was the case with all ancient Near Eastern kings. The prefix could also be read "to or for David," indicating that it was dedicated to David or whatever king sat on the thrown at any given time.

Whatever one decides on such matters, the reader may still wonder, "Why would David's authorship be

an issue for LDS readers?" This brings us to our second observation. The pessimistic attitudes and ideals that many LDS readers bring to David and his eternal destiny far outpace what is certain about David—which is, in fact, very little. Much more humility is in order when it comes to LDS speculation concerning the possibility of David's full forgiveness and its assigning him an inferior place in the eternal realms.

The second most common LDS objection to the psalms is found in more mundane: the Book is, many complain, too repetitive—this from a group of people who attend a weekly sacrament "meeting" whose format has not changed one iota in at least three-quarters of a century! We will see, I hope, that what passes as repetition has much originality and subtle points of difference and enhancement. In my experience, the third most common LDS objection to the psalms is exemplified for the first time in this third psalm. As several have put it, "David [there he is again] is such a wimp. All he does is complain. He seems, almost, paranoid."

Well!

The Psalmists—for there are certainly many—do complain a great deal. Indeed, "lament" is how scholars have categorized many a psalm, including this one. While the Psalmists complain or lament about much that they experience, one complaint appears more, far, far more than any other. While God is the principal figure of the Book, and it is He who is nearly always addressed—for much of the Book is prayer—there is another oft discussed and addressed character or class: the enemy. Enemies are everywhere, appearing over and over again. It would be fair to say that "the enemy," often identified and associated with "the malevolently immoral," "wrongdoers," and the "contemptuously antisocial" that we met in Psalm 1 is one of the elemental themes of the Psalms.

While no one has explicitly articulated it to me, the common complaint that there is a great deal of complaining and "paranoia" in the Psalms, suggests that this focus on enemies is, for many, one of the Book's "problems." "Who has so many enemies who are so persistent that they must complain about them so often?"

Well, then, we will need to address this matter or enemies and enmity. We will have many opportunities to do so in immediate and many a following meditation. For now, we will only admit, I guess, to having entered the world of the Psalmists' paranoia. There are enemies. And they are numerous. They are flesh and blood, and they are disembodied. And enmity is everywhere. Pervasive. Just have a look at the near constant state "wars and rumors of warms." Or, closer to home and less dramatic, have a look at the U.S. House of Representatives of this early 21st century. Consider the fact that there was even "war in heaven" before the great human enterprise was undertaken. Talk about enmity.

Based upon theological propositions and my own observation of the world around me I see no reason to question the Psalmist view that human (and non-human) enmity is pervasive and dominant. Yes, the Psalmists seem to be onto something when they not only present a world of enmity but also present a God who is the only rescue from such a world.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 16, 2023)

meditation 3— psalm 3.[1-3]

YHWH! How my adversaries have multiplied!
How numerous are those that rise against me!

How many are those who say of me:
"He'll get no help from 'ĕlohîm"!

But You, YHWH, are my battle shield,
defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing.

In the end, the Book of Psalms is about God. He is the central figure. We learn as much about Him and His character in the Psalms as anywhere in scripture. The Psalmists, for they are many, along with those who would adopt their words, sentiments, attitudes, and actions toward and about God are the second subject of the Book. Through their prayers, we learn as much about ourselves and our relationship with God as anywhere in scripture. Based upon my decades of reading, praying, and meditating upon the Psalms, the enemy, identified by several Hebrew words, is the third most present and important figure in the Book.

We note, here, that the Book of Psalms began, not with a description of or appeal to God, but with a description of and warning about those who opposed God and His directions for a fulfilling life—those it called, "the malevolently immoral," "wrongdoers," and "contemptuously anti-social" (1.[1-2]). Psalm 2 began, not with a description of or appeal to God, but with a description of those who opposed God and His right to world rule—directly or indirectly (2.[1-3]). Now, in Psalm 3, the Psalmist begins with the theme of opposition yet again. Just as there are those who opposed God, His directions, and His rule, there are those who oppose those devoted to God. Opposition and enmity are omnipresent. This reality, it will turn out, is one of the principal themes of Psalms. Before examining the text of Psalm 3, we should begin to address the omnipresence of opposition to God and all things and people godly, the omnipresence of enmity, and the omnipresence of enemies in the Psalms.

The near omnipresence of enemies in the Psalms is, for some, off-putting. To some, it comes off as self-absorbed, pessimistic, and paranoid. It feels unrepresentative of their daily life. They forget, or ignore the fact that Jesus counseled about enemies and was, Himself, a victim of their violence. While I have not thought of many of the countless individuals who have entered my life as "enemies," I have sensed some who felt enmity toward me and toward whom I felt some greater or lesser enmity. Indeed, any honest look at the world around us proves that the existence of enmity between individuals and groups is pervasive, being, almost, the rule rather than the exception in individual and international relations.

Call me self-absorbed, pessimistic, and paranoid if you will, but the MAGA years have been a painful revelation that I do, in fact, have enemies—and of course they feel the same in reverse, as I am viewed a danger to them. There are people who would do me harm. They would, for example, sacrifice me and millions of others rather than place a thin piece of cloth over their mouth and nose, or experience the tiny pin prick of a vaccination needle in their fleshy upper arm. They would take away my right to vote. The list of harms they would bring to me is long. Here is not the place to catalogue them.

But these enemies of whom I speak are mere flesh and blood. As Jesus witnessed, such enemies can only threaten the life of my body. They are to be feared less than those who possess the desire and power to do spiritual harm and "kill the soul." (Mt. 10.[28]). These are beings of flesh and blood and beings disembodied. We cannot see the disembodied enemies, but they are numerous. According to LDS theology, God had a third more spiritual offspring than the billions upon billions who have or will ever occupy mother earth. They occupy a different dimension but exert some influence in ours. I do not

pretend to understand all this. I can't even say that I take it all literally. But, I am persuaded to at least consider the possibility that there are numerous forces that are hostile to God and hostile to me and hostile to you too in that measureless cosmos we see when we look out into the night sky or through a space telescope. Maybe you feel the same. Maybe not.

When we think of such cosmic enemies, we most often think of their attempts to tempt and their encouragement to deviate from just and godly principles. Perhaps they do so, but it seems that we do pretty well on our own without much encouragement. The Psalmist doesn't give much press to this aspect of the enemy. More often he focuses, as he does in this psalm, on the enemy's accusatory and demeaning impulses.

While in its private musings, the religious mind is often insecure, in its public offerings it can often seem confident and self-righteous, possessing a rather exaggerated opinion of itself and its capacities. In both private and public expression, it can be unreasonably demanding of self and others. At the same time, it often possesses an exaggerated view of God's thin skinned-ness and liability to feel dishonored and angry. Taking advantage of this fertile ground, the enemy, responsible or not for encouraging our deviations, accuses us of unworthiness and god-forsakenness. Probably, in this regard we are as much our own enemy as any external enemies.

We meet such accusatory enemies over and over again in the Psalms.

> "When my enemies speak out against me,
> and those scrutinizing me plot together,
> asserting: 'God has forsaken him.
> Pursue and seize him for he has no one to rescue him…'" (Ps. 71.[10-11]; author's translation)

> "He has anticipated that YHWH would deliver him.
> He should deliver him, then, seeing that He takes such pleasure in him" (Ps. 22.[8]; author's translation).

This accusatory spirit is universal and everywhere present. Even Jesus felt the sting of feeling forsaken by God and used the Psalmist's words to express the pain and wonder of it (See Ps. 22.[1]). But the Psalmists know that God is of a different and more powerful spirit than the accusing enemy. He knows what the Revelator saw in vision; that God is a defender of the accused and will bring deliverance from the accuser's tyranny.

"Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night." (Rev. 12.[10]).

> "But You, YHWH, are my battle shield,
> defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 26, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 3.[1–3]

Israel's "prayer book" began with two introductory psalms that were not prayers. But with Psalm 3, we entered the world of pray. And as is so often the case in the Psalms, this world of prayer is inhabited by enemies. If there were once but a few enemies, they have multiplied until now they are many. These

enemies make an assertion or, as we understand it, an accusation.

> "How many are those who say of me:
> 'He'll get no help from 'ělohîm'"!

This could, I suppose, be read as an assertion of atheism—the Psalmist will get no help from God because God does not exist. But modern style atheism seems to have been extraordinarily rare in the ancient world. This statement of divine inaction does not seem to fit the context.

On the other hand, this statement of divine inaction might be indicative of a lack of trust in God rather than blatant atheism—He does not involve Himself in human affairs, including those of the Psalmist. Here and there, the Psalmist speaks of this type of unbelief. As I understand it, in the very next Psalm, we witness a disputation between the Psalmist and his accusing enemies. When the Psalmist counsels restraint in their opposition to him and for trust in God with a question, the respond with a skeptical,

> "Who will show us any good?"

The Psalmist responds with his countering faith that God is present and active in human affairs.

> "Oh, cast the light of Your presence upon us, YHWH!"

Elsewhere, the Psalmist enemies assert,

> "God pays no attention.
> He's absent. He sees nothing, ever" (10.[11], author's translation).

We could go on. Suffice it to say that the Psalmist often finds himself confronted by those who profess an uninvolved God. Though the Psalmist can be perplexed by God inaction, in the end, he does not buy it, but maintains God's active participation in his and all other human affairs.

Indeed, in this Psalm, the Psalmist quickly responds to the charge of God's absence in his life.

> "But You, YHWH, are my battle shield,
> defender of my reputation and the one who restores my standing."

The nature of the Psalmist's response hints at the real reason for his enemies' assertion that "He'll get no help from 'ělohîm"! It isn't that they believe that there is no God or that God is habitually and generally inactive in human affairs. Rather, they assert that God is specifically inactive in the Psalmist's life.

With his expressed faith that God defends his reputation and restores his standing, the Psalmist allows us to see that it is his reputation and standing in the community and, even more significantly, before God that is under assault. The Psalmist's enemies suggest that there is something flawed about him that will cause God to be inactive in his life.

As we have indicated in our introductory meditations on this psalm, Psalms 3-7 have much in common. They seem to address a similar situation. That situation is false accusations of wrongdoing against the Psalmist. This charge of divine absence in the Psalmist's life is the opening salvo in a long barrage of attacks.

As we will see, in the end, the Psalmist will adamantly maintain his innocence in the face of the specific charges brought against him. But in this and the accompanying four Psalms in this series of laments/complaints, as throughout the Book of Psalms, the Psalmist maintains his faith in God's willing,

anxious, and beneficial interest and involvement in the Psalmist personal life, in the life of those who trust Him, and, indeed, in human affairs universally.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 17, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm 3.4–6

[4]I'll publicly and loudly appeal to YHWH,
and He will answer me from His temple preeminent.
[5]I will retire, sleep peacefully,
and awake, knowing that YHWH supports me.
[6]I will not fear though a force of ten thousand
is arrayed against me on every side (author's translation).

As we have discussed in our previous meditations on Psalm 3, "the enemy" is a common, even dominate theme of the Book of Psalms. This concentration on enemies is not mere pessimism or paranoia. Enmity between individuals, groups, and nations is pervasive on every corner of the planet. There is a reason why the very first recorded human even after "the fall" was the murder of one brother by another—a murder that flowed from envy, greed, and the enmity they engendered (See Gen. 4.[1-8] & Moses 5.[16-33]). This first story serves to warn us about our violent human nature and our inclination to enmity and violence.

But as "war in heaven" reminds us, enmity is not limited to this planet. The cosmos may be a far more dangerous place than our romanticized views of "eternal life" and "heaven" may account for. Enemies, rather mortal or not, may or may not turn physically violent. But they always evidence violence by the attacks they level against character. The enemy always possesses a sophisticated repertoire of negative propaganda about their enemies/victims.

In this third Psalm, the enemy attacks the character of the Psalmist, as discussed in previous meditations. The charge the Psalmist's enemies level, "He'll get no help from 'ĕlohîm," is intended less as a statement about God, and more as character assassination against the Psalmist. It is less about God's unwillingness or inability to help and more about the Psalmist's unsuitability to receive divine assistance. The Psalmists are not bombarded by such character defamation once or twice. Such denigrating voices are shockingly numerous.

"How my adversaries have multiplied!
How numerous are those that rise against me!"

In response to such character assassination, the Psalmist went to the temple where he very publicly made his needs known to God and where he seems to have received some time of assurance, for he very shortly confessed,

"I will not fear though a force of ten thousand
is arrayed against me on every side" (vs. 6).

This can be read, of course, as poetic exaggeration. We can determine that no one is surrounded by ten thousand enemies. Yet, as we have suggested, the world and the cosmos are littered with forces hostile to each other. There is no telling how many enemies, mortal or otherwise, are arrayed against us on a daily basis. But with God as our comrade in arms, we need not fear.

No doubt, we have all had sleepless nights when worries kept us awake while our minds spun intricate and fearsome webs of personal demise. Such worries, too, can be viewed as enemies—enemies of our peace. But, again, we can and should take comfort and find strength in the Psalmist's experience. Because of the Psalmist's trust in God and His willingness and capacity to help in times of distress, the Psalmist could "retire, sleep peacefully and awake [refreshed]."

I doubt that there is a single reader of that sentence that has not and will not again yearn for such peace in the face of anxious self-doubt—whether self-induced or a consequence of other's opinions and claims. It is the Psalmist's testimony that God can and will come to our defense as either we ourselves or others cast doubt on our character and God's willingness and ability to work in our lives because of our unworthiness. I, for one, am grateful for the Psalmist's testimony. I have relied on it many times. You can too. God is faithful.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 17, 2023)

meditation 6— psalm 3.[7-8]

[7]Arise, then, YHWH;
deliver me, my God
by hitting all my enemies in the mouth—
shattering the teeth of the malevolently immoral.
[8]This victory is YHWH's doing.
Your blessing ne upon Your people (author's translation).

This psalm began with the Psalmist's complaint that numerous enemies assaulted him by verbally maligning his character. In their assault, the enemies asserted that the had no credible claim on God for relief from the assault (vs. 1-2). Notwithstanding such consistent and insistent claims, the Psalmist faithfully went to the temple to publicly ask the Lord for relief from his enemies' onslaught. There, he received assurance of God's help (vs. 3-4). This assurance brought such peace of mind that the Psalmist was able to put aside worry and sleep peacefully and restfully (vs 5-6).

Having gratefully received this assurance, the Psalmist now asks the Lord to act according to the promise. He asks that God

"hit all my enemies in the mouth—
shattering the teeth of the malevolently immoral."

We were introduced to the "malevolently immoral" in the very first verse of Psalm 1, where they are portrayed as in opposition to God and His life-inducing principles. There, they seek to waylay and deceive others to their way of thinking and behaving. Here, they oppose the Psalmist, a devotee of God through false accusation.

We might be put off by the violent imagery that the Psalmist uses in his request that God resists his enemies' attacks. The image of a blow to the mouth resulting in broken teeth is unquestionably graphic and violent. We should keep in mind that we are dealing with poetry. We need not understand the Psalmist to be asking God to act in a literal and physically violent manner. Since the enemies' threat comes from their mouths in the form of verbal assaults on the Psalmist's character, it is only logical that

the Psalmist would focus on putting a stop to their mouthiness. It wouldn't make poetic sense, would it, to ask that God break the enemies' *legs*? So, the Psalmist's request is simply a poetic way of saying, "Put a stop to their verbal assaults."

"But," one might object, "couldn't the Psalmist have made his request using less violent imagery?" I suppose he could have. He might have asked the Lord to put his hand over their mouth. I guess he could have asked God to wash their mouth out with soap. I am being facetious, of course, but still the question remains, "Why use such violent imagery?" Here is one thought.

We have already discussed the pervasive presence of enemies, in the Psalms. These enemies are often committed to defamation, and belittling. They are intense, committed, and enduring in their contempt. "They hate," the Psalmist complains elsewhere, "with cruel hatred" (Ps. 25.[19]). They "breathe out cruelty" (Ps. 27.[12]). The Psalmist likens the enemies' intensity and cruelty in wicked defamation to lions. They are like "a young lion lurking in secret places" "that would swallow me up" (Ps. 17.[12]).

> "My soul is among lions:
> and I lie even among them that are set on fire,
> even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows,
> and their tongue a sharp sword" (Ps. 57.[3-4]).

So committed are the Psalmists' enemies to defamation; so ingrained is their wicked belittling; so habitual is the spirit of accusation that no gentle correction is likely to convince them to change their ways. It will require an act of God to stop them. What Jeremiah found to be true of Judah in his day, is likely what the Psalmist (and the Lord) found to be true of these enemies.

> "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jer. 13.[23]).

> "Are they ashamed by the abhorrent things they do?
> They are not ashamed at all, nor feel humiliation.
> For this reason, they will fall right along with others who fall" (Jer. 6.[15]).

The Psalmist's aggressive imagery, therefore, serves to remind us that the enemies' ways are deeply engrained and unlikely to be reformed easily. Deep sin cannot be removed through a light touch. Light cleaning will not remove the stains that have sat for so long. Reform sometimes requires a heavy hand. It requires a dramatic act. In this, we might think of the unnamed Lamanite king who, having been taught by Aaron, prayed, "What shall I do that I may have… this wicked spirit *rooted* out of my breast" (Al. 22.[15]). "Rooting out" is highly disruptive, the soil often left torn and tattered.

The Psalmist could hope that he could be released from the enemies' assault through their easy reform. But he is a realist. He knows that their wickedness is deeply rooted. His enemies' reform will require a dramatic divine act. If reform is to be had, it will be a painful transformation. Hopefully, it is not so late that they cannot be reclaimed, their wickedness persisting until they are brought to a bitter end.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 17, 2023)

psalm 4

meditation 1— psalm 4.1-6

invocation

[1]When I appeal to you, answer me,
Oh, my God, the one who vindicates me.
Make me equal to the challenge before me.
Have compassion, and give heed to my plea.

disputation

[2]How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?
How long will you love falsehood
and seek after deception?
[3]Know this: YHWH is attentive to those devoted to him;
it is YHWH that responds when I cry out to Him.
[4]Be agitated, but don't behave badly.
Examine yourselves in private.
Just be calm!
[5]Offer approved sacrifices,
and put your trust in YHWH.

[6]Many might respond, "Who will show us any good?"
Oh, cast the light of Your presence upon us, YHWH! (author's translation).

Though difficult and susceptible to highly subjective conclusions, as one reads the Psalms one must be attuned to the possibility that any individual psalm might contain more than one voice and address more than one audience. As indicated in my meditations on Psalm 2, I believe that psalm to be an example of a psalm with multiple voices.[1] Identifying the various voices can assists the reader in their understanding and interpretation of many a psalm.

In my view, Psalm 4 represents an example of a psalm with multiple *audiences*. In verse 1, the Psalmist addresses God, appealing to Him for help in the face of challenging circumstances, the nature of which we only come to know in the following verses. We continue to hear the Psalmist's voice in verses 2-6. However, here, the audience is no longer God, but those who speak lies in an attempt to smear the Psalmist's reputation for their own ends. In verses 7-8, the Psalmist returns to addressing God directly.

In this meditation, we will focus on the critique and counsel that the Psalmist offers his detractors in verses 2-6. As critic, he makes known his detractors' reliance on lies and deception to besmirch his

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[1] I identify these voices as follows:

1st voice (vss. 1-2)	temple patrons/ temple priest or priests
2nd voice (vs. 3)	rebellious nations as quoted by a group of priests or temple patrons
3rd voice (vss. 4-5)	temple patrons/ temple priest or priests
4th voice (vs. 6)	God, Himself, as quoted by a patron/ temple priest
5th voice (vs. 7a)	the chosen king or a priest representing him
6th voice (vs. 7b-9)	God, Himself, as rehearsed by the king
7th voice (10-12)	temple patrons/ temple priest or priests (it should be noted that this 7th voice addresses the rebellious nations directly)

reputation (vs. 2). No doubt, the Psalmist is aware that he is not perfect and without fault. He is likely aware of very real character flaws that weaken him and his ability to influence and serve. But, even in these circumstances, the Psalmist's detractors may be wrong in attacking him. However, as is so often the case, those who seek to besmirch another's reputation seldom confine themselves to what is "true." Their zeal to destroy leads them to invention—the invention of additional and questionable flaws. They come to trust in lies and deceptions to tear down another and build themselves up.

As counsel/ warning, the Psalmist asserts that because he has shown fidelity to God, God will show fidelity to him.

> "Know this: YHWH is attentive to those devoted to him;
> it is YHWH that responds when I cry out to Him."

Attacking the Psalmist is tantamount to attacking God. God will respond in defense of the Psalmist and in opposition to his detractors. They would do well, then, to lay off.

The Psalmist understands that laying off may be galling for his detractors. But, he counsels, it is better to be a little vexed than be engaged in sin against the Psalmist and, through his association with God, God, Himself (vs. 4a). The Psalmist's detractors would do well to sincerely take a long, hard, and honest look at themselves (vs. 4b). Is it possible that their chaffing at the Psalmist actually reflects a private displeasure that they have with themselves? How often unhappiness with others is reflective of one's unhappiness with oneself! How often is focus on real or imagined faults of others really an attempt to forget or hide one's own troubling faults!

The Psalmist kindly reminds his detractors that no amount of focus on the real or imagined faults of others can ever truly satisfy internal self-doubts and self-criticism. Self-confidence can never come by tearing others down. In the face of obvious and inevitable personal weakness, they must learn to trust and turn to God. Only through honest introspection combined with trust in and reliance upon God, His strength, and His compassion will they find the self-confidence for which they so ardently long.

This is a little of what I find in the Psalmist's counsel/ warning to his detractors. It is counsel we all can and should live by. It is no use trying to feel good about ourselves by tearing others down. It is no use using lies and deceptions about others to hide the lies and deceptions we tell ourselves about ourselves. Personal introspection combined with trust in God and His fidelity to us is essential if we are to enjoy, honor, and serve others. True confidence, self-worth, and the capacity to be a blessing in the lives of others comes only through God and our reliance on Him.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 17, 2023)

meditation 2— psalm 4.[1-6]

> *Many might respond, 'Who will show us any good?'*

In our first meditation on Psalm 4.[1-6], we suggested that the Psalmist addresses two different audiences. In verse 1, he addresses God and pleads for his help. In verses 2-6, the Psalmist addresses those who seek to smear his reputation. Here, he first challenges their smears, warning them that in attacking him, they are really in conflict with God (vs. 2-3). Then, in the spirit of goodwill, he offers them counsel (vs. 4-5). The Psalmist does not question their right to anger and frustration. They can be angry and frustrated if they want. But he counsels them to self-control and the avoidance of bad behavior as a result of frustration

over others. He counsels them to engage in silent and honest self-examination. In addition to this "will worship" (See Col. 2.[23]), they should seek to reinvigorate their relationship with God.

This brings us to verse 6. This verse has and does cause major interpretive problems. Nearly all readers and interpreters feel its abruptness. The following represents my reading, but I am in no way dogmatic about it. Other reasonable solutions to this difficult verse exist and should be considered.

We begin with the first line.

"Many might respond, 'Who will show us any good?'"

Here we continue to hear the Psalmist's voice and his continuing disputation with his detractors. He has warned them about attacking him and has suggested that they look inward for truths about themselves. He has encouraged them to trust God. Now, he anticipates their objection. Perhaps he has even heard murmurings of their objection.

The Psalmist detractors have no confidence that God will act in their life and respond to their attempts at self-improvement. They have no confidence that trusting God will make things any clearer or better for them—hence their reliance on themselves and personal attacks on others. The respondents' skepticism—whether anticipated or expressed—might remind us of Jesus' encounter with Pilate. After meeting with Jesus' accusers, Pilate has additional questions for him. Is he a king? for example. Jesus answers that he is, indeed, a king, but not the kind of king this world knows. Those with discernment know who he is and what kind of king he truly is. To this Pilate responds,

> "What is truth?" (Jn. 18.[38])

Like the Psalmist's detractors in our reading of Psalm 4, Pilate is unsure, even agnostic about his, or anyone's ability to discern "truth," or things as they really are. This agnosticism when it comes to God's engagement with people goes a long way in explaining the comfort with which the Psalmist's enemies use lies and deceptions. This is just the sort of nihilism that exists in American society today and that has in the past few years allowed its political class to create their "alternative facts" so divorced from the realities of life and that do such harm to American society.

The skeptical response of the Psalmist's detractors also brings to mind a tiny and well-known snippet of dialogue that passed between Nephi and his brothers, Laman and Lemuel. Nephi, observing their confusion and debate concerning the nature and meaning of their father, Lehi's, dream, asked them "the cause their disputations."

> "And they said: 'Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive tree, and also concerning the Gentiles.'
> And I said unto them: 'Have ye inquired of the Lord?'
> And they said unto me: 'We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us'" (See 1 Ne. 15.[2-9]).

Laman and Lemuel certainly questioned God's ability or willingness to answer prayer and communicate meaning and understanding to them. But their response reveals an even more deeply rooted doubt. They questioned God's ability or willingness to involve himself in their lives and engage with them for good.

In the Psalmist's detractors' "Who will show us any good?" I hear this same faithlessness, this same disbelief in God's willing and beneficial influence in human affairs. I hear the same skepticism toward "truth claims" and thus the justification for all alternative facts they might use in their defamation of the Psalmist.

Now, the Psalmists, whoever they were, were no strangers to confusion over God and His dealings with them. They are honest and bold about this, not hesitating to question God. But, in the end, they remain firm in the belief that "God is faithful" (See 1 Cor. 10.[13]) and participatory in human affairs—private and global.

In the next meditation, we will hear the Psalmist's response to his accusers skepticism about God's engagement with them. We will also hear him express his faith in God as he calls upon God to enlighten and engage both him and his detractors.

"Oh, cast the light of your presence upon us, YHWH!"

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 17, 2023)

meditation 3— psalm 4.[1–6]

Oh, cast the light of your presence upon us, YHWH!

After pleading with God that He come to his aid against those who were smearing his reputation, the Psalmist directly addresses his detractors. He offers them several bits of counsel but his last and most important bit of counsel was, "put your trust in YHWH."

In response to the Psalmist's counsel, we hear,

"Who will show us any good?"

It is not impossible or even unreasonable to hear in this line a question asked by an assembly of worshippers gathered at the temple. I accept the generally accepted assumption that this and many other Psalms were used in public worship at the temple. Some psalms may have been written primarily for such use in public temple worship. Some psalms' use in the temple was secondary to their original purposes and settings—purposes and settings that are often obscure. I take whatever use this Psalm might have had in Israel's temple worship as secondary to an original private experience.

I find the primary context of this psalm to be located in an individual's real-life experience. The original or primary context of this psalm involved a real (perhaps ritualistic?) attack upon someone's character (vs. 2). Its context is a real-life plea for help, a real defense that took the form of disputation, real counsel offered to the attackers, and the refusal of attackers to accept the counsel offered (vss. 2-6).

Those who were engaged in the smear campaign against the Psalmist responded to his counsel with the question, "Who will show us any good?"

As was so often the case in Nephi's relationship with his brothers, Laman and Lemuel, and the many admonitions he gave them, the Psalmist is confronted with the faithless doubt of his detractors. They are not inclined to take his advice. They are particularly doubtful about God's ability or willingness to engage with them in any meaningful way.

In Nephi's experiences with his brothers' doubt, Nephi informs us that he "was grieved because of the hardness of their hearts" (1 Ne. 15.[4]). In the face of such stubborn hardness, one sometimes feels at a loss—a loss of words and a loss of explanations. One knows only to turn to God and plead for his

intervention. This, it seems to me, is what we hear in the Psalmist's,

> "Oh, cast the light of your presence upon us, YHWH!"

Now, we could read this line as a plea that the Psalmist's detractor's offer after confessing their skepticism. It is nice to think that at the very least the Psalmist was successful in convincing them to "try the experiment" (see Al. 34.[4]) that he proposed in verse 5. However, nowhere in the Psalter is there a report of an enemy voluntarily yielding to God and seeking repentence.

I am inclined, rather, to hear the Psalmist's voice in this line. In his "us," I hear the Psalmist pray as if he were his detractors. I hear him pray the prayer that he wishes/hopes the skeptics might take up. In this, the Psalmist plays the role of a kind of advocate for them. This sort of intercessory prayer is found elsewhere. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, often offers such prayers. Jeremiah 14.[19-22] offers one such example. Hear, Jeremiah prays,

> "Hast thou utterly rejected Judah?
> Hath thy soul lothed Zion?
> Why hast thou smitten us,
> and there is no healing for us?
> We looked for peace, and there is no good;
> and for the time of healing, and behold trouble!
> We acknowledge, O LORD, our wickedness,
> and the iniquity of our fathers:
> for we have sinned against thee.
> Do not abhor us, for thy name's sake,
> do not disgrace the throne of thy glory:
> remember, break not thy covenant with us."

It should be clear that Jeremiah's "we," and "us" and "our" are his words. But he is speaking for his people, as if he were them. He is praying as he wishes they would pray. He is undoubtedly hopeful that his intercessory prayer will produce a positive response from both the nation and its God. He would be disappointed on both counts. The people refused to repent, and God rebuffed Jeremiah's attempt to play intercessor between people and God.

> "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me,
> yet my mind could not be toward this people:
> cast them out of my sight,
> and let them go forth" (Jer. 15.[1]).

This back and forth between Jeremiah and God demonstrates the intercessory nature of Jeremiah's prayer.

In offering his own intercessory prayer in 6b, the Psalmist seems to have invoked the spirit found in the great high priestly blessing found in Numbers.

> "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee:
> The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee:
> The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Num. 6.[24-26]).

The Psalmist believes that God acts in people's lives. In this instance, he believes that his detractors could discern his innocence in whatever charge they have brought against him rather than rely on lies or "alternative facts." He believes that his detractors could engage in self-reflection and, with God's help, discern their true selves and how they could find a sense of personal worth and value in the eyes of God.

Though his detractors doubt his assertions, he does not give up on them. More importantly, he does not give up on God's willingness and ability to engage in individuals' lives. Turning advocate for those who prosecute him, the Psalmist prays as he wishes and hopes they might do for that enlightenment which comes only and most powerfully from God Himself.

Thus, in the Psalmist's plea that God "cast the light of your presence upon us," the Psalmist acts the part of not only advocate but evangelist. Through his plea, he preaches good news. He concludes his testimony of the good news about God in his confession found in the final two verses of this psalm. It is to those two verses that we turn in the next meditation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 17, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 4.7-8

[7]You bring me a deep-rooted joy,
a joy greater than that induced by an abundant grain harvest or supply of new wine.
[8]Completely at peace, I will lie down and fall fast asleep;
for only You, YHWH, allow me to rest securely (author's translation).

In this psalm we have seen that the Psalmist is under attack, his reputation smeared by accusers. He defends himself against their attacks and charitably offers them godly counsel. They doubt the truth and efficacy of his counsel. But their doubt does not cause the Psalmist to loose heart or faith in God. His accusers' doubt, rather, leads him to take up the mantle of advocate and to pray in their behalf, or offer a prayer that he wishes/ hopes they might offer.

"Oh, cast the light of your presence upon us, YHWH!"

But the Psalmist does not stop there. Turning his face away from his doubtful accusers and toward God, the Psalmist offers a prayer. This prayer is, however, more than praise and thanks directed at God. It is additional affirming testimony directed at his doubtful accusers.

In a day when food is almost incomprehensibly available on row after row of shelves in thousands upon thousands of grocery stores; when meals are ready to eat right out of pre-packaged containers; when food is handed to us through fast food windows or by waiters and waitresses in restaurants, we may find it difficult to appreciate the sentiment the Psalmist expresses when he testifies,

"You bring me a deep-rooted joy,
a joy greater than that induced by an abundant grain harvest or supply of new wine."

So, this testimony requires us to use our imagination to recall the past. Imagine that there are no grocery stores, or food preparation factories or restaurants. Imagine that all your food comes from your own and a few neighbor's fields. Imagine, next, that it is harvest time. Imagine that what and even whether you eat in November and December and January and February and March depends on the quality of the harvest. Harvest time truly is a matter of health or sickness, life or death—as it is today, of course, though our distance from the process and our easy access to food makes us feel safe from the realities of food insecurity and its ultimate danger: starvation.

Imagine, then, how happy and how relieved and how secure you feel when the harvest comes in in

sufficient quantities and qualities that you are assured of food security necessary to survival. Imagine the joy of knowing that you can survive another winter.

Maybe you can consider the relief you felt in, say, the spring and early summer of 2020 when you found enough food on shelves emptied because of COVID 19 to carry you through the week. Or, maybe you can recall the relief you felt when you finally found the baby formula that had previously been near impossible to obtain. These modern examples can, at least, approximate the feelings of relief that ancient agrarian societies felt when harvests came in plentiful—of course, there are still parts of the world, to the western world's shame, where people live in such uncertainty, experience food shortage, and die of starvation.

It is the Psalmist's testimony that the relief and joy and security that God brings into life is even greater than the relief and joy and security of a plentiful harvest. Indeed, there is no security like the security God brings into the life of one who chooses to let Him enter the sacred spaces of their soul. I don't know about you, but the Psalmist's testimony, born through personal prayer, greatly increases my yearning for God. It makes me want to partake of Him. Be filled with and by Him. He is, after all, as He, Himself, said,

> "that bread of life…. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever…" (See Jn. 6.[48-51]).

Surely the Psalmist discovered what Lehi and Nephi later discovered: that God's loving presence is "most sweet above all" (1 Ne. 8.[11]) "precious above all" (1 Ne. 11.[9]) and "desirable above all" (8.[12]). He discovered what Paul later discovered: that "in all things he [has] the preeminence (Col. 1.[18]). Yes, the Psalmist discovered what Jesus later asserted: that there is "one pearl of great price" (See Mt. 13.[45-46]) that is to be valued above all, and one kingdom for which we should seek above any other.

> "Therefore take no thought, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or, 'What shall we drink?' or, 'Wherewithal shall we be clothed?' (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Mt. 6.[31-33]).

Here's hoping that the Psalmist's detractors, heard his witness, accepted his witness, and lived his witness in their own lives. Here's hoping, too, that we hear, accept, and live his witness that God brings the greatest joys and the greatest securities this world has known or can know.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 17, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm 4.[7-8]

> *Completely at peace, I will lie down and fall fast asleep;*
> *for only You, YHWH, allow me to rest securely.*

Psalm 4 concludes with more of the Psalmist's continuing witness about God and the wisdom in putting one's faith in Him. His witness, borne ages ago to those who sought to demean him and smear his reputation, has entered the ears of generation after generation for thousands of years until, finally, it has reached our ears. How thankful we are for the Psalmist's witness of God and his example of enduring faith in God!

We have all experienced sleepless nights due to uncertainty and worry. So, the Psalmist's witness that in God we can overcome the dread of uncertainty and worry is welcome news—not that life is carefree, but that God gives us strength and comfort to handle life's cares and find peaceful sleep even in the midst of them. In the previous lines, the Psalmist had us consider the security that comes with an abundant harvest. We might, then, think of the peaceful sleep that the Psalmist envisions as that which the ancient villagers had as a consequence of an abundant harvest and the knowledge that there would be enough food for their needs.

But the sleep of which the Psalmist speaks here seems specific to this entire Psalm and relates to the Psalmist's experience of being under attack by those who would demean and smear his reputation. Indeed, it seems specific to the series of laments found in Psalms 3-7, which we read as if they address the same trial brought on by accusation.

In this reading, we understand the Psalmist to be agitated by his enemy's assault. His agitation has caused sleepless nights. He comes to the sacred temple precincts with the intent of spending the night in prayer and supplication—some refer to this nocturnal stay in the temple as "incubation." We hear this nighttime supplication throughout Psalms 3-7.[2] But there comes a time when the Psalmist senses that God has heard his prayers and will come to his aid.

Perhaps this assurance comes through the quiet and private whisper of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it comes through priestly oracle. Perhaps it comes through his confidence in ordinance and ritual. However it comes, it leaves the Psalmist in such peace that he can sleep peacefully. He sleeps peacefully in the knowledge that when morning breaks, the Lord will provide the defense that the Psalmist so desperately needs in the face of his enemy's sustained assault.

Daily life can sometimes feel like an assault. Worries of all sorts assault our senses. We worry about our families. We worry about our health. We worry about our finances. We worry about tomorrow. All these, and more worrying assaults can weaken our confidence that we possess the wherewithal to endure and even surmount the challenges that we face. They can weaken our sense of personal capability and worth. And, of course, Satan, the ultimate adversary and accuser, is often there to magnify feelings of discouragement, incapability, and worthlessness.

It is the Psalmist's witness that at such times, we must go in search of God. We must go wherever it is we think we will find Him, lay our worries before Him, and put our faith and confidence in not only His power to help, but in His absolute willingness and pleasure in being present in our lives and act as our help and stay. In seeking and knocking and asking, we will find Him, Hear him, and experience the peace that only He can bring. We will find peace such that we can go to bed and rest peacefully knowing that God will be with us at morning's first light and accompany us throughout the challenges that come in the light of every new day.

With this in mind, the words of Lamentations come to mind. We end this meditation with them.

> "This I recall to my mind,
> therefore have I hope.
> It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed,
> because his compassions fail not.
> They are new every morning:
> great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. $3.^{21\text{-}23}$).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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[2] See $3.^{5}$, $5.^{3}$, and $6.^{6}$. See, too, our first introductory meditation for Psalm 3.

(edition: October 17, 2023)

psalm 5

meditation 1— psalm 5.1-2

[1]O give ear, YHWH, to my words.
Give heed to my groanings.
[2]Give close attention to my call for help, my King and God,
for it is to You that I present my plea!

The Book of Psalms begins with two introductory psalms. In the next 5 psalms (3-7), all laments, the Psalmist is in trouble, as they are so often throughout the Book. Trouble seems to follow them, as it does most of us. For reasons that we have given previously, and we will review here, it does not seem impossible that those who ordered the Psalms wanted us to read these five psalms together almost as if they were a unit embracing the same or very similar situation. Whether they intended this or not, doing so allows for some interesting and inspiring insights.

Often in the Psalter, the Psalmists' troubles come in the form of accusation. They are accused of wrongdoing, lacking character, and being on the outs with God. One could make the argument that the enemies found in the Psalms are most often and most likely to be those who stand as accusers to the Psalmists and, through him, temple worshippers. Accusation, it seems to me, is the context of Psalms 3-7.[1]

In Psalm 3, the first of the series, the Psalmist's foes claim that "He'll get no help from ʾᵉlohîm!" (vs. 2). This should not be read as if an atheist is expressing his disbelief in the existence of God and so views the Psalmist's faith as vain. Rather, this should be read as accusation. The Psalmist is somehow unsuitable for or unworthy of God's help. The sense of accusation is strengthened when one hears the Psalmist confess his faith that God is a "defender of my reputation" (vs. 3). It isn't that the Psalmist is perfect—he will make many confessions of sin in the course of the Book—but he is innocent of whatever the specific accusation of this psalm is.

Psalm 4 is also to be located in accusation. "How long," the Psalmist asks his accusers, "will you men of repute smear my reputation" (vs. 2). Whatever its nature, the accusation is false with deceptive evidence presented (vs. 2).

In Psalm 7, the Psalmist calls upon God to convene a hearing and to serve as witness and judge of his innocence (vss. 6-11). He then makes his opening appeal,

"YHWH, if I have done this,
if I bear responsibility for this wrong…" (vs. 4).

Clearly, he has been accused of something. We find out something about that something in the next verse. He stands accused of having "done intentional harm to one who befriended me" and treating them as "an enemy" (vs. 4).

In Psalm 5, as we will see later (vss. 9-10), the Psalmist is once more under accusation, though his accusers present no positive proof of guilt.

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[1] While no accusation is mentioned in Psalm 6, the Psalmist is in plenty of trouble. Given its presence in this series of laments, it is not unreasonable to assume, minus evidence to the contrary, that the trouble is the same as that found in the Psalms that join it in the series.

"Nothing coming out of their mouth has been proven."

Little wonder, then, that this Psalm begins with the thrice repeated appeal to God.

"Give ear, YHWH, to my words.
Give heed to my groanings.
Give close attention to my call for help, my King and God
for it is to You that I present my plea!"

The accusation is damaging. The need is great. The danger is real.

One might wonder what possible application such complaint and need has for us today. Perhaps we have been the object of false accusation, perhaps we have not. Perhaps we have been the accuser of another, perhaps we have not. If we have ever found ourselves, or ever do find ourselves on the receiving end of accusation and slander, Psalm 5 and the four Psalms that surround it can provide much counsel and comfort. If we have ever found ourselves, or ever do find ourselves on the giving end of accusation and slander, Psalm 5 and the four that surround it offer words of wisdom and warning.

But I suspect that most of us have heard the inner voice of accusation. Perhaps we can relate to this confession:

> "I am familiar with the voice of that 'slanderer.' It is the voice that whispers to us, just when we most need to marshal all our abilities in order to perform an important task, 'You're no good, and you never will be any good.' 'You're not smart enough, you'll never succeed in this job.' 'You deserved this, you had it coming, this is what you get.' 'You're ugly, fat (or skinny), and unlovable.' Do you recognize that voice?… No doubt it gains leverage from every flaw, every grain of remorse, every impossible perfectionist demand and unachievable ego ideal we lay upon ourselves, and flays us with them.… The fact that in some this voice is raucous and shrill, and in others scarcely even heard, indicates that the structure of the individual personality or the extremity of the circumstances has a great deal to do with its effectiveness…"[2]

Like the Psalmist, none of us are perfect. There is plenty of room for improvement. But this voice of hopeless accusation, louder in some than in others, is often magnified by Satan—he who is called "the accuser of our brethren" (Rev. 12.[10]). We see him in his role as accuser in Job (See 1.[6-11]). If he is skilled as a tempter, he is just as skilled as an accuser. Both are important tools in the satanic toolbox that is used to dismantle, deconstruct, and destroy.

Satan is portrayed as having been charismatic and vocal in heaven (See Moses 4.[1-6]). He is no less so now as he whispers thunderously into our ears of accusation and worthlessness. Psalm 5, with its two accompanying psalms forward and its two accompanying psalms aft, has much to teach us about all accusation, whether satanic or otherwise, and how to resist it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 19, 2023)

[2] Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, p. 27.

meditation 2— psalm 5.[3]

[3]YHWH, You'll hear my voice in the morning.
At first light, I'll present myself to You and anticipate Your response,

In previous meditations, we have attempted to demonstrate how Psalms 3-7, all laments, could, almost, be read as a single unit, addressing a single or similar experience or situation. In them, the Psalmist is under attack. The attack takes the form of accusation. The Psalmist accusers smear his reputation, accusing him of wrongdoing such that he has lost all right to or hope in God's help. Though his accusers rely on lies to level their accusations (4.[2]; 5.[6]), they are numerous (3.[1-2, 6]), persistent (4.[2]; 5.[3]), and vicious, likened to ravenous lions (7.[1]), or to hunters (7.[12-13, 15]).

Under such circumstances, outnumbered and outgunned—among his accusers are those who are "men of repute" (4.[2])—the Psalmist turns to God for defense against his accusers. This group of psalm seems to be temporally located during the night (See 3.[5]; 4.[8]; 5.[3]; 6.[6]) when the mind, lacking the distractions of the day, more easily settles on the worries of life. And so, much of the night is taken up with prayers for deliverance. At times during the night, the Psalmist tosses and turns on his bed, his mind active with worry (6.[6-7]). At other times, his mind finds comfort in God's faithfulness, giving him the calmness of mind that permits him to sleep (4.[8]). But, before sleeping, he assures God that when the morning breaks, it will find him once more in prayer.

"YHWH, You'll hear my voice in the morning.
At first light, I'll present myself to You and anticipate Your response,"

On might read these lines as an expression of the Psalmist's trust that God listens to prayer. He does, indeed, believe this. However, what I hear in these two lines is the Psalmist unwavering commitment to prayer. He has been praying all night. Finally, he will sleep, but before falling asleep, the Psalmist promises that after whatever sleep he is able to enjoy, his first act upon waking will be to return to prayer. One thinks, here of the Book of Mormon writer, Enos. He reports that "my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens" (Enos 1.[4]). Apparently, both the Psalmist and Enos know what Jesus knows: "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Mt. 17.[21]).

All prayer is not created equal. There may be times when prayer can become somewhat rote and repetitive without serious spiritual harm to the worshipper. There are other times, however, when serious, searching prayer is called for due to the seriousness of the challenges. Some life challenges require a heavier, more serious prayer effort than others.

The challenge of accusation facing the Psalmist in Psalm 5—and, indeed in each of the Psalms in this series of lamentations—is just such a weighty challenge. The challenge of accusation, whether simply internal or magnified by "satanic" influences, are appropriate and necessary reasons for intense and constant prayer. But whether the challenges are severe or mundane, a commitment to a meaningful and regular prayer life is necessary, rewarding, and rewarded. We would all do well to follow the Psalmist's example in his commitment to maintaining a meaningful and regular prayer life.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

(edition: october 19, 2023)

meditation 3— psalm 5.3

As we mentioned in the previous meditation, all prayer is not created equal. There may be times when prayer can become somewhat rote and repetitive without serious spiritual harm to the worshipper. There are other times, however, when serious, searching prayer is called for due to the seriousness of the challenges. Some life challenges require a heavier, more serious prayer effort than others.

But, there are reasons for serious, searching prayer other than life challenges. Consider the following statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith. "The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out" (*TPJS*, p. 137).

I do not know how often they should occur, but I suspect that all of us could benefit from more frequent serious and searching prayer over matters unrelated to and larger than this life and its challenges. I suspect God would be pleased if we engaged in at least the occasional "careful and ponderous and solemn" prayer that has God and the "things of God" as its principal objective. I suspect that He would be pleased if we used prayer to get to know Him better through the questions we ask Him and the pondering in which we engage. Among the meanings behind the Psalmist's "looking up" as the KJV has it, or in "awaiting" the Lord's response as I have it, I suspect that this personal and intimate inquiry after God was one of them. Elsewhere, the Psalmist confessed,

> "When thou saidest, 'Seek ye my face,"
> my heart said unto thee, "Thy face, LORD, will I seek" (Ps. 27.8).

Perhaps, we could all devote a little more time and effort in prayer to explore not only the challenges of life but also the "solemnities of eternity" (See DC 43.34). Perhaps we can more diligently and intimately seek to converse with Him as one man or woman converses with another, thus expanding our understanding and appreciation for God, Himself, until, finally, "he will unveil his face unto you… in his own time and in his own way" (DC 88.68) and we "behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27.4).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: October 19, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 5.4-7

> 4knowing that You are not a God who takes pleasure in willful wrongdoing;
> that cruelty cannot find safety in You;
> 5that those who intend harm cannot stand in Your presence;
> that You reject all who act abusively.
> 6that You bring an end to those who utter falsehood;
> that YHWH abhors the violent and deceptive individual.
>
> 7But, as for me, because of the immensity of Your unwavering devotion to me,
> I can enter Your house.
> I can bow down in Your sacred temple precincts;
> bow in reverence to You (author's translation).

The Book of Psalms is many things. It is above all a prayer book. Because it is a book of prayers, its chief interest is God and how, when, where, why, and on what basis we approach Him. It has much to say about God, Himself. It is a veritable theological catalogue of God and His character. There are few, if any

places in scripture where God's character is more deeply and consistently explored. The Book goes a long way in answering the question, "What kind of Being is God?"

It truly is a shame that our LDS culture has paid so little attention to this magnificent Book. Given, for example, that the Book of Psalms is roughly the same size as the Doctrine and Covenants, it seems imbalanced, to say the least, to devote an entire year of Gospel study on the latter and skim through the former in a mere two or three weeks.

Anyway, we think of the Book of Psalms' intense focus on God when we consider this reading from Psalm 5. We think of it, especially, as we contemplate the Psalmist's faith—a faith that moves him to action and to prayer—that God possesses "unwavering devotion." Our reading of a fundamental divine attribute as "unwavering devotion" reflects our translation of Hebrew word, *ḥesed*.

This word, used over 40 times in the Psalms alone, is central to understanding ancient Israel's understanding of God. Much ink has been spilt trying to capture this word's meaning. Few words have given me more trouble in translation. The King James translators decided that one word was not sufficient to capture its nuances and so settled on the oft used two-word translation, "loving kindness." The Septuagint's penchant for translating the word as *éleos*, has led many to translate, "mercy." Given the word's importance in characterizing God, we would like to make a few additional observations about this word and the infinite divine attribute that the finite word tries to capture.

First, as the Septuagint suggests, "mercy" gets at a core aspect of the word. Now, mercy is more than a feeling or sentiment. It is also an active response. It reflects a feeling and helpful response, especially, to the trials, hardships, and failures, great or small, of another. No one asks for "mercy" when things are going well, after doing something well, or when experiencing success. Only after doing poorly or failing does one feel the need and make a request for mercy—human or divine. Given the needs and failures of the object of mercy, the mercy cannot be said to have been "earned." Thus, "undeserved mery" begins to capture the meaning of *ḥesed*.

But it is only a beginning. The merciful act suggested by *ḥesed* is notable for the basic "kindness" and "goodness" of the merciful individual and of the act toward the one in need of mercy. So, *ḥesed* becomes an "undeserved merciful action filled with kindness." The one feeling and acting upon *ḥesed,* also feels "sympathy" for the one undergoing hardship. They not only feel something within themselves, but have the ability and willingness to feel what the other feels in their hardship. Now, in *ḥesed* we have a "sympathetic and undeserved merciful act filled with undeserved kindness."

Still, there is a little more to the word. The word, *ḥesed,* also has an enduring quality to it. This brings us to "sympathetic and undeserved merciful act with enduring kindness." Finally, *ḥesed* implies acceptance that a binding relationship exists between the parties, leaving us, finally, with "sympathetic and undeserved merciful act of unity with enduring kindness."

Interestingly, the root is found as a verb only twice in the Hebrew Bible. It is a noun when used of God, suggesting to me, anyway, that it isn't so much something God does as something He IS. In using the word, sometimes a passage implies all of it: "sympathetic and undeserved merciful act of unity with enduring kindness." This is especially and most often true, it seems, when it is used in relation to God and His character. Sometimes a passage may focus on a narrower aspect of *ḥesed*. This must be determined by context. Either way, the word is comprehensive and multi-faceted in its meaning.

Obviously, we can't translate, "sympathetic and undeserved merciful act of unity with enduring kindness," every time we come to this word. Yet, the King James translators, it seems, were right in concluding that the concept behind *ḥesed* is too big for any single English word. After countless hours of thought and possible formulations, and, literally, many a restless night, I finally settled on the still

inadequate, "unwavering devotion." There are times when I translate with other words, especially when the word is applied to human beings and their relations or when the context seems to call for a narrower understanding. But, when talking about God, "unwavering devotion" comes as close to the idea and the fundamental aspect of divine character encompassed by Hebrew *ḥesed* as any. It seems to encompass both the emotional response and the committed action. Finally, it has within it the idea of compassion and love—as we sense when we speak, for example, of a mother's devotion to her child or a religious devotee who both feels love for God and expresses that love in action.

As we mentioned earlier, the word is used some 40 times in the Book of Psalms. The Psalmists, whoever they were, cannot say enough of the devotion, commitment, fidelity to human beings that exists in the bosom of God. Over the course of the Book, the various Psalmists will go on and on about it. Nowhere in the Psalms, it seems to me, is there any better description of God's unwavering devotion than in Psalm 103.

> "But as high as the heavens are above the earth,
> so overarching is his unwavering devotion toward those who revere him" (vs. 11).

God's unwavering devotion to human beings is as boundless as the universe. That's a very big universe out there. It goes on and on and on. We have yet to find its farthest edges, if it even has one. It goes on well beyond our ability to measure or identify. To think that God's fidelity toward us is that expansive and goes that far beyond our knowledge and imagination is truly mindboggling. To think that this unwavering devotion is directed at frail and fallible human beings—and the Psalmists know and confess how very frail and fallible they and we are—is beyond mindboggling. For the Psalmist knows that God's unwavering devotion is indeed undeserved.

> "Compassionate and generous is YHWH;
> slow to become angry and abounding in unwavering devotion.
> He is not always condemning.
> He is not always annoyed.
> He does not relate to us as our sins deserve
> or deal with us as our iniquities might suggest" (130.$^{8\text{-}10}$).

Here, the Psalmist is specifically describing God's response to human sin and spiritual failure. He does not become angry, does not constantly condemn, does not become annoyed. He does not treat us as we deserve. He sticks with us. Continues to work with us. Patiently and kindly. All of this represents aspects of his *ḥesed*.

All of this has a tremendous impact upon those who can see, believe, and feel these truths about God's character. It dramatically impacts the Psalmist of Psalm 5. As we saw in our previous meditations, the Psalmist confidently enters the temple. There, he is committed to engaging in constant prayer. He has full expectation of receiving a positive response. The Psalmist's confidence in entering the temple, his stamina in prayer, his assurance of a divine response, these are all based upon his awareness of, and his belief and trust in God's *ḥesed*, His unwavering devotion.

> "But, as for me, because of the immensity of Your unwavering devotion to me,
> I can enter Your house.
> I can bow down in Your sacred temple precincts;
> bow in reverence to You

In this meditation, we have discussed, all too briefly for such an expansive topic, God's unwavering devotion. God's unwavering devotion is the basis for the Psalmist's confident entrance into the temple, his stamina in prayer, his expectation for a positive response. However, the Psalmist knows something

more of the divine character. The Psalmist also knows something of God's character in judgment. This too informs the Psalmist and contributes to his confidence in entering the temple and approaching God in diligent and expectant prayer. We turn to God's character in judgement and its impact upon the Psalmist in the following meditation. For now, we can only say, as we so often do,

> "Therefore, let us glory,
> yea, we will glory in the Lord;
> yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full;
> yea, we will praise our God forever.
> Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord?
> Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy,
> and of his long-suffering towards the children of men?
> Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.
> Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful?" (Al. 26.[16-17])

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 20, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm 5.[4-7]

As I understand them, Psalms 3-7 address attacks made on the Psalmist's character and the Psalmist's night-long pleas to God for help and deliverance in the face of those attacks. These pleas are offered in the temple precincts. Psalm 5 began with the Psalmist's thrice repeated plea that God hear his continuing pleas (vs. 1-2). In verse 3, the Psalmist doubled down on his commitment to prayer, assuring God that the morning would find him on his knees, pleading once more in expectation of God's positive response. In verse 7, we saw that the Psalmist's confident entrance into the temple, his stamina in prayer, and his expectation of a positive divine response were based upon his knowledge that "unwavering devotion" is central to the divine character.

> "But, as for me, because of the immensity of Your unwavering devotion to me,
> I can enter Your house.
> I can bow down in Your sacred temple precincts;
> bow in reverence to You."

Yes, it is in the divine character to be devoted and committed to others. God's unwavering devotion gives hope where no hope could exist. But there is another basis for the Psalmist's confident entrance into the temple and pleas for help. That basis for confidence is found in the Psalmist's knowledge about God's character in judgment. God accurately assesses human behavior. It is part of his character to allow human behavior to play a role in whether an individual may legitimately enter the temple and expect a positive divine response to prayer.

> "that You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness;
> that the evildoer cannot take asylum in You;
> that those who intend harm cannot stand in Your presence;
> that You reject all who act abusively.
> that You bring an end to those who utter falsehood;
> that YHWH abhors the violent and deceptive individual."

The attitudes and behaviors catalogued in these verses are the exact opposite of devotion—divine or human. The Psalmist's statement is both tacit confession of his own innocence in regard to his behavior

toward others, and condemnation of those who attack him. He has avoided being purposefully hurtful. He has avoided being intentionally abusive. He has avoided deceit and violence toward others. Thus, his confidence in approaching God in the temple is increased. His enemies, having engaged in all these behaviors in light of God's unwavering devotion to them, cannot legitimately enter the temple in anticipation of a favorable response from God.

Here, we are reminded of Jesus' parable in which a debtor, forgiven his impossibly gigantic debt by a generous king, would not return the favor and forgive a pittance that a fellow debtor owed him (See, Matt. 18.[23-24]). Those who have experienced the benefits of God's unwavering devotion to them must go out into the world and show that same unwavering devotion to others.

None of this should be read as if God's devotion to us is somehow part of a quid pro quo. God's devotion to us always surpasses our devotion to him. He is always devoted to us beyond what appears to be reasonable and deserved. Jesus' parable of the "Prodigal God" (usually called the "Prodigal Son") is a beautiful illustration of God's devotion above and beyond the call of duty or deserts (See, Lk. 15.[11-32]).

Nevertheless, God's unwavering devotion is not gratuitously bestowed. God has purpose in it. It comforts the worshipper, yes. But, in demonstrating his unwavering devotion, God means to serve as Exemplar to human beings. He shows how people are to be treated—or not treated as in this passage. He hopes, anticipates, expects that, however imperfectly, we will imitate in our relationships with others the divine devotion shown to us, a devotion that we so much appreciate and depend upon.

So, we are called to do something more with God's devotion than bask in it. We are to imitate it. We need not, indeed cannot imitate it to perfection. We are unlikely to even imitate to our own satisfaction. But to not try? To willfully act in ways that are exactly opposite divine devotion? To harm and abuse and violate and deceive? This has an impact upon our relationship to God. We cannot legitimately enter the temple or expect God presence and aid when we willfully treat others opposite to what God would treat them were He present.

The Psalmist's confidence in entering the temple and offering an expectant plea for help against his accusers is, then, based on his knowledge and acceptance of these truths. First and foremost, it is based on God's own character. God is devoted to us far beyond comprehension or deserts. Second, God's judgement is always appropriate and right. Third, the Psalmist knows that he is innocent of serious breaches of fidelity toward his fellow beings. Finally, the Psalmist knows that those who attack him are, themselves, guilty of serious breaches of fidelity toward him, against others, many others, and against God. Any appeal they may make of God in respect to the Psalmist, therefore, will go unheeded.

So, this Psalm is not only a call to trust God and rely on his unwavering fidelity. It is a call to follow Him. Imitate Him. Follow His example of devotion, fidelity, and commitment to others. This is one key that opens wider the temple doors. a confident approach of God, and God presence in our lives.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 20, 2023)

meditation 6— psalm 5.[4-7]

Under attack from enemies who defame his character, the Psalmist enters the temple and confidently prays for God's intervention and protection. The Psalmist can confidently pray in the temple and receive a favorable reception because of God's character and the devotion He has toward the Psalmist. The Psalmist's confidence is also based on his trust in God's judgment. He knows that God is

"not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness;
that the evildoer cannot take asylum in You;
that those who intend harm cannot stand in Your presence;
that You reject all who act abusively.
that You bring an end to those who utter falsehood;
that YHWH abhors the violent and deceptive individual."

The Psalmist trusts that God will see that he is innocent of any wickedness that is intentionally hurtful, abusive, deceptive, or violent toward others. In addition, the Psalmist is confident that, notwithstanding God's natural devotion, those who attack the Psalmist will not receive a favorable reception or be granted success in their attacks against him because, far from innocent, they are guilty of hurtful, abusive, deceptive, and violent behavior against the Psalmist and, likely, others as well.

All of this has application beyond the Psalmist and his immediate enemies. There are principles here that apply to all who would approach God in hopes of His help. This approach may take place inside or outside the temple, but the Psalmist's focus here is on those approaches that take place inside the temple. In this meditation, we will reflect on his temple focus. What the Psalmist expresses here about the temple and its relation to ethical behavior is found elsewhere in the Psalms. In Psalm 24, for example, the Psalmist asks,

"Who can go up into YHWH's temple,
and who can stand in His incomparable place?" (vs. 3)

In another, he asked God directly,

"YHWH, who can feel secure in your temple?
Who can stay comfortably in your sacred mount?" (Ps. 15.[1])

The answer to each question is similar.

"Whoever is blameless and has a clear conscious,
does not give himself to deceitfulness,
and does not swear in confirmation of a deception.
He will receive a blessing from YHWH
and triumph from God who saves him.
This is the community that inquires of Him.
They who seek your presence, O God of Yaʿaqōb̲" (Ps. 24.[4-6]).

"One whose life is one of integrity;
who does what is right,
and is committed to speaking what is true.
No slander escapes his tongue.
He brings no injury upon a fellow citizen.
He does not countenance the dishonoring of those around him.
He avoids the contemptuous,
but he honors those who reverence YHWH.
He might make a commitment that is not in his best interest,
but will not renege on his promise.
He does not lend money at interest.
He does not accept a bribe that might turn a case against the innocent

He that acts in these ways
  can never be shaken" (Ps. 15.[2-5]).

The Psalmist's assertion that one's ethical conduct outside the temple is central to one's experience inside the temple is consistent with those of the Hebrew prophets. The Hebrew prophets often expressed reservations about the temple. Their reservations often stemmed from the disconnect between what the temple represented and taught inside its walls and how temple devotees lived outside its walls. The temple taught the celebrant that the life lived outside the temple was to be one of justice, compassion, and engaged discipleship.

"How should I approach YHWH?
  How should I bow to my exalted God?
Should I approach him with a fully burnt offering?
  How about with new-born calves?
[7]Will YHWH be satisfied with thousands of rams?
  How about with countless channels of olive oil?
Should I offer my firstborn for my willful defiance?
  How about my offspring for less serious private infractions?
[8]He has already told you, man, what is good.
  What does YHWH want from you
but to do justice,
  and love compassion,
    and be willing to live like your God?" (See Mic. 6.[6-8,] author's translation).[3]

The temple taught that this justice, compassion, and discipleship is to be exercised toward all, but especially to the vulnerable whose lot in live it is to most often experience the exact opposite (See Is. 1.[16-18]). Those who attend the temple and clearly hear its message, leave the temple committed to seeking reconciliation and peace with everyone they meet outside the temple (See Is. 2.[1-5]). A life lived outside the temple that is inconsistent with the life mandated inside the temple is a sham. It makes a sham of the temple.

"Trust ye not in lying words, saying,
'The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.'
For if ye throughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye throughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.
  Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say,
'We are delivered to do all these abominations?'
Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD" (Jer. 7.[4-11]).

There is, then, as the Psalmist asserts in this Psalm, an unbreakable link between a worshipper's ability to enter the temple and confidently anticipate a positive interaction with God, and the life that the worshipper lives outside the temple. God's unwavering devotion to individuals does not break this link. Rather it is intended to strengthen it.

As we approach God in or out of the temple, He is interested in and examines the life we live in the

[3] See our meditations on this passage.

mundane world. He does not bother so much with the sorts of trivial and legalistic behaviors that we so often consider—where our posterior is sat on Sunday morning, what percentage of the mammon for which He has no need we give Him, of what our diet does and does not consist, etc., etc., etc.

Rather, he examines our relationship with others, especially the vulnerable. He looks to see whether we show a devotion to others that is imitative of the devotion He shows to us—or, at least, an approximation of His devotion. He looks to see whether we act in ways that intentionally harm, abuse, deceive, and violate others, or whether we live ethically and expansively with others; whether we practice justice and compassion toward others. And, as always, we must remember that it is not only our own individual behavior that is examined. Also examined is how we interact with societal laws and policies that impact others in society—especially, again, the vulnerable, the downtrodden, the disadvantaged.

How we treat others outside the temple impacts the quality of our experiences inside the temple. This is so particularly because the temple itself directs us to devotion toward others. How we treat others in our daily lives and in our societal responsibilities directly impacts the quality of our prayer life and to what degree our prayers gain access to heaven and bring relief in times of need. How we treat others can turn temple worship into a sham and prayer into hypocrisy or it can turn mundane prayer and mundane temple worship into something extraordinary.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 20, 2023)

meditation 7— psalm 5.4–7

In this Psalm, the Psalmist enters the temple and confidently pleads with God for deliverance from his detractors. His confidence flows from both God's devotion to him and his own imitative devotion to others. He knows that those who are intentionally hurtful, abusive, deceptive, and violent toward others can have no assurance of God's positive response in times of need. God's devotion and one's devotion to others should, truly, be all the "yes" necessary to a successful temple recommend interview and a meaningful temple worship experience.

As I meditation upon this passage, it comes to mind that the Psalmist likely believed that God was most apt to hear the pleas offered to Him if they originated in and from the temple. The temple was sacred space, after all. To be in the temple was to be as physically near God's presence as one could get—God sat on his throne, the ark of the covenant, in the throne room (the holiest place) at the back of the temple.

Perhaps early Jewish Christians shared the Psalmist's belief. However, it would not be long after Jesus' death and resurrection that Christians began having difficulties with temple officials, causing them to rethink, perhaps being forced to rethink such beliefs. Acts informs us that Peter was forcibly removed from the temple several times. The reason for his removal, according to the temple authorities, was his insistence on teaching in the temple what they considered false doctrine. In addition, they found him inside the temple performing unauthorized ordinances in the form of healings (See Acts 4). In such circumstances, how long, do you suppose, could Peter reasonably expect to maintain his temple recommend?[4]

Later, Paul and, perhaps, new Christian gentiles (and thus, uncircumcised) converts were driven from the

[4] In mentioning "temple recommends" and "temple recommend interviews, please do not take me literally. Such things did not exist then. I am being poetically anachronistic for the sake of understanding and relevance.

temple—"Are you circumcised" was, after all, one of the temple recommend questions. Even the possibility that uncircumcised individuals might have entered the temple was deemed so serious that the temple was closed and cleansed—a veritable temple rededication! (See Acts 21). Whether Paul really introduced a gentile into the temple is immaterial. Clearly, a Christian who was a gentile was not going to pass a temple recommend interview and so would live without temple and the benefits that were supposed to derive therefrom.

It is little wonder that a Christian such as Stephen was soon preaching openly anti-temple sermons (See Acts 7). This cost Stephen more than his recommend. It cost him his life.

What, then, was one to do if they lost their temple recommend and were refused admittance into the temple? Could their prayers, increasingly offered without the benefit of the temple, reach heaven as certainly as those offered in and from the temple? How would individuals without the benefits of the temple maintain direct communion with the much-needed God of Israel? Such questions and issues must have caused some degree of spiritual heartburn for early Christians who were, largely Jewish.

Soon Christian reflections on the relevance or irrelevance of the temple became a cottage industry. The writer of the New Testament's Book of Hebrews, for example, made the argument that the temple in Jerusalem was but a dim earthly shadow of the real temple, which was in heaven. It was into this heavenly temple that Jesus, the true High Priest, entered. His entrance into this true heavenly temple granted access to that same heavenly temple to all who took him as their great High Priest (See, Heb. 8-9).

John's gospel reasoned that God had tabernacled in Jesus (Jn. 1.[14]). It reported Jesus' teaching to his disciples, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (Jn. 1.[51]). Just as Jacob had come upon a holy place to which angels descended from heaven and then ascended back to heaven, those who came to Jesus would have access through him to heaven. Jesus was the true ladder by which not only angels, but they, themselves could pass into heaven and heaven descend upon them.

Couldn't get into and pray inside the temple sitting atop Zion's mount? Not to worry. Jesus was the real temple of God. Go to him and worship in him.

Whatever Paul thought of these reflections, he had another take on the problem of Christian "temple-lessness" and direct access to God.

> "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Cor. 3.[16]).

> "Ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2.[22]).

Returning to Peter, who was, as we have seen, one of the first forced to wrestle with the problem, we find that he came to much the same conclusion as Paul.

> "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house…" (1 Pet. 2.[5]).

The temple of God is not to be found perched atop any hill. No! The temple is wherever you are!

I don't know if the Psalmist was right in his time to feel as he did about the temple: that it offered the best access to God. But it is not true today. Jesus changed everything. Now, we will not try and stand in the way of those who feel the need to go to a latter-day temple in prayer, believing that it will grant them more and better access to God. They are welcome to pray there to their heart's content.

But, the truth as it is found in Christ is that one need not travel over land or sea to go to a temple made by mortal hands to commune with God. One need not change into different clothes or utter rote phrases. God is not confined to one place. Rather, as in the days of Israel's ancient tabernacle, God is perfectly happy to move about, comfortable wherever he finds a tabernacle that has the name of Jesus written in its heart. The most welcoming tabernacles are those in which Christ dwells. There are millions of these dotted over the entire globe. For my money, no brick and mortar building can compete with Jesus when it comes to gaining access to God. And there is no temple closer to God or dearer to his heart than the individual.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 21, 2023)

meditation 8— psalm 5.[8-10]

[8]YHWH, bring me acquittal
in response to my accusers.
Grant me access to You.
[9]Because nothing coming out of their mouth has been proven;
because ruinous intent resides deep inside them;
because their throat is an open grave;
because their tongue is a slippery slope
[10]O ʾᵉlōhîm, pronounce them guilty.
Let them fall prey to their own malicious intentions.
Banish them because of the enormity of their legal overstep,
since their defiance is really directed against You.

As is the case with the two Psalms immediately before Psalm 5 and the two immediately after it, the Psalmist is under attack. The attack comes in the form of accusation. The Psalmist has resorted to the temple where he spends the night in intense and expectant prayer (vs. 4). He expresses his faith that in His "unwavering devotion" toward him, God will respond to his pleas (vs. 7). He also believes that because of God's character in judgment, God will judge him to be innocent, and his enemies guilty of behavior toward others that is harmful, abusive, deceitful, and violent (vss. 4-6). Now, in verses 8-10, the Psalmist asks God to come forward in his defense. He confesses his innocence, and he asks that his violent accusers be thwarted in their false attacks against him. More than thwarted, he wants them to pay for their wickedness.

It should perhaps be said, first, that the Psalmist is not claiming to be sinless. He knows that he sins. The Psalmists candidly and repeatedly make this confession. There seems little doubt that the Psalmists would have all agreed with Paul when he uncompromisingly declared, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3.[23]). But, here, the Psalmist is innocent of the specific charges brought against him: "Nothing coming out of their mouth has been proven."

We do not know the exact nature of the charges. Given the Psalmist's assertion/ confession in verses 4-6, we can reasonably surmise that it involves some form of harm, abuse, deception, and violence against another. If we read Psalms 2-7 as reflecting the same or a similar situation, then we might consider the charge brought in Psalm 7.

"YHWH, if I have done this,
if I bear responsibility for this wrong—

that is, if I have repaid with evil one who befriended me,
or if I have deemed one an enemy without cause—
let the enemy pursue me,
catch me, and stomp my life into the underworld;
establish my abode in death" (vs. 3-5).

Here, whatever the exact nature of the alleged offense, the Psalmist is accused of wrongfully turning on someone who had previously been beneficially friendly to him.

In light of the charges brought against him, the Psalmist requests that God, Himself, involve Himself in the trial.

"YHWH, bring me acquittal
in response to my accusers.
Grant me access to You."

Perhaps the Psalmist wishes to have God as his "defense attorney." This is the case just two Psalms later.

"My defense rests with ʾᵉlōhîm,
Deliverer of the sincerely upright.
It is ʾᵉlōhîm who arbitrates for the innocent,
whom he never condemns" (7.[10-11]).

Here, we might think of Jesus who, as he prepared to leave his disciples, promised that he would send the Holy Spirit to do what he, Jesus, had always done for them during his ministry: serve as *paraklētos* (Jn. 14.[16]). One of the several meanings of this Greek word is "advocate, defense attorney."

On the other hand, and perhaps more likely, in asking for acquittal the Psalmist desires to have God preside as judge over his trial—perhaps God serves both roles: defense attorney and judge. In this Psalm, the Psalmist places his trust in God's attribute of judgment. The Psalms speak often of God's role as judge. He is judge over the whole earth. But more intimately, the Psalmists speak of God's role as judge and ask that he act in that role in their own lives. There is no clearer or more visual depiction of God as judge to individuals than that found, again, in Psalm 7.

"Arise, YHWH, vigorously.
Rise up to match my enemy's excessive outburst.
Rouse yourself and demand that I be given a fair hearing.
With the assembly gathered round you,
sit, as the one presiding over it.
It is YHWH who judges people.
Judge me, YHWH, as befits my total innocence.

Please undermine the malice of the unjust,
while supporting the innocent,
by examining heart and mind, God of justice" (vss. 6-9).

Whether as defense attorney, judge, or both, the Psalmist has come to the temple seeking God. He asks that God grant him access to Him. We might read this in response and contradiction to the claim his enemies made in Psalm 3: "He'll get no help from ʾᵉlohîm"! (vs. 2). But the Psalmist believes he will get help from God. Indeed, he firmly anticipates God's help as he himself confessed: "At first light, I'll present myself to You and anticipate Your response."

The Psalmist's overriding hope is that God will find him innocent of the accusations leveled against him. But he wants more than this. He wants his enemies' maleficence exposed. But even this is not enough for him. He wants to see his enemies pay for their maleficence (vs. 9-10). We might feel that the Psalmist is carrying things a bit too far. Perhaps he should just forgive and forget. We will explore the Psalmist's imprecation of his enemies in the next meditation on this passage.

Even so, come Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 21, 2023)

meditation 9— psalm 5.[8-10]

The Psalmist stands accused of acting in such a way as to harm, abuse, deceive, and violate another (vss. 4-6), perhaps one from whom he had formerly benefited (see Ps. 7.[3-4]). In response, the Psalmist, firm in his faith in God's devotion to him and His character in judgment, has come to the temple, where he spends the night pleading that God stand up in his defense, hear his case, and pronounce him innocent.

The Psalmist adamantly maintains his innocence in regard to the charges his accusers have brought against him. His accusers have, he maintains, failed to make their case.

> "Nothing coming out of their mouth has been proven."

The fact is, it is his accusers who are guilty of planning harm, abuse, deception, and violence against him—and likely others. The Psalmist presents the words his accusers speak, the accusations they let fly against him as a mortal danger. It is in his enemies very nature to seek the ruin and even death of others, most notably the Psalmist. Perhaps this is poetic exaggeration. In an honor-based society, losing one's reputation and honor really is akin to a sort of death. It really can lead to death, not only of the one whose family has been besmirched by the loss of honor, but of others as well as retribution has its way back and forth between the antagonistic parties. Then again, it is possible that the Psalmist's enemies do indeed seek the death penalty against the Psalmist.

This brings us to the Psalmist's imprecation, his calling for evil to be brought down upon his mortal enemies.

> "O ʾᵉlōhîm, pronounce them guilty.
> Let them fall prey to their own malicious intentions.
> Banish them because of the enormity of their legal overstep,
> since their defiance is really directed against You."

Imprecation is an extraordinarily common feature of the Psalms. It is a feature with which we are not always or completely comfortable. We think of Jesus who, when asked by Peter how magnanimous one should be in forgiveness toward others, counseled to forgive "seventy times seven" times or, essentially, "always" (See Mt. 18.[21-22]). We think of the challenge posed in the Sermon on the Mount that disciples "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully us you, and persecute you" (Mt. 5.[44]). We think of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (which some refer to as the Prodigal God) and that father's unwavering devotion to his wayward son (Lk 15.[11-32]). Most powerful of all, perhaps, we might think of Jesus' own "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" as he hung and suffered on the cross (Lk. 23.[34]).

Surely the Psalmists' propensity of resorting to imprecation is a thing of a bygone era. A relic of a violent past. Surely Jesus' call for devotion and forgiveness supersedes the possibility of imprecation. Yet, one

wonders if this is a matter of our domestication of Jesus. For this same Jesus, just days before his violent death, offered a scathing rebuke and pronounced uncompromising "woes"—eight of them, to be precise—on "scribes and Pharisees," his most vociferous antagonists and accusers (Mt. 23). This same Jesus offered as one of his final sermons a full-throated and apocalyptic warning of coming catastrophes and destructions that would flow from society's rejection of him (Mt. 25). And this same Jesus, the one who talked and lived so much of forgiveness, this same Jesus found words of imprecation coming to his lips as he made his way to the cruel cross.

> "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.'
> Then shall they begin to say to the mountains,
> 'Fall on us;' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'
> For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" (Lk. 23.[28-31]).

The fact is, we are under the near impossible necessity of keeping these things—imprecation and blessing—in balance, not sacrificing one for the other. As we have discussed in these meditations, there are times when God, in His "unwavering devotion,"

> "does not relate to us as our sins deserve
> or deal with us as our iniquities might suggest" (Ps. 103.[10]).

There are other times when he lets fly

> "A hero's arrows, sharp pointed,
> burning hot" (Ps. 120.[4]).

There are times when there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth as our evil deeds catch up to us.

I do not maintain that God has a cosmic dashboard on which he punches buttons for the infliction of punishment or the bestowal of blessings. I do not pretend to know the balance between imprecation and blessing or the calculations heaven makes to achieve its perfect balance. With my limited sight, there are many times when I think I would do things very differently than He. But I have to believe that there is a balance for which we must strive. It seems that both imprecation and blessing exist in the cosmos. The Book of Mormon prophet, Alma, takes this stab at explaining the machination of imprecation and blessing with what we sometimes call "the law of restoration."

> "And if their works are evil they shall be restored unto them for evil. Therefore, all things shall be restored to their proper order, every thing to its natural frame—mortality raised to immortality, corruption to incorruption—raised to endless happiness to inherit the kingdom of God, or to endless misery to inherit the kingdom of the devil, the one on one hand, the other on the other— the one raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness, or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil…" (Al. 41.[4-5]).

It seems that "what goes around comes around" has scriptural support. But, still, it is all well above my paygrade. Perhaps it is a matter of intent? Most of us do not intend to harm, oppress, deceive, and violate others. Perhaps for this reason we are not treated as it appears we should be treated? Perhaps those who do intend and scheme to harm, oppress, deceive, and violate others as the Psalmist's accusers seem to do… perhaps there comes a time when imprecation is the only alternative—and maybe even then, not as soon as some of us would think and hope. Then again, perhaps imprecation is about the deliverance of the innocent more than about "punishing" the guilty.

I don't know. But it does seem that the Psalmists' enemies lived to harm, lived to oppress, lived to deceive; lived to violate others. Harm, oppression, deception, and violence found a comfortable home deep, deep inside them. Such behavior became as natural to them as breathing. It is difficult to see anything other than imprecation being appropriate to their condition. They directed their wickedness at the Psalmist and the Psalmist called upon God to not only deliver him from their wicked schemes but to deliver them over to their own wicked schemes.

I do know this, though. Balance is to be sought after when striving to understand the character of an infinite God. Attempting to domesticate God the Father and God the Son, turning them into something that resembles us or, worse, snuggly teddy bears is to be avoided.

I also know that I will avoid intentionally harming, oppressing, deceiving, or violating others. More than that, I will attempt in my puny way to imitate the unwavering devotion that God has shown me as I relate to others. I will strive to do so because it is the right thing to do. But I also know that in doing so I might find comfortable access to God—comfortable for me and comfortable for Him. I do very, very much want to be comfortable with Him and have Him be comfortable with me.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 21, 2023)

meditation 10— psalm 5.[11-12]

[11]But, all those who seek shelter in You will loudly rejoice;
always shout joyously, those over whom You throw Your protection.
As for those who love You for who You are, they will exalt in You.
[12]For You bless the devout, O YHWH.
As a full body shield, You surround them with Your acceptance (author's translation).

As is the case in Psalms 3-4 and again in 6-7, enemies attack the Psalmist's character, accusing him of wrongdoing (vs 8-9) in such a way as to threaten his relationship with God (See 3.[2]) This Psalm begins with the Psalmist direct appeal to God that He come to his aid (vs. 1-2). This appeal is made in the temple (vs. 7). This is followed with the Psalmist's confession of trust in God (vs. 3-7). He fully expects God to respond to him (vs. 3). The Psalmist's trust is based first on God's character in judgment. God judges with discernment, accuracy, and justice. He responds and grants entrance to the temple to those who resist the temptation to intentionally harm, oppress, deceive, and violate others. At the same time, He refuses access to those who intentionally engage in those same wicked behaviors (vs. 4-6). More, the Psalmist's trust in God is strengthened by his knowledge of God's "unwavering devotion" to him (vs. 7).

This confession of trust in God is followed by another direct appeal to God (vs. 8-10). In this appeal, the Psalmist asks that God actively participate in his acquittal (vs 8) and that He see that his accusers pay for the harm, oppression, deception, and violence they have engaged in against him (vs. 9-10), and perhaps others.

Now, in verses 11-12, the Psalmist returns to direct confession of trust in God. But here, the Psalmist presents an expanded vision of God's devotion. God's devotion is not limited to the Psalmist but is extended to all who trust Him; who seek to shelter in Him; who respond to His devotion toward them with their own devotion toward Him. All who trust in God, love Him for the expansiveness of His character, and are devoted to Him will find the protection they seek and will rejoice in God without inhibition. God will surround and protect them with His acceptance.

"As a full body shield, You surround them with Your acceptance."

This final line leads me to think of God's grace of which Paul so often speaks. There is no end to what one could say of God's grace. Like Him, it is infinite. But among the many things that could be said is this. Grace is, first and foremost something that exists in God, Himself. It is part of his divine character. The word reflects an immense generosity of acceptance and appreciation for others. It is an acceptance that is life-changing for the one experiencing it.

Think of the Italian, "grazie," or the Spanish, "gracie," both related to the English word "grace" Both mean, "thank you." "I appreciate that." Such expressions as thanks reflect the aspect of "acceptance" that underlays the word. "I accept, I approve of what you have done, the gift you have given."

Acceptance, approval, appreciation… these are all part of God's grace. Grace reflects His willing and happy acceptance of those who put their trust in Him. It is impossible to calculate the empowerment that comes with God's acceptance of us—his grace. Grace is not empowerment itself, as we sometimes claim, but grace does bring empowerment in its wake. Who, among those who truly know His character and trust Him, will fear to approach Him? What can we not do with Him on our side? What boldness will we avoid, knowing that with His acceptance we need not fear failure? What advances can we not make through the courage that His acceptance brings? Those who know not His grace, His boundless acceptance, are often spiritually stifled in their progress through their fear of failure and of displeasing Him.

So, yes, God's acceptance is indeed like a full body shield that shields us from, among other things, this fear of failure and its accompanying erosion in spiritual advancement.

God's grace or, as here, His acceptance, is related to His "unwavering devotion" that brought such confidence to the Psalmist, as expressed earlier in this Psalm. God's devotion to us creates in us a reciprocal devotion to God. This devotion to God, this "devoutness," brings blessings into not only our lives, but the lives of everyone with whom we interact as we seek, albeit imperfectly, to imitate in the lives of others the divine devotion God has shown to us. God's "acceptance," then, sets off a chain reaction until it surrounds, protects, and empowers not just one, but many.

Sadly, there are some—we might think of those the Doctrine and Covenants calls "Perdition," who refuse all of God's advances—who willfully reject God's acceptance. This brings them to engage in all manner of harm, oppression, deceit, and violence toward others, as the Psalmist observed about his enemies earlier in this Psalm. After much patience and longsuffering, they run the risk of being removed, perhaps removing themselves, from divine accompaniment as the imprecations of this Psalm also suggest.

But, if enough individual "manies" take shelter in the shield of God's acceptance and pass it on to others, then entire societies can be shielded; can be changed, strengthened, and given unhindered access to the God of "unwavering devotion;" they can become little Zions until, finally, they are drafted into the Kingdom of God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 21, 2023)

"YHWH, You'll hear my voice in the morning.
At first light, I'll present myself to You and await Your response."

Though we might read these lines as an expression of faith that God hears prayers, it seems best to read them as a statement of the Psalmist's firm commitment to a diligent, searching, and hopeful prayer life. Before anything else, he commits, each morning will find him praying expectantly to God.

In this prayer, the Psalmist ask God to "give ear," "give heed," and "give close attention" to his prayer and his plea. Just as in Adam's thrice repeated prayer soon after he had been expelled from the garden of Eden, the Psalmist's thrice repeated plea for God's attention perhaps gives some indication to the seriousness of the challenge facing the Psalmist.

All prayer is not created equal. There are times when prayer can become somewhat repetitive without serious spiritual harm to the worshipper. There are other times when, due to life's temporal and spiritual challenges, serious, searching prayer is called for. Some challenges require a heavier, more serious prayer effort than others. "This kind," Jesus said, speaking of his healing of a father's "lunatic" son, "goeth not out but by prayer and fasting" (Matt. 17.21).

Joseph Smith once observed that "The things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out" (*TPJS*, p. 137). I do not know how often they should occur, but I suspect that all of us could benefit from more frequent serious and searching prayer over "the deep things of God" which it is our privilege to receive (See 1 Cor. 2.*10*).

I suspect God would be pleased if we engaged in at least the occasional "careful and ponderous and solemn" prayer that has God and the "things of God" as its principal concern. I suspect that He would be pleased if we used prayer to get to know Him better through the questions we ask Him and the pondering in which we engage. Among the reasons behind the Psalmist's commitment to prayer, I suspect, is a personal and intimate inquiry after God. Elsewhere, the Psalmist confessed,

"When thou said, 'Seek ye my face,"
my heart said unto thee, 'Thy face, LORD, will I seek'" (Ps. 27.8).

Perhaps during the Lent Season, we could devote a little more prayer time to exploring the "solemnities of eternity," and in setting our sites on growing our understanding and appreciation for God. Maybe, we can converse with Him as one man or woman converses with another. Perhaps we can more diligently seek the face of the LORD for the innate beautify that is in it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 17, 2024)

psalm 6

meditation 1— psalm 6.[1-7]

[1]YHWH! Please don't correct me in anger!
Don't discipline me while inflamed.
[2]Have pity on me, YHWH, for I am incapacitated.
Restore me, YHWH, for I am shaken to the core.
[3]I am filled with great terror.

And I ask you, YHWH,
"How long will this go on?"
[4]Come back, YHWH! Deliver me!
Rescue me commensurate with your unwavering devotion,
[5]for in death there is no thought of you.
Who praises you in š[e]'ôl?

[6]I am worn out from mourning.
All night long I inundate my bed with tears.
I flood my bedchamber.
[7]My sight blurs because of my anguish.
It dims because of my all-embracing distress (author's translation).

We have treated Psalms 3-7 as if each represents a single or similar experience. In each, the Psalmist is under assault, having his reputation smeared (3.[3]; 4.2) through accusation of wrongdoing (5.[8-10]; 7.[3-4]) and is thought to be outside the purview of God's interest and care (3.[2]). The Psalmist appeals to God to come to his defense (3.[7]; 4.[1]; 5.[8-10]; 6.[1-5]; 7.[1, 6-11]). The attacks and the Psalmist's pleas last throughout the night (3.[5]; 4.[8]; 5.[3]; 6.[6]).

With Psalm 6, things seem to reach fever pitch. Psalm 6 seems darker that the other four laments with which it is associated. The Psalmist was certainly unsettled and troubled in Psalms 3-5, but we have not previously heard language as intense as this:

"I am shaken to the core.
I am filled with great terror."

"My sight blurs because of my anguish.
It dims because of my all-embracing distress."

The restful sleep that the Psalmist anticipated in Psalms 3 and 8 is nowhere present in Psalm 6, but has been replaced with sleepless worry and anguish.

"I am worn out from mourning.
All night long I inundate my bed with tears.
I flood my bedchamber."

So low are the Psalmist's spirits that death begins to loom before him as a very real possibility.

"For in death there is no thought of you.
Who praises you in š[e]'ôl?"

This is all new territory for us in our reading of the Psalms. The Psalmist has doubted God (4.[6]), but the Psalmist has never questioned God or His intention to come to his aid. It has always been clear to the Psalmist who is responsible for his trial and suffering. But, in this Psalm, for the first time, the Psalmist seems to consider the possibility that God is somehow in league with his accusers.

> "YHWH! Please don't correct me in anger!
> Don't discipline me while inflamed."

The Psalmist has had cause to wonder about the number of enemies who attack him.

> YHWH! How my adversaries have multiplied!
> How numerous are those that rise against me!
> How many are those who say of me…" (3.[1-2]).

He has wondered at the enemy's persistence.

> "How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?" (4.[2])

But in this psalm, the Psalmist finds himself wondering about God and His commitment to him. God seems to have abandoned him.

> "And I ask you, YHWH,
> "How long will this go on?"
> Come back, YHWH! Deliver me!"

This Psalm will end on a positive note as the Psalmist recovers his hope that God will come to his rescue. But, as the reader can see, the Psalmist suffers some bleak times between the beginning of the attacks he suffers and their end.

This psalm is numbered among a group of seven psalms that have, at least since the 6th century A.D., been known as Penitential Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143). These Psalms have been used and prayed in the midst of sin and its accompanying repentance. They express the sorrow and worry and darkness that sin produces, the insuppressible trust in God's unwavering devotion, and the hope of forgiveness and defeat of sin that comes through that divine devotion.

This psalm has been numbered among the Penitential Psalms even though there is no mention of personal sin in it. Perhaps I am not the first to sense that the question of guilt or innocence found in the surrounding psalms is the context for this psalm.

We too might find ourselves passing through bleak times. We too might find our character under assault. We ourselves may question our goodness. We too might find reason to question God and his treatment of us. In this and its four surrounding psalms, we might find expression for the anxiety we face as we join others in questioning our own integrity. But in them we can also find voice to an abiding faith that in the end God will come to our defense and take us to himself because of his unwavering devotion.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 23, 2023)

meditation 2— psalm 6.[1-7]

As I have mentioned on several occasions in the past, I often chaff at our use or misuse of Nephi's encouraging words: "we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Ne. 25.[23]). When we have finished with it, it is no longer comforting, but demanding nearly beyond endurance or possibility.[1] And "grace" is no longer "grace," but pure, unadulterated "justice." It transmutes God from the heroic bestower of "grace" because it is part of his magnanimous character, to the common dispenser of justice toward those who please him because they accomplish the heroic task of doing "all they can do." The confession of sin almost completely disappears and is replaced by an "I've-exerted-my-innate-power-and-done-all-that-I-was-ask-to-do" boast. This is such a perversion of inversion. Now, I don't have any issue with trying our best. But mercy is based upon the character of God rather than the character of the individual.

Nephi's comforting message and my response to our misinterpretation of it comes to mind as I consider today's Lent reading in which the Psalmist pleads for mercy. Such pleading is central to Lent. The Psalmist is "sore vexed." The vexation runs deep into his being. The vexation has brought a loss of sleep and a deep weariness. His nerves are shot. His bodily functions are disrupted. The vexation has become the dominate concern of his prayers. His prayers are accompanied with groans and tears. In his trouble, he knows of only one thing he can do. He pleads relentlessly for mercy. We are, perhaps, not surprised at the Psalmist's resort to God's mercy. Maybe we feel that under similar circumstances we would do the same. But we might wonder at the conditions that the Psalmist places on the requested mercy.

> "Oh save me *for thy mercies' sake*."

No, "Oh save me for I've done everything I can think to do." No appeal to his own heroic, partially successful, but mostly failed efforts. No, the Psalmist does not ask to be saved because of who he is and what he has done. He asks God to save him because of who He, God, is. He knows that mercy is consistent and central to God's character. "Save me *on account of* your mercy." "Save me *because of the mercy that is natural to Your Being*." This invocation of the goodness of God rather than one's own "goodness" is central to our salvation. King Benjamin said it as well as any.

"And again I say unto you as I have said before, that as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or if ye have known of his goodness and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the mouth of the angel" (Mos. 4.[11]).

During Lent and always thereafter, we would do well to ponder, meditate, and pray about this truth of God's character. But even more, we would do well to approach God in the spirit of full recognition and acceptance that He is drawn to us far more than we are drawn to Him; for it is in the very nature of His Being to drawn to others no matter their state and standing before him.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 23, 2023)

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[1] For who ever said, "Well, I've done my best; done everything possible"? No, its always, "Shucks, I should'a, could'a done better."

meditation 3— psalm 6.[8-10]

[8]Leave me alone, all you, who would do me harm,
for YHWH has heard my weeping.
[9]YHWH has heard my cry for help.
YHWH has accepted my prayer.
[10]All my enemies will be disappointed and greatly dismayed.
They retreat. They are thwarted, in the blink of an eye (author's translation).

Psalm 6 is the darkest of the five psalms traditionally categorized as lament that stand together between the introductory psalms (1 & 2) and psalm 8, which might be viewed as a sort of apotheosis after the trials of psalms 3-7. Perhaps this darkness contributed to its being traditionally grouped with six other psalms as Penitential (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).

"Lament" has never sat quite right with me as a description of these five psalms—or many of the other psalms so labeled. "Complaint" might be better. And yet, all five psalms also express an expansive level of trust in God. As dark as psalm 6 is, it ends on a high note of trust in God and optimism about the future. The Psalmist is confident that God has heard his "weeping." God has heard his "cry." God has "accepted" his prayerful plea for help.

One of the requests that the Psalmists often make and one of the hopes that they have about the future is that their enemies and, indeed, all enemies of what is good and right will be disappointed, frustrated, thwarted, experience failure. The common Hebrew word for this is *bôš*. It is unfortunate that the KJV nearly always translated *bôš* as "ashamed." When we think of being ashamed, we most often think of an internal feeling or sentiment. We think of embarrassment. But the Psalmist is not concerned with the enemy's feelings. The Psalmist's desire visa via the enemy is that they not find success in any of their vile and hurtful undertakings.

The enemy, as we have observed often, is a dominant theme in the Psalms. Outside of the Psalmists themselves, and God, Himself, the enemy appears more often than any other individual or group. The enemy portrayed in the Psalms is no cream puff. The enemy is numerous. The enemy is powerful. The enemy is committed and persistent. The enemy is dedicated to violence and harm. The enemy is against what is good and right.

The possibility that the enemy can be reclaimed or that the enemy will, of themselves, cease and desist is seldom considered in the Psalter. There is no thought that the enemy might repent or surrender. They will fight on until they either defeat their foe or are defeated. The enemies are likely mortal, though there are times in the Psalms when they take on an almost demonic intensity—Psalm 22, for example, comes to mind. These mortal enemies may be inspired by and pattern themselves after demonic beings who are inalterably committed to destruction and chaos—one thinks, for example, of Lucifer and his hosts of followers. So committed are they, that there is little or no thought of their repenting.

The Psalmists pray over and over again that the enemy will be disappointed in all their intentions and labors. They pray that the enemy will know only failure. This is not self-righteousness, or mean-spiritedness, or unrighteous judgement. This desire that their enemies and the enemies of all that is good and right fail in their attacks does not even reflect a desire for "vengeance" or "revenge." It reflects the Psalmists' desire that what is good and right prevail; that evil and wickedness fail; that all that brings harm to creation, including God's greatest creation, humankind, ceases.

I, for one, share the Psalmist's desire. I pray every day for the failure of evil and wickedness, with which the world seems to abound. I pray that those who oppose God fail in accomplishing their deviant desires.

I don't care whether they are ever embarrassed by their desires and efforts to undermine what is good and right and to harm others. But I do want them to fail. Their failure can't come soon enough or be too severe for my tastes. I do not feel the slightest hesitation to pray,

"ʾĕlōhîm! Knock the fangs out from their mouth.
Shatter the jaws of lions, YHWH!
May they vanish away as flowing water.
When he shoots his arrows, let them become flimsy.
May they be like a slug that oozes away as it crawls along.
Like a woman's miscarried fetus, let them not see the light of day.
May they be like a thornbush that, before it grows thorns
and matures, a blazing heat blasts it" (Ps. 58.[6-9]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 23, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 6.[2-7] (lent)

[2]Have pity on me, YHWH, for I am incapacitated.
Restore me, YHWH, for I am shaken to the core.
[3]I am filled with great terror.
And I ask you, YHWH,
"How long will this go on?"
[4]Come back, YHWH! Deliver me!
Rescue me commensurate with your unwavering devotion,
[5]for in death there is no awareness of you.
Who praises you in šᵉʾôl?
[6]I am worn out from mourning.
All night long I inundate my bed with tears.
I flood my bedchamber.
[7]My sight blurs because of my anguish.
It dims because of my all-embracing distress.

As I have mentioned on several occasions in the past, I often chaff at our use or misuse of Nephi's encouraging words: "we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Ne. 25.[23]). When we have finished with it, it is no longer comforting, but demanding nearly beyond endurance or possibility.[2] And "grace" is no longer "grace," but pure, unadulterated "justice." It transmutes God from the heroic bestower of "grace" because it is part of his magnanimous character, to the common dispenser of justice toward those who please him because they accomplish the heroic task of doing "all they can do." The confession of sin almost completely disappears and is replaced by an "I've-exerted-my-innate-power-and-done-all-that-I-was-ask-to-do" boast. This is such a perversion of inversion. Now, I don't have any issue with trying our best. But mercy is based upon the character of God rather than the character of the individual.

Nephi's comforting message and my response to our misinterpretation of it comes to mind as I consider today's reading in which the Psalmist pleads for mercy. The Psalmist is "filled with great terror." The

[2] For who ever said, "Well, I've done my best; done everything possible"? No, its always, "Shucks, I should'a, could'a done better."

terror runs deep, sinking to his very core. The terror brings a loss of sleep and a deep weariness. His nerves are shot. His bodily functions are disrupted. The terror has become the dominate concern of his prayers. His prayers are accompanied with groans and tears. In his trouble, he knows of only one thing he can do. He pleads relentlessly for pity. We are, perhaps, not surprised at the Psalmist's resort to God's mercy. Maybe we feel that under similar circumstances we would do the same. But we might wonder at the conditions that the Psalmist places on the requested mercy.

> "Rescue me *commensurate with your unwavering devotion*…"

No, "Oh save me for I've done everything I can think to do." No appeal to his own heroic, partially successful, but mostly failed efforts. No, the Psalmist does not ask to be saved because of who he is and what he has done. He asks God to save him because of who He, God, is. He knows that devotion to others is consistent and central to God's character. "Save me *on account of* your devoted feelings for me." "Save me *because of the devotion that is natural to Your Being*." This invocation of the goodness of God rather than one's own "goodness" is central to our salvation. King Benjamin said it as well as any.

> "And again I say unto you as I have said before, that as ye have come to the knowledge of the glory of God, or *if ye have known of his goodness* and have tasted of his love, and have received a remission of your sins, which causeth such exceedingly great joy in your souls, even so I would that ye should *remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you*, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come, which was spoken by the mouth of the angel" (Mos. 4.[11]).

During Lent and always thereafter, we would do well to ponder, meditate, and pray about this truth of God's character. But even more, we would do well to approach God in the spirit of full recognition and acceptance that He is drawn to us far more than we are drawn to Him; for it is in the very nature of His Being to drawn to others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 21, 2024)

psalm 7

meditation 1 — psalm 7.[1-5]

[1]YHWH, my God! It is to you that I look for protection.
Help me against all those who pursue me.
Rescue me [2]lest he, as a lion, tear me to pieces;
mutilate me with no chance of recovery.
[3]YHWH, if I have done this,
if I bear responsibility for this wrong—
[4]that is, if I have done intentional harm to one who befriended me,
or if I have deemed one an enemy without cause—
[5]let the enemy pursue me,
catch me, and stomp my life into the underworld;
establish my abode in death (author's translation).

We have interpreted Psalms 3-7 as if they all addressed the same or a similar circumstance. In them, we understand the Psalmist to be under attack by those seeking to defame his character by falsely accusing him of wrongdoing (4.[2], 5.[6], 7.[3-4]). These accusers are numerous (3.[1]). Their attack is unrelenting and vicious, threatening death (5.[9], 6.[5], 7.[2, 5, 12-13]). The accusers are skeptical of God's involvement in human affairs (4.[6]) and especially of His involvement with the Psalmist (3.[2]).

Because of the attacks and in spite of the claims of God's disregard for him, the Psalmist continues to plead expectantly for God's intercession. We understand these pleas to have taken place overnight during a possible incubation ritual (3.[5], 4.[8], 5.[3], 6.[6]). The Psalmist's hopeful expectation that God will intervene and defend him against the accusations rests on two facts. First, it rests on God's own character and His unwavering devotion to him and to all those who put their trust in God (5.[7]). Second, the Psalmist's hope rests in the fact that he is innocent of the specific charges (4.[2], 5.[3-7]), something he reasserts in this psalm (vs. 3-5).

The Psalmist's trial reached its lowest point in Psalm 6. Earlier the Psalmist had wondered at "how numerous are those that rise against me"! In wonder and pain, he asked those who attacked him,

> "How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?
> How long will you love falsehood
> and seek after deception? (4.[2])

In his lowest moments, the Psalmist wondered about and directly questioned even God.

> "And I ask you, YHWH,
> 'How long will this go on?'" (6.[3])

We can understand this bold and questioning query when, next, the Psalmist intimates that his conflict is a matter of life and death.

> "For in death there is no thought of you.
> Who praises you in šᵉ'ôl?"

If, the Psalmist confesses, he is found to be guilty of the false charges, then

"let the enemy pursue me,
catch me, and stomp my life into the underworld;
establish my abode in death."

The Psalmist knows that his enemies intend to show him no mercy. His death will be unsparing and brutal. To illustrate the violence and brutality of his accusers, the Psalmist resorts to powerful and disturbing imagery.

"Rescue me lest he, as a lion, tear me to pieces;
mutilate me with no chance of recovery."

As the Psalmists contemplate their own and others' enemies, the Psalmists return to the imagery of lions several times in the course of the Book of Psalms.

"Like a lion, he lies in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
He lies in ambush to seize the poor—
He seizes the poor, dragging him into his lair.
He crouches low, he hunches down
and falls upon the bones of the vulnerable" (10.[9-10]).

"They are just like a lion that craves to rend asunder" (17.[12]).

"They open their mouths against me,
lions, rending and roaring" (22.[13]).

"My life exists among lions.
I lay down among those who feast on human beings—
their teeth a spear and arrows,
their tongue a sharp sword" (57.[4]).

In Psalm 7, we marvel at the Psalmist's poetic skills and ability to communicate his thoughts and feelings. He invites us to consider the hunting lion. He invites us to visualize the lion setting upon its prey, slashing its prey with razor sharp claws, and tearing its flesh with sharp pointed teeth. He invites us to visualize the slaughtered victim, pieces of it scattered about the kill zone: torn flesh thrown here and there, bones chewed, mangled and broken, scattered haphazardly. If the enemy has its way with the Psalmist, there will be no coming back.

But the Psalmist's resort to lion imagery is, perhaps, more than metaphor. Its use reminds us that humans can act like animals. Too often, especially when lust fills them with animus toward others, they act according to nature and let loose the violence that is deep within human DNA in ways that drown the good that lies within. This is especially prevalent when individuals act as part of a group.

Throughout this and the preceding four psalms, the Psalmist has spoken of his enemies in mostly general and metaphorical ways. He has informed us of their intentions, but has said little about what informs their intentions. He will become much more specific about the character of his enemies and what drives them in Psalm 10.

We may not want to follow the Psalmist invitation to imagine the devouring lion. We may not want to visualize. We may not want to think our fellow beings capable of such brutality. But, we must. We must do so out of respect for the inspired poet. But, more importantly, history has taught us that we must. Our present moment teaches that we must. We must understand the intentions of the enemy, the ungodly. It will not do to bury our head in the sand and pretend that evil and brutality do not exist. Such delusion

leaves others easy prey and only postpones the time when, sooner or later, the ungodly enemy comes for us.

The Psalmist remains sure of this, however. God sees. And he will not forget.

> "Sing praises to YHWH, who sits enthroned in Ṣîyôn!
> Proclaim his deeds among the nations:
> that, finding acts of violence, he remembers them;
> he never forgets the wail of the downtrodden" (9.[11-12]).

We must believe this and follow the Psalmist's example of bold, sometimes uncomfortable, truth recognition and truth telling. And, yes, sometimes this truth telling includes truthful imprecation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

meditation 2— psalm 7.[1-5]

> *YHWH, if I have done this,*
> *if I bear responsibility for this wrong—*
> *that is, if I have done intentional harm to one who befriended me,*
> *or if I have deemed one an enemy without cause—*

We have interpreted Psalms 3-7 as if they all addressed the same or a similar circumstance. In them, we understand the Psalmist to be under attack by those seeking to defame his character by falsely accusing him of wrongdoing. He pleads expectantly for God to come to his aid and defend him against the charges. His expectation for God's intervention rests on two facts. First, it rests in the character of God, whom, the Psalmist believes, is unwaveringly devoted to him and to all those who put their trust in God. Second, the Psalmist's hope rests in the fact that he is innocent of the charges. The Psalmist has repeatedly maintained his innocence.

However, to this point the Psalmist has not informed us concerning the exact nature of the any charges or any alleged wrongdoing. In this Psalm, however, while maintaining his innocence, the Psalmist finally gives us insight into the nature of an alleged crime.

> "YHWH, if I have done this,
> if I bear responsibility for this wrong—
> [4]that is, if I have done intentional harm to one who befriended me,
> or if I have deemed one an enemy without cause…"

While the exact nature of the betrayal is still unclear, the Psalmist here reveals that he stands accused of being untrue to and betraying one who had trusted him and with whom he had previously been at peace. Still, the Psalmist maintains his innocence in relation to these charges.

We wish to repeat that last bit: "the Psalmist maintains his innocence *in relation to these charges*."

This reflects my narrow reading of the Psalmist's profession of innocence. Why do I mention this?

Throughout the Book of Psalms, the Psalmists frequently profess, as he does here, their innocence. From the very beginning, and particularly since the Protestant reformation, Christian exegetes of the Psalms

have often experienced some heartburn at and struggled with the professions of innocence found in the Psalter. They have at times engaged in all sorts of gymnastics to explain it.

The difficulty has arisen, in part, from Paul's doctrine of justification (righteousness, innocence) and the deep impact it has had on Protestant reformers. Without going to a long description of Paul's doctrine, we can say that Paul was adamant that no one could think of themselves as innocent or be thought of by God as innocent through their own works and efforts. Only the unearned grace of God could bring about lasting and saving innocence, righteousness, or justification—this through divine forgiveness. Indeed, "justification" can be seen as a fancy word for "forgiven." But that is for another time.

Still, comparing the Psalmists' confessions of innocence to Paul's understanding of innocence is like comparing apples and oranges. They are two utterly different things. The Psalmists' confessions of innocence are narrow and circumstantial. Paul's understanding of innocence is broad and general. An example may be in order.

Let's say I am accused of murder. Let's also say that I am innocent of the charge. It is no challenge to Paul's doctrine of justification by faith without works to maintain my innocence of the charge of murder. I can declare myself innocent of having committed murder without maintaining that God has found me innocent in the way that Paul means it. Indeed, knowing that I am innocent of the charge of murder legitimately gives me increased faith that God will come to my defense in relation to those charges.

Even as I have this confidence, I might be anxious about my overall state and standing with God. Has he forgiven me (declared me innocent) of all offenses that I might have committed against him? Maybe yes. Maybe no. But whether He has or not has no bearing on whether I am innocent or not of the charge of murder brought against me.

Even the most cursory of readings in the Psalms, demonstrates that the Psalmists know that they sin and displease God on a regular and ongoing basis. They confesse this reality over and over again. They also know, as Paul and his readers know, that they need God's forgiveness, and that God is forgiving beyond all human expectation and understanding. The Psalmists know that they cannot "earn" God's forgiveness and thus His verdict of "not guilty," "innocent."

Thus, when the Psalmist here claims innocence, we should understand him doing so on the basis of the fact that he is not guilty of the narrow charges made against him. There is, then, no real disagreement between Paul and the Psalmists.

We are under covenant to be the best we can be. We often do well. At such times, if others level a charge against us that is false, we can make confident appeal to our own behavior without hypocrisy and without doing harm to God's immeasurable and unearned grace. We can find joy in doing the right things. Even as we make such claims of innocence, we might remain fully and painfully aware that in many other regards we do not measure up to God's expectations of us—or is it our own expectations of self that we project onto God? With this awareness of inadequacy and guilt, we also make appeal to God's undeserved grace.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

meditation 3— psalm 7.1-5

YHWH, if I have done this,
if I bear responsibility for this wrong—
that is, if I have done intentional harm to one who befriended me,
or if I have deemed one an enemy without cause—

As we have discussed several times previously, the enemy—individual and national—is pervasive throughout the Psalms. When it comes to individual enemies', the most common weapon is accusation. The Psalmists are repeatedly accused of wrongdoing. Accusation of wrongdoing on the part of the Psalmist and the assassination of his character are unifying features of the five laments found in Psalms 3-7 (3.2-3, 4.2, 5.8-9, 7.3-4)—psalms that we have treated as if they addressed the same or a similar situation. While the specific nature of the alleged wrongdoing went unspecified in the previous psalms, in Psalm 7 we are finally given a specific charge: the Psalmist is accused of having unjustifiably acted with hostile and harmful intent against one who had treated the Psalmist as a friend. While we remain in the dark about exactly *how* the Psalmist is alleged to have been unfaithful in his relationship, we do know, finally, that the Psalmist's wrongdoing involved a relationship with another.

Perhaps this accusation, even if true, may not sound like much to us. Perhaps we might view the accusers' intensity and vehemence as an overreaction to such a minor infraction—whether real or imagined. Perhaps we might find the Psalmist's intense language in appealing to God to defend him overwrought. Perhaps we might think that surely there are worse sins than this.

If so, perhaps we have misunderstood or forgotten what sin really is. Perhaps we have misunderstood God expectations of us as expressed in commandments. Consider, for example, the most basic of commandments, those called, "The Ten Commandments" (See Ex. 20.3-7). The first three dictate our relationship with God—we are to worship only the true God (#1), resist using images to represent Him or any other supposed deity in our worship (#2), and refrain from lightly or falsely or wrongly invoking his name—or power (#3).[1] The final seven commandments all dictate our relationships with our fellow beings.[2] Commandments, then, lean heavily in the direction of safeguarding and fortifying human relationships.

In his understanding of commandments, Jesus famously finds but two.

"'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.'

[1] God's "name" often stands as a metonym for God's "power." So, we might read this command as, "You are not to invoke the power of YHWH, your God, for any false purpose." Whether one decides it should read "name" or "power," God is often invoked in relation to others. We can, for example, invoke his name falsely if we bear false witness against another or in our own behalf—this "taking of the name of God in vain" happens every day in American courtrooms both on the part of the prosecution and the defense. We can unjustifiably invoke his power against our enemy—this takes place in nearly every nation on earth (and, as of this writing, is taking place with a vengeance between Israel and Hamas as each ridiculously claims God as their own). This commandment can, then, be seen to bridge the two types of commandments—the two that clearly dictate our relationship with God and the seven that just as clearly dictate our relationship with others.

[2] I have discussed elsewhere how the commandment to keep the sabbath can be seen as a matter of social justice. While enslaved in Egypt, Israel was worked to the bone, never allowed to rest. Israel, either individually or collectively, was not to act the same when they/it became the dominate power. Though this is not the emphasis in Exodus' stipulation for the sabbath, it is the emphasis in Deut. 5.12-15).

This is the first and great commandment.
And the second is like unto it, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22.[37-40]).

Commandments are about love. They teach us how to love and what love looks like—whether it is directed at God or humans.[3] "The first and great commandment" may be the love of God, but the second can hardly be separated from it. Indeed, there are times when the second takes priority.

"Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matt. 5.[23-24]).

This reminds us that supposed love for God and the worship of Him is but a sham if human relationships are in shambles. Jesus wasn't reinventing the wheel here. He was tapping into and championing age old Israelite belief.

"How should I approach YHWH?
How should I bow to my exalted God?
Should I approach him with a fully burnt offering?
How about with new-born calves?
Will YHWH be satisfied with thousands of rams?
How about with countless channels of olive oil?
Should I offer my firstborn for my willful defiance?
How about my offspring for less serious private infractions?
He has already told you, man, what is good.
What does YHWH want from you
but to do justice,
and love compassion,
and be willing to live like your God? (Micah 6.[6-8], author's translation)

God is perfectly aware and infinitely interested in human relationships and how we treat one another. Indeed, how we treat one another serves as revelation about our love for and relationship with God, as Jesus expressed in parable. How we treat one another also serves as the principal criteria for our own judgement before God.

"When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, 'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.'
"Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, 'Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? Or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?'
And the King shall answer and say unto them, 'Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me'" (Matt. 25.[31-40]).

The adverse, Jesus reminds us, is also true.

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[3] This is only one reason among many that I prefer "instruction" to "commandment."

> "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (Matt. 25.[45]).

These latter, Jesus warns "shall go away into everlasting punishment" (Matt. 25.[46]).

The Psalmist, then, has a right to be concerned about the accusation leveled against him that he has brought a fissure into a previously cherished relationship. This accusation is no trifle. If, as Paul observed, "the intent of the commandment is love" (See 1 Tim. 1.[5]), then, if guilty, the Psalmist is guilty of having broken a commandment that is central to God's evaluation of human character and their ability to abide in a place of lasting and harmonious relationships. Little wonder that the Psalmist energetically resists the accusation and calls upon God to be his defense, is jury, and his judge.

As we contemplate our own place in eternity, we would do well to examine closely our relationships with those around us. Hopefully, we can confidently call upon God to judge us in light of these relationships and the way we treat others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 8, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 7.[6-11`]

[6]Arise, YHWH, vigorously.
Rise up in response to my enemy's fury.
Rouse Yourself and demand that I be given a fair hearing.
[7]With the assembly gathered round You,
sit, presiding over it.
[8]It is YHWH who judges people.
Judge me, YHWH, as befits my total innocence.
[9]Please undermine the malice of the unjust,
while supporting the innocent,
by examining character and conscience, O just ʾElōhîm.

[10]My defense rests with ʾElōhîm,
Deliverer of the sincerely upright.
[11]It is ʾElōhîm who arbitrates for the innocent,
whom he never condemns (author's translation).

We have interpreted Psalms 3-7 as if they all addressed the same or a similar circumstance. In them, we understand the Psalmist to be under attack by those seeking to defame his character by falsely accusing him of wrongdoing. He pleads expectantly for God to come to his aid and defend him against the charges. His expectation for God's intervention rests on two facts. First, it rests in the character of God, whom, the Psalmist believes, is unwaveringly devoted to him and to all those who put their trust in God. Second, the Psalmist's hope rests in the fact that he is innocent of the charges. The Psalmist has repeatedly maintained his innocence, but without specifying the exact nature of the accusation. But, in 7.[3-4], the Psalmist specifies the crime he is accused of having committed.

> "YHWH, if I have done this,
> if I bear responsibility for this wrong—

that is, if I have repaid with evil one who befriended me,
or if I have deemed one an enemy without cause…"

Just as the Psalmist was not clear in the psalms 3-6 about the specific nature of the accusation brought against him, he was not clear about precisely how he hoped God would help him. He had repeatedly pleaded for and expressed hope in God's help, but always in the most general of terms. But in this Psalm, the Psalmist makes his expectations explicit.

The Psalmist calls upon God to convene a hearing and preside as judge over it.

"With the assembly gathered round You,
sit, presiding over it."

He invites God to examine both his, the accused's character and conscience, as well as that of his accusers. The Psalmist welcomes the scrutiny because he knows that he is innocent and his enemies' malicious accusations. He anticipates that God will defend him while prosecuting his accusers. The Psalmist's hope, then, is that God will serve as judge, defender, and prosecutor.

"It is YHWH who judges people.
Judge me, YHWH, as befits my total innocence.
Please undermine the malice of the unjust,
while supporting the innocent,
by examining character and conscience, O just ʾElōhîm."

As if making his opening statement in court, the Psalmist declares,

"My defense rests with ʾElōhîm,
Deliverer of the sincerely upright.
It is ʾElōhîm who arbitrates for the innocent,
whom he never condemns."

There are a great many things said about God over the course of the Book of Psalms. His character is examined and reexamined over and over again. Indeed, outside of the New Testament Gospels that explore God's character through Jesus of Nazareth, there is no other book in all of scripture that examines God and His character more than the Psalms. Among the many things the various Psalmists have to say about God is that He judges the actions of humankind; that He is accurate in his estimations; that He is both just and merciful in His judgements; that he defends the innocent; and that he condemns those guilty of planning and executing harm toward others, especially the vulnerable.

Here is but a small sampling of the Psalmist's testimony concerning God in his role as judge.

"But YHWH sits enthroned forever,
having established his throne for justice.
He governs rightly the world over.
He judges nations equitably" (9.7-8).

"YHWH is in his sacred temple.
YHWH is in heaven, where his throne is.
His eyes observe.
His glances evaluate mortals.
YHWH approves of the just,
but for the degenerate, those given to malevolence, he feels aversion.

He rains down encircling sulfurous fire upon the degenerate;
a burning wind is their destiny" (11.[4-6]).

"He calls out to the heavens above
as well the earth, for the purpose of judging His people:
'Gather to Me those faithful to Me
who have entered into covenant with Me through sacrifice.'
The heavens are to declare His justness;
for it is ʾĕlōhîm who is Judge" (50.[4-6]).

"I know that YHWH holds court for the downtrodden;
brings justice for the impoverished" (140.[12]).

The Psalmist fully believes in a merciful God. His testimony concerning the reality of this divine attribute can be a benefit and needed comforted to those with an overly sensitive conscience, an overly legalistic perspective on God's expectations, and unreasonable personal expectations. God is much more realistic about our capacities than we and does not require perfection. His mercy is indeed great toward those who are trying the best they know how.

But this emphasis on God's mercy does not cause the Psalmist to lose sight of his belief that God does evaluate human conduct, especially as it relates to how we treat others. The Psalmist firmly believes that God accurately perceives acts committed by those with the knowledge that their actions are likely to devalue and harm others. He believes that God serves as protector to the wronged, sometimes to the detriment and suffering of the wrongdoer. The Psalmist might hope that wrongdoers find their way to repentance, but he also hopes and boldly prays that God act to protect the vulnerable even if it means the wrongdoer, in their recalcitrance, pay for their wrongdoing.

This is all part of the Psalmist's testimony about God. But, in light of the horrors we have witnessed human beings perpetrate against each other—from America's large scale and centuries long institution of slavery and racism, or the horror of the holocaust in which unimaginable millions of innocents were murdered, or the violence of the present Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the madness of American mass murderers, or the contagion of evil spread by the 45th president of the United states, or any number of small scale horrors of individual hatred and violence, to name but a few—we might be forgiven for questioning the Psalmist's beliefs and witness about God's role as a check on the wicked and a protector of the innocent. It sometimes seems that God does nothing to correct or stop those who perpetrate such horrors against their fellow beings—I mean, how hard or wrong could it be for a caring and involved God to put an end to just one instigator of human depravity such as a Hitler, a Putin, or a Trump?

I confess that I often find it difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile the Psalmist's claims with what I observe in the world. I must admit that God at times seems either impotent or indifferent to human suffering, especially that suffered at the hands of others. I find little comfort in the claims that all will be made right—eventually. Indeed, it seems the Psalmist himself was not always quite so sure. Sometimes, when contemplating the continued existence and even success of the wicked, the Psalmist could lose his emotional and spiritual footing and balance (see author's translation of 73.[2], ff). He could wonder,

"Why, Yahweh, are You now so standoffish?
Why do You remain absent during these distressing times?" (10.[1])

And he could wonder just how long God would endure the private corruption the ungodly perpetrated or the corruption they spawned in others.

"How long will the ungodly, YHWH;
how long will the ungodly dominate? (95.[3])

In such uncertainty and frustration, I sometimes find that I can follow the Psalmist's advice.

"Rest quietly in YHWH, steel yourself in him.
Don't become enraged over one who is successful;
over one who manages to pull off his schemes.
Let go of anger and stop becoming riled up.
Don't become enraged as it leads only to additional evil" (37.[7-8]).

At other times, yielding to anger and frustration and hurt, I let fly psalm-like imprecation,

"ʾĕlōhîm! Knock the fangs out from their mouth.
Shatter the jaws of lions, YHWH!
May they vanish away as flowing water.
When he shoots his arrows, let them become flimsy.
May they be like a slug that oozes away as it crawls along.
Like a woman's miscarried fetus, let them not see the light of day.
May they be like a thornbush that, before it grows thorns
and matures, a blazing heat blasts it" (58.[6-9]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm 7.[12-17]

[12]But he, will not relent.
He keeps his sword sharpened.
He bends his bow and arms it.
[13]He keeps his deadly weapons ready for use;
his relentless arrows ready.
[14]Look how he plans cruelty,
brings about misery,
and gives life to falsehood!
[15]He prepares a pit and digs it out,
but he falls into the very pit that he prepared.
[16]The misery he intended for another will come back on him;
his own violence will come down upon him.

[17]I will praise YHWH commensurate with His rectitude,
and most certainly will sing of YHWH 'Elyôn's character (author's translation).

We have interpreted Psalms 3-7 as if they all addressed the same or a similar circumstance. In them, we understand the Psalmist to be under attack by those seeking to defame his character by falsely accusing him of wrongdoing (4.[2], 5.[6], 7.[3-4]). These accusers are numerous (3.[1]). Their attack is unrelenting and vicious, threatening death (5.[9], 6.[5], 7.[2, 5, 12-13]). The accusers are skeptical of God's involvement in human affairs (4.[6]) and especially of His involvement with the Psalmist (3.[2]). In this passage, the Psalmist focuses his attention on his attackers.

The Psalmist likens his attackers to hunters preparing for the hunt or, perhaps, warriors preparing for battle. They sharpen their swords. They prepare and arm their bows. This likening of words and accusations (often depicted as teeth, lips, and tongues in a kind of metonymy) to weapons is not uncommon in the Psalter. God is often said to engage sword, bow, and arrow—both literally and metaphorically—against his enemies. But the Psalmist's enemies, as here, also often wield them.

> "My life exists among lions.
> I lay down among those who feast on human beings—
> their teeth a spear and arrows,
> their tongue a sharp sword" (57.[4]).

And in a passage that is extremely reminiscent of the language found in Psalm 7, we read,

> *"*Protect me from the plotting of those who are malicious;
> from the conspiracy of those who practice aggression,
> who sharpen their tongue as if it were a sword.
> They draw their arrows, hateful words,
> intent on shooting the blameless from ambush.
> Suddenly they fire at him, without fear.
> They are committed to the malicious affair.
> They secretly organize their traps" (64.[2-5]).

The attack against, or the hunt of the Psalmist is not haphazard or spur-of-the-moment. It is well thought out, organized, and premeditated. As hunters prepare for the hunt or soldiers for battle by digging pits in which to catch and then shoot their prey/ enemies, the Psalmist enemies have prepared traps for the Psalmist. This, too, is a common theme in the Psalms.

And the Psalmist's enemies are unrelenting.

But the carefully planned and relentless attack will backfire on the Psalmist's enemies. In imagery reminiscent of the Book of Mormon's "Law of restoration" (see Alma 41.[13-15]), the Psalmist's enemies will find themselves suffering as they intended to make the Psalmist suffer. They will fall into the very pits that they have dug for him.[4]

Having described his enemies and God's response to them, the Psalmist ends on a note of praise. In defending the Psalmist against false accusations, giving him victory over his accusers, and allowing those accusers to be caught in their own snares, God reveals His surpassing character and His commitment to governing and judging rightly and justly.

O that we might see the evidence of this Divine character in the present-day ensnarement of those who would ensnare and willfully harm others. O that we might see evidence of this Divine character in the deliverance and victory of those targeted for deliberate ensnarement and harm!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: october 27, 2023)

[4] Also found in 9.[15], 28.[1], 35.[7-8], 57.[6].

psalm 8

meditation 1— psalm 8.[1-9]

[1]YHWH, Our Lord! How preeminent is Your fame the world over.
Even more, You spread Your grandeur across the heavens!
[2]In the mouth of suckling babes
You place the power to counter those who oppose You
and annihilate the vindictive enemy.

[3]When I see the heavens, Your handiwork,
the moon and the stars, which You placed there,
[4]I wonder, "What is a mortal being that You should pay them any attention,
or the human race that you take interest in it?"
[5]You make them something less than divine,
but bestow upon them prominence and pride of place.
[6]You grant them rule over all that You have made.
You subject all to their power:
[7]all flocks and cattle,
as well as all undomesticated animals,
[8]birds inhabiting the sky, and fish, inhabiting the seas,
and traversing the currants of the oceans.

[9]YHWH, Our Lord, how preeminent is your fame the world over! (author's translation)

Though his enemies claim in Psalm 3, "There is no help for him in God," the Psalmist finds confidence in God such that he could sleep peacefully. In Psalm 4, though the Psalmist's enemies seek to smear his reputation, he could, again, sleep well knowing that God would defend him because of his innocence relative to whatever the accusations were. In Psalm 5, the Psalmist is once more under verbal assault. The morning, he promises, would find him confidently praying for God's help, knowing that he is innocent of the claims against him and, more, knowing of God's unwavering devotion to him. In Psalm 6, the Psalmist, once more under assault, reaches a low, spending the night in anxious weeping. Eventually, he regains his confidence that God will come to his aid. In Psalm 7, the Psalmist is again under accusation of guilt, this time of being disloyal to a former close associate. Though his accusers possess the viciousness of a ravenous lion, the Psalmist knows, again, that he is innocent of the charge and that God will defend him against the charges.

We would not want to leave the impression that the Psalmist is wholly consumed by his trials in these five psalms. There are moments when the Psalmist's words are directed at God in exultant praise (3.[8], 4.[7-8], 7.[17]). Neither would we want to leave the impression that the Psalmist is narcissistically consumed with his own life. In three of the five psalms, the Psalmist's vision expands, allowing him to see beyond his personal difficulties and beyond the Lord's devotion to him, to find application in the life of others and to possess something like evangelical fervor in encouraging others (3.[8], 4.[6], 5.[11-12]).

Still, nothing in these five psalms really prepares us for the expansiveness of vision found in this eighth psalm. The Psalmist's vision expands astronomically from God's dependability in his own life and those close to him who might hear his witness to something global and cosmic.

"YHWH, Our Lord! How preeminent is Your fame the world over.
Even more, You spread Your grandeur across the heavens!"

Even in his darkest moments, the Psalmist has trusted God throughout his ordeal, sure of God's response and aid. He had even discerned that others, many others could also depend upon God. But now, the Psalmist sees that God's influence extends across the globe and, further, out into the cosmos.

The Psalmist has been confident about God's willingness and ability to directly withstand and defeat his enemies. But now the Psalmist's sees that God can, through His own word, empower humans, even the weakest of them, to withstand and defeat the enemy.

> "In the mouth of suckling babes
> You place the power to counter those who oppose You
> and annihilate the vindictive enemy.

This leads him to inspired wonderment—wonderment that this magnificent Being would so willingly involve Himself in the Psalmist's life, or, for that matter, in the life of any mortal being.

> "When I see the heavens, Your handiwork,
> the moon and the stars, which You placed there,
> I wonder, "What is a mortal being that You should pay them any attention,
> or the human race that you take interest in it?"

Yet, upon further reflection, the Psalmist sees that God does involve Himself in human affairs, and has from the beginning. Perhaps this reflection is based on scripture that he had not previously appreciated as he does now, after his ordeal. Before the first human being stepped foot on the planet, God granted them "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Gen. 1.[26]). This dominion, though far less than that of God, bestowed upon human beings a certain likeness to God. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1.[27]).

Such expansive thoughts leave the Psalmist, almost, speechless. After reflecting upon them and God's magnificent generosity toward humankind, the Psalmist can only end where he began.

> "YHWH, Our Lord, how preeminent is your fame the world over!

Psalms 3-7 have much in common. It is no great stretch to understand these five Psalms in terms of the same or a similar situation. Psalm 8 serves very well—whether as actually belonging to the circumstances behind the previous five psalms, or through redactional structuring choices—as a fitting conclusion to Psalms 3-5. Indeed, one could think of Psalm 8 as something of an apotheosis that not only serves to conclude the series, but to expand its scope.

God is not parochial. He embraces all eternity. This insight enhances the Psalmist's wonder at God. It also serves to enhance his understanding of, and appreciation for human beings with whom the great Expansionist willingly and powerfully associates—an association that not only gives them wise rule over God's earthly creation, but over intimidating and destructive enemies such as those met in the previous five psalms.

We can certainly relate to the Psalmist's wonder at God's expansive inclusiveness. We have more than once found ourselves feeling as the LDS hymnist, who confesses,

> "I stand all amazed at the love Jesus offers me.
> Confused at the grace that so fully he proffers me" (LDS Hymn # 193).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 2, 2023)

psalm 9–10

meditation 1— introductory

Psalms 9 and 10 were once a single psalm that, for whatever reason, was broken in two. As the broken acrostic pattern demonstrates, the text has been corrupted in a number of ways and locations with a central portion seemingly missing. This meditation, as well as those that follow, will be based on the unity of the two psalms.

The first two psalms, which many consider introductory to the entire Book of Psalms, were followed up with five psalms (3-7) often called laments or complaints. They are, however, more than complaint, for in them the Psalmist expresses a great deal of trust in God. Unlike the first two psalms, these five psalms are, according to our expectations of the Book, prayers offered to God.

As I understand them, these five psalms address the same or a similar situation in which the Psalmist is attacked by those who accuse him of being guilty of wrongdoing and thus being forsaken by God. In these psalms, the Psalmist resists the charges, maintains his innocence, steadfastly trusts that God will defend him against the charges, and continues to look forward to entering the temple where he expects to find a God who accepts him. The Psalmist's trust and expectations are based upon his own innocence and upon the character of God, who is unwaveringly devoted to him.

Psalm 8 is of an utterly different character. Here, there is no lament or complaint. No clue of any struggles or dangers. No mention of enemies. We understand this psalm to be a sort of apotheosis in which the Psalmist marvels, notwithstanding all expressions of trust in God found in Psalms 3-7, at the committed attention that God, who is unimaginably great, gives to lowly human beings.

The apotheosis, however, is short-lived. With Psalms 9-10, the enemy is back with a vengeance. Here, the enemy is characterized as being "guilty of hostility," and "malevolently immoral." Such individuals not only attack the Psalmist. They are seen as enemies to all who are oppressed, downtrodden, and destitute. In this psalm, the malevolently immoral, to whom we were introduced in the very first verse of the Book of Psalms, multiply on a global scale, so far as to give malevolent and immoral character to entire nations.

The enemy possesses relentless motivation—heretofore somewhat vague but outlined in detail in Psalm 10—and energy. While the Psalmist might be accused of being somewhat parochial in focusing exclusively on himself and his woes in the five laments of 3-7, after the apotheosis of Psalm 8, the Psalmist's vision seems to expand. While he still expresses private need in the face of personal attacks, he realizes that he is not alone in being attacked. The Psalmist—oppressed, downtrodden, disadvantaged, mistreated, and vexed—is joined by a world-wide congress of the oppressed, downtrodden, disadvantaged, mistreated, and vexed for whom he speaks. God will come to the aid of the oppressed, downtrodden, disadvantaged, mistreated, and vexed wherever they may be found.

Notwithstanding the expanded and ramped up hostilities that he and his fellow oppressed experience, in Psalm 9 and 10 the Psalmist expresses his continued trust in God, providing additional reasons to those he has already recounted for his confidence in God and His help. First, the Psalmist appeals to history. God had delivered those who trust Him in the past and so one can believe that God will act similarly in the present. Second, God's decision making is always correct. He is a just ruler. As part of his rule, he judges justly.

Psalms 9 and 10 are good news indeed not only in the life of the Psalmist but in the life of all those the world over who experience the oppression and mistreatment at the hands of those who are willfully and morally degenerate and malevolent. In these two psalms, once one, the malevolently immoral have their

secret motivations clearly exposed.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 9, 2023)

meditation 2— psalm 9.1-6

[1]I will praise You, YHWH, with my entire being.
I will certainly recount Your unparalleled wonders,
[2]joyously shout about and boast in You,
and sing of Your power, ‘elyôn,
[3]when my enemies fall back in retreat,
stagger and flee from You
[4]because You took up my case and my defense;
because You sat on Your throne, a just judge.

[5]You rebuked entire nations; You brought an end to those guilty of hostility;
You wiped them from existence, always and forever.
[6]The enemy still lies in complete and perpetual ruin.
You tore down their cities,
their influence obliterated (author’s translation).

As in Psalms 3-7, the Psalmist is in trouble. Concern over his enemies has returned after the brief hiatus of Psalm 8’s apotheosis. He is, again, in need of God’s defense as he is attacked and abused in some undisclosed manner. He continues to trust God. He is committed to worshipping God.

“I will praise You, YHWH, with my entire being.
I will certainly recount Your unparalleled wonders,
joyously shout about and boast in You,
and sing of Your power, ‘elyôn…”

The Psalmist’s trust in God and his commitment to praise Him flow from the Psalmist’s anticipation that God will indeed come to his defense. This defense is imagined, first, in militaristic imagery, the Psalmist seeing with an eye of faith his enemies in retreat and staggering away in humiliating defeat.

“My enemies fall back in retreat,
stagger and flee from You.”

Then the Psalmist resorts to forensic language, imaging God as a just judge sitting on his throne defending the Psalmist against accusations.

“You took up my case and my defense;
You sat on Your throne, a just judge.”

That, at least, is what I hear in this Psalm’s first four verses. It is all very familiar territory. We heard much the same in Psalms 3-7. However, with verses 5-6, we enter new territory, at least as far as the Psalter has gone to this point.

In Psalms 3-7, the Psalmist has already confessed some of the reasons for his trust in God and his

expectation of God's help. First, the Psalmist knows something of God's inner character. He knows God to be an unwaveringly devoted God.

"But, as for me, because of the immensity of Your unwavering devotion to me,
I can enter Your house.
I can bow down in Your sacred temple precincts;
bow in reverence to You" (5.[7]).

God's long, at times tortured, history with the rebellious nation of Israel is a powerful demonstration of God's devotion. But what adds to the Psalmist's trust in God and his expectation of divine help, is his belief that God is uniquely devoted to those who are, themselves, devoted to Him. And, notwithstanding personal flaws, the Psalmist is nothing if not devoted to God.

"Know this: YHWH is attentive to those devoted to him;
it is YHWH that responds when I cry out to Him" (4.[3]).

"For You bless the devout, O YHWH.
As a full body shield, You surround them with Your acceptance" (5.[13]).

Finally, the Psalmist's confidence in God and expectation of His help flows from his knowledge that he is innocent of the charges made against him.

"Because nothing coming out of their mouth has been proven…" (5.[9]).

"YHWH, if I have done this,
if I bear responsibility for this wrong—
that is, if I have done intentional harm to one who befriended me,
or if I have deemed one an enemy without cause… (7.[3-4]).

This is powerful and inspiring testimony. But, still, some might need additional assurance. The Psalmist finds additional assurance in the past. In my reading of this psalm, this is the import of verses 5-6. The Psalmist looks back in history and sees God act on the world stage.

"You rebuked entire nations. You brought an end to those guilty of hostility.
You wiped them from existence, always and forever.
The enemy still lies in complete and perpetual ruin.
You tore down their cities,
Their influence obliterated."

Here, it seems we should think of Israel's enemies. Great cities, once powerful and consequential in people's lives, now sit empty, perhaps unrecognizable as cities, having no role or influence in individuals' lives or in international affairs—this might serve as warning to us, we who carelessly think our society and way of life is inevitable and inalterable.

This looking to the past and finding in it examples of God's devotion and help is a valuable and common source of faith and hope in God and His willing presence and aid in our lives today. Paul reminds the Corinthian saints that what scripture had recorded of the past was meant to serve as "ensamples" and were "written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10.[11]).

Given the task of securing the plates of Laban, Nephi encouraged his hesitant brothers to carry out their charge by reminding them of God's past deeds.

> "Therefore let us go up; let us be strong like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and the armies of Pharaoh did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea. Now behold ye know that this is true; and ye also know that an angel hath spoken unto you; wherefore can ye doubt? Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians" (1 Ne. 4.[2-3]).

Alma possessed a strong assurance that God would "raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory." Certainly, this assurance flowed from his own personal experiences with God. However, the sacred histories that reported God's past acts also played a role in his assurance.

> "And I know that he will raise me up at the last day, to dwell with him in glory; yea, and I will praise him forever, for *he has brought our fathers out of Egypt*, and *he has swallowed up the Egyptians in the Red Sea*; and *he led them by his power into the promised land*; yea, and *he has delivered them out of bondage and captivity* from time to time. Yea, and *he has also brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem*; and *he has also, by his everlasting power, delivered them out of bondage and captivity*, from time to time even down to the present day; and *I have always retained in remembrance their captivity*; yea, and ye also ought to retain in remembrance, as I have done, their captivity" (Al. 36.[28-29])

Then again, we think of Moroni who, like the Psalmist, was aware that the history of God's past deeds could and should serve as a source of faith and hope. In editing and writing the work that would come to be known as the Book of Mormon, he expected, reasonably enough, that many would question the veracity of the work. They would, he knew, be dependent upon God for assurances of its veracity. But how and why should they believe that God would respond to their queries concerning the veracity of the work? Would God be so generous? In anticipation of these uncertainties, Moroni offered the following advice.

> "Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts" (Moroni 10.[3]).

Moroni believed that if we immerse ourselves in past acts of divine generosity and help, we will find it more believable that God will act in our lives and provide the assistance that we so desperately need. Psalm 9 is an example of an ancient believer practicing this same sort of immersion in God's past acts of generosity and help. As we continue with Psalm 9/10, we will see where this immersion in the past led and the vision of the present and future that it produced.

So, again, as the Psalmist contemplates his own challenges—and later all those who are the victims of others hostility—the Psalmist adds to the reasons previously enunciated for hoping in God's deliverance: God's past acts of help and deliverance in the experience of victimized individuals and nations.

We would do well to engage ourselves in the same immersion of the past and of God's past acts of generous help and deliverance. There are no clearer waters for such immersion than those found in the Book of Psalms.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 9, 2023)

meditation 3— psalm 9.7-12

[7]But YHWH sits enthroned forever,
having established His throne for justice.
[8]He governs rightly the world over.
He judges nations equitably.

[9]YHWH is an unassailable stronghold for the oppressed;
an unassailable stronghold in times of oppression.
[10]Those who know Your character, put their trust in You,
for You never abandon those who seek You, YHWH.
[11]Sing praises to YHWH, who sits enthroned in Ṣîyôn!
Proclaim His deeds among the nations:
[12]that, finding acts of violence, He responds to them.
He never ignores the wail of the downtrodden (author's translation).

Being once more in need of God's defense against those who attack him, the Psalmists sends his mind forward in time to promise praise for God's anticipated intervention and victory in his behalf (vs. 1-4). Then, as further reason for his trust in God's positive intervention in his behalf, the Psalmist casts his mind back in time to rehearse God's past willing intervention in behalf of the oppressed and downtrodden who put their trust in Him (vs. 5-6). This remembrance of God's past actions in behalf of the victimized, the oppressed and downtrodden, can serve to strengthen trust in God for all those who are in present need of God's intervention.

Having briefly rehearsed God's willing help to those who trusted him in the past, the Psalmist draws broad conclusions and lessons. In doing so, the Psalmist's vision expands from being merely personal and parochial to global. This, anyway, is how I understand verses 7-12.

Those who truly know God, know that His interests and concerns are not limited and parochial. He not only governs in Israel, but the world over. This insight is consistent with the insight and proclamation found at the beginning and end of the previous Psalm—what I have called an apotheosis.

"YHWH, Our Lord! How preeminent is your fame the world over!"

Over the length of the Book, the Psalmists come back to God's worldwide rule over and over again.

God's governance is not only worldwide. Is always and universally just and equitable. His governance does not apply only to the powerful and influential—the world's "worthies." Indeed, as first and perhaps ultimate proof of God's just and equitable worldwide governance, the Psalmist offers God's strong defense and support for the world's oppressed and downtrodden, whose suffering and needs He never ignores. This, too, becomes one of the Psalmists' common refrains.

"Because of the ruin brought upon the downtrodden
and the pain induced cry of the impoverished,
I will immediately arise," promises YHWH.
"I will provide them with protection against those who hold them in contempt" (12.[5]).

Such promises, so oft repeated, are sure.

"YHWH's promises are sure promises.
They are like silver refined in an earthen furnace,
refined to perfection" (12.[6]).

God's defense of the oppressed and downtrodden is not only one of, if not the principal evidence of his just governance, it is a cause for celebration and a reason to praise God.

"Sing praises to YHWH, who sits enthroned in Ṣîyôn!
Proclaim his deeds among the nations:
that, finding acts of violence, he responds to them;
he never ignores the wail of the downtrodden."

Really, to this point in the Psalms, the only oppressed and downtrodden individual we have heard from or about has been the Psalmist, himself. But in this Psalm, we find the Psalmist's mind turning from himself to all those who suffer grief and oppression as he. Perhaps in reviewing examples of God's past acts of deliverance, the Psalmist thought once more on the oppression of Israel in Egypt and, periodically, that of Israel's neighbors.

This turning of the mind from oneself to others is a common response found among those who have experienced God's help and deliverance after passing through oppressive suffering, whatever form it might take. We think of Enos who, having been redeemed of God, "began to feel a desire for the welfare of my brethren, the Nephites; wherefore, I did pour out my whole soul unto God for them" (Enos 1.[9]).

As we proceed through Psalm 9/10, we will see that the Psalmist's mind not only turns to those oppressed as he, but to oppressors such as his. But, before this, the Psalmist will illuminate other lessons and find additional encouragement in the lessons of the past. He will renew his call for help in his present circumstances. He will pray that all, the world over, will learn the lessons of history, trust and rely on God, and submit themselves to God so that He might act in their lives as well.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 9, 2023)

meditation 4— psalm 9.[7–12]

[13]Look favorably upon me, YHWH,
and respond to the mistreatment perpetrated by those who oppose me,
raising me from death's door
[14]so that I may innumerate all the reasons to praise You in Ṣîyōn's gates;
so that I may publicly rejoice because of the deliverance You provide.

Though the enemies are back after the apotheosis of Psalm 8, the Psalmist can already see them in retreat due to God's intervention (1-4). He can anticipate his enemies' demise, in part, because he knows of God's past actions against enemies—actions that left entire nations in ruin (5-6). God's past actions against enemies shows Him to be a just and worldwide ruler who cares for and comes to the defense of the oppressed and downtrodden. For this reason, God is worthy of praise. The good news about Him should be proclaimed the world over (7-12).

Having established for himself these global-sized realities, the Psalmist once more makes his own personal plea known. As but one of those oppressed and downtrodden, the Psalmist asks that God act

against his oppressors, whose aim is his complete destruction.

> "Look favorably upon me, YHWH,
> and respond to the mistreatment perpetrated by those who oppose me,
> raising me from death's door…"

Then, the Psalmist assures God, he can and will praise God for His help. The Psalmist lacks the capacity, of course, to send his praise out into the world to the extent that God deserves. But he can be diligent and effective within his sphere of influence, however small and humble. So, the Psalmist promises that he will speak incessantly of all that God does and can do. He will "innumerate all the reasons to praise You in Ṣîyōn's gates." Zion is his sphere of influence, and he will make sure Zion's inhabitants have every reason to praise and honor and trust and follow God.

Here, we think of the counsel given to one, Oliver Cowdery, and think that the Psalmist felt much as Oliver was counseled to feel and act: "He shall not suppose that he can say enough in my cause" (DC 24.[10]). No, one can speak often enough or with sufficiently elevated language to describe the infinite and indescribable Being called "God."

> "Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord?
> Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy,
> and of his long-suffering towards the children of men?
> Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel" (Al. 26.[16]).

But none of this will keep the Psalmist from trying. And his exuberant praise of God will not be cautious and measured. His praise of God will be loud, and very, very public.

> "so that I may publicly rejoice because of the deliverance You provide.

Here, we think of the repeated admonition that in proclaiming the good news about God one should "lift up your voice as with the sound of a trump, both long and loud" (DC 34.[6]; 24.[12]; 30.[9]; 33.[2]), with the "sound of rejoicing" (DC 28.[16]; 29.[4]), sparing nothing (DC 34.[10;] 33.[9];). Yes, only a very public and loud voice would do as one proclaimed "Hosanna, blessed be the name of the most high God" (DC 36.[3]; 19.[37]; 39.[19]). Indeed, while far below angels, the worshipper "like unto angels of God" (DC 42.[6]) proclaims the wonder of God.

Little wonder, then, that Alma expressed, "O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth" (29.[1]). But such was not his lot. Neither is it mine or yours. It is enough, as it was with the Psalmist, to stand in the sphere in which we find ourselves, for "the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word" (Al. 29.[8]). So let us do our part, speaking often and loudly of a God who is too big for our biggest and brightest and loudest exclamations.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 9, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm 9.15–18

[15]Nations have sunk in the very pit that they themselves dug;
their feet ensnared in the trap that they themselves hid.

[16]YHWH is known for the way he governs—
in those guilty of malevolence being ensnared by their own devices.

[17]Those so guilty go to Še'ôl,
even every nation that disregards 'ĕlōhîm.
[18]But truly the destitute are never forgotten,
or the hope of the disadvantaged ever lost.

Surrounded by enemies who leveled accusations of wrongdoing against him in Psalms 3-7, the Psalmist fully expected God's help in defending him against attack. His confidence was based first on God's character, as God was both just in judgement and unwaveringly devoted to him personally. Second, the Psalmist was, in fact, innocent of the accusations made against him.

After the apotheosis of Psalm 8, in which there is no mention of enemies or attackers, enemies are back in Psalm 9. Once more, however, the Psalmist is confident in God, anticipating his enemies in retreat due to God's intervention (1-4). In addition to his previously stated reasons for confidence in God, the Psalmist adds yet another: God has acted in the past against unhallowed enemies. These actions had left entire nations given to hostility in ruin (5-6). God's past actions against enemies shows Him to be a just and worldwide ruler who cares for and comes to the defense of the oppressed and downtrodden, of whom, the Psalmist is one. For this reason, God is worthy of praise. The good news about Him should be proclaimed the world over (7-12).

With these facts in mind, the Psalmist appeals once more for God's help, with the promise that when God has come to his aid he will joyfully and publicly praise God without restraint (13-14). In making this appeal, he returns to the lessons of the past and draws several conclusions.

First, history teaches the Psalmist that once a strong nation embarks on the path of malevolence and hostility toward other nations, it will, sooner or later, become the victim of others' malevolence and hostility. In a sense, one can foretell a nation's future by this rule. A nation's future can be forecast by the way it presently conducts itself on the world stage. The same can be said of individuals. Individuals who engage in malevolence and hostility toward others will find themselves the target of malevolence and hostility. What goes around comes around, as the modern saying goes.

The Psalmist's second insight concerns the reality of God's good judgment, His wisdom. He knows how this world works and has given advice and counsel about it. He has warned against malevolence and hostility at both the individual and global level and has revealed the inalterable consequences of such conduct. Whatever else Še'ôl is, it is the consequence of malevolence and hostility. It is the eruption and disruption of chaos. It is death and destruction, both for individuals and nations.

We come now to the Psalmist's very important third insight gleaned from the history of God's dealings with and among human beings. Earlier in the Psalm, the Psalmist had confessed his belief that

"Those who know Your character, put their trust in You,
for You never abandon those who seek You, YHWH" (vs. 10).

We can assume that this is true at both the micro and macro level, at the individual and national level. But the Psalmist is insistent on bringing God's dependability right down to the lowest levels of society: to those who are devalued and dismissed, and thus targeted with and victimized by the malevolence and hostility of those whom society values more; those who are wealthy and powerful and influential.

> "But truly the destitute are never forgotten,
> or the hope of the downtrodden ever lost."

Though God is unimaginably high and mighty, he never forgets the low and powerless.

> "Though YHWH is exalted, still He takes notice of the lowly,
> while He remains distant with the exalted" (138.[6])

Though in his might He is creator of "heaven and earth and ocean," He is a God of lowliness. As such, he is

> "the One who effects justice for the oppressed,
> the One who provides food for the hungry,
> YHWH, who liberates those held captive,
> YHWH, who gives sight to the blind,
> YHWH, who lifts those who are exhausted,
> YHWH, who loves those who do right,
> YHWH, who watches after foreigners;
> He adopts orphans and widows
> but undermines the pursuits of the malevolently immoral" (146.[5-9]).

The Lord is particularly watchful over those victimized, oppressed, downtrodden, and impoverished—perhaps because so few watch over them and so many victimize them. As the Lord began to explain the character of Zion to Joseph Smith and to prepare the prophet to restructure the world through its principles, He made sure Joseph understood one of His principal motivations for Zion's establishment: "the poor have complained before me" (DC 38.[16]). Such it always is, as the Psalmist bears witness.

After a final plea (vss. 19-20), in Psalm 10 the Psalmist will return to this theme with a vengeance as he clearly delineates "the pursuits of the malevolently immoral."

The nations of this world would do well to give heed to the Psalmist's insights found in Psalms 9 and 10—remember, the two psalms should be read as one. Those who have a voice in the election of their leaders would do well to give heed to these insights.

The Psalmist is not the only one issuing forth a warning to the nations and their inhabitants.

> "For I, the Almighty, have laid my hands upon the nations, to scourge them for their wickedness.
>
> And verily I say unto you, the rest of my servants, go ye forth as your circumstances shall permit, in your several callings, unto the great and notable cities and villages, reproving the world in righteousness of all their unrighteous and ungodly deeds, setting forth clearly and understandingly the desolation of abomination in the last days. For, with you saith the Lord Almighty, I will rend their kingdoms; I will not only shake the earth, but the starry heavens shall tremble" (84.[96, 117-118]).

All this, for the oppressed, the downtrodden, the impoverished; for those victimized by this world with its perverted and twisted values and contempt for the downtrodden.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 6— psalm 9.[19-20]

[19]Arise YHWH. Mere mortals should not prevail.
Nations should be governed by You
[20]Give them, YHWH, insecurity
that nations come to understand that they are mortal.

In Psalm 9, the Psalmist is once more faced with those who oppose him (vss. 3 and 13). As he considers this, the Psalmist calls to mind the reality that malevolent and oppressive forces—both individual and national—opposed to a well-ordered society and, especially, the vulnerable in society, have always been present. He remembers that in the past when Israel faced malevolent enemies, God came to Israel's help and that those hostile nations were brought to complete destruction (vss. 5-6, 15-17).

Having recalled God's past help against antagonistic forces, the Psalmist draws conclusions about God, His Character, and His present stance visa via those who are hostile to the Psalmist. God is just and right in His world governance. God is especially solicitous of the oppressed, the destitute, and the downtrodden (vss. 7-12, 16-18). In making these discoveries about the character of God and in knowing that he, himself, is one of the world's ever-present oppressed, the Psalmist is confident that God will respond to his appeal for help against his adversaries (vss. 1-4, 13-14).

Clearly the Psalmist is grateful for and personally encouraged by what history has taught him about the character of God. But the Psalmist is no narcissist. He thinks of others. As he looks outside himself to the larger world, he wants others, many others, entire nations of others to learn what he has learned. He wants the oppressed everywhere to find comfort and trust in God. He wants all nations to know their place, acknowledge their inadequacies, and allow themselves to be governed by God.

So it is that the Psalmist pleads to God that He demonstrate to the nations their vulnerabilities so that "nations come to understand that they are mortal." Such revelation, often utterly unanticipated, is life-changing at the individual level. Moses was forever changed by his encounter with God.

> "*It was for the space of many hours before Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man; and he said unto himself: 'Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed'" (Moses 1.[10]).

The Psalmist expressed a similar idea.

> "The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man,
> that they are vanity" (94.[11]).

> "Give us help from trouble:
> for vain is the help of man" (108.[12]).

> "Human beings are simply worthless;
> humankind completely untrustworthy.
> On a weight scale, they are, combined, less than air" (Ps. 62.[9]).

But just as importantly, this revelation is necessary at a national and global level. Nations must

understand, as Isaiah pronounced,

> "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket,
> and are counted as the small dust of the balance:
> behold, he [God] taketh up the isles as a very little thing" (40.[15]).

Such global and national awareness and humility are necessary if malevolence and hostility toward one another and especially toward the vulnerable are to come to an end. We still wait for the Lord to teach the nations their lowly place, even if it be through the things they suffer. For the nations must "come to understand that they are mortal." The vulnerable must be defended and, more, know victory over their oppressors.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 9, 2023)

meditation 7— psalm 10.[1]

[1] Why, Yahweh, are You now so standoffish?
Why do You remain absent during these distressing times? (author's translation)

Some years ago I met with a student who was angry with God. Hopping mad, in fact. When I asked her if she had told God how she felt, she looked at me like I was out of my mind. "Of course not. I can't say that to Him!"

I asked her, "So, you think He doesn't already know?" She realized immediately how silly it was to not "go public" with something that God already knew. She later informed me that things had gotten better between her and God since she had decided to always be completely honest with Him.

One of the things that I appreciate most about the Psalmists, is their brutal honesty with God. The Psalmist begins this psalm by expressing his perplexity. He has just reexamined in his mind God's past acts in delivering Israel from its enemies (9.[5-6, 15])—Psalm 9 and 10, remember, were once a single psalm. He cannot understand God's inactivity in the face of the present distress. He will go on in the psalm to describe the distress.

I believe that God desires and treasures such honesty as that in which the Psalmist engages. He appreciates, of course, hearing our expressions of love of and trust in Him. However, He is no less appreciative when we confess our true feelings, eve if they are something like, "I'm not liking You very much right now," or "I'm really not sure You know what You are doing."

I view such honestly on the part of the Psalmists as one of their greatest strengths and reflective of deep and profound faith and trust in God. I believe that God views such honesty on our part as a sign of our love and trust in Him. When we are sincerely honest with God, I believe, the relationship between Him and us grows stronger. We learn to trust Him more. And, perhaps, He comes to trust us more.

Or, at least, I like to think so, because, for me, today, the Psalmist's complaint, "Why do You remain absent during these distressing times?" resonates deeply. I find our present times extremely distressing. I am distressed with my nation's past and present love affair with perhaps the single most immoral, anti-Christ, and dangerous politician—if he can indeed be called that—in our nation's history. I am distressed at the harm this love affair has done to the moral fiber—such as it was—of our nation. Every day I lament Alma's too-true lament

> "Yea, and we also see the great wickedness one very wicked man can cause to take place among the children of men" (Al. 45.[9]).

I am distressed at the dishonesty and greed of our politicians who have been corrupted by corporate greed and dishonesty.

> "Your leaders are criminals,
> collaborators with thieves.
> All of them want bribes,
> and, more, actively seek out kickbacks" (Is. 1.[23])

I am distressed that citizens of my country, including those who call themselves Christians, have largely accepted and adopted the idolatrous propaganda—worthy, really, of the name, "false doctrine"—of the business class. I am distressed that in their inability or unwillingness to discern the false doctrine and

abject greed of the elite business and political classes, the middle class has adopted, as wicked King Noah's people, the same idolatrous and abject greed.

> "Yea, and they also became idolatrous, because they were deceived by the vain and flattering words of the king and priests; for they did speak flattering things unto them" (Mosiah 11.[7]).

I am distressed that this abject and idolatrous greed has brought suffering upon millions of innocent people—men, women, and, most distressingly, children—in the lower classes.

> "O ye pollutions, ye hypocrites, ye teachers, who sell yourselves for that which will canker, why have ye polluted the holy church of God? Why are ye ashamed to take upon you the name of Christ? Why do ye not think that greater is the value of an endless happiness than that misery which never dies—because of the praise of the world? Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not? Yea, why do ye build up your secret abominations to get gain, and cause that widows should mourn before the Lord, and also orphans to mourn before the Lord, and also the blood of their fathers and their husbands to cry unto the Lord from the ground, for vengeance upon your heads? (Mormon 8.[38-40]).

I am distressed that so many in my nation have willfully accepted and propagated patently and obvious lies and conspiracy theories rather than face the truth that they are descending into darkness and destruction because of their idolatrous ideologies and the behavior that flows from them.

> "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Tim. 4.[3-4]).

I could go on. I am distressed. The Psalmist makes a lot of grand claims about God's active deliverance of those who suffer through the oppression of others. But I am not seeing it. God looks to be inactive and absent to me. I am distressed at the human behavior I witness. I am distressed at God's seeming indifference and inaction—though, I confess, I am not sure what I would have Him do.

The reader may wonder why, here, I must rant so, and stir up all this modern muck. Must I always come back to TFG, our putrefied politics, our idolatrous materialism, and our inability to discern the vileness they bring into our daily lives and the suffering they heap upon the vulnerable? You will see, if you will, how very applicable my distress is to this 10th Psalm. After all his complaints about his enemies found in Psalms 3-7 and 9, the Psalmist will finally give a name to those who distress him—the "wicked" or "malevolent immoral"—and provide detailed accounting of their character, motivations, and the global suffering they cause. He will reveal the global reach and character of the malevolent and immoral. His descriptions will all look very, very familiar. Uncomfortably familiar. Psalm 10 represents an intense rant against the malevolently immoral.

So, yes, the Psalmist's complaint resonates deeply in me,

> "Why, Yahweh, are you now so standoffish?
> Why do you remain absent during these distressing times?"

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 11, 2023)

meditation 8— psalm 10.$^{2-11}$ (introductory)

[2]In self-importance, the malevolently immoral vigorously pursues the disadvantaged.
The disadvantaged are ensnared by the plans they conceive.
[3]For the malevolently immoral finds fulfillment only in satisfying their own lust,
and laud one accumulating unjust profits—he who shows distain for YHWH!
[4]The malevolently immoral, consistent with their stubborn arrogance, are unreflective.
’ělōhîm is not considered in any of their plans.
[5]They twist ’ělōhîm’s principles.
’ělōhîm’s elevated judgement opposes them.
Anything that would restraint them they blow off.
[6]They say to themselves, “I cannot be toppled.
My future holds no misfortune.”
[7]Their mouth is full of cursing and injurious lies:
while misery and cruelty flow from their tongue.
[8]They sit in ambush outside villages.
From concealed places they slay the innocent;
their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.
[9]Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.
[10]They crouch low, hunch down,
and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable.
[11]They say to themselves, “God pays no attention.
He’s absent. He sees nothing, ever” (author’s translation).

In considering these verses, we should remember where we are and where we have been. After what many consider to be two introductory psalms (1-2), the following five psalms of complaint addressed the same or a similar situation in which the Psalmist was under attack by those who accused him of wrongdoing and having lost access to God and His help (ps. 3-7). The Psalmist maintained his innocence in relation to the specific charges and expectantly anticipated that God would come to his aid. The Psalmist’s expectation of God’s help, however, was not based solely upon his own innocence in relation to the charges. It was also based upon the character or God: God is unwaveringly faithful to those who look to Him.

After a sort of apotheosis in which the Psalmist observed the preeminence of God in both this world and in the cosmos, then saw and wondered at God’s interest in lowly humanity (ps. 8), the Psalmist is made to reject any and all parochial understanding of God and His willing assistance in human affairs (ps. 9). Thus, in Psalm 9, the Psalmist’s view turns somewhat global. He sees God as a just world-wide ruler. He recalls God’s past acts of help against national enemies and finds in this yet another reason to trust God to act, not only in his own life but in the life of all the abused and downtrodden, of whom the Psalmist now sees himself as but one of many the world over. Mortals, especially those who oppose God and the well-ordered society by acting as abusers and oppressors of others, should take heed, and understand their smallness and vulnerability in the face of God’s preeminence and His just rule in the world and the universe.

In light of these facts about God, the Psalmist begins Psalm 10 by expressing dismay at God’s seeming absence in the distress which the Psalmist and other oppressed individuals with whom he numbers himself are made to endure (vs. 1).

Now, to this point, the Psalmist has been somewhat lean in his description of those who attack him and,

he now understands, many others who are vulnerable to abuse. The enemies and oppressors are many (3.[2]). They discourage trust in God (3.[2]; 4.[6]). They utilize lies as a weapon (4.[2]; 5.[6, 9]; 7.[14]). They are violent (5.[6]; 9.[12]). They are relentless (7.[12]). They are deadly—temporally and spiritually (7.[12-16]). But in Psalm 10, the Psalmist goes further. Here, he not only describes the abusers, naming them "malevolently immoral," but exposes the inner motivations, thoughts, and rationales by which they conduct and justify their malevolent attitudes and behaviors.

To be sure, God is the principal figure of the Book of Psalms just as the "tree of life" is the principal figure of the Lehi's inspired dream found in 1 Nephi 8. We are moved and inspired by the portrayal and testimony of the great and incomparable Being of whom the Psalmist bears witness. But, just as Lehi identifies and describes forces that stand in opposition to the tree—forces represented by the great and spacious building—the Psalmist identifies and describes forces that stand in opposition to God and to a well-ordered society—both in time and eternity.

Ideally, I suppose, we would act rightly by coming to know and striving to emulate God, the perfect role model, best seen in Jesus' portrayal of God as found on the pages of the New Testament Gospels. However, as history and the present suggest, the exemplary life of Jesus has largely fallen on deaf ears.

At the other extreme, we might be kept in the right way through harsh threats, as Enos suggests in his rather pessimistic view of human nature.

> "And there was nothing save it was exceeding harshness, preaching and prophesying of wars, and contentions, and destructions, and continually reminding them of death, and the duration of eternity, and the judgments and the power of God, and all these things—stirring them up continually to keep them in the fear of the Lord. I say there was nothing short of these things, and exceedingly great plainness of speech, would keep them from going down speedily to destruction" (1.[23]).

There is a middle road between optimistic presentation of God and pessimistic presentation of threat. That middle ground is to portray in stark and graphic detail the motives and actions of those who oppose God and oppress the disadvantaged, and then hope we can and will look in the mirror to see what we see there reflected back at us. We must be cognizant and knowing about both God and the forces that oppose Him.

Outside the New Testament Gospels where God is portrayed in the person of Jesus, no book of scripture is better at describing God than the Book of Psalms. At the same time, no book is more consistent and descriptive of the "malevolently immoral" that oppose God and have dominated the world stage from its very beginnings than the Book of Psalms. And here, in the ten verses comprised of verses 2-11 of Psalm 10, we get the Book's first extended meditation on the wicked, the ungodly, the malevolently immoral in all their ugliness.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 11, 2023)

meditation 9— psalm 10.[2–11]

[2]In self-importance, the malevolently immoral vigorously pursues the disadvantaged.
The disadvantaged are ensnared by the plans they conceive.
[3]For the malevolently immoral finds fulfillment only in satisfying their own lust.
and laud one accumulating unjust profits—he who shows distain for YHWH!

The Book of Psalms began with a macarism, a statement of happiness, fulfillment, and security. They are fulfilled, happy, and secure who "choose YHWH's direction" and "consult his *Tôrâ* at all times" (Ps. 1.[2]). But before this positive statement, came a negative one, a warning. They are fulfilled, happy, and secure who "do *not* walk by the direction of the malevolently immoral" (Ps. 1.[1]). One follows the directions of God or of the malevolently immoral. The latter oppose God. There are those who resist and oppose God and those who love and seek to follow Him. The reality and existence of such opposition must always be in mind, and never forgotten.

In Psalm 2, the Psalmist wondered that not only individuals but entire nations resisted and opposed God.

> "Why do the nations raise such a ruckus,
> and entire populations grouse to no avail?
> The world's kings offer resistance;
> world leaders form a united front
> against YHWH
> and against his Māšîaḥ.
> 'We will break free of his restraints;
> throw off his control, [they say]'" (vs. 1-3).

This resistance and opposition to God shows the nations of this world and its leadership to have been infiltrated and dominated by the malevolently immoral, whom Psalm 1 already marked as opposers of God.

In Psalms 3-7, many resisted, opposed, and attacked the Psalmist who was a devoted, if imperfect, follower of God. In these five psalms, the Psalmist was somewhat lean in his description of those who opposed him and, he comes to understand in Psalm 9, many others who are vulnerable to abuse. Those who oppose the Psalmist are many (3.[2]). They discourage trust in God (3.[2]; 4.[6]). They utilize lies as a weapon (4.[2]; 5.[6, 9]; 7.[14]). They are violent (5.[6]; 9.[12]). They are relentless (7.[12]). They are deadly—temporally and spiritually (7.[12-16]).

After a brief respite from these hostile forces in Psalm 8, In Psalm 9-10, the Psalmist is once more dismayed to find himself opposed by hostile forces (see, for our purposes, 10.[1]). But here, in the ten verses comprised of verses 2-11 of Psalm 10, the Psalmist launches into his first of many extended meditations on the specific and ugly attitudes, behaviors, motivations, and character of the opposition: the wicked, the ungodly, the malevolently immoral. In this meditation, we consider verses 2 and 3.

> "In self-importance, the malevolently immoral vigorously pursues the disadvantaged.
> The disadvantaged are ensnared by the plans they conceive.
> For the malevolently immoral finds fulfillment only in satisfying their own lust,
> and laud one accumulating unjust profits—he who shows distain for YHWH!"

As we noted, the first Psalm began with a warning concerning individuals it calls "malevolently immoral." Their counsel stands in direct opposition to God and the direction He provides in His *Tôrâ*. The Psalm closed out by mentioning this class of people three more times in verses 4, 5, and 6. They make their next appearance by name in Psalm 7.[9], where they are those who oppose the Psalmist and falsely accuse him of wrongdoing. They appear by name again in Psalm 9 (vss. 5, 16, 17). Here they are individuals who possess and act with hostility toward others. Their lifestyle will land them in hell.

The Hebrew word for these individuals is *rāšāʿ*. A wide variety of translators and translation committees have traditionally and most often translated this word as "wicked." "Ungodly" is not uncommon. The word seems to reflect attitudes and behaviors that are wrong and bring a sentence of guilt. Such

individuals' attitudes and behaviors are contrary to both divine and societal norms. These attitudes and behaviors are not simply indicative of a character flaw in the individuals called *rāšāʿ*. Just as importantly, such individuals are *rāšāʿ* because they are engaged in willful and purposeful public thoughts and behaviors that they fully recognize as likely being harmful to others and to society as a whole.

As we have said of the word, *ḥesed*—our, "unwavering devotion"— Hebrew, *rāšāʿ*. feels too big for a single English word translation. Our "malevolently immoral" attempts to get at all described in the previous paragraph. "Malevolence," is no accident. The word suggests that which is intentional and purposeful. It also reflects a willingness and desire to harm others. "Immoral" gets at the idea of going against norms—divine and societal. All but the antisocial would agree that the "malevolently immoral" are guilty and subject to the threat of sanction.

The two verses explored in this meditation put a little more meat on the bones and expand upon the character of the *rāšāʿ*. The malevolently immoral act out of exaggerated self-importance. The malevolently immoral also act out of lustful appetites which they seek to satisfy above all other considerations. They associate with and champion those who acquire material wealth through any means, even those that are fraudulent, giving evidence to the fact that they put worldly, materialistic achievements above all else. Indeed, their participation with and championing of those who fraudulently acquire material wealth—the most common way of acquiring material wealth, according to the Hebrew prophets—shows them to be in opposition to God, Himself.

As a corollary to their self-importance and lust, the malevolently immoral necessarily possess a deflated value of and contempt for others. Their contempt is particularly acute in regard to society's disadvantaged. They purposefully, actively, and vigorously plan, calculate, scheme, and act in ways that put society's disadvantaged at even further disadvantage.

Indeed, the *rāšāʿ*, the malevolently immoral, and the *ʿānî/ʿānāw*—the disadvantaged, downtrodden, poor, exploited, abused, and oppressed—are engaged in a macabre dance. Both are largely defined by the other and the interaction that takes place between them. The malevolence and immorality of the *rāšāʿ* is found most clearly in their conduct toward and treatment of the *ʿānî/ʿānāw*. The disadvantage, downtroddenness, exploitation, abuse, and oppression of the *ʿānî/ʿānāw* is largely the result of the malevolent immorality of the *rāšāʿ*.

It is perhaps no accident that the *ʿānî/ʿānāw* appeared for the first time in the Book of Psalms in association with the Book's first detailed and extended meditation on the *rāšāʿ* (Ps. 9-10). There could not be the one without the other. "There was no poor among them," we are informed of Zion (Moses 7.[18]). It may just be that there are poor because of the existence of the malevolently immoral. The malevolently immoral create them. Where there is an absence of the malevolently immoral, there is an absence of the poor.' The Book of Psalms will frequently return to the relationship between the downtrodden and the malevolently immoral.

Scriptures such as Psalm 9 and 10 with passages such as this one (vss. 2 and 3), serve as both guide and warning to individuals and society today. When we see individuals and society show distain for and mistreat society's disadvantaged members, we are fully justified in concluding that those individuals and societies are malevolently immoral. When we see large segments of society empower—through election or otherwise—those who distain and mistreat the disadvantaged and who enact and maintain legislation and policies that carry out distain and mistreatment of the disadvantaged through public policy, we can call that segment of society, malevolently immoral. There are times—times such as we are currently living in—when the character of society in relation to the disadvantaged is malevolently immoral. And we can confidently conclude that such individuals and societies act contrary to the character and will of God. They stand in opposition to Him in the same way that the great and spacious building stood in opposition to Him (See 1 Ne. 8).

Psalm 9 and 10, along with many other psalms provide ample warning concerning the attitudes, behaviors, and fate of malevolently immoral individuals and societies that belittle, abuse, and oppress the disadvantaged and downtrodden. Indeed, as we will see, the Psalmist is often driven to inspired imprecation against the malevolently immoral. We can understand why.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 11, 2023)

meditation 10— psalm 10.[2-11]

[4]The malevolently immoral, consistent with their stubborn arrogance, are unreflective.
ʾĕlōhîm is not considered in any of their plans.
[5]They twist God's principles.
God's elevated judgement opposes them.
Anything that would restraint them they blow off.
[6]They say to themselves, "I cannot be toppled.
My future holds no misfortune."

In interpreting Psalms 3-7, we treated them as if they all addressed the same or a very similar circumstance. There, the Psalmist was opposed by those who leveled false accusations of wrongdoing against him. Though attackers were absent in Psalm 8—a kind of apotheosis, as we understand it, in which the Psalmist view of things becomes somewhat global—they are back in Psalms 9 and 10, which should be read as one psalm.

In Psalms 3-7, the enemies were for the most part personal and private, the Psalmist being their primary target. The Psalmist's main concern was for himself and the damage those who opposed him might do to his reputation and the harm they might inflict in and upon his life. But, perhaps influenced by the global insights of Psalm 8, in Psalm 9-10, the Psalmist considered not only his personal enemies but those which his own nation faced in the past (9.[5-6, 15]). Here, the enemies become less personal and more global—although the *rāšāʿ*, the malevolently immoral, are always mentioned in the singular, the verbs associated with their thoughts and behaviors alternate back and forth between singular and plural. It is almost as if the Psalmist has realized that his private experiences with those who oppose him are not unique. Rather, the malevolently immoral exist not only as individuals but as a class and infest the entire world.

Perhaps because the malevolently immoral—though the Psalmist did not so name them in Psalms 3-7, the characteristics, desires, and actions of his enemies there is consistent with what he has to say about the malevolently immoral in Psalm 9-10—are everywhere present in human affairs and society, the Psalmist engages in an extended meditation on their character and actions. This meditation extends from 10.[2-11]. It is the first of several that we will find in the Book of Psalms.

In Psalm 10.[1], the Psalmist gives expression to the dismay he felt at God's inaction in the face of the present distressing times and the dangers posed by the malevolently immoral. No doubt, he is dismayed at God's seeming inaction on his behalf, but perhaps the Psalmist is also dismayed that God might stand aloof from the pain that so many malevolently immoral brought upon so many, especially the disadvantaged, the downtrodden, and the powerless. In 10.[2-3], the Psalmist observes that it is self-importance and lust that drives the malevolently immoral to purposefully plot and act against the interest of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. He recognizes in the behavior of the malevolently immoral more than a simple flaunting of societal norms. He recognizes a distain for God, Himself. This observation

leads him to the reflections that we find in today's passage, 10.[4-6].

Though the malevolently immoral are exceptionally self-interested, their arrogance makes it impossible for them to engage in any type of introspection that might lead to self-awareness. There is a big difference between being self-interested, which seems to look outward into the world for what it has to offer, and self-awareness, which is inward looking. We will leave it to the psychologists to explain this observation of the Psalmist.

As the malevolently immoral look out into the world, and especially as they make their plans in opposition to the interests of the disadvantaged and downtrodden, they give no more thought to God and his principles than they give to being introspective. If they do for a moment consider God and his principles, which inevitable stand in opposition to their desires and actions, they pooh-pooh anything that might threaten to check their lusts and find ways to twist divine principles to match and justify their own behavior. They simply will not accept any suggestion, whether from man or God, that their attitudes and behaviors might be wrong, for this might lead to a diminishment of their ultimate desires: the things of this world, which are most often acquired through false worldly values and devious, often violent means.

In their arrogance, the malevolently immoral cannot give room to the possibility of failure. Theirs is always a trajectory of onwards and upwards. Failure and misfortune are the inheritance of the weak and disadvantaged. The doctrine of the malevolently immoral is fully compatible with modern Darwinian capitalism and the survival of the fittest, in which the true God, who is to be served, is replaced with an idolatrous one, who serves humans such as to guarantee success.

The Psalmist's observations are important. And timely. Our society would do well to consider them. To ponder them. To internalize them. To act upon them. To let them bring it to repentance.

We have spoken of the Psalmist's "observations" concerning the malevolently immoral. We have spoken of the Psalmist "meditating" on the character and behavior of the malevolently immoral. But we would not want to leave the wrong impression. We would not want to leave the impression that such "observation" and "meditation" are carried out in the spirit of intellectualism or philosophy, or that it is conducted in an emotionally calm and detached manner.

We could just as easily have called what the Psalmist does here "complaint," and "jerrymander," even. The Psalmist is not a detached observer. He is passionate about what he sees as he looks out into the world. So, rather than simply mulling over his observations in his own mind, the Psalmist is presenting them to God. And his presentation is not intended to demonstrate his intellectual and observational acumen. No, the Psalms hopes to waken a God who seems to be slumbering. The Psalmist hopes to move God to action against the malevolently immoral—against their success, at the very least, but, if need be, then against the very fiends, themselves.

We are in full agreement with the Psalmist's observations concerning the destructiveness of the malevolently immoral in the lives of individuals and societies. Our agreement with him extends so far as to our possessing the same hope: that God will act to put a stop to the decadent arrogance, the unchecked lust, and the purposeful destructiveness of the malevolently immoral.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 12, 2023)

[4]The malevolently immoral, consistent with their stubborn arrogance, are unreflective.
ʾĕlōhîm is not considered in any of their plans.
[5]They twist God's principles.
God's elevated judgement opposes them.
Anything that would restraint them they blow off.
[6]They say to themselves, "I cannot be toppled.
My future holds no misfortune."

Already in this psalm, the Psalmists has expressed his confusion about God's inaction in the face of the abuse heaped upon society's vulnerable (verses 2-3). This abuse flows from "the wicked" who are rich and powerful and care only about feeding their insatiable appetite for wealth and power—a selfishness and appetite they find exemplary.

In this reading, the Psalmist identifies the causes for the sorry moral state of the wealthy and malevolently immoral. As we would expect in an ancient society in which God's existence is taken for granted, the immoral are not atheists. But, in accepting his existence, the wealthy and malevolently immoral are contemptuous of God. Distressed, and feeling condemned and constrained by God's lofty values, the wicked expect God to stay in his lane and give them open highway to do whatever they please. He simply has no business stepping out of the realm of the sacred and dabbling in the material and profane world of, for example, economics and politics. Any suggestion that this profane realm is imbued with the sacred and that immoral and self-serving attitudes and actions in this realm have far-reaching negative consequences in this world and the world to come is dismissed with a contemptuous snort. The malevolently immoral simply will not allow his appetites to be restrained, nor will he accept being held responsible for his foul deeds. Not even by God. Ensconced securely behind his gilded gates, he demands a theology that pronounces him safe from all misfortune and immune from accountability.

If all this sounds familiar, modern even, it should. This stubborn resistance to God and the righteous checks he places on human greed pervades modern America. This resistance is accepted and justified by America's middle classes. It is exuberantly adopted and lived by America's upper classes and power elites. And, finally, this stubborn resistance to God and the righteous checks he places on human greed is the cause of much of the suffering that America's lower classes endure at the hands of those who claim to know and love God and so should know better. Notwithstanding the hope and vain claims to the contrary, there will be a day of reckoning.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 13, 2023)

meditation 12— psalm 10.[2–11]

[7]Their mouth is full of cursing and injurious lies:
while misery and cruelty flow from their tongue.
[8]They sit in ambush outside villages.
From concealed places they slay the innocent;
their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.

[9]Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.
[10] They crouch low, hunch down,

and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable.

Though the Book of Psalmist is primarily focused on God and his engagement with humanity, it recognizes that there are forces that exist and act in opposition to God. The importance of the latter reality can, perhaps, be seen in the fact that these opposing forces—given, among others, the name, "malevolently immoral"—appeared in the very first line of the very first verse of the very first Psalm. Indeed, they were mentioned even before God, Himself. The malevolently immoral were mentioned three more times in that first psalm. The Book of Psalms has much to say about the forces that oppose God. It would not be too much to say that this is one of the Book's principal themes.

Psalm 2 presented us with a view of global forces opposed to God.

"Why do the nations raise such a ruckus,
and entire populations grouse to no avail?
The world's kings offer resistance;
world leaders form a united front
against YHWH
and against his Māšîaḥ.
'We will break free of his restraints;
throw off his control'" (vss. 1-3).

Then, in Psalms 3-7, the Psalmist was confronted by forces that opposed him. In the middle psalm of these five, the Psalmist came to believe that his enemies' unfounded opposition to him really represented opposition to God.

"Banish them because of the enormity of their legal overstep,
since their defiance is really directed against You" (5.[10]).

Here, we are reminded of Jesus' teaching through parable that whatever we do or don't do to one another we do to God (See Mat. 25.[31-46]). It is our contention that though they were not named, "malevolently immoral," in Psalm 2 or 3-7, those who oppose, respectively, God and the Psalmist in these psalms, are, in fact, part of the class called, "malevolently immoral."

The Psalmist's principal concern in Psalms 3-7 was largely personal. However, after the apotheosis of Psalm 8 in which God is seen to be engaged the world over, Psalms 9-10 adopt a less private and more global attitude toward the malevolently immoral. Here, the Psalmist affirms that enemies such as his are present and active in the lives of individuals all over the world. With this global perspective, the Psalmist feels it necessary to describe the character and activities of the malevolently immoral in greater detail than he has heretofore done.

We are the beneficiaries of his insights. But, within Psalm 10 the purpose is less didactic and more plaintive. The Psalmist uses the description to move a God who seems, to him, inattentive and inactive (10.[1]), to action not only in his own life but in the life of all those suffering under the domination of the malevolently immoral.

In Psalm 10, the Psalmist describes the malevolently immoral as being self-interested and filled with lust. In their drive to fulfill their selfish interests they make the vulnerable and disadvantaged their primary target (vss. 2-3). Indeed, the disadvantaged seem to be a product of the attitudes and actions of the malevolently immoral. In Psalm 1, the directions of the malevolently immoral stand in opposition to the directions God provides in Torah (1.[1-2]). In Psalm 10, the malevolently immoral twist and blow off divine principles that would restrain their acting out of self-interest and lust (vs 4-5). With their exaggerated

sense of self-importance, they also blow off any suggestion that they might suffer negative consequences for their actions (vs. 6).

This brings us to the verses under examination in this meditation. In Psalms 3-7, the Psalmist had identified his personal enemies as liars.

> "How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?
> How long will you love falsehood
> and seek after deception?" (4.[2])

> "Nothing coming out of their mouth has been proven" (5.[9])

> "If I have done this,
> if I bear responsibility for this wrong… (7.[3]).

But in Psalm 10, we learn that lying and deception are recurring, calculated, and purposeful strategies the malevolently immoral use for achieving their immoral ends. However, we must not think of liars and lying in simple terms of propagating untruths, "alternative facts." Rather, the lying of liars serves a purpose. Deception is an instrument of intentional harm and violence. The Psalmist stated this in Psalm 5 as he contemplated his enemies.

> "Nothing coming out of their mouth has been proven
> *Ruinous intent* resides deep inside them" (vs. 9).

So, now, the Psalmist identifies the same characteristic in the malevolently immoral.

> "Their mouth is full of cursing and *injurious* lies:
> while *misery and cruelty flow from their tongue*."

How injurious and cruel are they, these malevolently immoral? In complaining about his private enemies, the Psalmist found something animalistic and inhuman in them.

> "Rescue me lest he, as a lion, tear me to pieces;
> mutilate me with no chance of recovery" (7.[1]).

In Psalm 10, the Psalmist expands upon this theme. With his global perspective, the Psalmist understands and confesses that the malevolently immoral are not to be thought of in terms of singularity. There is a whole pride of lions lurking, hunting, tearing, and devouring.

> "They sit in ambush outside villages.
> From concealed places they slay the innocent;
> their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.
> Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
> They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
> They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.
> They crouch low, hunch down,
> and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable."

There is nothing in the behavior of the malevolently immoral that is accidental or haphazard. Their activities cannot be chalked up to "misunderstanding" or simple "error." Their activities are well thought out and planned. They are planned in secrecy and stealth. They seek out and recruit collaborators (See Ps. 1.[1]). Their needs, their lusts, their appetites are voracious. Unlike animals, though, the appetite of the

malevolently immoral is insatiable.

And, once more, their activities, their voracious appetite are turned especially upon the innocent, the vulnerable, the disadvantaged, the downtrodden.

> "They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
> They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair."

Just as the lion instinctively sniffs out the weak gazelle in the herd and focuses its hunting efforts on it, the malevolently immoral—often hunting in packs, as lions do—devour the resources, the hopes, and the lives of the downtrodden and disadvantaged. How very brave and heroic of them!

The Book of Psalm began by promising fulfillment, security, happiness, and advancement to those who

> "Choose YHWH's direction,
> and consult his Tôrâ at all times" (1.[2])

This direction and guide with principles that lead to good living and happiness stood in opposition to the direction and principles offered by the malevolently immoral (1.[1]). In Psalm 10, the Psalmist provides us with further means to identify and avoid the deception of the malevolently immoral and the values they espouse.

The malevolently immoral give themselves away through their self-interest, their lust, their lying, their scheming, their disregard for the worth of others, and their violation of others for their own ends. Alongside all these giveaways, is their abuse, oppression, and attack against downtrodden, disadvantaged, and poor people. If it is "by their fruits" that we can know the "ravening wolves" that falsely pose as prophets (See Mt. 7.[15] ff.), it is by the individual's and society's treatment of the downtrodden and disadvantaged that we can know the malevolently immoral.

The Psalmist sees that they are a global force to be reckoned with. They are very active today. They have convinced entire societies that their path is the path of happiness. They have convinced entire societies to devalue and abuse the downtrodden and the disadvantages. They lie. This path is the path to misery and destruction for one and all not only in this world but in the world to come. As we witness the malevolently immoral hunt down and devour, we cry out with Psalmist,

> "Why, Yahweh, are You now so standoffish?
> Why do You remain absent during these distressing times?"

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 12, 2023)

meditation 13— psalm 10.[2–11]

[8]They sit in ambush outside villages.
From concealed places they slay the innocent;
their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.
[9]Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.

[10]They crouch low, hunch down,
and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable.
[11]They say to themselves, "God pays no attention.
He's absent. He sees nothing, ever."

As the Psalmist describes the thoughts and actions of the malevolently immoral in this, the tenth psalm, we would be remiss if we limited our insights into these thoughts and actions to a few individual bad apples. The fact is, there really are very few places in all scripture that contain a better description of the very nature of wickedness itself than that which is found in this psalm. So far in this psalm, the Psalmist has utilized a rich vocabulary to describe the malevolently immoral and the nature of their motives and actions. But finally, the Psalmist seems to conclude that the rich vocabulary is still insufficient to adequately describe the insidious nature of the immorality he seeks to describe. So, he resorts to imagery.

The wickedness that the malevolently immoral commit against the vulnerable, the poor, the downtrodden, the unsuspecting innocent is likened to the hunt of a lion. Like the crouching lion, the malevolently immoral attempt to hide what they are doing. They always call their wickedness something else. Giving it the reasonable, innocent sounding title—"capitalism" is one of my favorites. But propaganda cannot hide the reality. The violence is like the sound of a lion feasting upon the still warm flesh of its prey, during which feast the sharp white ivory of the lion's teeth scrapes against the victim's white bones. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

But, unlike lions that do not eat their own, the malevolently immoral do, thus becoming less hunters than cannibals. We are unsurprised when the Psalmist asks his horrifying question: "Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread? (Ps. 14.[4]). Sadly, no. They continue to believe, or pretend to believe, that God cannot see through their camouflage; does not see what they do for the depravity that it is. But they would be wrong. In the end, no matter how low they crouch to avoid God's judgement, they will not be able to hide from Him who sees all.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 13, 2023)

meditation 14— psalm 10.12–15

12Rise up, YHWH, my God!
Strike out with Your power.
Do not abandon the downtrodden,
13on which basis the malevolently immoral could hold ’ělōhîm in contempt,
saying to thimselves, “God doesn’t care.”
14But You do see, indeed you do.
You do look upon misfortune and vexation.
It is in Your power.
The helpless leaves it to You.
You are the orphan’s protector.
15Break the power of those guilty of malevolence and cruelty.
Give full attention to their willful wrongdoing until it can’t be found (author’s translation).

So far in this psalm, the Psalmist has provided us with as good a description as anywhere in scripture of the depravity of the malevolently immoral, in particular in their oppression of the vulnerable and downtrodden. It is brutal. It is not a dog-eat-dog world. Rather, it is a predator-eat-prey world. The Psalmist has watched this world unfold before him and has expressed his perplexity, maybe even a little anger, over God’s silence and inactivity in the face of such brutality. Finally, the Psalmist seems to come to the end of his rope. He cannot take God’s inactin any longer.

If he is honest about his perplexity over God’s inactivity, he is no less honest in telling God what he expects and wants from God. He wants God to come to the rescue of the prey. Since the predator has no intentions of ceasing and desisting from his rampage—indeed, he refuses to see it as a rampage or acknowledge, if it is a rampage, that he can be held accountable for it—this rescue will entail striking out against the predator. God’s continued silence will only serve to reinforce the attitudes and actions of the wicked, thus allowing them to continue. This continuance will bring more suffering to those already suffering under the normal and natural trials of life.

“But.” Suddenly the Psalmist’s previous meditations on God’s past acts of rescue (Psalm 9), come back, full force into his mind. “But, you *do* see.” And not only “see.” God acknowledges the dire straits of the prey and takes the situation in hand. He does come to the aid of those who ask for his protection—even if and when it requires the shattering of the malevolently immoral and exposing for all to see that power for the depravity that it is.

What goes around, comes around. The “Law of restoration” cannot be broken. The oppressor becomes the oppressed. It is as inevitable as day and night. We don’t have to be happy about the malevolently immoral getting their comeuppance. But we can pray for it. For, whether we know it or not, when we pray for the deliverance of the oppressed and downtrodden, we are likely praying for the breaking down of the oppressor because, as the Psalmist has already shown us, the oppressor is utterly resistant to acknowledging their malevolent immorality or accepting responsibility for it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 13, 2023)

meditation 15— psalm 10.16–18

[16]YHWH is king forever and always,
while nations disappear from existence.
[17]The desires of the downtrodden You do indeed hear, YHWH.
You strengthen their inner resolve.
You lend a listening ear.
[18]In Your defending orphan and oppressed
never again will a mere mortal earthling seem intimidating (author's translation).

The malevolently immoral have had a good run. They have dominated the human experience since the beginning. Uruk, Babylon, Nineveh, Memphis, Thebes, Teotihuacan, Chichen Itza, Troy, Mycenae, Athens, Rome, Constantinople, Florence, Paris, London, Berlin, Tokyo, Shanghai, New York, Chicago, Washington DC—everywhere they have demanded to have their way, no matter the cost to others. One can almost forget that they are mortal; that they are not gods. Certainly, they have often forgotten. "He says to himself, 'I cannot be toppled. My future holds no misfortune'" (Ps. 10.[6]). Even the Psalmist could lose his footing and fall prey to their false bravado; think more of them than he ought, thinking no more clearly than an animal.

"But I, for a time, lost my footing;
lost my balance.
I felt envious of the corrupt
when I observed how well off the malevolently immoral were….

My mind then became disillusioned.
Inside, I felt humiliation.
I, myself, had been stupid and knew nothing.
Beastly was I before you" (Ps. 73.2-3, 21-22).

But the Psalmist is not confused in this Psalm. We would do well to remember the Psalmist's insight. God will put an end to the demi-god status of the nations of this world governed by the malevolently immoral who resist God at every turn. They will lose their ability to intimidate. For God will show his hand. He will show all what true divinity looks like when he shows his hand, and, as righteous king, rescues those upon whom the predator has preyed. "So," the Psalmist admonishes,

"Don't be overawed when someone grows wealthy;
as their house grows more impressive.
Because, when they die, they can't take a thing;
their grandeur won't follow along.
Though they might celebrate their life while living,
others praising them because they do well for themselves,
they will end up right where their fathers did" (Ps. 49.[17-20]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: november 13, 2023)

psalm 11

meditation 1— introductory

Individual psalms have varying authors, dates of composition, genres, original contexts, uses within temple liturgy, etc. Each psalm can be examined as a stand-alone composition in hopes of understanding this variety. Investigations into authorship or date or genre or original context, or temple use of individual psalms are all legitimate enterprises and can yield important and useful insights. However, because we often simply lack the data that would permit us to draw firm, once-and-for-all conclusions about these and other matters, such investigations tend to be highly subjective and always provisional. This is no criticism. Contrary to the desires and claims of some, we are not doing science here—as if "science" is the only legitimate approach to understanding the world around us. So, everyone is welcome to their own insights and to respond to the text and the messages it sends to them in their own unique and individualistic ways. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews suggests that the scriptures are there less to be read by us than to read us.

> "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is *a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (Heb. 4.[12]).

The reader of my previous meditations on Psalm 3-10 will observe that I now and then delve into such subjects as authorship, genre, original context, temple use, etc.[1]. However, overwhelmingly my approach to the Psalms is more holistic and more focused on the psalms and the shape of the Book as we have come to possess it. I explore individual psalms not only as separate units, but as members of a whole. Someone, probably several someone's knit the psalms together as they are today. Presumably, the ordering of the psalms had purpose and made sense to them. Considering and investigating the purpose and reason behind the ordering of the psalms is, as so many attempts demonstrate, also subjective. That too is O.K.

In my subjective approach to Psalms 3-7, I handle them almost as a distinct unit that addresses the same or a very similar situation. That situation is one of hostile and false accusation against an individual whom, for purely stylistic reasons, I identify as "the Psalmist." In the midst of attacks upon his character and reputation, the Psalmist calls confidently upon God for defense and offers reasons for his confidence. In doing so, the Psalmist reveals much about the character of God as he understands and experiences it. At the same time and on the other hand, the Psalmist also describes his accusers and the motivations that move them to opposition against both himself and God. In these Psalms, then, the actors are 1) the Psalmist, 2) God, and 3) those who oppose both Psalmist and God.

Whatever, the original sitz-im-leben or temple use of Psalm 8, in its present setting, I understand the psalm to represent a sort of apotheosis. In it the Psalmist, always confident in God, finds even greater reason to marvel at God and His trustworthiness. He comes to understand that God's trustworthiness and participation with humanity extends far beyond himself. It is global.

> "YHWH, Our Lord, how preeminent is your fame the world over!" (8.[1, 9])

In my holistic reading of the Psalms, Psalms 9 and 10, once a single psalm, represent an insight that is corollary to God's participation in human affairs the world over. The Psalmist is not the only one with a committed opposition. It is not only his opponents that oppose God. Just as God's influence is found throughout the world, so too is the influence of those who oppose the innocent, the downtrodden, the

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[1] I approach Psalms 1 and 2, as so many others have and do, as a sort of introduction to the Book.

vulnerable, among whom the Psalmist is—and through them, God. With his awareness of the global presence of this opposition, the Psalmist takes time to explore in more depth the nature of this opposition, its activities and its motivations. In doing so, he names the opposition. They are the malevolently immoral.

In so naming them, the Psalmist has returned to the introductory Psalm 1, where he identified the malevolently immoral as standing in opposition to God and representing a danger to ordered society. Indeed, as we discussed in our meditations on Psalm 1, there, in the introductory Psalm, the Psalmist introduced the malevolently immoral before introducing God or the weapon—His word, direction, Tôrah—that God provided to fend off the malevolent immoral.

Anyway, Psalms 9 and 10 are as good a description of the malevolent immoral, the "principalities," "powers," "rulers of the darkness of this world," and of "spiritual wickedness in high places" as anywhere in scripture (See Eph. 6.[12]).

With this introduction, we are ready to examine Psalm 11, its meaning, and how and why it finds its placement and meaning within the Psalmist's broader work.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: February 5, 2024)

meditation 2— psalm 11.[1-3]

the psalmist is challenged to question his trust in god

[1]It is to YHWH that I look for safety.
How, then, can you say to me:
"Flee to the hills, a helpless bird.
[2]Just look how the malevolently immoral draw back the bow string;
they place their arrow on the string
to shoot from concealment at the truly upright.
[3]When the foundations are being torn down,
what can the just do?"

In my holistic reading of the Psalms, these first three verses of Psalm 11 represent a perfect follow up to Psalm 10. After expressing puzzlement and pain at God's seeming absence (10.[1]), followed with a long mediation—perhaps more akin to diatribe—on the nature, actions, and motives of the malevolently immoral (10.[2-11]), the Psalmist pled once more that God would deliver him from their malevolent machinations (10.[12-15]). He ended with confident assertions that, notwithstanding the commitment of the malevolently immoral to harm others and their power to carry out their commitments, God would respond to the pleas of those victimized by the malevolently immoral—the downtrodden, orphan, and oppressed (10.[16-18]).

Psalm 11 begins where the Psalmist left off in Psalm 10: with an expression of trust in God.

"It is to YHWH that I look for safety."

This expression of trust is not only offered in response to the challenges posed by the malevolently immoral, who make their appearance in verse 2. It is also offered in response to those who have or seem

ready to simply give up the fight and yield to the onslaught of the malevolently immoral. Some, perhaps many, maybe even the majority have observed facts on the ground.

"Just look how the malevolently immoral draw back the bow string;
they place their arrow on the string
to shoot from concealment at the truly upright."

Elsewhere, both before and after this Psalm, the Psalmist makes similar observations.

"But he, will not relent.
He keeps his sword sharpened.
He bends his bow and arms it.
He keeps his deadly weapons ready for use;
his relentless arrows ready" (7.[12-13]).

"The malevolently immoral brandish their sword,
and draw back the bow string
to bring down the disadvantaged and impoverished;
to slaughter those who live an upright life" (37.[14])

To the Psalmist's interrogators, the malevolently immoral look potent, persistent, and protected. The interrogators resort to the metaphor of the hunt. The malevolently immoral hunt from the protection of ambush. The victim does not see them coming. One wonders where these malevolently immoral hunters are concealed. Where do they hide. One suspects that if we were to put such questions to the Hebrew prophets, they would answer, "They hide in plain sight. They hide behind the screen of corrupt laws that transform, as if by magic, evil into good and what is immoral into that which is legal. We think, for example, of Isaiah's charge,

"Warning! To those who issue oppressive statutes
and continuously write laws that afflict;
that put redress out of the reach of the underprivileged
and rob the poor among my people of justice,
making prey of widows
and plundering orphans" (10.[1-2]).

What better way to engage in abuse of others than by making abuse legal and righteous through law and government policy? This is part of the brilliance of the malevolently immoral. They turn everything upside down and use the levers of power to do so. Just like the GOP's leading anti-Christ candidate for U.S. president and his disciples.

Yes, in such circumstances, one can easily feel and ask, as the Psalmist's interrogators did,

"When the foundations are being torn down,
what can the just do?"

There is, the Psalmist's interrogators maintain, nothing to do about it. As Darth Vader so succinctly warned, "Resistance is futile." And so, the Psalmist's interrogators remind him that he is nothing but a helpless bird, subject to the whims of the hunters. The best he can do is run. Head for the hills, where there are fewer hunters.

"Flee to the hills, a helpless bird."

Yes, it is indeed tempting, and often safer, to surrender. To go into hiding. Either actively fall in line with the malevolently immoral, or be complicit through silence and inactivity. These are the most common responses to their temptations, often offered with the utmost self-assurance.

In his celebrated vision of the tree of life, Lehi saw a great and spacious building. This building represented the wisdom and the pride of the world or, put differently, those things in which this world takes pride and in which it is skilled. It would be my view that this building's occupants were the malevolently immoral and those who fall prey to their temptations and wickedness. Lehi saw

> "multitudes feeling their way towards that great and spacious building… and great was the multitude that did enter into that strange building. And after they did enter into that building they did point the finger of scorn at me…"

"But," Lehi tells us, "we heeded them not" (1 Ne. 8.[31, 33]).

Nor is our Psalmist. He is having none of it. He does not buy what the malevolently immoral or those who surrender to them are peddling. He has his own question for his interrogators.

> "How, then, can you say to me:
> 'Flee to the hills, a helpless bird.'"

He is not helpless, subject to the whims of the malevolently immoral. He has God on his side. He will continue to trust God, as we will see in the following verses.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 5, 2024)

meditation 3— psalm 11.[4–7]

the psalmist responds to the challenge

[4]YHWH is in His temple preeminent.
YHWH is in heaven on His throne.
His eyes observe.
His glances evaluate mortal beings.
[5]YHWH approves of the just,
but for the malevolently immoral, those devoted to violence,
He feels true abhorrence.
[6]He casts down upon the malevolently immoral
coals of burning sulfur;
and a scorching wind is their destiny.

the psalmist's reaffirmation of trust

[7]Because YHWH is just;
because He loves doing what's right,
the upright look ecstatically upon Him.

Psalm 11 begins with the Psalmist's response to those who observe the machinations of the malevolently immoral and conclude that they cannot be resisted or stopped. Some who observe these machinations

have concluded that any who might oppose the malevolently immoral, such as the Psalmist, are helpless in the face of the onslaught and the total collapse of all that had previously seemed normal and reliable. Even God, it seems to many, is powerless in the face of the onslaught. The Psalmist, however, keeps his eyes on the prize: God and His concern for and action in behalf of those who trust Him.

> "It is to YHWH that I look for safety.
> How, then, can you say to me:
> 'Flee to the hills, a helpless bird.
> Just look how the malevolently immoral draw back the bow string;
> they place their arrow on the string
> to shoot from concealment at the truly upright.
> When the foundations are being torn down,
> what can the innocent do?'"

God is not like that famous God, Bel, who might nap, sleep soundly, party, become drunken, or be absent as he vacations in some distant and exotic land. He is very much present. He is very observant. He is watching and weighing all that He sees. He sees the machinations of the malevolently immoral. He sees the collapse they induce at society's center. He is appalled at what they do, just as those are who know and live by God's grace-filled instructions for a secure life and an enduring society. God will not remain silent and inactive. The Psalmist has been pretty confident of this. God will act to stop the seemingly unstoppable. But how?

There are times when the Psalmist seems to suggest that God puts a stop to the machinations of the malevolently immoral by letting nature take its course; allowing natural causes and effects to have their sway. "Let them fall prey to their own malicious intentions" (5.[11]), the Psalmist prays.

> "The misery he intended for another will come back on him;
> his own violence will come down upon him" (7.[16]).

> "Nations have sunk in the very pit that they themselves dug;
> their feet ensnared in the trap that they themselves hid" (9.[15]).

But, here, the Psalmist resorts to something closer to imprecation in which God is far more active.

> "He casts down upon the malevolently immoral
> coals of burning sulfur;
> and a scorching wind is their destiny."

This is about the most involved God has been in direct action against the Psalmist's enemies, the malevolently immoral, since Psalm 3, when the Psalmist anticipated God

> "hitting all my enemies in the mouth—
> shattering the teeth of the malevolently immoral" (3.[7]).

Imprecation will grow in number and severity as we proceed through the Psalter. One does not want to be identified as a malevolently immoral individual. The consequences are severe and lasting. These divine consequences are not indicative of divine vindictiveness. They are less "punishment" of the "malevolently immoral" and more protection of the downtrodden and oppressed who trust God rather than their own devious machinations for security and fulfillment. As we have discussed elsewhere, the downtrodden and oppressed have a right to existence and happiness. It is not divine vindictiveness to protect that right.

God's judgement, which is fundamentally the protection of the downtrodden and oppressed who trust

Him is just and right. It produces profound love and appreciation for God.

> "Because YHWH is just;
> because He loves doing what's right,
> the upright look ecstatically upon Him."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 5, 2024)

psalm 12

meditation 1— psalm 12.1–4

plea and complaint

[1]Help, YHWH, because the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
the truthful have vanished from humankind.
[2]Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear.
[3]Put an end, YHWH, to all such flattering language.
Put an end to lips uttering boasts
[4]that assert, "We will maintain power by means of our speech.
We are in control. Who can be our master?"

After two introductory psalms, Psalms 3-7 are full of the Psalmist's complaints about those who oppose him. Those who oppose the Psalmist accuse him of wrongdoing which, they charge, has separated him from God. However, in this series of related complaints, the Psalmist consistently maintains his innocence, trusts in God's fidelity toward him, and persistently makes confident requests for God's help against his detractors. In Psalm 8, a sort of apotheosis, the Psalmist's view turns more global so that in Psalms 9 and 10, the Psalmist considers that such adversaries as he has, whom he identifies for the first time as "malevolently immoral," are a global phenomenon.

The malevolently immoral are characterized as attacking the vulnerable everywhere and in whatsoever circumstances they may be found. Notwithstanding the global influence and power that the malevolently immoral possess or the pessimism of so many about being able to counter or stop their influence and power (11.[1-3]), the Psalmist maintains his confidence in God and maintains hope of victory over these malevolent forces. The Psalmist is sure that God remans aware of the threat posed by the malevolently immoral and is willing and able to help against their attacks (11.[4-6]). In this confidence, the Psalmist and all others who believe in God's fidelity keep their eye firmly and joyfully on God (11.[7]).

But the malevolently immoral who oppose the Psalmist and other innocent victims like him, are persistent. And so, their threat is present again in Psalm 12. While those of whom the Psalmist complains in verses 1-4 are not named, they are, finally, named in the final verse.

"…the malevolently immoral roam about absolutely everywhere,
whenever what is despicable is celebrated among humankind."

We will return to this final verse in an upcoming meditation. For now, we limit ourselves to the first four verses which provide further characterization of the malevolently immoral. We have already noted their global influence as described in Psalms 9 and 10. In Psalm 12, it seems to the Psalmist that they have completely taken over the world.

"…the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
the truthful have vanished from humankind.
Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear."

The prophet Jeremiah made a similar observation.

"Take ye heed every one of his neighbour,
  and trust ye not in any brother:
for every brother will utterly supplant,
  and every neighbour will walk with slanders.
And they will deceive every one his neighbour,
  and will not speak the truth:
they have taught their tongue to speak lies,
  and weary themselves to commit iniquity.
Thine habitation is in the midst of deceit;
  through deceit they refuse to know me,
    saith the LORD.
Therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts,
  Behold, I will melt them, and try them;
    for how shall I do for the daughter of my people?
[8]Their tongue is as an arrow shot out;
  it speaketh deceit:
one speaketh peaceably to his neighbour with his mouth,
  but in heart he layeth his wait" (9.[4-8]).

The prophet Micah warns,

"Don't confide in an acquaintance.
  Don't trust a friend.
    Guard what you say to your wife" (7.[5]).

The Psalmist, Jeremiah, and Micah are not alone in seeing that something has gone terribly wrong on earth. The Psalmist portrays God, Himself, has drawing a similar conclusion.

"YHWH looked down from the heavens
  upon humankind
to determine, "Are there any in possession of knowledge;
  any who consult 'ělohîm?"
The whole lot of them had rebelled;
  as one, they had become morally tainted.
There were none among them who did good.
  None! Not even one!" (Ps. 14.[2-3])

So, in Psalm 12, the Psalmist feels that no one can be trusted. Everyone speaks in a false, manipulative, and performative manner. We know ourselves and others better than we often think. Whether consciously or unconsciously, in any conversation or relationship with another, we very quickly discern the thoughts and feelings of the other. We easily discern what they want to hear. If impressing them, in some way winning them over, or gaining power over them is of high enough value, we will say what they want to hear, regardless of our own views. Such disingenuous speech is as much a form of flattery as when we disingenuously complement another in some way.

While such false, manipulative, and performative speech can be somewhat benign when engaged in at the personal level, the Psalmist has something far less benign and much more sinister in mind. False, manipulative, and performative speech is especially useful to and prevalent among those who wish to acquire or maintain power and influence over others. In this sphere, it becomes propaganda and spin. The Psalmist has this more sinister use of false, manipulative, performative, and flattering speech in mind when he makes his complaint to God. The malevolently immoral assert,

"We will maintain power by means of our speech.
We are in control. Who can be our master?"

Far too much political discourse is divorced from truth and reality, and is manipulative and performative in content and intent. Examples of this performative and manipulative political discourse abound among politicians who seek to obtain or maintain power and influence. While such speech is common, it is especially egregious in the speech of the former U.S. president and current GOP's leading 2024 presidential candidate, who, devoid of principle or real governing interests, acts more like actor or performer than one with serious governing interests. Based on the responses of his audiences, they love his belligerence and irreverence. Swear words, slurs, and hate speech aimed at certain groups elicit the loudest cheers and largest roars of approval and gratification. Knowing what his audiences feel themselves and what they want to hear, he gives it to them in spades. Again, this performative speech in which he mimics his audiences and gives voice to their own twisted views is a form of flattery (why his audiences at twisted as they are is a question for another time and place).

For two years, this same candidate used a derisive nickname for his presumed chief rival. The moment the rival withdrew from the political race, the leading candidate ceased all name calling and began to speak respectfully and appreciatively of the rival. When asked why the nickname had been abandoned and a previously absent conciliatory tone had been adopted, the candidate responded casually with, "Well, he is no longer my rival." This explanation, amounting, really, to a confession, demonstrates that all the name calling of the previous two years was performative, divorced from any real sense of what the leading candidate felt about the other. It was meant to manipulate his audiences. Among the many marvels that surround this candidate is that his followers cannot see through the obvious façade.

Unfortunately, these two examples are the least offensive and least destructive of the innumerable examples of this candidate's false, manipulative, and performative speech in which he incessantly engages. They also confirm what the Psalmist discerns: that such false, manipulative, and performative speech and action are central to the acquisition and maintenance of power (and, yes, by associating this candidate with the Psalmist's complaint, I identify him as an example of the malevolently immoral, and an extreme one at that. This is not me being ugly. This is simply me speaking truthfully, and, popular or not, consistent with scripture's judgments).

False, manipulative, and performative speech is also used to influence. One modern example at the institutional level will suffice for now. FOX, one of the U.S.'s broadcast "news" networks, does little more than put its finger in the air, establish what its audience wants to hear, and then give it to them. There have been rare occasions when it has either misjudged its audience's appetite for truth or decided to tell the truth regardless of its audience's appetite to hear itself parroted. As soon as its viewership complained or dropped because it rebels at hearing something that does not conform to its conceptions, the network quickly retreats and goes back to feeding its audience what it wants to hear, truth be damned.

Individuals and institutions often chose to maintain their power and influence though false, manipulative, and performative speech. They refuse to act with self-restraint or control. They will not be reined in by society's norms, any moral principles, or regard for truth. And, most assuredly, they will not be guided by God and the principles upon which respectful and healthy personal relationships and an enduring society are based.

"We are in control. Who can be our master?"

This is in line with the Psalmist's observation in Psalm 10.

"The malevolently immoral, consistent with their stubborn arrogance, are unreflective.
'[E]lōhîm is not considered in any of their plans.

They twist ’ĕlōhîm’s principles.
’Elōhîm’s elevated judgement opposes them.
Anything that would restraint them they blow off.
They say to themselves, ‘I cannot be toppled.
My future holds no misfortune’” (10.4-6).

The malevolently immoral and their false, manipulative, and performative speech represents an assault upon decency. It represents an assault upon society. “What,” the Psalmists asked in the previous Psalm, “can the just do, when the foundations are being torn down?” Whatever resistance we can offer, our best resistance rests with God. We plead, as does the Psalmist in this psalm, that God help us and put an end to the those who seek influence and power though the use of false, manipulative, and performative speech.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: February 18, 2024)

meditation 2— psalm 12.5

Yhwh’s positive reply

5“Because of the despoiling of the downtrodden
and the grieving of the impoverished,
I will immediately arise,” promises YHWH.
“I will provide them with protection against those who hold them in contempt”.

In verses 1-4, the Psalmist complained about the malevolently immoral who used false, manipulative, and performative speech to acquire and maintain influence and power. Such behavior, it seemed to him, was nearly universal.

“Help, YHWH, because the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
the truthful have vanished from humankind.
Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear.
Put an end, YHWH, to all such flattering language.
Put an end to lips uttering boasts
that assert, “We will maintain power by means of speech.
We are in control. Who can be our master?”

However, this quest for influence and power is but one motivation for the use of false, manipulative, and performative speech. From his initial complaint of the false, manipulative, and performative speech and his characterization of the malevolently immoral, the Psalmist transitions into God’s reply in verse 5. Here, God makes a promise. It is a marvelous promise. It moves the Psalmist. He will reflect beautifully on it in the concluding verses of the Psalm. But before we reflect on the promise, we should make an important observation. In transitioning from his characterization of the false, manipulative, and performative speech of the malevolently immoral to God’s response to that speech, the Psalmist speaks of

“… the despoiling of the downtrodden
and the grieving of the impoverished…”

In the Psalmist’s mind, then, there is some connection, some relationship between the false, manipulative,

and performative speech of the malevolently immoral and the oppression that the malevolently immoral perpetrate against the downtrodden and impoverished. What is that connection and relationship?

We were informed in Psalm 10.[2] that

> "In self-importance, the malevolently immoral vigorously pursues the disadvantaged.
> The disadvantaged are ensnared by the plans they conceive."

Furthermore,

> "They [the malevolently immoral] sit in ambush outside villages.
> From concealed places they slay the innocent;
> their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.
> Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
> They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
> They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.
> They crouch low, hunch down,
> and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable.
> They say to themselves, "God pays no attention.
> He's absent. He sees nothing, ever" (10.[8-11]).

No one, of course, is safe from the false, manipulative, and performative speech of the malevolently immoral. But the downtrodden, impoverished, and disadvantaged are particularly vulnerable to such speech. First, they inevitably become the targets of such speech. They are targeted by those who seek power. They are bad-mouthed and belittled as a means of obtaining power. We saw an example of this in the 2016 American election as the leading GOP candidate for president used grotesque, false, manipulative, and performative speech to belittle foreigners, immigrants, migrants, and asylum seekers—all of whom are disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Once those who seek power have aquired power, they can use their influential speech to target the vulnerable, disadvantaged, and poor through the manipulation of public attitudes toward them and through public policy. Society is encouraged to consider vulnerability as a character flaw rather than a proof of societal failure. Too often, the vulnerable and their grieving becomes viewed with a sense of justified glee rather than compassion. Laws are passed that leave the poor to suffer all manner of insecurities—food insecurity, housing insecurity, and health insecurity, for example. The poor suffer all manner of injustices in the legal system as they are denied quality legal representation and equal treatment under the law. All too often a corrupted legal system does not hold accountable the wealthy who take advantage of and mistreat the vulnerable.

The Hebrew prophets see all these evils in their society and comment energetically upon them. We could fill pages, write entire books on the prophet criticisms of the malevolently immoral and societies that follow their lead. Of course, the modern world is every bit as guilty of such malevolent immorality as ancient Israel and Judah.

One comes to believe, indeed, that the targeting and disadvantaging of classes of fellow citizens is one of the driving motivations of the malevolently immoral as they seek power and influence. According to the false belief in a "zero-sum game," the losses that the vulnerable suffer are gain for the malevolently immoral. In the false doctrine of the malevolently immoral in which any success, however slight, that the vulnerable might enjoy is felt to be a loss to themselves, the malevolently immoral do all in their power to keep the vulnerable in their subservient place.

It's all unspeakably pathetic. Unspeakably evil. Very few things rouse God to action like the false,

manipulative, and performative speech and the very real action that is taken against the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, the poor, and the impoverished. We should be overjoyed, then, but not surprised by the Lord's promise,

> "'I will immediately arise,' promises YHWH.
> 'I will provide them with protection against those who hold them in contempt.'"

One can hardly wait for God to fulfill His promise and come to the aid and rescue of the downtrodden, disadvantaged, and impoverished. It is to this promise of that divine aid and rescue that we turn our attention in the next meditation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 18, 2024)

meditation 3— psalm 12.[6-8]

Certainty of yhwh's promises

[6]YHWH's promises are sure promises.
They are like silver refined in an earthen furnace,
refined to completion.
[7]It is You, YHWH, who protects them.
You continually defend them from their peers—
[8]the malevolently immoral roaming about absolutely everywhere
whenever what is despicable is celebrated among humankind.

One of the great strengths of scripture is its adaptability to new conditions and applicability to every reader. Its strength as "a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" is priceless (Heb. 4.[12]). Many a man and woman has been undone as scripture read them and then remade by the matchless and discerning word of God.

As valued as scripture's applicability is to each individual and their circumstances, it is, nevertheless, always a good idea to begin one's understanding and application of scripture as best one can within its original historical, cultural, and narrative context. The former two can be difficult and sometimes impossible. The latter, however, is easily assessable to every reader.

Today's reading provides a good example of the importance of the narrative context. The Psalmist bears witness that "YHWH's promises are sure promises." This is true of every word and every promise God speaks. They can be relied on. Yet, here, in its narrative context, the Psalmist has a more localized focus on the dependability of God's words and promises. As recorded in verse 5, the Psalmist has heard God forthrightly declare,

> "'Because of the despoiling of the downtrodden
> and the grieving of the impoverished,
> I will immediately arise,' promises YHWH.
> 'I will provide them with protection against those who hold them in contempt.'"

It is these words and this specific promise, this specific "word of God" to which the Psalmist refers when he speaks of the tried-and-true dependability of God's promises.

God informs the Psalmist that He observes very closely and accurately how individuals, institutions,

governments, and societies treat the disadvantaged, impoverished, and downtrodden. He sees every act of oppression perpetrated against them. His ears are wide open to every sigh the vulnerable utter, every worry they express, and every heartache they suffer. He will rescue the downtrodden and impoverished from every oppressor who holds them in contempt. He will hold the malevolently immoral accountable for every troubled sigh, every worry, and ever heartache they cause.

The Psalmist believes God's witness. We can count on this promise being fulfilled, he assures us. In our language, we might assure that "you can take it to the bank." In the Psalmist's language, God's promise to rescue the downtrodden and impoverished is as sure as silver is pure that has passed through the most arduous purifying process.

> "They are like silver refined in an earthen furnace,
> refined to completion."

There are few expressions of this faithful and divine promise more beautiful, edifying, or encouraging than that found in the fifty-eighth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Here, God reminds His followers that they are called to testify and bear witness of His future intentions, intentions that will be best exemplified and fulfilled in a society that goes by the name, "Zion." There, in Zion,

> "a feast of fat things [will] be prepared for the poor; yea, a feast of fat things, of wine on the lees well refined, that the earth may know that the mouths of the prophets shall not fail; yea, a supper of the house of the Lord, well prepared, unto which all nations shall be invited. First, the rich and the learned, the wise and the noble; and after that cometh the day of my power; then shall the poor, the lame, and the blind, and the deaf, come in unto the marriage of the Lamb, and partake of the supper of the Lord, prepared for the great day to come. Behold, I, the Lord, have spoken it" (vss. 6-12).

Though one rejoices that such a time will come, still, it is a major disappointment that this day has not already arrived. One is tempted to complain and ask why. Are God's promises really as sure as the Psalmist claims? I am not always so hopeful. Some two-and-a-half millennia have passed, after all, since his utterance, and still the malevolently immoral rule. Still, the vulnerable worry and hurt and suffer at their hands. "How long, O Lord, holy and true," must they continue to suffer?" we ask with the suffering to whom the Revelator gave voice (Rev. 6.[10]).

I don't know. I am as uncertain as the next about God's plans. There are, for example, two hypothetical types of millennialism: premillennialism and postmillennialism. Those who advocate for the first, believe that Jesus will come before the millennium begins and will, in fact, usher it in. He will dramatically and miraculously change society. Those who advocate for the second, believe that Jesus will come after the millennium begins, coming then because humanity has already ushed it in a new type of society, and, having chosen to live by his principles, are prepared to meet him.

I am not a strong literalist and am unsure about the whole millennium thing. But, if I were a millennial literalist, I would lean toward the postmillennialist view. God has had thousands of years to do something about the malevolently immoral and for the vulnerable. He has not. He has been silent as the Stalins and Hitlers and Pol Pots and Trumps have wreaked havoc. He has silently watched many millions suffer at their and their kindred spirits' hands. This leads me to conclude that when it comes to His promise to check the power of the malevolently immoral and protect and deliver the vulnerable from them, God cannot or will not bring it to fruition through force and violence; that He can't or won't fulfill His promise without the help and cooperation of others—without the help and cooperation of you and me.

It seems likely to me that Zion represents those people who, among other things, exemplify for all the world to see what true godliness looks like in relation to the treatment of the downtrodden, the impoverished, and the vulnerable. Zion must act as example before the world can begin to change and

become a place better fit to receive its King.

Sadly, it seems that the vulnerable continue to suffer, in part, because God's people continue to be ensnared by their own unholy and lustful temporal desires, and, so, are not the examples that they are called to be. Perhaps it is God's people who are largely to blame for the delay of God's promises to the world's downtrodden, impoverished, and vulnerable. God's people are, perhaps, still enthralled by "the malevolently immoral who roam about absolutely everywhere;" Too many of them continue to celebrate perverted economic, nationalistic, and militaristic systems, are enslaved by their despicable principles, and engage in despicable behavior themselves. If so, woe, woe, woe be unto those slothful and unwise servants and the world that is left without the savor of salt.

The Psalmist began Psalm 12 with the observation and complaint that the malevolently immoral seemed to have taken over the world.

> "…the trustworthy individual has ceased to exist;
> the truthful have vanished from humankind.
> Everyone speaks disingenuously with everyone;
> using flattering language, they tell each other what they want to hear."

He ends on much the same note, complaining that the malevolently immoral seem to be "roaming about absolutely everywhere," and lamenting that this state persists because "what is despicable is celebrated among humankind." It seems to me that not much has changed since the Psalmist's day. The malevolently immoral continue to roam unhindered across the planet. Mankind continues to celebrate what God finds despicable.

We join the Psalmist in pleading with God to rise in defense and comfort of the downtrodden, impoverished, and vulnerable, and that the malevolently immoral will get their comeuppance. We join God, Himself, in hoping for a day when His people will fulfill their role as the light of the world; as salt to give savor to the world so that the promises made to the downtrodden, impoverished, and vulnerable will finally be realized. We look forward to that day when God

> "comfort[s] all that mourn…
> gives[s] them beauty for ashes,
> the oil of joy for mourning,
> the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
> that they might be called trees of righteousness,
> the planting of the Lord,
> that he might be glorified" (Is. $61.^{2\text{-}3}$).

May His people reject the lies of the malevolently immoral and the celebration of what is despicable. May they be found willing partners in this grand enterprise of creating a new society in which the downtrodden, the impoverished, and the vulnerable feast on the fat things of this world and the fat things of eternity.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 2, 2024)

psalm 13

meditation 1— psalm 13.[1-2]

invocation/ complaint

[1]How long, YHWH? Will You always ignore me?
How long will You conceal Yourself from me?
[2]How long must I suffer deep doubt,
deeply grieving day in and day out?
How long will my enemy continue to have the advantage over me? (author's translation)

In commenting on Psalms 3-7, we treated them as if they all addressed the same or a similar circumstance in which the Psalmist was the victim of character assassination and charges of guilt—guilt such as separated him from God and His assistance. Throughout, the Psalmist maintained his innocence and his faith in God's help. After a kind of apotheosis in Psalm 8, in which the Psalmist adopts a more global view, the Psalmist recognizes in Psalms 9 and 10 (one psalm) that enemies such as he had were a global problem. Those whom the Psalmist calls "malevolently immoral" attack all the planet's vulnerable people and populations. The Psalmist reflects on the past and on examples of God's history of deliverance. He hopes and prays that history will repeat itself in his own and other vulnerable individuals' lives.

Notwithstanding such expressed hopes, in Psalm 11 the threat of the malevolently immoral is very much present. Some have given up hope that the power of the malevolently immoral can be checked, and suggest that the Psalmist join them in their pessimism. The Psalmist rejects their pessimism and expresses faith in God and His deliverance. In Psalm 12, the Psalmist gives voice to the reality of the dominance that the malevolently immoral enjoy. They seem to be everywhere and to have grown their influence and prestige among the general population. But, in the midst of the Psalmist's lament over this sad state of affairs, he hears God's voice. God promises that he will rise up and deliver the vulnerable from the threat the malevolently immoral pose. The Psalmist believes God's promise. Indeed, nothing can be as sure as this Divine promise.

Whether or not we read Psalm 13 as a continuation of the same or a similar threat against the Psalmist that we found in the proceeding psalms, we should understand the Psalmist's desperate opening plea in light of Psalm 12's divine promise in which the Psalmist put such stock. God has not fulfilled His promise. The Psalmist has been suffering for a long time and continues to do so now. God is nowhere to be found. He seems to have forgotten and ignored the Psalmist's affliction and need. The divine absence and disregard causes serious doubt to enter the Psalmist's mind.

In Psalm 4, the Psalmist had questioned those who attacked him. "How long will you men of repute smear my reputation?" (vs. 2) In Psalm 6, a previous low for the Psalmist, he was so bold as to question God.

"And I ask you, YHWH,
'How long will this go on?" (vs. 3)

He again questioned God in Psalm 10.

"Why, Yahweh, are You now so standoffish?
Why do You remain absent during these distressing times?" (vs. 1)

But Psalm 13 reaches a new low. The Psalmist's questioning of God is more intense. He wonders, not once, not twice, not trice, but four times "how long" his enemies will continue to thrive and "how long" his suffering will last. Though the Psalmist's enemies are not named, or the nature of their attacks specified, a wholistic, canonical reading of the psalms leads us to conclude that the enemies are the same class of malevolently immoral who have prowled the previous psalms and are found "absolutely everywhere" according to the Psalmist's view (12.[8]).

I appreciate the Psalmist's questioning of God. It amounts, really, to a challenge. I appreciate the Psalmist's honest and faithful expression of doubt. I have from time to time felt doubts similar to his. I have doubted God, doubted His promises to right wrongs, doubted his interest or engagement with not so much my own difficulties as those facing all of humanity, especially the word's vulnerable and poor. I have chaffed at the dominance of the world's malevolently immoral, who seem to infest every nook and cranny of the planet, causing immeasurable suffering in every corner of the globe.

Many years ago, a friend suggested that I should go to the theaters and watch a movie. The movie's name was "Platoon." I self-righteously informed this friend that, as counseled, it was not my habit to watch R-rated movies. Less self-righteously, he informed me that it was not his habit either, but that this movie was one that addressed moral issues with which our world needed to wrestle. Somehow, his challenge moved me, and I ended up going to the theater and watching the movie—I smile now, remembering how I slinked in and out of the theater hoping that no one I knew would see me.

The movie was revelatory. And it wasn't simply the intensity of R-rated entertainment. I left the theater ashamed. Ashamed to be human. Ashamed to be a member of a despicable race that could act with such cruelty, brutality, and violence. More intelligent than apes, we acted little better than they, our moral capacities falling far short of our intellectual. I was embarrassed by our animal nature—a certain church leader of my younger years by the name of David O. McKay used to speak of our "animal nature" and the need to rise about it.

I have, since, watched a number of R-rated movies that I felt had redeeming social value. I recently watched the movie, "Oppenheimer." Like "Platoon," it is a movie that, in my view, perhaps ought to be mandatory viewing. It might provide a moral education for the natural man, the intelligent ape that resides within our species.

Anyway, after watching the movie, I felt, once more, ashamed to be human. But, this time, my shame extended beyond myself and my species. My shame extended to God, Himself. I was embarrassed for Him. What a lousy Father He must feel like to have sired such a despicable, self-destructive race! If God exists, I felt, thought, and expressed, what a failed parent He seems to be. Which is more likely? I wondered. Which is better: to believe in such a flawed and impotent God or to disbelieve in God's existence? Sometimes I find both the belief in such a seemingly flawed and impotent God and the disbelief in God to be disconcerting. It was not a pleasant few days afterwards.

I am not fully reconciled to or with God. With the Psalmist, I wonder at His standoffishness. I do, though, find myself praying still. That's something, I suppose. I find my mind repeating a certain Lamanite king's prayer. "I've been told 'that there is a God; and if there is a God, and if thou art God, wilt thou…'?" (Al. 22.[18]). I have, as a loving father once did when he approached Jesus, pleaded, "help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9.[24]).

As scripture has done throughout my life, such scriptures provide a measure of comfort. They are a spiritual lifeline to which I cling. The Psalmist's bold questioning of God gives me comfort. I am not alone among the doubting faithful. And like the Psalmist who continues to hope even in the face of doubt, I will continue to hope in my doubt. I will continue to question. I will continue to challenge. I will continue to hope. And I will continue to be grateful to scripture which has been the greatest influence in

my life. And no Book has been more influential in helping me maintain faith and hope than the Book of Psalms.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 2, 2024)

meditation 2— psalm 13.[3-4]

plea

[3]Pay attention! Respond to me, YHWH, my God.
Brighten my eyes, lest I sleep death's sleep,
[4]lest my enemy can boast, "I've defeated him!"
lest my adversaries exalt because I succumb (author's translation).

Psalm 13 began with a faithful expression of doubt and bold questioning, even challenging of God.

"How long, YHWH? Will You always ignore me?
How long will You conceal Yourself from me?
How long must I suffer deep doubt,
deeply grieving day in and day out?
How long will my enemy continue to have the advantage over me?" (author's translation)

The Psalmist follows up this quartet of bold and faithful questions with three pleas—tripartite pleas for divine assistance are common in the Psalter. The Psalmist's pleas that God "pay attention," "respond," and "enliven" him are surely in response to his earlier expressed feelings that God has ignored him and made Himself scarce, causing doubt to enter his mind. The tripartite pleas also give us insight into the intensity of the Psalmist's need. His suffering is a matter of life and death.

The potential death is not a passive one—one caused, for example, by illness. Nor should we understand the death to be a reflection of poetic metaphor. The death that threatens the Psalmist is not an accident of mortality. It is real and violent. It is a death that the Psalmist's enemies have actively planned and toward which they have worked. We have seen this before.

In Psalm 5, the Psalmist was charged with wrongdoing. His accusers' "throat is an open grave" (vs. 9). The danger the accusations pose for the Psalmist were no less real for the poetic imagery in which they are expressed. The accusations brought against the Psalmist were intended to do more than undermine his place in society. They were intended to end his life. The Psalmist's enemies intend to

"catch me, and stomp my life into the underworld;
establish my abode in death" (7.[5]).

All too aware of his enemies' intentions, the Psalmist reminds God,

"in death there is no awareness of you.
Who praises you in šᵉ'ôl?" (6.[5])

The Psalmist's enemies have carried out their deathly plans far enough that he must plead

"respond to the mistreatment perpetrated by those who oppose me,
raising me from death's door" (9.[13]).

In the 10th Psalm, the Psalmist comes to the realization that the threats he faces face all the world's vulnerable people. His use of metaphor to represent the threat is intense.

"They sit in ambush outside villages.
From concealed places they slay the innocent;
their eyes peer out at the vulnerable.
Like a lion, they lie in wait from a concealed place in the brush.
They lie in ambush to seize the downtrodden.
They seize the downtrodden, dragging him into their lair.
They crouch low, hunch down,
and fall upon the bones of the vulnerable" (Ps. 10.[8-10]).

The threat against the Psalmist and his vulnerable brothers and sisters worldwide is likened to that a lion presents. Of course, the threat can be metaphorical for judicial attacks. It can be metaphorical for economic attacks. Judicial and economic threats against the vulnerable can end in reputational and financial ruin. But they can also end in death. Poor, vulnerable people do die because of judicial and economic injustice. Lifespans are shortened by society's immorality. We try to ignore this reality. The reality of a kind of "passive murder." But our ignoring the reality only deepens our crime and intensifies the consequences.

Adding to the tragedy is that those who attack, causing suffering and even death, do not have a moment's second thought. They feel no guilt. Quite the opposite. They are boastful: "I've defeated him!" They are exultant when their prey succumbs to their violence.

As we watch such scenes play out before our eyes, we cry out, and that repeatedly. We not only cry out, "How long?" We also plead that God pay attention and respond. That he put an end to those who feel justified, rewarded, and happy when others suffer at their hands.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 2, 2024)

meditation 3— psalm 13.[5]

benediction/ assurance

[5]But I have placed my trust in your unwavering devotion.
Most certainly I will fully rejoice in your deliverance.
I fully intend to sing of YHWH
when He has restored me.

As he was in Psalms 3-7, 11, and 12, and as he and all the world's vulnerable were in Psalms 9 and 10, in Psalm 13 the Psalmist is under the threat of attack by those who are enemies. The Psalmist has boldly and repeatedly expressed his confusion and doubt over God's absence.

"How long, YHWH? Will You always ignore me?
How long will You conceal Yourself from me?

How long must I suffer deep doubt,
deeply grieving day in and day out?
How long will my enemy continue to have the advantage over me?”

He has pleaded for God’s help and deliverance.

“Pay attention! Respond to me, YHWH, my God.
Brighten my eyes, lest I sleep death’s sleep,
lest my enemy can boast, “I’ve defeated him!”
lest my adversaries exalt because I succumb.”

The Psalmist’s plight is most dangerous and his feelings most desperate. But into this darkness a light shines. God’s “unwavering devotion” pierces the darkness of the dangers and desperation. The Psalmist fixes his sight on this light, on God’s unwavering devotion.” He intends to remain fixed on it, believing that God will act consistent with his unwavering devotion. He will yet know the joy of God’s deliverance.

And like so many others who have experienced the joyful deliverance of God’s unwavering devotion, he will not be silent. He will sing of God. He will sing aloud. He will, as Oliver Cowdery was counseled “not suppose that he can say enough in my cause” but “at all times, and in all pleas, he shall open his mouth and declare [good news] as with the voice of a trump, both day and night.” (DC 24.10, 12).

The Psalmist will want God to hear his song, of course. But he will want others to hear is song. He will want others to learn from his song. He will want others to learn to put their faith in God and in his unwavering devotion—“gospel,” good news indeed.

Millennia later, that Oliver Cowdery was promised that as he opened his mouth without reserve God would “give unto him strength such as is not known among men.” (DC 24.12). The strength of the Psalmist’s voice, the strength of the Psalmist’s song as carried through the millennia. It have heard it. It has born fruit in me. May his song bear fruit in you too!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 12, 2024)

psalm 22

meditation— introductory

As with Psalm 2, we must consider Psalm 22 from more than one context. One is the original ancient context where the psalm is perhaps first to be located in an individual's suffering. The second context is to be found in its use within Jerusalem's temple cult. The third context is related to Jesus of Nazareth. In this case, it is not only Christian interpretation that is at issue, but the man himself, as Jesus is reported to have prayed the first line of the Psalm, finding in the words an accurate reflection of his thoughts and feelings as he suffered the agonies of the cross. A fourth context exists in which every reader, no matter the space or time in which they live, can apply it in their own lives during times of trial and affliction.

Whichever of the contexts we consider—an ancient individual's suffering, a temple prayer during a time of real or ritualistic suffering, the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth, or our own suffering—we have in the first two-thirds of the psalm one of the most intense laments found in the Psalter (vs. 1-21). The appeal to God's help is unsparing. So too is his critique of God. Though God has always been present in both the nation's and the Psalmist's past, He is inexplicably absent in this moment of greatest need, seemingly content to sit on His glorious and comfortable throne where He enjoys personal safety and basks in the praises of a nation.

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The description of the Psalmist enemies is even more unsparing and critical. In their hateful attack, the Psalmist's enemies have lost their humanity, their behavior more animalistic than human. Some have found an almost demonic aspect to the intensity of the enemies' hatred and violence. We can fully understand this impression. Finally, the Psalmist describes his own physical and spiritual suffering in language and imagery that is as intense as anywhere in the Psalms. His body and spirit are shattered and decimated, ripped apart and bled dry as if by ferocious predatory beasts.

In the end, however, the sufferer survives. Though the Psalmist does not describe the moment or means of salvation as he did, for example, in Psalm 18, He survives because God finally hears and responds to his plea. Because of God's deliverance in the face of such devastating suffering, the last third of the psalm reflects the Psalmist's commitment to praise God and make His compassion and power known (vs. 22-31). This commitment is as strongly stated as anywhere in the Psalter, matching the intensity of the lament and the danger found in the first two-thirds. The Psalmist intends through his praise of God to become a great world evangelist. His praise will not only be heard and known among his own people in temple assembly (vs. 22), but they will join him. His praise will not only be known to "the ends of the world" (vs. 27), but they will join him. His praise will reach out even to generations to come (vs. 31), who will join him in his praise. Indeed, all, the living, the dying, and the dead (vs. 29) will praise God through his evangelization.

We will consider all this and more in our series of meditations focused on Psalm 22. It is deservedly one of the best known of all Psalms. It provides strength in trial. It strengthens our confidence in God. It reinforces our desire to laud God to others. It increases our appreciation for Jesus and his endurance in the trial of faith and suffering that he experienced as he sought to do his Father's will in hopes of revealing Father's character and bringing salvation to a humanity much in need of such revelation and salvation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 22.[1-3]

[1]My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?
Why are You so far from helping me?
Why are You so far from my vigorous complaint?
[2]My God, I call out during the day, but You don't respond.
And during the night, even then I have no respite.
[3]But You, Incomparable One,
Just sit there amidst Yiśrāʾēl's praises. (author's translation).

meditation 1

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[1]My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?

For many, Jesus' utterance of the first line of Psalm 22 from the cross turns the line and all that follows into prophecy/ prediction. According to this view, the author of the psalm, traditionally David, saw Jesus hanging on the cross, saw his utterance of these words, and recorded these words from his vision. Maybe. The people of David's time were as much in need of Jesus' revelation of at-one-ment as any, including you and I today. And, scripture is pretty clear that, having "created all men" God "bring[s] forth [his] word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth" (2 Ne. 29.[7]).

In the end, though, it is the message of the psalm, including the message that is found in Jesus' praying its first line from his cross, that increases my testimony of both the value of scripture and the necessity of Jesus and his atonement. I could, I think, do without the prediction that others find in this Psalm. But I could not do without the message that Jesus' praying of the Psalm's first line sends. In this and the following meditation, I will share a couple of messages I learn from Jesus' praying of this first line of Psalm 22.

Many—an embarrassingly many, many— have, as the Psalmist does in this psalm, felt the humiliating sting of others' rejection and persecution and oppression. In this sting, many have been made to feel and, indeed, have felt that their rejection, their abandonment by others was a sign of God's abandonment. And surely, for the religious mind, there is no low lower than the feeling of being abandoned by God. Many have prayed the words of this first line, either exactly, as in Jerusalem's temple, or in words very much like them outside any sacred space.

In these initial words from Psalm 22, Jesus finds words that coincide with his own experience and his feelings of humiliation and abandonment. He has experienced the lowest of lows. But more than this, in uttering these words, Jesus demonstrates and proves the reality of his connectedness, his at-one-ment with all of us, but especially those who have felt the sting of other's rejection, persecution, oppression, and abandonment. Moreover, he bears witness to the fact that as part of this unity he feels with humankind, he experiences all that humankind experiences—all its highs and its deepest lows—including the terrifying feeling of God's abandonment.

So, for me, Jesus' utterance of this first line of Psalm 22 is confirmation of the testimony born by the writer of Hebrews that Jesus was "made like unto his brethren" As such, it also testifies to the surety of the help and deliverance he brings.

> "In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God… For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted" (Hb. 2.[17-18]).

When I witness how easily Jesus latched onto scripture, found in them something of himself, and

used them to express his deepest feelings, I find a testimony of the value of scripture that is as powerful as any. But more importantly, when I hear Jesus confess that he has descended to my depth, and then lower still, my trust in his ability to reach me and then pull me from even the deepest depths grows.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus

meditation 2

[1]*My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?*

As we indicated in the introductory meditation, this Psalm can be considered from the perspective of at least four contexts: the suffering of an ancient individual, the expression of personal, national, or cultic suffering in Jerusalem's temple, the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth, and the suffering of any individual anywhere and anytime.

On can easily imagine the words of the psalm's first line being uttered under any of these situations and environments. It is surely a common occurrence for individuals to feel abandoned by God during times of deep trial. The Psalmist's express such feelings often

> "Why, Yahweh, are you now so standoffish?
> Why do you remain absent during these distressing times?" (Ps. 10.[1], author's translation)

> "How long, YHWH? Will you ignore me forever?
> How long will you be absent in my life?" (Ps. 13.1, author's translation)

> "Then, you hid your face from me
> and I became alarmed" (Ps. 30.[7], author's translation).

> "It was I, only I, who thought, in my alarm, 'I have been abandoned by you'" (Ps. 31.[22], author's translation).

We could go on, but you get the idea. Perhaps the reader has experienced such trials and the accompanying feelings of abandonment.

When such feelings of abandonment come to us, we might feel unfaithful, as if such feelings were indicative of doubt toward God. We might refrain from uttering such words, fearing they reflect a lack of faith, maybe even an arrogant confrontation with God. But the Psalmist reminds us that such feelings, and the expression of such feelings are anything but faithless. Such honesty is a sign of deep and abiding faith in God.

If we doubt this assertion, we should once more call to mind that none other than Jesus the Christ uttered the opening words of this psalm. We would like to take a moment to meditate upon Jesus' use of this opening line of Psalm 22.

As the opening words, "My God, my God," indicate, we have entered the realm of prayer. When Jesus uttered the words, "My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?" from the cross, he was engaged in heartfelt communication with God. And, being engaged in prayer, he uttered words that had been repeated many, many times by many individuals as part of their temple worship and what some might call, unwisely, "rote prayer."

Jesus' praying the very words so often prayed by so many others reminds us that the mere repetition of words, or the prayerful recitation of words often prayed by others, does not qualify as the "vain repetition" against which Jesus warned (See Mt. 6.[7]). Jesus' repetition was not "vain," no matter how often or by how many these words had been repeated, because they reflected a profound and heartfelt truth in that moment of agony. In this psalm's opening words, Jesus found an expression of his own deepest feelings. Jesus, like so many others, felt that God had abandoned him. Jesus' truth turned these words from being those of others to being his own. No prayer, no matter how often or by how many it might be offered, is "vain" when it is fully adopted into one's truth.

So, Jesus' use of an oft repeated prayer can serve as a reminder that true prayer comes from deep within the human soul and that any words, even those oft repeated, when they reveal and express the deep truths that reside in us will find their way to the throne of Him who sits enthroned in celestial. Glory.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

meditation 3

But You, Incomparable One,
just sit there amidst Yiśrāʾēl's praises.

The KJV's translation of the second line, "Thou inhabitest the praises of Israel," is so beautiful. The idea is so uplifting. I hear and love the truth that can certainly be heard in it. That said, I have reservations about the mood that can be assigned to it—a mood of happy and grateful praise. These things are certainly subjective, but I, for one, do not hear happy and grateful praise in this line. I hear a different tone: the tone of complaint.

When we think of translation, we think first of dictionaries and lexemes, replacing words from one language with words from another. We might then think of grammar and syntax. More rarely, we might consider the historical and literary context. And even more rarely, we might think of mood and tone. But certainly, the tone or mood of words, phrases, and sentences is as much a part of the translation process as determining the lexical or grammatical nature of words and the context in which they are found.

However we think of translation, we have been conditioned by our age of reason and science to believe that an "accurate and true translation" is achievable. We might even reason that "the one and only true translation" is achievable. But, translation is not a science. And when it comes to the translation of ancient texts such as Psalms, a "one and only true translation" is as near impossible as impossible gets. I suppose it would be possible if the original Psalm writer/ composer sat right next to us and directed our new language translation. But, notwithstanding claims of inspiration through the Holy Spirit, this is as unlikely as the impossibility of translating a "one and only true translation" of individual Psalms.

I contemplate all of this and more as we consider and translate Psalm 22.[1-3], and more especially when I contemplate and translate verse 3. Though we can identify each grammatical element of the Hebrew verse—from its initial conjunction to its final personal name—and can identify the meaning of each word and grammatical element, our work is still not finished. We must consider context, most especially the context provided by surrounding verses. And, we must consider tone or mood.

The context of verse 3 is clear. The Psalmist is in trouble. Just how much trouble will become clear as we proceed. But with the three opening questions of verse one—in reality, one question thrice

repeated in different words—we know that whatever the trouble, it has been made worse by God's inexplicable absence. Verse two expands on this divine absence. God has, the Psalmist feels and expresses, "abandoned" the Psalmist. God is "far away." He is unresponsive to the Psalmist's continual cries for help so that the Psalmist's dire condition sees no improvement. Such is the lead up to verse 3.

The Psalmist's complaint continues on the other side of verse 3. Notwithstanding God's reputation as a deliverer, built on Israel's past experiences and the Psalmist own previous positive encounters with Divinity, the Psalmist is still in trouble and far from being delivered. Finding him repulsive and treating him as something less than human, the Psalmist's enemies are right up in his face, hissing insults and taunts while they bare their teeth and wag their heads.

So, coming back to verse 3, we note that the KJV translators do not mistranslate a single word. They commit no grammatical or syntactical errors. And yet, their translation of the verse does not seem to adequately fit the context or partake of the mood and tone of all that surrounds it. Whether one imagines God's throne to be in the dark and restricted confines of the temple's Holiest Place or in the bright brilliance of heaven itself, God is still, even here, distant. While the Psalmist suffers and pleads, pleads and suffers, God remains seated on his throne surrounded by the ascending voices of His worshipers.

It is true that God sits on a throne. It is true that He sits enthroned. It is true that He is gloriously enthroned. It is true that our Hebrew verb, *yāšaḇ*, used here, can say all of that. But is this how the Psalmist means to use it here, in this instance? Is it possible that the Psalmist's does not feel or communicate any of this with his present use of *yāšaḇ*? Is it possible that we have something here that is very different than happy worship? Is it possible to understand the present *yāšaḇ* as a disillusioned, perhaps angry and even sarcastic *yāšaḇ*? (Indeed, ought we, as we sometimes do when we indicate sarcasm, enclose "Incomparable One" within quotation makes in our translation, indicative of the Psalmist's feelings that God is not acting like an Incomparable One right now in his life?). Could our *yāšaḇ* be just plain ol' "sit"? Is God just "sitting," doing nothing? Is He too busy enjoying the praises heaped upon Him to pay any attention to the Psalmist plight? Too comfortable to act? Too enraptured? Is God, like everyone else, too wrapped up in His own life to bother with anyone else's?

Many readers will likely reply, "No. The Psalmist can't mean any or all of that. The Psalmist is a faithful believer in and follower of God." To which, I say, "Perhaps you've not been tried as the Psalmist was tried, stretched to the breaking point as he was here?"

Or, "Perhaps you misunderstand what it means to believe in and follow God."

Might believing in and following God faithfully include having the faith in Him to speak honestly to Him? To know that He wants to hear the unadulterated truth of our thoughts and feelings? To know that He can take our honest feelings of disappointment, maybe even anger toward him? That He endures it? That He appreciates it?

Yes, it seems to me that we ought at the very least to give serious consideration to the tone and mood of verse three. We ought to look for that tone and mood in what proceeds and follows it. We ought to consider the verse as partaking of the same spirit of complaint as what proceeds and follows it. And we ought to have enough respect for God to know that He desires and appreciates honesty, even when it is unpleasant, maybe even questioning and critical. We ought to have enough faith in Him, as the Psalmist did, to know that it is our sincerity, our honesty that draws Him to us and brings, finally, the deliverance that we so earnestly seek.

This is surely what repentance is. Brutal, often ugly honesty. And look how faithfully God responds

to that honesty! Surely, God responds no less faithfully to the honesty of complain and lamentation. Indeed, this is one of the greatest, most frequent testimonies contained within the Psalter.

So, yes, I think it possible that in verse 3 the sufferer is *not* offering a word of praise in hopes of convincing, almost manipulating God to take action on his behalf. Rather, I think it possible, even likely, that he is truly complaining, as he has done from the start of the Psalm, about God's inaction. Verse three is as likely to possess the tone of accusation as worship. That is bold. And it is faithful. For it is an expression of the Psalmist's true feelings. I, for one, hope and strive to possess this kind of integrity and faith before my God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 22.[4-8]

[4]Our fathers trusted You.
They trusted and You delivered them.
[5]They cried out to You, and they were delivered
They trusted You, and were not disappointed.
[6]But I am a nonentity, and less than human;
a human disgrace, whom many find repulsive.
[7]Everyone who sees me hisses at me.
They bare their teeth. They wag the head.
[8]"He has anticipated that YHWH would deliver him.
He should deliver him, then, seeing that He takes such pleasure in him" (author's translation).

meditation 1

In verses 1-3, the Psalmist has already expressed his confusion, perhaps even anger at God's seeming indifference and certain inactivity during a period of deep trouble and affliction. Thrice, he has asked, "Why?" Why this indifference and inactivity? As we understand it, the Psalmist has expressed his feelings that perhaps God is simply too busy enjoying Israel's praises to leave His throne and involve Himself in the Psalmist's ugly affairs.

In this reading, the Psalmist goes on to express what leaves him even more confused than he already is about God's inactivity in the face of his life-threatening trials. The Psalmist inherited and has believed the stories he has been told about God and His activity in the life of His nation. He has been told and believed that God has heard the complaint of His people when they have been inflicted and cried out to Him for deliverance. He has heard testimony that God, in fact, delivered them over and over again. And, having believed these inherited and cherished stories of divine deliverance, the Psalmist has always anticipated that should he, himself, be afflicted and call out to God for deliverance, God would respond consistent with His character and past behavior.

Surely, the Psalmist's present affliction in no less than the past afflictions of the nation. He is looked upon as one might look upon a worm: of no account, inhuman. But, it is precisely because he is a human being, that his state is even worse than that of a worm. A worm cannot feel disgrace or humiliation or think of itself as repulsive. But the Psalmist can and does.

So, why is God not responding in the present circumstances as He has responded in the past? Little wonder that his persecutors throw God's indifference and inactivity in his face. In His absence and inactivity, God has shamed him as much as his enemies have through their threats and persecution. How has God become party of the abusers?

This is all horribly devastating to read. How much worse to experience it! It is one thing to be without help when one does not expect help. But to have expected help, especially from a source with a reputation for reliability, and then not get it? This is doubly devastating and demoralizing. To be treated inhumanly when God has made one feel so fully human and so fully valued? This is the worst kind of dehumanization.

As devastating and demoralizing as all of this is, the Psalmist is not finished. It will get much, much worse before it gets better. We are but a third of the way through the Psalmist's complaint.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Just as Jesus found in the psalm's opening line an expression of his own experience and feelings of Divine abandonment, we can find in the ridicule that the three synoptic Gospels report being heaped upon Jesus an echo of the ridicule the Psalmist's enemies heaped upon him.

> "They that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, and saying, 'Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.'
> Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said, 'He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, "I am the Son of God"'" (Mt. 27.[39-43]).

> "And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, 'Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself, and come down from the cross.'
> Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, 'He saved others; himself he cannot save. Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe'" (Mk. 15.[29-32]).

> "And the soldiers also mocked him… saying, 'If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself…' And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, 'If thou be Christ, save thyself and us'" (Lk. 23.[36-39]).

Now, it is possible, as we have noted previously, to read this echo as the fulfillment of a very specific ancient prophecy or prediction. We should perhaps expect that some may have been given intimations of the most important event in human history. At the same time, even a cursory reading of the Psalms demonstrates that those who composed the Psalms, those who prayed the Psalms, and those who heard and witnessed the Psalms prayed were all too familiar, often intimately and personally so, with the ridicule of persecutors and enemies. Indeed, the ridicule with its suggestion of guilt and its charge of god-forsakenness is one of the most common and poignant themes of the Psalms.

> "How many are those who malign my character:
> 'He'll get no help from 'ĕlohîm'!" (Ps. 3.[2], author's translation).

> "When my enemies speak out against me,
> and those scrutinizing me plot together,
> asserting: 'God has forsaken him.
> Pursue and seize him for he has no one to rescue him…'" (Ps. 71.[10-11], author's translation).

There is no telling how many innocent victims have died with the sort of ridicule we hear in this psalm ringing in their ears as some of the final sounds they heard in life. There is no telling how many innocent victims of violence and murder were taunted in their final minutes with the assertion that their faith in God was wasted and vain. There is no telling how many innocent victims of violence and murder were taunted with the claim that their suffering was proof that they meant nothing to a God to whom they had offered a lifetime of devotion.

Neither is there any telling how many perpetrators of violent persecution and prosecution threw such taunts into the face of their victims to justify their own and their compatriots' violence against their hated enemy.

Whatever one decides about prophecy and prediction, there need be no doubt that in Jesus' experience of the prosecutor's scorn suffered in his final hours, Jesus, as he had done throughout his

short life, demonstrated his unity with humankind, becoming one, especially, with so many innocent victims who had and would suffer unjustifiable indignity and hatred and violence.

My own faith is such that I can live without prediction. But I cannot live without God's attachment to me. I cannot live without the belief that His experiences and knowledge allow Him to understand me, know how to succor me, and know how to save me. All who have truly read or heard or prayed this twenty-second psalm have discovered such a God, with or without the idea of prediction.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 22.[9-10]

[9]But You drew me from the womb.
You laid me on my mother's breast.
[10]I was given into Your care before birth.
From my mother's womb, You were my God.

meditation

Notwithstanding the Psalmist's intense and continuous plea for help in the face of his enemies' humiliating and life-threatening attack, God has been unresponsive and inactive. The Psalmist has expressed his confusion over God's inaction (1-3). The natural confusion that might be expected of one who believes in God and believes him to be interested and caring toward them, is intensified in the Psalmist when he considers God's energetic and saving responses to dangers Israel has faced in its past. He has always delivered the nation (4-5).

What adds yet more to the confusion is the depth of the Psalmist's present suffering. He is humiliated. He is treated as something less than human. What's more, God's inaction has given the Psalmist's enemies justification for their persecution. God, they have concluded, doesn't care about the Psalmist. Indeed, the enemies' dismissal of the Psalmist's value loops back upon God, Himself. God is inactive. The enemy can do what they wants without consequence. Does God not even care about His own reputation? (6-8)

As if all of this were not enough, what adds even more confusion is that the Psalmist has his own history with God. Did not God watch over the Psalmist's development in his mother's womb? Did not God look after him at his birth, guaranteeing a safe and healthy delivery? Did not God put him in the care of a loving and nurturing mother? Has not God always been there for him (9-10).

So, again, why is God absent? We can certainly feel for the Psalmist. Perhaps we too have felt abandoned, notwithstanding our pleas, our past experiences, and our expectations for the future. All we can say for now, is hang in there. The Psalm is not over yet. Perhaps we will come to understand. Perhaps God will yet act.

"Wait on the Lord," the Psalmist's encourages. "Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart."

"Wait, I say, on the Lord" (Ps. 27.[14]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 22.11-21

11Don't distance Yourself from me,
for the enemy is near, but there is no one to help.
12 Intimidating bulls surround me.
Powerful bulls from Bāšān encircle me.
13They open their mouths against me,
lions, rending and roaring.
14Like water, my blood flows,
and all my bones are broken.
My heart becomes wax,
melted inside me.
15My strength is sapped dry, like fired pottery.
My tongue sticks to the top of my mouth.
and You have brought me to the brink of death.
16Wild dog's surround me.
A vicious pack encircles me.
They pierce my hands and feet.
17I can count all my bones.
They look, they stare back at me.
18They divvy up my clothes amongst themselves,
and throw lots for my clothing.
19 But You, YHWH, don't be distant.
My Helper, rush to my assistance.
20 Rescue me from the sword.
Rescue me from the dog's power, solitary as I am.
21 Deliver me from the lion's mouth.
Deliver me from the wild ox's horns, attacked as I am.

meditation

Other than God, Himself, no subject occupies the Psalmist's attention more than his enemies. He knows no limit to the variety of ways that he describes them and their wickedness. But, few Psalms, if any, utilize more intense and disturbing language and imagery than this one. Indeed, the intensity and extreme nature of the language have led some to muse on the near demonic nature of the enemies and their attack upon the Psalmist. Whether it is demonic or not, it is certainly animalistic.

We have already heard the dehumanizing impact the enemy's attack had on the Psalmist personally. In these verses, he reveals that their hatred for and treatment of him demonstrates a yielding to a violent and unthinking animalistic spirit. This spirit has so powerfully taken over them, that the Psalmist cannot limit himself to comparing them to just one animal. Instead, he likens them first, to a herd of rage-filled, charging bulls, to a pride of lions hunched over their prey ripping flesh and crunching bones, then to a pack of wild dogs with gnashing teeth, biting the Psalmist and opening deep wounds, and finally to a wild oxen that gores with its horns.

We can think of the Psalmist enemies as being extraordinary, or we can think of the Psalmist being extraordinarily sensitive to and perceptive of the nature of human enmity and the unthinking irrationality that takes over human beings who yield their bodies and souls to it.

I have maintained often that Jesus' crucifixion was a revelation; that whatever it creates comes by means of the revelation. Jesus' crucifixion was meant, first and foremost to reveal the nature and character of God. But a close second revelation of the crucifixion was its revelation of human enmity and violence, the danger of their escalating out of control, and the devastating, dehumanizing impact

they have on their victims.

As we, all of us, look upon Jesus hanging on the cross, we not only look upon the face of God. We look, as if into a mirror, upon our own faces. And we look into the face of victims. We not only see the lengths to which God will go to reveal and save humankind. We see the depths of depravity found in human enmity and violence and the devastation it brings to its victims The revelation not only draws us to God, it drives us, disgusted and appalled, to abandon our conditioned human enmity and the violent impulses it sets in motion. It instils compassion for all victims, all the world's vulnerable.

It drives us to repent. To abandon the animalistic and adopt the divine.

There might have been any number of reasons for the Gospel writers and, indeed, Jesus himself to use and incorporate this Psalm into the crucifixion narrative. But, certainly, this Psalm possesses the same revelation concerning the unthinking and animalistic nature of human violence Jesus' cross reveals. It reveals the same dehumanization of those victimized by unthinking and animalistic human enmity and violence. And though it is delayed in the Psalm, it draws us to God, the revelation of what true, exalted human nature looks and acts like, and the only power sufficient to implant it in the human heart and soul.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 22.22-25

22 I will declare thy name unto my brethren:
in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.
23 Ye that fear the LORD, praise him;
all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him;
and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel.
24 For he hath not despised nor abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted;
neither hath he hid his face from him;
but when he cried unto him, he heard.
25 My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation:
I will pay my vows before them that fear him.

meditation

Many years ago, I attended a "praise service" of another faith. I remember at the time being put off by all the talk and movement of "praise." One reason for my dislike of what I saw and heard, I am sure, stemmed from the fact that my own LDS culture didn't talk or act like this. So, in a sense, my dislike of the praise movement was simply provincial and bigoted, evidence of my small-mindedness. But at the time, this was not part of my conscious thinking. I unconsciously covered up my small-mindedness with a justification that I now see was equally small-minded but which, at the time, seemed utterly reasonable. "What use and how legitimate is all this vocal praise when these people are not faithful in their daily lives; not living Gospel principles as I understand them and not holding a correct and proper view of God, his Being and Character?"

Of course, the errors in my judgements were legion. How did I know they were not faithful to God? Who said that faithfulness to God was contingent upon possessing and believing the dogmas I held to be so self-evident? How clearly, how fully does one need to "understand" the character and Being of God before one can be spoken of as "faithful." What does it mean, anyway, to the "faithful."

But, today, as I consider the Psalmist's message, I see that my small-mindedness extended no less toward God than it did to those worshipers of yesteryear. For even if I now grant that, like me, they were indeed not always as "faithful" to God as they might have been, I was the one without understanding of God.

I was the one denying his mercy. I was the one who created a God who, opposed to the Psalmist's, was offended by and highly energized against one who is humiliated—humiliated by weakness and sin. I was the "faithless" one in that I did not trust God with my weakness. Did not trust God with my sin. Did not trust God with my humiliation. I was the one who had invented a God who hid his face from the humiliation of others.

But, God be praised. I finally learned to approach him, even in humiliation. But I only learned to so love him, because he first loved me and unquestionably manifested his love to me. So, consider this *Small Simple Sermon* my way, today, of following the example of so many—past, present, and future—in praising God. Let me follow the Psalmist's example.

> "I… declare thy name unto my brethren:
> in the midst of the congregation… I praise thee."

Let me follow the admonition of Alma, the younger.

> "Therefore, let us glory,

yea, we will glory in the Lord;
yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full;
yea, we will praise our God forever.
Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord?
Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy,
and of his long-suffering towards the children of men?
Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel" (Al. 26.[16]).

Yea, let me follow the dictates of the Holy Spirit so that I can

"speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel" (2 Ne. 31.[13]).

Let mine be but one small voice among the multitudes of angels and the sanctified that kneel "before his throne, worshiping God, and the Lamb, which worship him forever and every" (DC 76.[21]).

Today, then, is as good a time as any to praise. That's it.

"Praise ye the Lord.

Praise ye the LORD from the heavens:
praise him in the heights.
Praise ye him, all his angels:
praise ye him, all his hosts.
Praise ye him, sun and moon:
praise him, all ye stars of light.
Praise him, ye heavens of heavens,
and ye waters that be above the heavens.
Let them praise the name of the LORD:
for his name alone is excellent;
his glory is above the earth and heaven" (Ps. 148.[1-4, 13]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 22.[26-31]

[26]The poor will eat and be full.
Those who search after YHWH will praise Him.
They are always enlivened.
[27]The world over will acknowledge and come to YHWH.
People from every nation will bow down before you.
[28]For kingship belongs to YHWH,
even rule over nations.
[29]All the earth's robust will eat and worship him.
All who are descending into the grave will bow before him,
and he whose life is not preserved.
[30]Descendants will serve Him.
My Lord will be spoken of for generations.
[31]They will come and declare His triumph
to a people yet to be born;
that it is he who acts.

meditation

Our trip through Psalm 22 has been a wild ride. Notwithstanding his own and his nation's past happy experiences with God, the Psalmist has experienced God's absence and has been confused by it. Amid God's absence, the Psalmist's demented enemies have taken advantage of the Psalmist's vulnerability. They have surrounded, threatened, and attacked him mercilessly until he is a broken and spent shell of his former self.

Still, the Psalmist refuses to let go his faith and hope in the God he has known since birth. He continues to entreat the renown God of Israel, asking to be delivered from his enemies. Suddenly, his prayers are answered. God has been watching after all. Undeterred by the Psalmist's humiliated and terrorized state, God somehow removes the Psalmist's enemies from the scene until they are little more than a distant memory.

Now, in today's reading, God is everywhere and everything. The Psalmist can't say enough about Him. He praises Him everywhere and to anyone who will hear. He invites others to join him. The Psalmist's vision is expanded so that he can now see beyond his own experiences. His own experiences, God's hand in his deliverance, and his praise of God, he sees, will impact broad swaths of humanity. The entire world will come to know God through the Psalmist's witness. Every nation will yield sovereignty to God through the Psalmist's witness. Both the living and the dead will worship God through the Psalmist's witness. Generations yet unborn will love and serve God through the Psalmist's testimony. I am counted as one of the multitude his witness has influenced and caused to trust in and praise God.

As I consider this psalm and the path it has taken, I think of two individuals. First, I think of Alma the younger. I am reminded of his experience of torment and deliverance. I am reminded of his commitment to serve God by witnessing of His great and delivering power.

> "Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Alma 36.[24]).

Alma's hope regarding the impact his witness would have on the world might not sound so grand and universal as that which the Psalmist expresses. Yet Alma's witness extended out through the generations until it reached out and grabbed me. His witness helped me understand of what God is

capable. His witness was instrumental in helping me have the faith to invite God into my life of humiliation. His witness was instrumental in giving God entrance into my life to heal and redeem and renew. I am extraordinarily grateful for his witness.

Yet, like John the Baptist who knew that there was one "preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose" (Jn. 1.[27]). Alma knew that

> "there be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people" (Al. 7.[7]).

This brings us to the second person I think of when I read the Psalmist's witness. I too, like John and Alma, know that there is one far, far greater than either of them. I do not confuse the servants for the master. Jesus suffered much as the Psalmist's suffered. God delivered him from something far, far worse than that which the Psalmist suffered. God delivered him from enemies far, far more powerful than the Psalmist's enemies. Jesus' witness of God reaches far, far beyond that of the Psalmist. Far, far beyond the witness of John or Alma. Indeed, we cannot comprehend just how far and wide it might extend. But, we are informed that

> "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Ph. 2.[10-11]).

Yes, Jesus' witness of his Father is the greatest, the brightest, the truest witness of God the world has ever seen. Even in that great day when we bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Master, we will sense him looking up and hear him utter his own heartfelt witness.

> "Glory be to the Father" (DC 19.[19]).

And then, truly everyone "will come and declare His triumph!"

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 24.[9-10]

[9]Lift up, O gates, your head.
Rise up, O ancient doors
so the King, The Incomparable may enter.
[10] Who is he, this King, The Incomparable?
YHWH Ṣ[e]b̲ā'ô̲t̲,
He is King, The Incomparable (author's translation).

meditation

The eighth chapter of 1st Kings tells how King Solomon removed the Ark of the Covenant—representing Jehovah's throne, and symbolic of His presence in Israel—from the temporary tabernacle David had built for it, and, in procession with much fanfare and many sacrifices, brought the Ark to his newly constructed temple.

> "And the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of the LORD unto his place, into the oracle of the house, to the most holy place, even under the wings of the cherubims…. When the priests were come out of the holy place, the cloud filled the house [and] the glory of the LORD had filled the house of the LORD" (See 1 Kgs. 8.[1-11]).

It is thought that each year, perhaps during the sacred feast of Tabernacles, Israel would reenact this important event. First, they would remove the Ark from the temple, housing it in a temporary tabernacle. Over the following days and weeks, they would clean, renew, renovate, and purify the temple. Upon finishing, the children of Israel would re-enact Solomon's processional, and escort the Ark back to the temple. As the Ark approached the temple, the people—priest and commoner alike—might have raised their voices and addressed the temple doors.

> "Lift up, O gates, your head.
> Rise up, O ancient doors
> so the King, The Incomparable may enter.
> Who is he, this King, The Incomparable?
> YHWH Ṣ[e]b̲ā'ô̲t̲,
> He is King, The Incomparable.

Others consider another possible context for these words. According to some texts, the ark accompanied Israel's armies in battle.[1] After the battle, of course, the ark would need to return to the tabernacle/ temple. This practice might explain these words found in this psalm.

> "Who is this King, The Incomparable?
> YHWH, powerful and heroic,
> YHWH, heroic in battle" (Ps. 24.[8]).

What does Israel's potential ancient processionals and the words spoken in this psalm have to do with us today? What might they have to do with our temple experience? The temple serves as a symbol to each of us. As we come and go to and from the temple, we do not address the temple doors, inviting them to open themselves in order to receive their King. But if we listen carefully to what we learn in the temple of the Lord, we might hear the temple doors address us. We might hear them invite us to open the gates of our heart and let the King of glory enter in.

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[1] See, for example, Joshua 6.[1-13] and 1 Samuel 4.[3-11]. Leviticus14.[44] credits a military defeat suffered by Israel to be the result of the ark's absence.

Today, the Lord ardently desires to pass through the gate of our heart and abide in our daily lives. "Know ye not," asks the apostle Paul, "that ye are temple of the God" (1 Cor. 3.[16]). In the temple doors' invitation, we might hear the very voice of the great Jehovah, even the Lord Jesus,

> "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3.[20]).

Today, as we face life's challenges and battles, we might want to call out to our hearts to open their doors and invite the King Incomparable, the mighty Hero to join in our battles bringing us success and victory. May we hear and accept the Lord's invitation, so powerfully extended in the temple, to lift up our gates in order to joyfully, trustingly, and confidently receive the King of glory.

Who is this King, so incomparable?

> "YHWH, powerful and heroic,
> YHWH, heroic in battle….
> YHWH Ṣᵉbā'ôt,
> He is King, The Incomparable."

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Psalm 27.[4, 7-8, 13-14]

[4]One thing have I desired of the LORD,
that will I seek after;
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to enquire in his temple.

[7]Hear, O LORD, when I cry with my voice:
have mercy also upon me, and answer me.
[8]When thou saidst, "Seek ye my face;"
my heart said unto thee, "Thy face, LORD, will I seek."

[13]I had fainted,
unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.
[14]Wait on the LORD:
be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart:
wait, I say, on the LORD.

Meditation 1

I don't know about you, but when I read and study the scriptures I do more than look for doctrines, principles, truths, etc. I also look for how they impact the writers; how they impact the writers' feelings and actions. I pay attention to how the writers respond to their encounters with truths. I pay special attention to how they respond to their encounters with God. So, when I read the Psalmist's confession, "One thing have I desired of the LORD," I pay attention. And, in this instance, I pay attention to that "one thing," that one "desire" that trumps all others; that one desire that makes all other desires fade into the background.

And what is that "one thing" that the Psalmist has desired? "To behold the beauty of the LORD." But we just have to say, this holy desire did not arise because the Psalmist pulled himself up by his own spiritual bootstraps or drew it out of the depth of his own enlightened soul. No, this desire was borne outside himself. It was suggested to him by another. And that other was none other than God, Himself.

> "Seek ye my face."

We just have to say, "WOW!" Can you believe it? Can you believe the invitation that God, "the greatest of all" (DC 19.[18]). extends, not only to the Psalmist but to little ole' us?

> "Seek ye my face."
> "Behold the beauty of the LORD."
> "See the goodness of the LORD."

The Psalmist's response to this grand and glorious invitation was not so very different than Alma's response to the message of the Redeemer's coming. In his own way, Alma saw the "beauty of the LORD." And with both the Psalmist's, "One thing have I desired," and Alma's "There is one thing which is of more importance than" anything else in human history (Al. 7.[7]), the two men show themselves to be faithful evangelists. Far from hording the invitation to seek the face of God and behold his beauty, they invite all to come and accept the invitation in their own lives.

"Wait on the LORD:
be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart:
wait, I say, on the LORD."

And what is it worth, this beholding of the beauty, the goodness, and, yes, the face of God? It is worth whatever wait there might be. It is worthy of being the "one thing" that fills our desire; the "one thing" after which we seek. What else could possibly compare? We do not wonder that the Psalmist felt feint when he contemplated missing out on such a grand and glorious vision.

As grand as it all seems, we believe in the sincerity, the seriousness, and the purpose of the Divine invitation, for the Lord God has spoken it. We will accept the invitation. We will seek until we behold. We will not feint until we have beheld "the beauty of the Lord," a "beauty," Nephi testifies, is "far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty" (1 Ne. 11.[8]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

meditation 2

While there is much to learn, as usual, from this passage, today I am struck by two truths. First, our desires and priorities say much about who we are and what we achieve in life and beyond. In this reading, the Psalmist tells us much about himself and where he will end up as he confesses that there is just one thing he asks of God. There is just one, single, solitary thing after which he seeks. It is that thing above all else that moves him and gives him purpose. He wishes to see God's beauty—his goodness, loveliness, attractiveness, friendliness— and to fix his mind always on its unparalleled magnificence.

This might seem rather ambitious. Maybe even presumptuous. The Psalmist, perhaps, is getting a little ahead of himself. Trying to fly too close to the sun. And maybe all this would be true but for one important fact. The Psalmist's desire did not originate inside himself. It did not flow out of personal hubris, or a sense of self-importance or an attempt at personal superiority. No, its origin came from outside the Psalmists. If flowed from the grandeur of another. It came to be imagined through the generosity of God, Himself. It came by divine invitation: "Seek ye my face."

And so, this is the second truth that strikes us today. God is generous and inviting. And He wants to be known. This divine desire to be known is not a matter of egotism on His part. He knows how weak and vulnerable we are. He knows our inclination to sin continually.

"Like as a father pitieth his children,
so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.
For he knoweth our frame;
he remembereth that we are dust" (Ps. 103.[13-14]).

And He knows that our best chance of survival and progression is to be attached to Him. To be one with Him and He with us. Hence, His invitation: "Seek me."

Perhaps the Psalmist had heard this invitation come directly to him from God. Or, perhaps, the Psalmist took to himself an invitation that had been extended to his ancestors centuries earlier through the greatest of the Hebrew prophets.

"And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the

> kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; for without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and *sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God*…" (DC 84.[19-23]).

However the invitation came, it moved the Psalmist. He set his sights on this one thing above all others. No other interest would get between him and this inquiry after God. Would we be so committed if the invitation came to us? The fact is, the invitation has come to us. Over and over again. Certainly, in scripture. And perhaps more directly and intimately.

> "I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever. Amen" (Eth. 12.[41]).

> "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden…" (Mt. 11.[28]).

> "Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith…
>
> > "Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely… (Al. 5.[33-34]).

> "And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things. Therefore, sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you, and it shall be in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will. Remember the great and last promise which I have made unto you…" (DC 88.[67-69]).

Yes, Psalm 27, properly and thoughtfully read, invites us to closely examine our lives and ask ourselves sometimes difficult questions about our priorities, and what we want out of our short lives. It invites us to do this in light of God's generous and earnest invitation to put Him first. To prioritize knowing Him, seeing Him, becoming intimate with Him until we see, not as "through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13.[12]) but clearly, the unparalleled beauty of the Lord.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 32.[1-2]

[1]Truly happy is the one whose rebellion is borne away
and whose sin is buried.
[2]Truly happy is the one whose guilt YHWH does not consider
and there is no intention to obfuscate.

meditation 1

Luther called this psalm a "Pauline Psalm." It is easy to see why. These first two verses were central to Paul's understanding of doctrine of justification—justification being a right standing with God achieved through the forgiveness of sin.

> "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying,
>
> > 'Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven,
> > and whose sins are covered.
> > Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin'" (Rom. 4.[5-8]).

Paul believes that no human effort can achieve a right standing with God or acquire forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness is the work and prerogative of God only. The ineffectuality of human effort in acquiring right standing with God through forgiveness is the consequence of several factors, but, as Paul sees it, the main factor is that human sin is continual and constant. Thus, in order to acquire right standing with God through forgiveness, one must trust Jesus' promise of forgiveness and believe that he was serious and earnest when he announced God willingness and ability to forgive.

We appreciate Paul's witness. He is on to something deep and profound about human nature. That said, we find that Paul, like so many before and after who have utilized scripture to make a legitimate and narrow point, played a little fast and loose with the first two verses of this Psalm.[1] What do we mean? The reader will notice that these first two verses are composed of four lines of poetry. However, Paul only quotes the first three lines, leaving out the fourth and last.

> "And there is no intention to obfuscate."

Or, as the KJV has it, "and in whose spirit there is no guile." Now, we are not accusing Paul of dishonesty. He had a point to make and the three lines make the point well. When it comes to forgiveness, God does all the heavy lifting. Perhaps Paul feared that adding the last line would produce uncertainty and misunderstanding—uncertainty and misunderstanding that would force him to explain the final line and thus divert him from his main thesis. What sort of uncertainty might he have feared? I can't say for sure, but I can imagine that it went something like this:

> God forgives those who possess no guile. Guile is sin. To be without guile requires personal thought and effort. So, if those who are forgiven are those who have achieved life without guile, doesn't this suggest that human effort does play a role in having a right standing with God through repentance?

Paul, of course, knew such thinking to be nonsensical and that the line could not and should not be

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[1] A parade example of this is to be found in Ezra Taft Benson's fast and loose use of DC 84.[56-57] to focus more attention on the Book of Mormon—a worthy effort that ignored the larger point of the verses to make a more narrow point.

utilized in any such fashion. At the same time, the line does introduce an element of human agency in the forgiveness of sin. And it can be quite difficult to act upon, as we will see in the lines of verse that follow these four lines. But discussion of this difficult act must await a future homily associated, especially, with verse 3. For now, we wish to return to the line Paul chose not to quote.

"And there is no intention to obfuscate."

The word that we translate here as "obfuscate" (obfuscation) and that the KJV translates as "guile" is *r^{e}mîyâ*. This word means "deception," "deceit." The verb can mean to "dissemble," "pretend," "deceive." The word group most often "refers to a situation in which reality differs from appearance. Such situations involve interpersonal transactions in which someone acts or speaks consciously and deliberately to conceal or cover up certain facts."[2]

The question becomes, what is the nature of the forbidden obfuscation. What is being hidden through pretense and deceit? As the context will make clear, that which is being hidden is sinful rebellion. There is an unwillingness on the part of the sinner to face up to the reality of his or her life. Further, and worse, there is an unwillingness to acknowledge to God the reality of sinful rebellion in his or her life. This unwillingness is a sign of distrust in God.

This line, then, suggests that while only God can forgive sin unto salvation, the human plays a small role through the exercise of personal agency. Individuals must avoid the temptation to deny their sin—to self, certainly, but especially to God. For forgiveness to come, the sinner must give more credence to God's faithfulness than to their own unfaithfulness by confessing his or her sin openly, without deception.

We can liken this line's truth of human agency in relation to forgiveness with something Nephi taught toward the end of his writings. Nephi was aware of the Holy Spirit's role in cleansing sinners from sin and in guiding them in their successful navigation of a dark and misty world filled with temptation. Thus, Nephi taught them the role they played in receiving the Spirit with its cleaning and directing influence. The would-be-forgiven must "follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, *acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God* but with real intent…"[3]

The avoidance of deception and the truthful confession of sin does not earn the sinner God's forgiveness. God's forgiveness continues to be bound up in the very nature of His divine disposition. Confession of sin is an act of faith, of trust in the reality of God's forgiving disposition and the sincerity of His invitation and promise.

As will become apparent in the following verse, there was a time when the Psalmist engaged in refusal to confess and in attempting to deceive God. Only after much mental and spiritual anguish did he exercise his agency and do what had appeared to him before to be a humiliation: acknowledge, confess, and lay bare his sins. Upon doing so, he found, as we all can, that God is faithful; that He is, indeed, "slow to anger, and long suffering, and of a forgiving disposition, and does forgive iniquity, transgression and sin."[4]

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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[2] Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
[3] 2 Nephi 31.[13]. You see how I did it too… focused on the point, avoiding other items that would require explanation and thus divert me from my object?
[4] See *Lectures on Faith*, "Lecture 3."

In our first meditation on these two verses, we focused on the promise that God will gladden individuals through forgiving rebellion, sin, and guilt. This forgiveness is, first and foremost a consequence of God's generous divine character. However, an individual's exercise of personal agency in acknowledging and confessing sin plays a role. This confession of sin is not so much a command obeyed or unobeyed as it is a reflection of individual character. An individual unable or unwilling to confess will not possess the capacity to feel a sense of emotional or spiritual release that forgiveness brings.

We have spoken of "forgiveness" repeatedly. Yet, the word nowhere appears in the author's translation above. The word does appear in the King James, but, really, does not capture the meaning and imagery of the Hebrew word it tries to signify. English, "forgive," from *for-giefan,* literally means something like, "completely give," or "completely give up." This could almost make it seem that the sinner is the subject of the verb, suggesting that the sinner is responsible for the absence of sin because he or she has, themselves, "completely given up" their sin. While we believe very much in God's interest in our character development and in the importance of our own efforts in character development, it is not only true that "all *have* sinned" (Rom. 3.[23]). it is also true that we are "evil continually"[5] and "liable to sin continually" (Eth. 3.[2]). There can be no thought, then, or our "giving up" sin before "happiness" is found or bestowed. If we think happiness can only come to us when we, ourselves, have accomplished this impossible task, we will never know happiness.

We should note, then, that the Hebrew word that the KJV translates as "forgive" literally means "to lift," "carry," "take." "The main emphasis… resides in the notion of carrying or bearing." Further, "the fundamental meaning 'to carry a burden' manifests itself frequently."[6] We carry sin as a burden, it is true. But we cannot carry the burden off and away. We cannot lift it up and off our shoulders. As the Psalmist reminds us elsewhere, only God can perform this herculean task. Only He can put distance between us and our sins.

> "As distant as east is from west
> so far does he remove our offenses from us" (Ps. 103.[12]).

Therefore, the Hebrew's choice of, essentially, making us the object rather than the subject of the verb is significant. God is the weightlifter. Not us.

In the second line, the Psalter shifts metaphors from "carrying off" to "burying." The Hebrew word is *k̲āsâ*. "The primary meaning… is 'cover,' either to render invisible what is covered or to protect it or keep it…" In the present instance, it is certain that the idea is to render sin invisible rather than to protect it. Such hiding away, however, does not annihilate sin. It simply removes it from view. While there can be no thought of God hiding sin from Himself, we might, perhaps, think of God hiding the sin away from us. This is a powerful psychological act. For we humans have pretty good memories—not as good as God's perfect memory, but pretty good, nonetheless—especially when it comes to personal disappointment, failure, and error and the feelings that accompany them. We have a dickens of a time letting go and forgetting. We fear cutting ourselves the least bit of slack.

Yet, it was just this sort of "covering," "hiding," or "disappearing" that Alma the younger experienced through God's mercy.

> "And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed

[5] *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture 3, questions
[6] *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*.

up by the memory of my sins no more" (Al. 36.[19]).

Note that it wasn't the memory of *sin* that disappeared, but the memory and continued experience of the *pain of sinning*. Truth is what really was, what really is, and what really will be. Thus, the fact of sin's presence in our lives, even when it is no longer harrowing, or even no longer present, is not annihilated. It will always be part of the truth of us.

So, the truth of our sin always remains. God does not forget or loose his capacity to observe. But, the Psalmist testifies, He does make a conscious choice to disregard. He makes a choice to disregard sin when considering how to relate to us. Though He, if He wishes, can see our ever-present sin if he chooses to, He does not choose to. He can relate to us as if it were not there, though it is. Again, the Psalmist of Psalm 103 speaks to this truth.

Devoted and generous is YHWH;
slow to become angry and abounding in fidelity.
He is not always condemning.
He is not always annoyed.
He does not relate to us as our sins deserve
or deal with us as our iniquities might suggest" (Verses 8-10).

So, taking the first three lines of this Psalms together, we find that God carries our sins far away, barriers them far off, and then chooses to ignore their existence.

As we see in the final line, and as we discussed in the first meditation on these verses, our willingness to acknowledge our sin or, better, our sinful state, plays some role in the carrying away, burial, and disregard of our sin. It may be a tiny role, a very minor supporting acting role, in the carrying off, burial, and disregarding of sin, but it is a role, nonetheless. Still, we must acknowledge, the leading role belongs to God. He is the muscular hero who, alone, can bear the load away and bury it deep enough for it to never be seen or considered again. He knows it's there. He can't forget. But He will not be controlled by it. He will not allow it to control His relationship with those who also know it is there and trust His generosity enough to acknowledge it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 32.3-5

3When I kept silence,
my bones waxed old
through my roaring all the day long.
4For day and night
thy hand was heavy upon me:
my moisture is turned
into the drought of summer.
5I acknowledged my sin unto thee,
and mine iniquity have I not hid.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions unto the LORD;"
and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.

meditation

I don't know about you, but I can relate to the Psalmist's stubborn refusal to acknowledge his sins—both to self and to God. There might be many reasons for such refusal, but I have recognized three in myself. First, I have at times refused to acknowledge sin and error out of self-pride. I simply couldn't admit that I had erred. My ego was too wrapped up in the error. It was vitally important to me and my sense of worth that I be right in whatever it was I erred. At times, it was important to me that some other be blamed so that I could maintain my imagined superiority.

I have also refused to acknowledge sin and error out of a different sort of self-pride. Although I realized an error, in this pride I disliked and shunned the idea of being dependent upon another for forgiveness. This hatred of dependence, it seems to me, is at the very heart of Korihor's rejection of Christ. "There could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength…" (Al. 30.[17]). To accept Christ is to acknowledge that we are not sufficient in ourselves, but have needs that require our dependance upon another. Refusal to confess due to the distaste for dependence upon another is a doctrine of anti-Christ.

But, perhaps, the number one reason for my occasional refusal to acknowledge sin, I think, is a lack of faith or trust in God. I don't trust Him with my sin. I don't trust what He might do with it. I do not believe God is as merciful as scripture claims—which is immense, by the way. I do not believe He is as merciful as Jesus portrayed Him with his every mortal breath. I fall prey to one of the great sins, itself a form of idolatry and described by Zenock" "…this people… will not understand thy mercies which thou hast bestowed upon them because of thy Son" (Al. 33.[16]).

This distrust of God is, in my reading of it, the error Adam and Eve made in the garden. Satan put it into their hearts to distrust God; distrust that He was committed to them above all else. He was committed to them even if it meant pain to Himself. They yielded to and acted upon this distrust thus creating the fallen man—the man who distrusts God and thinks of God as an enemy.

Maybe I, maybe all of us can use this lent and Easter Season to revisit God's commitment to us, more faithfully confess our sins, and thus receive a remission of sins and become more like God's Son and more like God, Himself.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: February 15, 2024)

psalm 46

meditation 1— introductory

Like any psalm, there are undoubtedly any number of ways to structure Psalm 46. It will not do to be dogmatic about such things. Here, we present one way to structure the Psalm. We can divide Psalm 46 into four sections. In the first (vss. 1-3), the Psalmist reflects on a world in disorder and our ability to trust God even in the face of that disorder. In the second section (vss. 4-5), the Psalmist reflects on an ordered world that God creates in His city, Zion. The third section (Vss. 6-9) reflect once more on a disordered world and invites us to consider God's response to and power over it. In the final section (vss. 10-11), the Psalmist reflects once more on the ordered world of God's making.

Disorder/ Order/ Disorder/ Order

The Psalmist first reflects on a disordered world. He envisions a sea, its raging waters surging beyond their boundaries causing the earth to tremble and mountains to collapse. Here, the Psalmist would seem to draw our minds to the "uninhabitably disordered and desolate" world ruled by "chaotic waters of the abyss" that existed before God imposed order during creation (See Gen. 1.[2]).

In his first reflection on an ordered world, the Psalmist contrasts the world in disorder with the order that God brings to the city in which He dwells, i.e., Zion. Unlike the earth and mountains of the first section, God's city cannot be shaken. In contrast to the threatening and surging waters of the first section, God's city enjoys the benefits of a gentle and non-threatening river.

Next, the Psalmist reflects again on a disordered world. This time, however, his reflection rests not on the disorder of nature but the disorder of the human mind and the world it creates. Human disorder is seen in the plotting in which nations engage. They plot against each other. They plot against Zion. They plot against and revolt from God, Himself. Said plotting and rebellion is seen most clearly in their taking up of bow and spear and shield to engage in worldwide, near universal warfare.

The Psalmist ends with a reflection once more on an ordered world. Just as God ordered chaos during creation, God will order the world created by the disordered mind of humankind. God is a fortress against which no disorder can stand.

As we will see, each of these four sections sheds light upon the other three. The disorder of the natural world informs our understanding of the disorder of the human mind, the first being a sort of analogy to the second. The order found in the city of God is to be contrasted to the disorder found in the disordered world of the human mind. Order, rather in nature or in the human mind is the work of God. Just as He ordered nature, He will, in the end order the human mind. However difficult it can be to see, God rules. He can be trusted and relied upon, whether in ordered times and places or in disordered times and places. He will have the final say and the final victory.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: january 19, 2024)

meditation 2— psalm 46.[1-3]

trusting god in the face of instability

[1] ʾ[E]lōhîm is our strong refuge,
He has proven to be an incredible source of protection in distress.
[2]Therefore, we will not fear because earth trembles,
or the mountains tumble into the sea;
[3]its waters roar and roil,
mountain ranges quaking from its surge.

In these verses, the Psalmist reflects on an unstable and disordered world. He envisions a sea, its raging waters surging beyond their boundaries causing the earth to tremble and mountains to slide into the sea. As mentioned in our introductory meditation on this Psalm, the Psalmist seems to allude to the earth's pre-creation chaos and the possibility of it sliding back into that same chaos. Such reverse creation is not an abstraction.

In much of ancient Near Eastern mythology, creation is the result of conflict between a god and personified disorder and chaos—Tiamat, for example, being a Mesopotamian personification of disorder and chaos. While the mythological elements are mostly removed from the Hebrew Bible's accounts of creation, some of the imagery remains.

Genesis begins with the creator God, Elohim, finding the earth "uninhabitably disordered [*tōhû*] and desolate" with "darkness spread over the surface of the chaotic waters of the abyss [*tᵉhôm*]" (Gen. 1.[2]). God imposed order on this chaos, not through conflict or battle but through the power of His word. He gave order to the chaos, restrained the tumultuous abyss, and infused light into a darkened world. At the end of His labors, all was at rest. Peace and calm prevailed. Stability and order reigned. The ultimate manifestation of chaos, violence, conflict, and death—especially violent death—were nowhere to be found. Therefore, God was able to call the product of His efforts, "good."

This state of affairs, however, was short lived. Through human misdeed, represented by that of Adam and Eve, disorder re-entered in the form of death, the ultimate chaos. The human mind increasingly gave way to disorder. This disorder manifested itself in the form of cruelty and violence. Human cruelty and violence, not God, brought about the first human death—the *violent* death of Abel (See Gen. 4.[8]). Having gotten a foothold, the disorder of human cruelty and violence grew like a cancer—or spread like a flood, to use Biblical language and imagery.

> "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually… The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth" (Gen. 6.[5, 11-12]).

Finally, through human cruelty and violence chaos returned. The churning and tumultuous waters of chaos, whose power God had checked, broke free of their restraints. The world was flooded, becoming once more a churning tumultuous abyss (See Gen 6.[11-12, 19-20]). No doubt, the book's authors and readers took this flood literally. Many still do. For some it is an article of faith. So be it. But we see the universal flood waters of the abyss as a representation of the disordered mind of human beings giving itself to the disorder that cruelty and violence produce. The world was flooded, all right; flooded with human cruelty and violence. God did not flood the world, humans did. The chaos of death was everywhere. Human corpses littered the planet. Human society collapsed.

Genesis' story of societal collapse and destruction due to the flood of human cruelty and violence reminds

us that nature's disorder is related to human disorder, the first often serving as metaphor for the latter. This is true of the Babylonian creation myths involving Tiamat, where societal order is as much at stake as nature's order. We easily perceive the use of natural disorder to envision human/ societal disorder in Jeremiah 4. Here, Jeremiah describes societal collapse using language and imagery reminiscent of nature's disorder before creation. The collapse of Judah's society is portrayed as a kind of anti or reverse creation.

> "I saw the earth—and, consider this—it was uninhabitably disordered and desolate!
> I looked to the heavens, but there was no light.
> [24]I saw mountain ranges—and, consider this—they quaked,
> and every hill shook!
> [25]I looked—and, consider this—there were no people!
> And every bird of flight had flown off.
> [26]I looked—and, consider this—cultivated land was desert,
> and all its cities lie demolished before YHWH;
> before His intense anger!" (Jer. 4.[23-26], author's translation).

Here, Jeremiah is not really talking about nature's demise through disorder, but of human society's demise through disorder. The same is true of the reflection on disorder with which the Psalmist begins Psalm 46. The Psalmist uses the image of creation's disorder to reflect upon the disorder of the human mind; to reflect on human cruelty, violence, and warfare that is so disordering to society; and to reflect on God's ordering alternative. The analogy between nature's disorder and the disorder of the human mind can be discerned in the Psalmist transition from the former to the latter in verses 6-9.

> "Nations have plotted. Kingdoms have collapsed.
> He speaks. Earth reels.
> YHWH Ṣ[e]b̲āʾô̲t̲ is with us.
> Yaʿ[a]qōb's God is our impregnable fortress.
> Come! Contemplate YHWH's deeds!
> How He disconcerts the world—
> putting an end to worldwide war,
> He will break bow and chop up spear,
> and burn round shield with fire!"

Here, disorder is represented by the collapse of kingdoms due to their incessant plotting—plotting against Israel, plotting against each other, and plotting against God. The plotting is active and violent. Bow, spear, and shield are used in almost continuous and worldwide war.

We live in troubled times. The world is as dangerous, unstable, and disordered as at any time in my seven decades. Yes, nature seems to be in revolt against order. But even more threatening, and more pertinent to Psalm 46 is humankind's revolt against order, manifest most clearly in the disorder brought by human cruelty, violence, and warfare. In Psalm 46, the Psalmist acknowledges that the earth is indeed a danger place and that it is not only nature's disorder that threatens, but the disorder of the human mind. But every ounce of such sure acknowledgement is accompanied by an equal and countervailing and confident assertion that God can and will reorder the world as He did in the first instance during his creative labors. He intends to reorder the disordered human mind.

Elsewhere, the psalmist wonders,

> "When the foundations are being torn down,
> what can the just do?" (Ps. 11.[3])

In Psalm 46, the Psalmist reminds us—and that, repeatedly—what it is that we can do when disorder threatens. We need not fear the disorder of either nature or the cruelty, violence, and warfare of the human mind. For,

"ʾᴱlōhîm is our strong refuge,
He has proven to be an incredible source of protection in distress.
Therefore, we will not fear…

"YHWH Ṣᵉbāʾôt is with us.
Yaʿᵃqōb's God is our impregnable fortress" (vs. 7).

"Be calm and acknowledge that I am ʾᴱlōhîm.
I rule over the nations.
I rule over the world.
YHWH Ṣᵉbāʾôt is with us.
Yaʿᵃqōb's God is our impregnable fortress" (vss. 10-11).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: january 22, 2024)

meditation 3— psalm 46.4–5

god's stabilizing effect on zion

4 There's a river, its channels gladden ʾᴱlōhîm's city,
ʿElyôn's unrivaled dwelling place.
5 ʾᴱlōhîm is in it.
It cannot be shaken.
ʾᴱlōhîm provides it immediate aid.

Though the Psalmist does not fear the disorder, verses 1-3 addressed the instability and disorder that humans face in this world. That disorder was represented by a sea, its raging waters surging beyond their boundaries causing the earth to quake and mountains to slide into the sea. Though depicted in terms of natural catastrophe, this instability and disorder should not be read solely, or even primarily, in terms of the potential instability and disorder of nature. It is also reflective of human disorder and the instability and disorder that the human mind brings to human society. The association of nature's instability and disorder with that of the human mind is made clearer in verses 6-9.

But before more clearly addressing human instability and disorder brought on by the unstable and disordered human mind, the Psalmist draws a contrast and presents a picture of stability and order in verses 4-5. In these verses, the Psalmist presents the stability and order that are found in the city of God, Zion.

We look first at the literary images and allusions of stability and order that the Psalmist uses to highlight the contrast between the nations of this world and Zion. We can then look at the meaning of the allusions and imagery.

We note, first, the river with its channels that gladden God's city. This river is symbolic of stability and order. We are surely meant to see the river as calm and gently flowing. It is to be contrasted with the previous lines in which roaring and roiling seas cause disorder and destabilize mountains and mountain

ranges so that they quake and slide into the sea. Far from creating fear or anxiety as the unstable and disordered roaring and roiling seas threaten to do, the river that runs through God's city brings stability, order, and security to those who live there.

Second, we note the city's stability in that it "cannot be shaken." This should be seen as an allusion to and a direct contrast with the earth that quakes, and the mountains and mountain ranges that slide into the sea. Zion is not like other places. What ails other places does not ail Zion. Zion's stability and its uniqueness in resisting disorder is the result of God's presence in the city. His presence there includes His governance and His dispensation of laws that produce stability and order.

As we have noted, the natural disorder of verses 1-3 is to be read alongside the human disorder to which verses 6-9 allude. The first can be read as symbol for the second. In verses 6-9, the disordered human mind yields and commits itself to cruelty, violence, and near universal warfare. Such human disorder brings disorder to the nations just as the roaring and roiling waters of chaos bring disorder to earth, mountains, and mountain ranges. We will have more to say about this in upcoming meditations.

The city of God, however, does not practice this disordering human occupation of cruelty, violence, and incessant warfare in either its domestic affairs or in its foreign affairs. We can offer a few examples of how this absence of cruelty, violence, and warmongering is manifest both visa via Zion's relations with other nations and its own citizenry. We can consider, for example, the city's relation to violent warfare.

Enoch built a city. It too was called Zion. God dwelt and ruled from there. The stability that existed inside the city could not always keep its enemies from acting upon the worldly fetish for war. "Their enemies," we are informed, "came to battle against them." But Zion was not under the necessity of engaging in traditional cruel and violent warfare in return.

> "And so great was the faith of Enoch that he led the people of God, and their enemies came to battle against them; and he spake the word of the Lord, and the earth trembled, and the mountains fled, even according to his command; and the rivers of water were turned out of their course; and the roar of the lions was heard out of the wilderness; and all nations feared greatly, so powerful was the word of Enoch, and so great was the power of the language which God had given him" (Moses 7.[13]).

We wonder, here, if we hear an echo of this in this psalm's verses 6-9, where God speaks and earth reels, bringing about the collapse of nations and, finally, the end of worldwide war.

Anyway, in the example of Enoch's Zion, we are presented with bloodless battles. Such bloodless battles are more likely to deter than instigate additional warfare—at least those that involve Zion.

> "All nations feared greatly, so powerful was the word of Enoch, and so great was the power of the language which God had given him… and so great was the fear of the enemies of the people of God, that they fled and stood afar off" (Moses 7.[13-14]).

God's power, found in Zion, removed the necessity of cruel and violent warfare on the part of Zion. Inspired by Enoch and the city he established, Joseph Smith was invited to attempt to build a latter day Zion patterned after Enoch's. The character and power of this city, like Enoch's, would serve to discourage enemies from waring against it.

> "And it shall be said among the wicked: 'Let us not go up to battle against Zion, for the inhabitants of Zion are terrible; wherefore we cannot stand'" (DC 45.[68])

The consequence would be a community that breaks the disorder of cruelty, violence, and warfare.

> "Among the wicked… every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must needs flee unto Zion for safety. And there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and *it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another*" (DC 45.[69-70]).

It is a test of the faith of Zion's citizenry to believe and live nonviolent lives themselves and to send emissaries out into the nations of this world to extend the invitation of nonviolence to them as well.

> "Therefore, be not afraid of your enemies, for I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me. *Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace*, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children…" (DC 98.[14-16]).

If Zion's citizenry can exercise such faith as to reject violence themselves and thereby extend effective invitations of nonviolence to others as well, they can change the world.

> "All nations will come streaming to it;
> many peoples will come, saying:
> Come! Let's go up to Yahweh's mountain;
> to the temple of the God of Ya'qōb.
> He will teach us his ways,
> and we shall walk in his paths.
> For Torah will come out of Ṣîyôn,
> and the word of Yahweh from Yᵉrûšālāyim.
> **4**Then will He mediate between nations;
> He will reconcile many peoples,
> so that they will retool their swords into plow blades
> and their spears into pruning instruments.
> One nation will no longer lift the sword against another,
> nor will they any longer train for warfare" (Is. 2.[2-4]).

Zion is the place where the spirit of cruelty, violence, and warfare go to die.

Zion also breaks the instability and disorder of cruelty, violence, and war through its ordered domestic principles. For example, we are informed that "the Lord called his people ZION, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them" (Moses 7.[18]).

No doubt, Zion's citizenry was "of one heart and one mind" about a whole host of things. Their "righteousness," or proper conduct in behavior encompassed many aspects of life. But chief among the areas of agreement and unity among Zion's citizenry had to do with matters of economics. Wealth should be distributed in such a way as to do away with poverty and create economic equality.[1]

Now, there can be no doubt that economic inequality is a major cause for disunity and the instability and disorder it brings. This is true at the domestic level, as in the "natural order of things" individual citizens engage in a sort of battle over resources. Envy, prideful and winner take all competition, cruelty, and conflict flourishes in such environments. Unity dies. It is also true at the international level of foreign affairs. Most often, the instability and disorder of violence and warfare ensues among the nations due to the battle for resources.

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[1] We have discussed this passage and the ideas of redistribution of wealth found in the Doctrine and Covenants many times in meditation and homily.

God knows how the natural, disordered mind of humans works. He knows it leads to the instability and disorder of cruelty, conflict, violence, and, ultimately, war. These are as destabilizing to the existence of a healthy and enduring society as the raging and roiling sea are to land, mountains, and mountain ranges. God has an antidote for the instability and disorder of the disordered human mind. That antidote is found in Zion and the principles upon which it is based. Psalm 46 compares and contrasts the disorder of this world, its kingdoms, and their near universal surrender to the disorder of cruelty, violence, and warfare with Zion and the stability, order, and peace that flow like a river. The stability, order, and peace that fill and encompass Zion is the consequence of its unrivaled ruler and the impact he has on the life of those who accept His rule, not only in the city, but, more importantly, in their hearts,

Oh that the world would give heed to and act upon the Psalmist's inspired witness.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: january 27, 2024)

meditation 4— psalm 46.6–9

God's destabilizing effect on the world

6 Nations have plotted. Kingdoms have collapsed.
He speaks. Earth reels.
7 YHWH Ṣᵉbā'ôṯ is with us.
Yaʿᵃqōb's God is our impregnable fortress.

8 Come! Contemplate YHWH's deeds!
How He disconcerts the world—
9 putting an end to worldwide war,
He will break bow and chop up spear,
and burn round shield with fire!

As we have seen in our previous meditations on Psalm 46, though the Psalmist does not fear it (vs. 2) and knows that God frees Zion of and from it (vss. 4-5), he nonetheless knows that the world can be and mostly is an unstable and disordered place. He imagined this instability and disorder in verses 2-3.

"Therefore, we will not fear because earth quakes,
or the mountains tumble into the sea;
its waters roar and roil,
mountain ranges quaking from its surge."

This harkens back to the disorder of earth's primordial times when the earth was "uninhabitably disordered and desolate," and the "chaotic waters of the abyss" dominated (See Gen. 1.[2]). Though God ordered the earth and made it not only livable but "very good," chaos and disorder re-exerted themselves in the time of Noah.

The disorder that the Psalmist's imagines—modeled on that of earth's primordial times and of Noah's time—is symbolic. As we will see, the disorder has less to do with nature's upheavals than with the upheaval of the human mind and the cruelty, violence, and warfare it produces. We see the disordering power of human cruelty and violence in Genesis 6.

> "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually… The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth" (see vss. 5, 11-12).

As the result of this flood of human cruelty and violence, society collapsed. The land was left without inhabitant. Societal collapse and mass death as the result of human cruelty, violence, and warfare is a repeated refrain in human history. Following is but one scriptural example. Though there are no "floodwaters," this narrative should be understood as telling essentially the same story of human cruelty and violence, with their consequent societal collapse, as that of Genesis' famous "flood" narrative.

In the Book of Ether, two great armies face off in extended warfare: one is the army of the more established king, Coriantumr. The other is that of the upstart, Shiz. "And so great and lasting had been the war, and so long had been the scene of bloodshed and carnage," we are told, "that the whole face of the land was covered with the bodies of the dead" (14.[21]). At one point, in a moment of rare lucidity, Coriantumr reflects upon the fact that "there had been slain by the sword already nearly two millions of his people, and he began to sorrow in his heart; yea, there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children" (15.[2]).

Year after year, month after month, week after week, day after day the two armies, enraged and bent on cruelty, violence, and warfare, face off. Reminiscent of Genesis Gen. 6.[11-12], the chronicler, Ether, informs us that "the Spirit of the Lord had ceased striving with them, and Satan had full power over the hearts of the people; for they were given up unto the hardness of their hearts, and the blindness of their minds that they might be destroyed; wherefore they went again to battle" (15.[19]).

After each day's long hard battles, "when the night came they were drunken with anger, even as a man who is drunken with wine; and they slept again upon their swords" (15.[22]). Nevertheless "on the morrow they fought again" (15.[23]). So powerful was the flood of cruelty, violence, and warfare that they fought until their millions became 121, then 59, and then 2. And then, finally, there was but 1. Just one. One survivor (See 15.[23-32])!

Tell me that is not "biblical," worthy of equal press with Genesis' flood narrative; the death and destruction flowing from a flood of human cruelty, violence, hatred, anger, and warfare. Both narratives bear witness to the disorder of the human mind and the disorder it brings to the world through cruelty, violence, and warfare. This human disorder, or course, was not limited to or unique to the time of either Noah or Coriantumr. Even with the post-flood reordering, God lamented, "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8.[21]).

This is reminiscent of the preacher's tragic observation.

> "…The heart of the sons of men
> is full of evil,
> and madness is in their heart
> while they live…" (Ecc. 9.[3])

In one of his tragedies, Seneca, the Roman writer, philosopher, and politician had one of his characters lament as follows.

> "This is the world,
> brutal and cruel, that Troy tried to withstand.
> Cruelty wins in the end.

Our little clearings of civilization may seem real,
but mindless wilderness always lurks,
may take its time,
but in the end overwhelms all our pretensions to decency.
We revert to beastliness."[2]

This, indeed, is the world that human disorder has created. The disorder of human cruelty, violence, and, above all, warfare, is very much on the Psalmist mind in Psalm 46, and is especially highlighted in today's reading.

Here, in verse 6, the Psalmist acknowledges and laments that "nations plot. He would be most concerned with the fact that they plot against Israel. But he is also aware and saddened by the fact that they plot against each other. With bow and spear and shield humans engage in "worldwide war" (vs. 9). As a result, kingdoms collapse, and earth reels just as it did in verses 1-3. Human cruelty, violence, and warfare are like the raging and roiling waters of the first three verses.

The human occupation and preoccupation with war does not bring order and stability. It brings only disorder and instability. It brings death. As Edwin Starr asked, then answered in song some fifty years ago,

"War… good God, y'all
what is it good for?
Absolutely nothing."

But this reality has not stopped humankind from devoting much of its resources and energies to the pursuit of war. Anyone coming from outside this globe—like God, for instance—might, first and foremost, characterize the planet as one of warmongering. If we doubt this, we should probably take our heads out of the sand. The fact is, scripture often characterizes planet earth as a stage for human cruelty, violence, and war.

In learning of his father, Lehi's, dream, commonly known as the tree of life vision, Nephi wished to understand the meaning of the dream and its many elements. In answer to his inquiries, Nephi saw a series of fourteen visions. He learned much from these visions. In these visions, Nephi's angelic guide repeatedly characterized Nephite, Lamanite, and, indeed, human history as one of "wars and rumors of wars," "great slaughters," and "contentions." These went on for "many generations" not only among Book of Mormon peoples but "among all the nations and kindreds of the earth." (See, for example, 1 Ne. 12.[2-3, 21]; 14.[15-16]).

As if to prove the angelic insight, Mormon described his generation as "thirst[ing] after blood and revenge continually; of being "without order and without mercy;" of being "brutal, sparing none;" of being "without principle, and past feeling," seeking for blood and revenge" (See, Moroni 9.[5, 18-20, 23]). There was, he charged, "blood and carnage spread throughout all the face of the land… and it was one complete revolution" (Mormon 2.[8]). Indeed, he lamented, it was just such "wickedness and abomination [that] has been before mine eyes ever since I have been sufficient to behold the ways of man" (Mormon 2.[18]).

Again, one hears echoes of pre-flood society and of what Noah might have said had he left behind a record. All the human disorder that Mormon described ended, as it always must, as it did in Noah's and Coriantumr's time, with the complete collapse and disappearance of society.

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[2] Seneca, *The Tragedies*, Vol. 1, "Trojan Women," Lines 985-990, David R. Slavitt and Palmer Bovie

We of what some call the latter days or end times have perpetuated the disorder. In 1832 it looked like the American south might attempt to leave the United States. While southern rebellion was postponed for a generation, the conflict worked on the mind of Joseph Smith. He saw that, sooner or later, "the rebellion of South Carolina [would] eventually terminate in the death and misery of many souls" (DC 87.[1]). But this, the American Civil War, was but the tip of the iceberg. Joseph's discernment went far beyond this tragedy. "The time will come," he saw, "that *war will be poured out upon all nations*, beginning at this place" (DC 87.[2]). Joseph discerned that the latter-days were to be an era of war and rumor of war. Time has vindicated his insight.

> "And thus, with the sword and by bloodshed the inhabitants of the earth shall mourn; and with famine, and plague, and earthquake, and the thunder of heaven, and the fierce and vivid lightning also, shall the inhabitants of the earth be made to feel the wrath, and indignation, and chastening hand of an Almighty God, until the consumption decreed hath made a full end of all nations" (DC 87.[6]).

We note, here, the same mix of natural and human disorder that we see in Psalm 46, with the psalm moving from the disorder of nature in verses 1-3 to the disorder of the human mind in verses 6-9. Sadly, we must also note the Doctrine and Covenants' implication that "the sword" and "bloodshed" are the consequence of a divine decree, making God responsible for and motivating human violence and warfare. This notion is even more strongly asserted in DC 63.

> "I have sworn in my wrath, and decreed wars upon the face of the earth, and the wicked shall slay the wicked, and fear shall come upon every man" (Vs. 33).

Such ideas about God are simply absurd and must be rejected. God does not stir up anger and hate, cruelty, violence, and warfare, as we have discussed on several other occasions. In fact, it is quite the opposite.

> "For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another. Behold, this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine, that such things should be done away" (3 Ne. 11.[29-30]).

The idea that humans need outside, much less divine encouragement to hate one another and engage in warfare flies in the face of thousands of years of human history. Far from encouraging such a hateful, warmongering history, God mourns it. And, as we see in this Psalm, far from encouraging it, He intends to put a stop to it, however much the end of warmongering vexes the nations of this world.

> "How He disconcerts the world—
> putting an end to worldwide war…"

How very irritating peace is to a disordered world addicted to war!

Still, our observation of the world throughout history and today leads us to accept the characterization of human society as being dominated by cruelty, violence, war preparations, rumors of war, and outright warfare. This human psychosis brings disorder and desolation to the world.

Earlier, we mentioned Lehi and his dream. In his dream, he saw "a dark and dreary wilderness." With time, Lehi realized that he, himself, was traveling through this same "dark and dreary waste." He eventually found relief from the darkness and the dreariness, but not before he had traveled "for the space of many hours in darkness" (see 1 Ne. 8.[4-8]). He sadly realized that "numberless concourses of people" were also engulfed in the same "great mist of darkness" as he had been" (See 1 Ne. 8.[21-23]). Lehi's son, Nephi, was taught that this wilderness waste with its mist of darkness was a representation of this world

with its Satanically inspired temptations. No doubt, the temptations took in a plethora of invitations to bad behavior. But chief among them has to be the temptation to cruelty, violence, and war, just as Lucifer promises in the LDS temple endowment: "I will buy up armies and navies and reign with blood and horror on the earth."

Little wonder that that same endowment speaks of the world into which Adam and Even were cast as a "lone and dreary world."

Jesus was "cast" into this same world. God, John taught, sent Jesus, the "Light of the world," to earth as a light that "shineth in darkness." But, "the darkness comprehended it not…. He was in the world… and the world knew him not" (See Jn. $1.^{4\text{-}10}$).

In each of these examples, scripture describes the world in which we live. It is a world as humankind has made it. It may be that "men are, that they might have joy" (See 2 Ne. $2.^{25}$), but we must find that joy as we slog our way through a "dark," "dreary," "lonely," cruel, violent, and war-ravaged world.

In this 46th psalm, the Psalmist too recognizes the darkness, the dreariness, and the loneliness of a disordered man-made world filled with the cruelty and violence of human warfare. The inclination is to become fearful in the face of such profound and enduring human disorder. But the Psalmist rejects fear of disorder, whatever its origin. He keeps his sight firmly fixed upon God. This will be the topic over our next meditation.

God will put an end to war, however contrary that end may be to the world order of a disordered world. Those who follow him come out of peaceful Zion and renounce war. Like their King, Zion's residents serve as ambassadors of peace, becoming princes and princesses of peace. They must not get sucked into the instability and disorder of human cruelty, violence, and warfare lest the earth be left without the savor of salt and all get trampled under foot.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: january 30, 2023)

meditation 5— psalm $46.^{10\text{–}11}$

god's stabilizing effect on zion

^{10}Be calm and acknowledge that I am ʾᴱlōhîm.
I rule over the nations.
I rule over the world.
^{11}YHWH Ṣᵉbāʾôṯ is with us.
Yaʿᵃqōb's God is our impregnable fortress.

As we understand it, Psalm 46 is a reflection on and contrast of order/ stability and disorder/ instability. God creates order, as He did at creation and as He does in Zion. Mankind creates disorder over every square inch of planet earth—and, it appears, it will do if and when it ventures out into the cosmos.

In reflecting on disorder, the Psalmist imagines the disorder of nature. He thinks of the earth quaking, of mountains sliding into the sea, and of the havoc ocean waters cause as they roar and roil over their boundaries (2-3). From this disorder, the Psalmist's mind turns to the order God establishes in Zion (4-5) and then, quickly, to the disorder of the human mind. The Psalmist is not under necessity of using his imagination when he turns to human disorder. The disorder is obvious. It is reflected in the plotting of

nation against nation (vs. 6), in their dependence on and use of bow, spear, and shield (vs. 9)—in their buying up armies and navies and reigning with blood and horror on the earth"—and in their engagement in "worldwide war" (vs. 9). We are to associate the disorder and consequent desolation of nature and the disorder and consequent desolation of the human mind with each other, the former a type or shadow of the latter.

In light of the unstable nature of this world, one might feel intimidated and yield to the spirit of fear. But not the Psalmist. God has spoken peace to his mind.

> "Be calm and acknowledge that I am ʾElōhîm.
> I rule over the nations.
> I rule over the world."

Even when forces of disorder are overwhelming, he refuses to fear and stays focused on God.

> "I'll not be intimidated though a force of ten thousand
> surround and array themselves against me" (Ps. 3.[6]).

Even when others offer strong reasons for fear, the Psalmist stays fixed on God and His word of comfort.

> "It is to YHWH that I look for safety.
> How, then, can you say to me:
> 'Flee to the hills, a helpless bird'?" (Ps. 11.[1]).

But the Psalmist is not helpless. He has God as a protection against instability and disorder. This psalm begins with this refrain.

> "ʾElōhîm is our strong refuge,
> He has proven to be an incredible source of protection in distress.
> Therefore, we will not fear…"

He returns to this theme and witness in the middle of the psalm.

> "YHWH Ṣeḇāʾôṯ is with us.
> Yaʿaqōb's God is our impregnable fortress" (7).

And he concludes with it to end the psalm.

> "YHWH Ṣeḇāʾôṯ is with us.
> Yaʿaqōb's God is our impregnable fortress."

This Psalm reflects upon God's power over disorder and chaos; that of nature, yes, but more central to the spirit of the psalm, that of the disorder of the frenzied and disordered human mind with its obsession and occupation with cruelty, violence, and incessant and global warfare.

As Israel stood on the shores of the Red Sea, faced the cruelty, violence, and war of the overwhelming Egyptian military might, and felt a deep trepidation and insecurity, Moses spoke God's truth to Israel.

> "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace" (Ex. 14.[13-14]).

A millennium and half later, Jesus encouraged his disciples who might fear the world's violent persecution.

> "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul."

But, at the same time, he did issue a warning" "Rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10.[28]).

The nations and kingdoms of this world present powerful arguments to justify their cruelty, their violence, and their warfare. They are enemies of humankind and a sure threat to its continuance. Most fall prey to their tempting propaganda. Those who fall prey often remain enthralled at the siren's call until they lose their soul to the power of disorder and chaos.

Somewhat unusual, this psalm offers no human petition to God. It restricts itself to the Psalmist's observations about the cruelty, violence, and warfare of this world's nations, the instability and disorder they bring to the world, and his confidence in God's power over it. But we find petitions elsewhere and often. We end this meditation with one of them. We can make it our own.

> "Hear, ʾElōhîm, my cry for help.
> Be attentive to my prayer.
> From the edge of earth, I call out to You, being deeply disheartened.
> Guide me into a mountain stronghold high above me.
> To be sure, You have been my refuge,
> a powerful defense against the enemy.
> I wish to always find refuge in Your temple.
> May I find shelter under cover of Your wings" (Ps. 61.[1-4]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 2, 2024)

Psalm 51.[1-6]

[1]Have mercy upon me, O God,
according to thy lovingkindness:
according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies
blot out my transgressions.
[2]Wash me throughly from mine iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
[3]For I acknowledge my transgressions:
and my sin is ever before me.
[4]Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
and done this evil in thy sight:
that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest,
and be clear when thou judgest.
[5]Behold, I was shapen in iniquity;
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
[6]Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts:
and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

meditation

Words matter. There is no doubt about the Psalmist's principal concern in Psalm 51. His vocabulary gives the game away as he, in just six short verses, confesses his evil, confesses twice of his transgressions, twice of his iniquity, and thrice of his sin. Clearly, he is consumed, even obsessed by a sense of personal failure.

The Psalm's superscript has it that it is King David doing the obsessing and confessing. Some, therefore, unwisely dismiss the Psalm's usefulness under the assumption that David is a sinner of a different order than they. Even if true, which is debatable, we are all just the sort of sinners who often feel much like the Psalmist as we consider our sins. Whatever the nature of our failures and sins, they can become consuming. It can feel as though they define us.

No one cared, for example, how kind or how gentle or how compassionate a leper was. Notwithstanding whatever good qualities the leper might have possessed, he or she remained defined by just one attribute: leprosy. The leper was made to shout, "Unclean, unclean, unclean," not matter how kind he or she was. There was no shouting, "kind, kind, kind." Contrary to such examples, we are not defined by our sins any more than we are defined by our positive traits.

So, no, it doesn't matter if it is David feeling overwhelmed by sin. We can all relate to the feelings of desperation expressed in this Psalm. And all of us can benefit by imitating the Psalmist's example of sincere regret and faithful confession. However aware of and obsessed by his sins, the Psalmist remained aware of and moved by another, greater truth. He could make faithful confession of sin because he knew that God is merciful. He knew that God can be trusted with sin when one feels its soul wound. He knew that God would respond to sin with lovingkindness. He knew what John knew: "if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart" (1 Jn. 3.[20]).

None other than Joseph Smith experienced a regret about sin that was every bit as obsessive as that of the Psalmist. He also possessed a trust of God every bit as impressive as that found in the Psalmist. In his earliest account of that grand and redemptive vision now known as the First Vision, Joseph reports

> "My mind become excedingly (sic) distressed for I become convicted of my Sins… and I felt to mourn for my own Sins…"

As a result of this distress, conviction, and mourning, Joseph

> "cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and ~~to~~ obtain mercy."

As a result of his plea for a merciful forgiveness of sins, Joseph testified,

> "the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in [the] attitude of calling upon the Lord [in the 16th year of my age] a pillar of ~~fire~~ light above the brightness of the Sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the [Lord] opened the heavens upon me and I Saw the Lord and he Spake unto me Saying *Joseph [my Son] thy Sins are forgiven thee*. go thy [way] walk in my Statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucifyed (sic) for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life" (Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith,* pp. 5-7).

Several years later, on the night of Moroni's first visit, Joseph found himself, once more ensnared by sin. On that night, Joseph pondered his "many foolish *errors*," his "*weakness (twice)*," his "*foibles* of human nature," his "*sins* (twice)," his "imperfections," and his "*follies*." He was dismayed at the "*temptations*" to which he yielded. Joseph's acknowledgement of sin is not to be dismissed because it was "nonmalignant." Certainly, Joseph did not, indeed could not dismiss it. By his own witness, his errors, weakness, foibles, sins, imperfections, and follies caused him to feel "*guilty*," "*offensive* in the sight of God," and "*condemned*" (See JSH. 1.[28-29])." This language is very revealing and is in keeping with the Psalmist's witness found in Psalm 51.

But, like the Psalmist, Joseph could see past his spiritual vulnerabilities and frailty. He too could trust in God's "loving kindness" and "tender mercies." Because he had encountered God and experienced His merciful forgiveness of sins in his "First Vision," Joseph tells us that

> "I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him…" (JSH. 1.[29]).

Like the Psalmist, Joseph discovered that when one trusts God with sin and makes open confession, amazing, unpredictable, and unexpected things happen. Here's hoping that all of us have amazing, unpredictable, and unexpected happenings during this Lent and Easter Season through our trust in God and our faithful confession of sin.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 27, 2024)

Psalm 51.[7-12, 16-17]

[7]Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean:
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
[8]Make me to hear joy and gladness;
that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.
[9]Hide thy face from my sins,
and blot out all mine iniquities.
[10]Create in me a clean heart, O God;
and renew a right spirit within me.
[11]Cast me not away from thy presence;
and take not thy holy spirit from me.
[12]Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation;
and uphold me with thy free spirit.

[16]For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it:
thou delightest not in burnt offering.
[17]The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:
a broken and a contrite heart,
O God, thou wilt not despise.

Meditation

We are all probably familiar with a great number of the Law of Moses' stipulations concerning sacrifice. Among them was the stipulation that for a sacrifice to be acceptable to God and accomplish whatever ends was being sought through the sacrificial act, then the sacrifice had to be perfect. It must needs be, according to the priestly language, "without spot" or "blemish" of any kind. Thus, any animal under consideration for sacrifice required a meticulous and expert examination by a priest. If any flaw was found, it was rejected as unsuitable for sacrifice. This priestly mediation not only increased the chances that the sacrifice would be successful in its intent, it also saved the offeror from the humiliation and perhaps even angry retribution of an offended God presented with an inappropriate sacrifice.

I have wondered if an awareness of God's rigid expectations for a perfect sacrifice is part of the reason for the misunderstanding that I believe exists about the meaning of a "broken heart," "broken spirit," and "contrite heart." Because we sure do work hard to formulate these into something good and wholesome. Something unblemished.

Let's think about the "broken heart," the "broken spirit," and the "contrite heart" in relation to the Psalmist's needs and hopes in Psalm 51. In this Psalm the Psalmist pleads for forgiveness. His need is great—and not because or just because he is David. In this very brief psalm, he confesses of an "evil" in him. He mentions his "transgressions" twice and his "iniquity" or "iniquities" four times. He speaks of sin five times. Because of the extensive evil, transgressions, iniquities and sins, the Psalmist fears the very real possibility of being "cast away" from the presence of God (not only in a future life but in this one) and of losing God's "holy spirit." He has already lost any hope of "salvation"—which is, at least in part, victory over evil, transgression, iniquity, and sin.

Clearly, the Psalmist is not unblemished or whole. He is blemished and broken. He is shattered to pieces, pulverized—this is the nuance of Hebrew word translated as, "contrite." The Psalmist is willing to make any sacrifice to be forgiven, to be released from his blemished and broken and shattered self. But he has come to the conclusion that animal sacrifice will not do the trick. Another sacrifice is needed. It is a startling sacrifice. A daring sacrifice. He must place his brokenness, his own broken heart, upon God's holy altar. If he will muster the courage to do so, he has somehow been assured, God will not,

notwithstanding the Law's demand for things unblemished and whole, "despise" his offering.

Now, we know from his language that his heart is blemished and broken—excessively so. So, there can be no thought of his putting anything unblemished and whole upon the altar. The offering is not "humility," or, at least, not our domesticated version of humility, for then there would be no concern about God despising it. Even if one wished to turn the Psalmist's acknowledgement of sin into some kind of "humility," it is (and yes, this is somewhat awkward) humiliating humility. To put my brokenness out there like that? To have everyone see it? To put it on display for *GOD* to see, undisguised? That's no tame version of humility. It is wild. Undomesticated. Humiliating.

Yes, it takes a good bit of trust in God to offer something as blemished and broken as a heart that has been enmeshed in sin. It is most difficult to believe. Hence, I think, our disguising the very real brokenness symbolized by a "broken heart" as some kind of cute and cuddly humility. Our faith is sufficient to put a cute and cuddly humility on display for God to see. But this interpretation of a "broken hearts is just camouflage. An attempt to "cover," like Adam and Eve's fig leaves, "our sins," "gratify our pride, our vain ambitions" (See DC 121.[37]). To save ourselves the humiliation of our evil and transgression and iniquity and sin.

Let provides the opportunity to be real and to put off the camouflage, step into sackcloth, and cover ourselves in ashes—signs, all, that we are uncomfortable with our current state, but that we are willing to trustingly present our uncleanness, our brokenness, our shattered selves to God in the belief that He is not only mightier than our sins, but gentler than our sins deserve. Indeed, as the Psalmist says elsewhere,

> "He hath not dealt with us after our sins;
> nor rewarded us according to our iniquities" (Ps. 103.[10]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 13, 2024)

psalm 51.13-15

13Then will I teach transgressors thy ways;
and sinners shall be converted unto thee.
14Deliver me from bloodguiltiness,
O God, thou God of my salvation:
and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.
15O Lord, open thou my lips;
and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

meditation

We do not know what sins tortured Enos such that they drove him to his knees in prayer that lasted "all the day long… and when the night came [he] did still raise [his] voice" (En. 1.[4]). They could not have seemed insignificant to him. We do know that his "guilt was swept away" as God spoke peace to his soul through sure forgiveness (See En. 1.[5-6]).

We know more about the sins of Alma the younger. They felt, he confesses, like murder. Enos's day and night prayer was tame compared with Alma's "three days and… three nights" during which he was "racked, even with the pains of a damned soul" (Al. 36.[16]). Finally, he was redeemed of God, putting an end to his excruciating ordeal. He testified,

> "I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!" (Al. 36.[19-20]).

As a result of their personal encounter with the God of mercy, both men committed themselves to praying and laboring among their fellow man so that they too might discover and experience the good news that they had discovered in their heavenly encounter.

> "And after I, Enos, had heard these words ["thy sins are forgiven"], my faith began to be unshaken in the Lord; and I prayed unto him with many long strugglings for my brethren, the Lamanites" (En. 1.[11]).

> "Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost" (Al. 36.[24]).

The reader might wonder why we have spent time on these two men and their experiences in a meditation focused on Psalm 51. Probably, though, he or she has not wondered long. Poetry can seem a little too indirect. Narrative with its rather concrete storytelling is much more direct and accessible. In these two Book of Mormon narratives, we have concrete examples that closely match the poetic voice and sentiments of the Psalmist.

We do not know the exact nature of the "evil," the "transgressions," the "iniquities," or the "sins" that tortured this psalm's composer (we should not be too quick to assign composition of this Psalm to King David or be so reckless as to imagine its confession of sin to be anything but universal, whether uttered publicly in ancient Israel's temple or in the dark privacy of a modern-day closet). But we do know that like Enos and Alma the Psalmist was consumed by sins. And we do know that he committed himself to the same post-redemption activity as his two Book of Mormon brethren.

> "Then will I teach transgressors thy ways;

and sinners shall be converted unto thee."

All three make a personal choice to function as a light to the world around them. In so choosing, they fulfill the very purpose for which God called Israel. God stated the call like this to Abraham,

"I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee,
and make thy name great;
and *thou shalt be a blessing:*
"And I will bless them that bless thee,
and curse him that curseth thee:
and *in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed* (Gen. 12.[2-3]).

As in Psalm 51, the various Psalmists frequently demonstrate their knowledge and acceptance of this mission. Here is another example of the Psalmists' awareness and acceptance of the mission.

'ělohîm! May you show us grace, and bless us!
May you lighten us with your presence
so that how you conduct yourself might be known throughout the earth;
made known to all peoples, the victory you can bring.
That the nations might acknowledge you,
all peoples yield to you;
that hosts of people might raise a shout of joy
when you govern the nations justly,
when you supply direction to the peoples of the earth.
That the nations might acknowledge you,
every people yield to you" (Ps. 67.[1-5]; author's translation).

Now, this is an "every member a missionary" calling that one can get behind. It is not about the show and tell of an institution or its leadership, both of which have shown themselves, and that, repeatedly, to be flawed like every other institution and their leadership. Rather it is about showing and proclaiming the most glorious Being imaginable—a Being interested in, willing involved with, and compassionate toward all his children even beyond imagining.

We can utilize the Lent and Easter seasons to deepen our appreciation for this compassionate Being, as well as our commitment to becoming faithful emissaries of Him. Perhaps during this season of renewal we can more openly and energetically "sing aloud of [His] righteousness and "open our mouths and "shew forth [His] praise," knowing that He has no flaws and will never be a source of regret or embarrassment. Now, that's something to shout about!

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 15, 2024)

Psalm 63.[1-8]

[1]O God, thou art my God;
early will I seek thee:
my soul thirsteth for thee,
my flesh longeth for thee
in a dry and thirsty land,
where no water is;
[2]To see thy power and thy glory,
so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary.
[3]Because thy lovingkindness is better than life,
my lips shall praise thee.
[4]Thus will I bless thee while I live:
I will lift up my hands in thy name.
[5]My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness;
and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips:
[6]When I remember thee upon my bed,
and meditate on thee in the night watches.
[7]Because thou hast been my help,
therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice.
[8]My soul followeth hard after thee:
thy right hand upholdeth me.

Meditation

He must be extraordinary. This God of whom the Psalmist speaks. The Psalmist "seeks" this God as if He were food. He "thirsts" for this God as if He were the last drop of water. He "longs" for this God as if His absence occasions the threat of death. He "clings to" and "closely follows" this God, wanting no distance between them.

This God's commitment to the Psalmist means more to him that life itself. This God's presence is like partaking of the tastiest of meals. The Psalmist is simply unrelenting in his need and desire to know and experience this God. When the day is past and gone—a day in which this God has dominated his every thought and desire and hope—this God continues to fill his mind. Even sleep cannot separate this God from the Psalmist's thoughts and hopes.

I don't know about you, but such testimony as this makes my mouth water. It fills me with an insatiable hunger and thirst. It lights a fire inside of me. Even in those moments of deepest uncertainty and doubt, this witness, like so many others, calls to me. It draws me back into the light of faith and hope and love. It fills me with the strength to trudge on. Endure the darkness. Wait for the dawn.

This God, if He is out there, is worth every discomfort, worth enduring every uncertainty in order to find Him who can at times seem so unsearchable, but who may be nearer than we know.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 69.1-5

[1]Rescue me, ʾĕlōhîm;
for the water has risen right up to my neck.
[2]I am sunk in such deep mud
that it is impossible to keep my footing.
I have fallen into unfathomably deep waters
in which a swift current sweeps over me.
[3]I am exhausted from screaming for help.
My throat is raw,
my eyesight fails
from waiting for my God.
[4]More numerous than the hair on my head
are those who hate me without reason.
They are intent on my annihilation—
my enemies without a cause.
What I had not stolen
I was forced to return.
[5]ʾĕlōhîm, you know my folly,
and my guilt is not hidden from you (author's translation).

meditation

Some years ago while visiting lake Michigan with family, I was enjoying the soothing bob of waves as I floated on one of those small inflatable rafts. Suddenly I heard the roar of an engine. Looking around, I realized that I had floated further from shore than I realized and that I was now in the path of an oncoming motorboat, its bow raised high as the boat sped along the top of the waves. I could not see the driver and realized that if I couldn't see him, he couldn't see me. I managed to paddle myself far enough that I was not struck by the boat, but it was close enough that I was caught up in the boat's wake and struck by the wake's churning waves. I was thrown from the inflatable raft. The raft went flying into the air and came down some distance from me. The boat driver never even knew I was there.

I am not the greatest of swimmers. The lake's natural waves combined with the waves in the wake of the boat made swimming to the inflatable difficult. I gulped a good bit of Lake Michigan's water as I struggled to make my way to the raft. I will never forget the moment when it occurred to me that I might just drown before I reached the safety of the raft. The horror that coursed through my mind and body was almost debilitating. It wasn't so much the thought of dying as the manner of death. I did not and do not want to die by burning or drowning. Obviously, after some difficult swimming and very anxious moments, I made it to the raft and paddled safely back to shore, chastened for my carelessness and grateful to be alive.

It wasn't long afterwards that, by chance, I found myself reading Psalm 69. There was something very, very familiar in the Psalmist's description of his near-death experience. I remembered my horror at the thought of drowning. And I could feel the Psalmist's horror as he faced his own imminent death by drowning.

This was well before I had really discovered the greatness of the Book. But, as I read the Psalm, I began to appreciate the Book's genius. The poetic genius on display in Psalm 69 allowed me to visualize the Psalmist and his suffering. This is what I saw.

The Psalmist was in a deep, dark pit, chin-deep in water. The water tossed unpredictably back and forth. I watched as he struggled to maintain his footing. I could now see that the floor of the pit was slippery and slimy from moss and weeds. I also saw that the Psalmist was sinking deeper in the water as a result

of a thick, slimy muck that seemed to suck him down deeper with his every panicked movement.

With every slip and slide, the water rose higher, sloshed into his face, got in his eyes, went up his nose, and, on occasion, even went over his head. He spit and sputtered as he gasped for a clean, dry breath of air. Just when he thought he had his footing, the water would heave against him from an unexpected angle knocking him off balance and causing the water to splash in his face once more.

It was then that I suddenly became aware of the sounds as well as the sights. The Psalmist was screaming at the top of his lungs. He had been for some time, I realized. He had been screaming… and screaming… and screaming: "Help! I'm down here. Someone… Help! Help me… I'm drowning."

I could see the veins on his throat bulging out as his brain, stimulated by adrenaline, sent the extra blood that his neck muscles and vocal cords needed for the lifesaving screams for help. Even so, I noticed that his voice was growing horse as his throat felt on fire and became raw from prolonged and loud screaming. I also noticed that his eyes were bulging from the effort of screaming. They were competing with his throat for blood flow, but they were losing the battle. As the blood flow increased to meet his throat's demands, his eyes were denied the needed supply of blood. I sensed that the Psalmist's vision was blurring.

The Psalmist was in deep, deep trouble. He was probably going to die. I was, I realized, watching a man in the throes of death.

It would get worse yet. And I thought I had it bad in Lake Michigan!

We are surprised, taken back, and confused by the sudden shift that takes place in verse 4. There is something more going on here than we at first thought.

> ¨More numerous than the hair on my head
> are those who hate me without reason.
> They are intent on my annihilation—
> my enemies without a cause.

Where did that come from? We thought the Psalmist was alone and under threat from dark, murky waters. We understood why, alone and in danger of drowning, the Psalmist was utterly absorbed by his clear and present danger and fixated on his urgent cries for help. How, in the face of such danger, has the Psalmist's thoughts and worries suddenly turned to enemies. Surely, he should concentrate on the present danger and worry about his enemies later, assuming he survives. He has no time or energy to spare But, the Psalmist's enemies are no more imaginary than they are absent. The are present… with him… in the pit.

What is happening? Where is the Psalmist? What is he experiencing? Is he in a pit or under attack by enemies; enemies whose attack takes the form of accusation?

> "What I had not stolen
> was I forced to return."

We will explore these questions in future *meditations* that have Psalm 69 as their texts. We will come to understand how the Psalmist can be simultaneously suffering under these two seemingly contradictory threats: 1) he is alone and drowning in a pit and 2) he is surrounded by enemies that accuse him of and prosecute him for wrongdoing and guilt.

As it turns out, and as we will find as we make our way through Psalm 69, in describing his

experience in the pit the poet was being, well, poetic. He was never in an actual pit with actual water, or actual weeds, or actual moss, or actual muck. All of this was a metaphor for a threat posed to something far more enduring than the Psalmist's physical existence. The Psalmist was only appealing to our own experience, our own horror at the thought of drowning, so that we would understand the spiritual horrors he once faced.

But, for now, we wish only to have the reader consider and appreciate the Psalmist's skill in communicating his experiences, his thoughts, and his feelings in such a way as to draw us in; to allow us to see through his eyes and to make us think and feel what he thinks and feels. We wish to suggest and/or remind the reader that they can and will find themselves, their experiences, their thoughts, their feelings, their hopes, their fears, their faith, their doubts and uncertainties, their longing for God, and much, much more reflected in the Psalmist's experiences, thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears, faith, doubts, uncertainties, and long for God.

This Psalm, and every single one of the other 149, is, to my way of thinking and according to my experience, literature at its very best. It fires the imagination. It stirs the feelings. It challenges the intellect. It inspires the soul. But, most importantly, it draws the faithful and discerning reader to God and brings God intimately into the reader's orbit, into his or her life.

Today is as good a day as any to discover or rediscover the literary genius and the spiritual inspiration that is the Book of Psalms. Today is as good a time as any to read, ponder, and even pray this incredible book which, like the Book of Mormon, has the potential to bring the reader closer to God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 69.29-33

29But I am poor and sorrowful:
let thy salvation, O God, set me up on high.
30I will praise the name of God with a song,
and will magnify him with thanksgiving.
31This also shall please the LORD
better than an ox or bullock that hath horns and hoofs.
32The humble shall see this, and be glad:
and your heart shall live that seek God.
33For the LORD heareth the poor,
and despiseth not his prisoners.

meditation

From the very beginning of Psalm 69, the Psalmist has described the deep trouble, affliction, and humiliation through which he has passed as a consequence of those who stand in opposition to him—whether mortal or immortal foes.

But the Psalmists is not simply venting frustration. He serves as an example to all who experience affliction. He recounts his afflictions in hopes of comforting and encouraging others who experience affliction. He speaks as an evangelist. Are you experiencing humiliation? Are you impoverished? Are you imprisoned? Are you humiliated by your impoverishment? Has your impoverishment resulted in imprisonment, as it all too often does? Just as God heard his plea for help and brought him victory over his trials, God will come to the comfort and aid of others suffering affliction.

Here, as so often, the Psalmist seems to anticipate Jesus' ministry—a revelation of God's character—in which he, Jesus, by his own testimony, came to minister to the sick and insecure rather than the "whole" and healthy, the self-possessed and secure. Such good news is indeed worthy of being turned into song that magnifies the Lord, for "his name alone is excellent."[1]

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

[1] Psalm 148.13

psalm 69.[34-36]

[34]Let the heaven and earth praise him,
the seas, and everything that moveth therein.
[35]For God will save Zion,
and will build the cities of Judah:
that they may dwell there,
and have it in possession.
[36]The seed also of his servants shall inherit it:
and they that love his name shall dwell therein.

meditation

When we read the Psalmist's confidence that God "will build the cities of Judah" and secure them such that their inhabitants will "have them in possession," or that "they that love" God will inherit and dwell securely in them, we might simply understand the confidence as "temporal," and limit our understanding to the literal. But we might find allegorical applications that we can apply to ourselves.

As we read, here, of the Psalmist's confidence in a future and secure inheritance, we might think of the promise that Jesus made to his disciples the night before his death: "In my Father's house are many mansions… I go to prepare a place for you… I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (Jn. 14.[2-3]).

Everywhere we turn, scripture assures us of God's awareness of our needs, his willingness to labor in our behalf, his desire to see us happy and secure, and his real and active participation in our lives. Such divine devotion to such lowly and helpless creatures is, indeed, cause for "everything that moveth" to "praise him." We happily unite our voice with the countless other voices, wherever they may be in the universe.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 94.[1-3]

[1]Avenging God, YHWH,
avenging God, reveal yourself.
[2]Rise up, Ruler of the world;
cause to rebound on those of rank what they deserve.
[3]How long will the ungodly, YHWH;
how long will the ungodly dominate? (Author's translation)

meditation

A God who avenges can be a difficult concept. To some, avenging seems out of character for Christianity's Jesus, Son of God, who, according to the Gospels' testimony, is the most accurate revelation of God and His character ever seen or heard. Many Christians domesticate this same Jesus into a man not entirely consistent with the one found in the New Testament Gospels. I, myself, have been and often am guilty of such domestication. But a careful and honest reading of the Gospels reveals a Jesus who recognized the necessity of and justification for vengeance.

We should first say a word about the word "avenge." I have chosen this word rather than "revenge" to represent Hebrew, *nāqam* for a reason. My choice has less to do with the connotations of *nāqam* than with those of the two English words: *avenge* and *revenge*. The English word *avenge* "suggests the administration of just punishment for a criminal or immoral act. *Revenge* seems to stress the idea of retaliation a bit more strongly, and implies real hatred as its motivation."[1] Some may argue otherwise, but the difference is important. Revenging is intensely personal and self-serving. It seeks to allay one's personal feelings of having been wronged and harmed. Avenging is not personal or self-serving. It seeks to deliver those who have been wronged rather than satisfy one's personal sense of offense.

We will see this difference throughout this psalm. The powerful and influential who govern arrogantly oppress their "inferiors." This oppression goes so far as the killing of widows, orphans, and refugees (vs. 5-6) through unjust legislation intended to serve the interests of the ruling elite at the expense of common citizens (vs. 20-21). The Psalmist justifiably calls upon God to deliver the oppressed from their oppressors. This is what it means to avenge. It is more focused on the deliverance of justice to the wronged than the harming or punishment of those inflicting the wrong.

In discussing the idea of God's "judgment," we read the following in the Lectures on Faith. "It is through the exercise of this attribute [judgement] that the faithful in Christ Jesus are delivered out of the hands of those who seek their destruction; for if God were not to come out in swift judgment against the workers of iniquity and the powers of darkness, His saints could not be saved; for it is by judgment that the Lord delivers His saints out of the hands of all their enemies… In due time the Lord will come out in swift judgment against their enemies, and they shall be cut off from before Him, and that in His own due time He will bear them off conquerors, and more than conquerors, in all things" (Lecture 4.[14]).

This is consistent with the meaning of vengeance and is consistent with the emphasis found in this psalm. It is not self-serving or wicked to wish to see the oppressed liberated. One hopes this liberation might be accomplished peacefully and without suffering on either the oppressed or oppressor's end. But if the oppressor will not cease and desist voluntarily, then it is appropriate to pray for and rejoice in God vengeance against the impenitent oppressor.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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[1] *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*, 1993

psalm 102.[17-21]

[17]He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and not despise their prayer.
[18]This shall be written for the generation to come:
and the people which shall be created shall praise the LORD.
[19]For he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary;
from heaven did the LORD behold the earth;
[20]To hear the groaning of the prisoner;
to loose those that are appointed to death;
[21]To declare the name of the LORD in Zion,
and his praise in Jerusalem…

meditation

In an earlier meditation on another of the Penitential Psalms, we examined a frequently misunderstood part of the Psalmist's testimony concerning the character of God.

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:
a broken and a contrite heart,
O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51.[17]).

In today's reading, we suggest, the Psalmist returns to bear the exact same testimony:

"He will regard the prayer of the destitute,
and not despise their prayer."

One might wonder why the Psalmist, and this writer, returns to this theme so often. I won't be so bold as to speak for the Psalmist. But, for myself, I return over and over again to this aspect of the Divine character because my own experience and those of others to whom I have ministered demonstrates how very difficult it is for so many to believe. Perhaps you will agree when we suggest that those who are spiritually destitute, broken, and shattered are likely to feel that they are on their own when it comes to repairing the self-inflicted damage. Because they almost inevitably brought the destitution upon themselves, they fear to report and confess it to God lest He turn away with a callused shrug:

"The man [or woman] has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not… impart unto him of my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just" (See Mos. 4.[17]).

Perhaps you know a little something about how it feels to have others "say all manner of evil against you falsely" (See Mt. 5.[11]). Perhaps, then, you can imagine how God feels when His character is so often maligned; when He is accused of being something other than what the Psalmist claims Him to be in today's reading. It must be particularly galling, hurtful, irritating—whatever—when, in fact, the Psalmist hasn't yet said the half of it and, indeed, never will manage to find the language that begins to characterize God accurately. For it is the Psalmist's testimony that not only does God rescue the destitute and broken, He goes out of his way to find them. He is constantly on the hunt, looking for souls to repair and rescue.

"For he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary;
from heaven did the LORD behold the earth;
To hear the groaning of the prisoner;
to loose those that are appointed to death…"

So, again, just imagine God's disappointment when we resist His efforts; when we "say all manner of evil against" Him by imagining Him to be callused toward our destitution and resistant to helping us. But, it gets worse yet. For when we imagine him to be what He is not, we become impotent to carry out one of our prime missions: to bear witness of Him in such a way that praise is magnified and increased the world over. When we fail in our mission in this way, we not only fail to bring the "generation to come" to Him, but drive them into the arms of all manner of false, impotent gods.

Lent provides a wonderful opportunity for us to explore more deeply God's character, and, where necessary repent of having said "all manner of evil against" Him. The season is a good time to yield to one of His fondest efforts: the rescue to destitute, broken, and shattered people. Then, freshly rescued, we can use Lent to broadcast the truth of God until His praise reverberates the world over.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 17, 2024)

psalm 103.[8-12]

[8]The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.
[9]He will not always chide:
neither will he keep his anger for ever.
[10]He hath not dealt with us after our sins;
nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
[11]For as the heaven is high above the earth,
so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.
[12]As far as the east is from the west,
so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.

meditation

Sometimes poetry can almost take on an aura of the visual arts. Poetry's use of symbolism, imagery, metaphor, likeness, etc. grant us the freedom to form pictures in our minds. A picture, they say, is often worth a thousand words.

The King James Bible's 79-word translation of today's passage contains unimaginably broad horizons and an expansive universe that boggles the mind. We would need a book of meditations to capture the grandeur found in this one Psalm. We would need more books than the world can hold to capture the grandeur of the God whom the Psalmist discovered and seeks to reveal. What follows is the smallest nibble from the sumptuous feast that is Psalm 103.[8-12].

> "As far as the east is from the west."

How far is that? However far it is—and it is very, very, very far—that's how far God can and does "remove our transgressions from us." I can think of a half dozen ways to imagine this. Picture it. I can, for example, see myself standing on a broad flat limitless plain. I look to the eastern horizon, its features tiny, unfocused, and indistinguishable. I then look to the western horizon, its features equally incomprehensible. Then, I physically move myself eastward until I come to that first eastern horizon that I made out earlier. Then I look to the west. I look for that western horizon that I saw before. But I can't see it. It has disappeared from view.

That, the Psalmist testifies, is what God does to and with our sins. He moves them. Moves them very far away. So far that we can no longer make them out. So far that we cannot see them. So far that they have no power to impact and impress themselves upon our senses. This is a way of saying that the impact of our sins upon us is reduced to nothingness. But this unimaginable feat is just the tip of the iceberg. For, God removes sin so far away that even He—He of perfect sight and knowledge and memory—even He can no longer see them.

As they disappear over the far horizon of eternity, we find Him negligent in dealing "with us after or sins" or rewarding (punishing) "us according to our iniquities." Even if He looked for cause to chide and upbraid and accuse—which He does not—He would come up empty. Sin has fallen off the edge of the universe. It has been disappeared. Annihilated. But this has nothing to do with the size of the universe or the breath of our horizons. Rather, it is about the immensity that is in God. The divine attribute of "mercy" is as high and wide and long and deep and expansive—infinite—as the universe is huge. "Were it possible," the prophet Enoch declared,

> "that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations; and thy curtains are stretched out still; and yet thou art

there, and thy bosom is there; and also thou art just; thou art merciful and kind forever; and naught but peace, justice, and truth is the habitation of thy throne; and mercy shall go before thy face and have no end" (Mos. 7.[30-31]).

Yes, the curtains of His mercy are "stretched out" as expansively as His creations. We have not yet discovered the beginning nor the end of the universe. Neither have we discovered the expansiveness of His mercy. We probably never will. Probably the expansiveness of His mercy would shock our senses. Possibly offend our sensibilities. I believe that it was this, or at least that portion of it that is comprehensible to the human mind, that came rushing in "with great force into every feeling of [Joseph Smith's] heart" (JSH 1.[12]) when he read James. God was not an upbraider. He did not find cause to accuse. Not because there was no cause, but because God was more righteous and powerful that puny human sin. He obliterated human sin, sending it to the furthest reaches of the unknown universe.

It is all hard to believe. And there's the rub. But lent is a good time to scan the universe, scour its every nook and cranny in search of a place where sin can survive God's hostility toward it. It's a good time to experience the muscular arms of God seize hold of our sins and hurl them into the furthers abyss of nothingness. Lent is a good time to come under the commanding influence of the Holy Spirit and "shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel" (2 Ne. 31.[13]) such that all may hear and join in the grand Hallelujahs of Easter.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 7, 2024)

Psalm 106.[1-2]

[1]Praise ye the LORD.
O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good:
for his mercy endureth for ever.
[2]Who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD?
who can shew forth all his praise?

Meditation

My goodness, how enamored we can become of those among us "which [are] of reputation" and "seem to be somewhat" (Gal. 2.[2, 6])! So enamored of Joseph Smith were those who knew him that they boasted that he had "done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it" (DC 135.[3]). Okay. I guess. But, did they know, do we know what a distant second Joseph Smith is to Jesus of Nazareth? In his first address as an apostle in the LDS Church, Neal A. Maxwell testified of Jesus,

> "He is utterly incomparable in what He *is*, what He *knows*, what He has *accomplished*, and what He has *experienced*…. We can trust, worship, and even adore Him without any reservation! As the only Perfect Person to sojourn on this planet, there is none like Him!"
> "In intelligence and performance, He far surpasses the individual and the composite capacities and achievements of all who have lived, live now, and will yet live!" (*CR*. Oct. 1981, p. 9).

Let's just repeat that last bit. "He far surpasses the individual *and the composite* capacities and achievements of all who have lived, live now, or will yet live!"

I like to visualize this in this way. I imagine having all humanity, every individual, stand on each other's shoulders one on top another. This human tower is incredibly high. We are talking millions of miles high. Then, I imagine Jesus stepping up to stand next to this human tower. His height far surpasses the height of the human tower. He towers over this human tower.

I just can't bring myself to be impressed by those among us who are "of reputation" and "seem to be somewhat." I find little to say of or for them. I don't mean to belittle them. I am sure many of them are fine people. But, really! How, having met Jesus, can one be expected to feel impressed.

Among my many appreciations for the Psalmists, none are greater than this one: the Psalmists' consistent insistence that there is no one even remotely like the great Yahweh. That "his name alone is excellent" (Ps. 148.[13]). That he "humbleth himself to behold the things that are in heaven, and in the earth!" (Ps. 113.[6]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 115.4-8

4Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of men's hands.
5They have mouths, but they speak not:
eyes have they, but they see not:
6They have ears, but they hear not:
noses have they, but they smell not:
7They have hands, but they handle not:
feet have they, but they walk not:
neither speak they through their throat.
8They that make them are like unto them;
so is every one that trusteth in them.

meditation

Lent is a time for self-denial and the mortification of the flesh. When I think of self-denial and mortification of lust and desire, my mind goes immediately to idolatry. Many picture little wooden, stone, or metal figurines when they think of idolatry. Me? I think of American department stores with row after row of consumptive temptations. I think of our too-big houses with their richly adorned kitchens and baths. I think of our irresponsibly huge vehicles. I think of those economically left behind because of our addictive drive to purchase and possess. I think, then, of wanting and desiring. Desiring and wanting. WANTING AND DESIRING. "Covetousness," says Paul, "is idolatry" (Col. 3.5).

We most often think of "covetousness" in relation to another and what they possess. But "covetousness" does not require "another." We are very good at wanting all by ourselves. We can easily dismiss the evil of our idolatrous consumption with a "it's not that bad," or "there are worse lusts, like sex," or "it is just how our culture works"—a kind of "everyone else is doing it"—rationalization. This is dangerous on numerous fronts. I often wonder, for example, which is worse: the occasion sexual lust, or the incessant, near constant lusts of materialism. And it isn't simply the wanting and consumption. It takes time, lots of time, and effort to gather the resources necessary for satisfying our near insatiable consumption. Such time and effort for so little return of real value is exhausting. Who has time for anything else, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually? And, having worked so hard for so little, who is really going to want to part with any significant portion of it in order to assist others? The whole thing, the whole idolatrous system is a drag on everything and everyone.

"The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals,
and fashioneth it with hammers,
and worketh it with the strength of his arms:
yea, he is hungry, and his strength faileth:
he drinketh no water, and is faint" (Is. 44.12).

It is all truly exhausting and debilitating. And wasteful. In today's reading, the Psalmist pointedly reveals the impotence of the idol and the idol worshipper. Among the many senseless wonders of the idol is that it has no feet and so cannot walk. Impotent. That's bad enough. But though the worshipper looks for profit through the idol, the idol's impotence, ironically, ends up being a drain on the worshipper. Because "they cannot walk," Jeremiah satirically recounts, "they must needs be borne" (Jer. 10.5). "They bear him [the idol] upon the shoulder, they carry him," observes Isaiah (46.7).

"Their idols were upon the beasts,
and upon the cattle:
your carriages were heavy loaden;
they are a burden to the weary beast.

They stoop,
  they bow down together…" (Is. 46.[1-2]).

Loaded down and wearied so, Jesus' conclusion concerning the wealthy—the great majority of us—is of little wonder (though his disciples at the time were "astonished).

> "A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle [or to thread a needle with a rope], than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19.[23-24]).

The Lent and Easter season should serve as encouragement for us to evaluate our individual drive for self-gratification and our insatiable wanting and desiring; our covetousness. In addition, they can serve as a time for us to consider our society's flimsy justifications for its consumerism and how it impacts especially those who lack needful life resources. Lent is a good time to plead for help in casting our idols away and freeing ourselves of their domineering lordship—a dominance which can, ironically, make us impotent in spiritual and heavenly things, as Jesus himself testifies.

> "He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful" (Matt. 13.[22]).

Hence, Jesus' warning,

> "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6.[24]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 28, 2024)

psalm 130.[1-8]

[1]Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.
[2]Lord, hear my voice:
let thine ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications.
[3]If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities,
O Lord, who shall stand?
[4]But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou mayest be feared.
[5]I wait for the LORD,
my soul doth wait,
and in his word do I hope.
[6]My soul waiteth for the Lord
more than they that watch for the morning:
I say, more than they that watch for the morning.
[7]Let Israel hope in the LORD:
for with the LORD there is mercy,
and with him is plenteous redemption.
[8]And he shall redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

meditation

We have utilized Psalm 130 as a reading several times over the course of this site's history. I have written more than one homily based upon it. It is easily in my top-ten favorite Psalms. I read it often. It is one of my favorites for several reasons. But today, I am going to ask you to join me in a thought experiment. I am going to ask you to use your imagination. O.K., here we go. Let's start imagining.

You are an ancient Israelite. You strive to be true to Yahweh's law but know that you are guilty of breaches against it. You fear Yahweh is angry with you. You fear that He might withhold cherished blessings from you, not least among them, His presence in your life. You wish to be relieved of the feelings of guilt and separation from God; feelings that wash over you as deep waters, and leave you with a sense of drowning. What do you do? How do you rid yourself of these thoughts and feelings? How do you regain confidence with God and confidence that He will continue to be present in your life?

As an ancient Israelite, you know that there is but one way to obtain this desired relief and assurance. You must offer animal sacrifice to God. It will mean a bit of a journey, but you commit to traveling to Jerusalem and there offering the animal for the forgiveness of your sins and the return of God into your life.

You have made the journey. You stand in the temple court. You slit the animal's throat, utter a confession of sin on its head, and hand it over to the priest for the sacrificial slaughter and burning. You watch as the priest places your sacrifice on the altar. You smell the roasting meat. You see the fire's smoke rise into the air. You believe that the sweet smell of roasting meat will be carried up to God in the smoke. You believe that your prayer for forgiveness of sin will rise with the smell of roasting meat and the rising smoke up into the presence of God. You pray to God, asking Him to accept your offering and forgive your sins. You assure Him that you will try to do better.

We can't know for sure what the temple setting was for the 130th Psalm. We do not know for sure how and when and why it was used in Israel's temple. But there is general agreement that it was used in Israel's temple. And we can easily believe that the sentiments expressed in the Psalm are consistent with

the hopes of an offering made for the forgiveness of sin. It is in line with the hopes of one who looks to God for forgiveness and restitution.

Now, like the writer of the New Testament Book of Hebrews, I sense that millions of animals were sacrificed over the course of a thousand years. However, these multitudes could never bring the sort of forgiveness and peace of conscience that the devotee wished, and that God is actually capable of granting (See, for example, Heb. $10.^{1\text{-}4}$).

I am skeptical that God ever required a sacrifice—animals, human, or His Only Begotten Son—as a prerequisite for satisfying some idea of justice or alleviating His wounded honor before He would agree to grant merciful forgiveness. Jesus' sacrifice, as I have said so often, did not "create" atonement. It does not possess some form of magic by which forgiveness is granted. Among the many revelations of Jesus' life, suffering, and death is the *revelation* of atonement. It revealed the mercy that was already and always will be a central aspect of God's character and has always been and ever will be available to the sincere petitioner. This revelation made it possible for us to experience forgiveness as we come to believe that merciful forgiveness is simply part of the divine disposition.

But neither my imaging a sin offering at the temple as a setting for this Psalm, nor my skepticism about the efficacy of sacrifice in any way lessens my appreciation for the Psalmist's faith in God and His willingness to forgive. The Psalmist is as sure of God's merciful forgiveness as he is of the sun's rise at dawn. He knows, perhaps, that God forgives because he knows that God is not the type of Being who is on the lookout for sin to begin with. He knows that God often does not even take notice of, "mark," sin. It isn't that God possesses a giant and magical eraser in the sky with which he wipes sin from his giant and eternal sin ledger. It is that he so seldom picks up pen and paper to record the existence of sin in the first place. This is, for many, a difficult doctrine. This merciful response to sin and error is so unlike our response to sin and error—both our own and others—and so unlike the God whom we have created after the image of our own hearts, that it seems simply too good to be true. But, it is true. The Bible tells me so. All scripture tells me so.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: february 2, 2024)

Psalm 143.[1-2]

[1]Hear my prayer, O LORD,
give ear to my supplications: in thy faithfulness
answer me, and in thy righteousness.
[2]And enter not into judgment with thy servant:
for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

Meditation

Earlier in the Psalms, the Psalmist reports having gotten himself into quite a pickle. He had for a time "kept silence." His "silence" represented his stubborn refusal to confess his sins. Whether out of personal arrogance, or a lack of trust in God, or both, his stubborn refusal to confess caused him real heartache. Finally, after some hard knocks, he reported, "I acknowledged my sin unto thee." This confession of sin brought peace through the forgiveness of "the iniquity of my sin" (See Ps. 32.[3-5]).

In today's passage, the Psalmist makes no such mistake. He confesses quickly and bluntly, "in thy sight shall no man living be justified." If, at the time that he entered into judgment with God, he was to be judged only on the basis or his own faithfulness and righteousness, he would not be, could not be "justified"—found innocent and acceptable.

The Psalmist's plea that God "enter not into judgment" with him reminds us of Zenos' discovery recorded in the Book of Mormon: "Thou hast turned away thy judgments because of thy Son" (Al. 33.[13]). The Psalmist reminds us that the confession of sin, the plea for forgiveness, and the experience of forgiveness is based on God's "faithfulness," not ours. It is based on God's "righteousness" not ours. Zenos reminds us that God's "faithfulness"—his fidelity to us—and God's "righteousness"—His commitment to do right by us—is best revealed through His Son.

With this knowledge, we make confession willingly and quickly and often. With this knowledge, we feel assured of God's mercy and grace. With this knowledge we experience the joys of repentance and forgiveness. And with this knowledge, we have hope and faith and power to act upon His invitation to improve, to advance, and become like Him. We move always forward in our path to sanctification.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

psalm 143.[1-2, 4, 6-9]

[1]Hear my prayer, O LORD,
give ear to my supplications: in thy faithfulness
answer me, and in thy righteousness.
[2]And enter not into judgment with thy servant:
for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

[4]Therefore is my spirit overwhelmed within me;
my heart within me is desolate.

[6]I stretch forth my hands unto thee:
my soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land.
[7]Hear me speedily, O LORD:
my spirit faileth:
hide not thy face from me,
lest I be like unto them that go down into the pit.
[8]Cause me to hear thy lovingkindness in the morning;
for in thee do I trust:
cause me to know the way wherein I should walk;
for I lift up my soul unto thee…
[9] I flee unto thee to hide me.

meditation

I personally find any thoughts or feelings that the Psalms are not pertinent to be utterly mystifying. But, my experiences with students and congregations suggest that passages such as today's reading leaves many LDS readers feeling confused and ambivalent about the Psalms. The confusion and ambivalence about today's reading is at least two-fold. First, the idea that "no man living" "shall be justified" in the eyes of God challenges their view of man's divine heritage and potential—a view more in line enlightenment philosophy than scripture. Second, they conclude, as they do elsewhere in the Psalms, that because David is the author and because David is guilty of a far worse sin (murder) than they, the Psalms, including this one, have little to offer them. David deserves to suffer the pains of hell—"the pit" in today's reading—while they, apparently, do not.

Such misunderstandings are most unfortunate and wrong on numerous fronts. We cannot address them all, but can share a thought or two. Leaving aside David's final eternal state, which is a matter of complete conjecture, we can mention the fact that many, considering the possibility that they might not achieve the highest degree of glory—a consideration which, itself, causes chills to run up and down many a spine—never consider hell as a realistic alternative for or threat to their eternal being. With this dubious conclusion in mind, I have always been intrigued by Lehi and Nephi, and the father and son's thoughts about hell in relation to themselves.

First, we should understand what they meant by "hell." Nephi speaks of "death and *hell*, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit" (2 Ne. 9.[10]). So, in Nephi's mind, "hell" entails more than physical death. It entails "the death of the spirit." Moreover, Nephi speaks of "that awful monster the devil, and death, and *hell*, and that lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment" (2 Ne. 9.[19]). Thus, "hell" entails "endless torment" and lakes of "fire and brimstone"—metaphorical or not. Given, then, the nature of the place and the "righteous" nature of Lehi and Nephi, we might expect that they would have no fear of the place or feel any need for redemption from hell. But we would be wrong. In praising God for his saving influence in his life, Lehi exclaims,

> "But behold, *the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell*; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled

about eternally in the arms of his love."

It seems clear that Lehi would not need to be "redeemed" from something that posed no actual threat. Thus, it seems that Lehi did see hell as a possible threat to his eternal well-being and was extraordinarily grateful for the Lord's labors in "redeeming" him from that terror and torment. In his much beloved "psalm," Nephi pleads,

> "*May the gates of hell be shut continually before me*, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite!"

Apparently, Nephi continued to worry that the "gates of hell" still stood wide open, awaiting his arrival and hoping to monstrously engulf and consume his eternal soul. The point is, "hell" is not open for business to murderers such as David only. Even individuals, "good and obedient" individuals such as Nephi and Lehi have felt its awful draw. Without becoming obsessed by the very real threat, we too can and perhaps should feel its awful draw. The danger is as real for us as it was for David or Lehi or Nephi. As we follow the Psalmist's example and find a hiding place in God, our appreciation of God grows ever stronger. Lent is a good time to "let the solemnities of eternity rest upon [our] minds" (DC 43.[34]). This admonition comes immediately after this warning,

> "And the wicked shall go away into unquenchable fire, and their end no man knoweth on earth, nor ever shall know, until they come before me in judgement" (43.[33]).

Lent is a good time for us to confess and repent so that as we "let the solemnities of eternity rest upon [our] minds" as David and Lehi and Nephi did, our expectations might be far more pleasant.

> "And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say unto me: 'Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father.' Amen" (Enos 1.[27]).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 10, 2024)