

Songs of a **Warrior Poet**

David Son of Jesse teaches us
about Persecution, Courage,
Suffering, and Love

JesusLifeTogether.com

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For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.



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The Warrior Poets

“The LORD Has Sought Out a Man After His Own Heart”

He was warrior, poet, king. He was, perhaps, the greatest man to live in the millennium before Christ. But life was rarely easy for David son of Jesse. Many loved him, but many others despised him. Some desperately wanted him dead.

Life got off to a rough start for David. When God rejected Saul as king, He sent the prophet and judge, Samuel, to Bethlehem on a secret mission to anoint a new ruler for Israel. At God’s command, Samuel invited Jesse’s family to celebrate a sacrifice. Jesse presented seven sons to Samuel. Only after God, to Samuel’s surprise, had rejected all seven of these physically impressive young men did the prophet coax the information out of Jesse that there was an eighth son. With the godliest man in Israel at his home, Jesse somehow never thought to invite his youngest to meet him. David had remained in the fields with his father’s sheep. To his own family, David was a nobody. God thought differently. “The LORD does not see as mortals see,” God said to Samuel. “They look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). So Samuel “anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward” (1 Samuel 16:13).

That development did not mean that David now had the respect and esteem of his family. The evidence points in the opposite direction. Despite—or maybe because of—the fact that he had grown to be “a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence” (1 Samuel 16:18), David was still treated contemptuously by his brothers. When he visited them on the battlefield, the eldest taunted David with accusations that he was irresponsible, presumptuous, and deceitful, a mere thrill seeker.

Life only became more difficult in the years that followed. David made the top of the “most wanted list” for the regional power, Philistia. Israel’s own king, who by then was David’s father-in-law,

became obsessed with killing him and chased him all over the wilderness of Palestine. David's family, along with the wives and children of his men, were kidnapped by raiders. His own men were so angry at David for this debacle they almost stoned him. Later, his own wife, disgusted by the fervor of his worship, mocked him bitterly for his faith. And it got worse. After David began consolidating his power as king, he endured two heartbreaking civil wars—the second one instigated by his own rebellious son.

David was a persecuted man.

In the New Testament, we learn that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). But we should be careful not to over-spiritualize persecution. Even though our struggle is against spiritual forces of evil, these cosmic powers use everyday humans to do their dirty work. As David discovered, persecution is usually meted out by antagonistic family members, treacherous spiritual leaders, and callous unbelievers. Even Jesus was not killed by a sudden blast of fire from Satan's fingertips, but by an unholy alliance of a traitorous friend, some jealous clergymen, a fickle crowd, and a spineless civil government. When you are persecuted, the opposition and betrayal come from real people, many of whom may have once claimed to be your friends. That's what makes persecution so deeply personal and so intensely painful.

But in David son of Jesse, God had found a man after His own heart. Rather than reacting with fear or bitterness or cynicism, David responded to the pain by turning his face towards God. He recorded his agonies, his pleas, and his assurances of God's provision in poetry, which became the deeply moving lyrics to some of David's most profound and challenging psalms.¹ This treasury of

¹ A partial list would have to include Psalms 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 22, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 55, 58, 59, 68, 70, 71, and 137. There are many other examples of songs David wrote after he had triumphed over enemies.

victorious suffering has helped many a persecuted man or woman of God to find Him in days of trouble.

Even Jesus in His dark hours on the cross quoted Psalm 22 when He cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Jesus was not despairing. His ancestor after the flesh, David, had walked this lonely road before him and had found the Father waiting for him at the end. Jesus was affirming that this psalm had found its fulfillment in His suffering, and that it would likewise find its greatest fulfillment in His resurrection.

During the past five years, the psalms of David have taken on a rich meaning for the ones who are writing down these thoughts. When we found ourselves the targets of a vicious and irrational slander campaign, it drove us to Father and to His word. Suddenly these songs of David were no longer simply “scripture”; they were our reality. As we have turned our own faces to God, we have discovered, like David before us, that while we may live on a cruel planet, we live under a compassionate Heaven. We have even begun to taste what Paul spoke of when he said, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).

But enough of that! For really, this book isn’t about us and our persecutions. It isn’t even about David and his.

It’s about you and yours.

“A Sacrifice of Praise”

There is no use sugar-coating the truth. We were born on a battlefield. If we have been bought by Jesus’ blood, then we are stationed in an outpost of Heaven on a planet ruled by hell. Our very existence in this world is an offense to the brutal tyrant and twisted psychopath who rules it. It infuriates him that we reject his world’s values. It threatens him that we regard him as an illegitimate imposter. It enrages him that we offer wholehearted, loving obedience to Another. So he targets us. He attempts to deceive

and distract us through life's riches, worries, and pleasures. If we pass that test, he tries to squeeze us into his world's mold through intimidation. So for every life that has been laid on God's altar, persecution is an unavoidable fact.

Persecution is not just for some hypothetical elite class of Christian. Paul assures us, "All who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12-13). You heard right: all you have to do to guarantee you will periodically experience painful episodes of persecution is to *want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus*. You need not be all that mature or "successful." If you have a sincere passion to abandon your life to Jesus and His Kingdom, you will automatically make yourself a target for satan's wrath. And the reverse is also true. People who can live long lives without being persecuted for their faith must not have any—at least as God defines faith.

While satan can attack us directly at times, he normally uses human pawns. It's easy, and he has billions to choose from. He can inflame people's prejudices and fears and jealousies simply enough. Those who belong to the world—whether religious or secular in their inclinations—have a natural hatred for anything different, especially if it makes them somehow feel guilty or inferior. But Jesus would encourage us! The world is only reacting to His Life inside of us:

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated Me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of My name, because they do not know Him who sent Me (John 15:18-21).

So if our impact on others helps them obey Jesus, then that is a wonderful outcome. What we must see is that it is equally won-

derful, though far more painful, if they respond with hatred. The only intolerable response would be for the world to accept us as its own. If we are being faithful to Jesus and His word, we should expect persecution, and we should even learn to rejoice when it comes:

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets... Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets” (Luke 6:22-23,26).

Hated but happy—what a paradox! Personally excluded from human society, publicly insulted and criticized, privately rejected as evil, and yet *blessed*. But Jesus is not speaking in riddles here. He means what He says. Jesus gives us three good reasons to rejoice.

To begin with, the pain we experience in this world will be infinitely outweighed by the reward we will receive when we graduate to the next one. As Paul put it, “This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

What is more, we can receive the world’s insults as a compliment. The true prophets of God have always been treated shamefully by the world. Invariably they proclaim a call to repentance and a warning of impending disaster if sin and idolatry are tolerated—and just as invariably, false prophets proclaim a false peace (Jeremiah 6:13-14; Jeremiah 23; Jeremiah 28; Ezekiel 13; Micah 3). Little wonder on our fallen planet that the false prophet wins the popularity contest every time. Persecution may not prove you are a true prophet, but widespread and lasting popularity proves you are a false one. If a world so twisted that it crucified Christ also hates you, is that such a bad thing? Would you want it another way?

For in the end, Jesus assures us, we are in fact suffering “on account of the Son of Man.” There are sacrifices we would never make for ourselves but we willingly make as a gift to someone else. There are sufferings we could not put up with for our own benefit but we gladly endure for the sake of one we love. When we suffer as Christians, we are suffering for Jesus. What a privilege! When we are rejected because we belong to Him, it is an honor. We are taking a stand for the One who is the only Light in a dark world, the only Truth in an ocean of lies—for a Heart so full of beauty and nobility and courage that we have pledged ourselves to follow Him wherever He goes. We are only showing our loyalty and love to the One who died for us. As the Hebrews writer put it,

Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by His own blood. Let us then go to Him outside the camp and bear the abuse He endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess His name (Hebrews 13:12-15).

The “sacrifice of praise” that we bring to God is not really a worship song shared among friends in safety. It is “the fruit of lips that confess His name” when doing so invites abuse. David once declared, “I will not offer burnt-offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24). The *living* sacrifice that we offer Him will likewise be costly. What can we give the King of the Universe to show Him our devotion? Does He need anything from us? No. But we can offer Him something costly to us, and He will receive it as a treasured gift. The faithful proclamation of the name of Jesus in the face of persecution is just such a sacrifice.

All of that explanation is pointing to a simple conclusion: you will be persecuted, if you are loyal to Jesus. Some of you who read these words have already experienced the reality of that statement. If so, we offer you our love and gratitude and respect. Like David, you and we must learn to walk the costly way of faith in the face of persecution. There is so much at stake.

“The Good News of the Kingdom”

While times of peace are welcome in the corporate life of the church (Acts 9:31) and in the lives of individual believers as well, we must accept that persecution is a part of our existence in this world. It cannot be avoided without endangering our souls through compromise and lukewarmness. Instead it must be met with faith. Only then will suffering be transformed into *hope* by a miracle of God’s love (Romans 5:3-5).

This faith-response to persecution will affect far more than just you. When you turn your face toward Father in your time of suffering, you touch Divine Life. The comfort and consolation and peace that you receive will overflow into others’ lives as well (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). The death we die on the inside becomes life for others (2 Corinthians 4:12). This “death in us, life in others” principle has always been true. But it has special bearing for these last of the Last Days as we draw nearer the return of Christ. Please consider this truth! It will change your life.

There is an increasing sense among Christians that the Day of Jesus’ second coming is near. We are not referring, of course, to hucksters who try to profit from end-of-the-world hype. They hope their hysteria gains them followers to buy their books and trinkets—and truly, financial gain is the only reward they will ever receive. No, we are talking about something far purer and nobler than that! Among genuine believers there seems to be a growing longing for Jesus to return and a stirring of hope that His coming could be soon. These yearnings might just signify the very beginning stages of “the Spirit and the Bride saying, ‘Come.’”

But even among true children of God, there is still far too much attention paid to *when* Jesus will return and far too little focus on *what must happen first*. We can be absolutely certain from the prophetic words of scripture that the church, Jesus’ Bride, will have “made herself ready” before He comes for her (Revelation 19:6-8) and that she will be beautiful and radiant on that day (Revelation 21:1-4). The worldliness, weakness, and compromise that characterize most of contemporary “Christendom” are unacceptable to God in any age, let alone the end times. We delude our-

selves if we think Jesus will come back without seeing a dramatic advance in holiness² and a striking growth in spiritual stature³ in the church. His own words also assure us that this Prepared Bride has an assignment to complete before He returns for her:

Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come (Matthew 24:9-14).

According to Jesus' prophecy, the church must first proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom throughout planet earth. She must testify to every nation about the reign of Jesus as King over a people who have submitted to Him in self-abandonment and love. She must go beyond proclaiming this message in words. She must *demonstrate* it in her *life*. Then and only then will the end come: when through both her testimony and her life, the church has manifested the wisdom of God in its rich variety to the nations of the earth and to the authorities in heavenly realms.

And the proclamation of this Kingdom Gospel has *everything* to do with persecution.

Those who will complete this task will have endured unimaginable suffering. They will be hated by all the nations they are trying to reach—including the nation where you live. They will be tortured and killed. They will even be betrayed by false brothers. Their love for Jesus and for each other will remain at the boiling point, despite deception and coldness all around them. And this is

² See *Dear Bride* (http://heavenreigns.com/read/read_dear_bride.html)

³ See *The Church Prepared for the Return of Christ* (<http://books.jesulifetogether.com/Church-Prepared-For-the-Return-of-Christ>)

the hallmark of the prepared Bride: she will withstand all of these trials and be saved, and she will press past mere endurance to accomplish the work of testimony that Jesus assigned her.

So if we are faithful to Jesus today, we will be persecuted. But as the end approaches, this satanic opposition, mediated through human beings, will become much more frequent and increasingly severe. If we are to “endure and be saved,” and if we are to become fit vessels to take the Good News of the Kingdom to the nations, it is essential that we learn now to meet persecution with courage, resolve, hope, joy, and a reckless faith.

For all these reasons David, the warrior poet of Israel, has much to teach us. May his songs become yours during both the bright days and the dark nights, as you grow into being a man or woman after God’s own heart!

Conviction of the Righteous Heart

Psalm 11

To the leader. Of David.

In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to me,
“Flee like a bird to the mountains;
for look, the wicked bend the bow,
they have fitted their arrow to the string,
to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart.
If the foundations are destroyed,
what can the righteous do?”

The LORD is in His holy temple;
the LORD’s throne is in heaven.
His eyes behold, His gaze examines humankind.
The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked,
and His soul hates the lover of violence.
On the wicked He will rain coals of fire and sulfur;
a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.
For the LORD is righteous;
He loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold His face.

“The LORD’S Throne is in Heaven”

Why does the devil stir up persecution against the people of God?
His primary goal is never to destroy us physically. Oh, he enjoys killing. After all, it was he who introduced death to paradise. And to be sure, he is maddened with hatred toward Jesus and toward all who bear His Name. But killing Jesus didn’t work out that well for satan, did it? And historically, killing Christians has often harmed satan’s cause. No, his main agenda is not physical death. His goal is always to separate men and women from God. Failing that, he at least hopes to neutralize them and render them useless to God’s purposes. To accomplish those goals, he must pollute the

human heart with unbelief. And that is what persecution is for: to use intimidation and pain to draw our eyes away from the Father and towards ourselves, to create doubts in our minds about God's promises and His character.

So beware the voice of unbelief when persecution threatens. The temptations can be subtle. The words can come from concerned relatives or acquaintances—maybe even from brothers and sisters in Christ whose affection for you momentarily blinds them to greater realities. The words may not come to your ears in a spoken voice at all; they may try to form in your own unguarded thoughts. And on the surface they can even sound reasonable:

“Don't be foolish! These are wicked, hateful people that you are dealing with. They have the power to hurt you, and they intend to do it. Even now they are preparing themselves to destroy you, and they won't rest until they do. They are clever. They will protect themselves. They will attack you from the shadows of anonymity, or they will convince everyone that they are doing God a favor by opposing you publicly. But attack you they will, and mercilessly. I know you want to stand firm, but you have no place to stand *on*. Save yourself! Just run. If you can't physically hide, at least take a low profile. What else can you do? What else could anyone do in times like these?”

It is hard to argue with *some* of that logic. Persecution does hurt. People sometimes die. Reputations often do. And oppressors can be amazingly obsessed. The pride and prejudice of human flesh mixed with the supernatural fury of hell is a poisonous recipe. To make matters worse, the obsessed often seem to be coming from a position of strength, whether in numbers or influence or authority. Is there really anything to be gained from bearing the brute force of their attacks? In view of those facts, self-preservation can seem the better part of wisdom.

But faith does not look at facts and wring its hands. Faith faces the facts, yet it rests on greater realities.

Here is a rock-solid reality: “The LORD is in His holy temple.” In David's day, he could look at the tabernacle and know beyond any doubt that the God who brought Egypt to its knees, the God

who parted the Red Sea, the God who shook Sinai—the very same God who had chosen him to be king—was still alive. His Presence was there, enthroned above the Mercy Seat. God was near. The greater reality for the child of God today is that Jesus has made His home with us and in us through His Spirit. We are His temple. His dwelling place is now in the human heart, most powerfully in the corporate reality of His Body, the *ekklesia*. Our Immanuel, “God with us,” is ever present and always approachable. No external force can separate us from Him.

And just as real is this truth: “The LORD’s throne is in heaven.” Slanderers and adversaries may stalk the earth, but our Father is not threatened. He is secure on His throne. The accuser of our brothers has already been forcibly expelled from heaven. In our visible universe, God may still have enemies, but He absolutely has no rivals. Seated at the Father’s right hand is Jesus, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.” All authority, in heaven and on earth, has been given to Him. The Father has put all things under Jesus’ feet and has made Him the head over all things for the *ekklesia*.

“The LORD is Righteous”

And another reality, one that persecutors always fail to consider: God’s “eyes behold, His gaze examines humankind.” He is totally aware of everything that is happening. Nothing is hidden from His sight, even if it is buried in the inner recesses of the human heart. Nothing surprises Him, nothing catches Him off guard. He knows. He cares. And in His scrutiny of the human race, God is not passive. “The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked.” While the statement that the wicked intend to “shoot in the dark at the upright in heart” may be true, God’s judgment of their wickedness is Truer still.

The justice of God is an attribute that is scarcely mentioned in contemporary religion. His role as Judge has been surgically removed from most theologies. As one astute observer has written, most people “tend to view God as either a butler or a therapist, someone who meets their needs when summoned...or who listens

nonjudgmentally and helps [them] feel good about themselves.”⁴ The notion that God will “judge the secrets of human hearts” on a Day of reckoning may be an unpopular one, but Paul says it is central to the gospel (Romans 2:16). The idea that God judges people’s actions in *this* age is likewise ignored, but it is a critically important truth.

For God is infinitely *passionate*. When He hates, He hates with a sacred passion, and “His soul hates the lover of violence.” His very being, the holy seat of His emotion, is appalled by the heartless injustice of one human against another. It was so after the first murder, when the blood of righteous Abel “cried out to God from the ground.” It was still true in the days of Noah, when God was “grieved to His heart” (NRSV) and “highly offended” (NET) by the wickedness of men who had “filled the earth with violence” (Genesis 6:5-6, 13). It is still true today. He is the same, yesterday, today, and forever! In his day, David grasped that the unchanging God would notice the violent intentions of the wicked—and that if God noticed, He would care passionately and judge decisively.

That judgment is expressed in two powerful word pictures. “On the wicked God will rain coals of fire and sulfur.” Fire and sulfur from heaven were the outpouring of God’s wrath on Sodom and Gomorrah. Further, “a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.” In the scriptures, when God offers you a cup, you will surely drink every drop, whether it is filled with blessing or with judgment. The cup He hands the wicked contains nothing but scorching wind.

These images may seem frightening. But in truth the justice of God is of enormous comfort to those who suffer unjustly at the hands of the wicked. A god who did not notice injustice would be remote and out of touch. A god who noticed but did not care would be a monster. A god who noticed and cared but failed to act would be a weakling. None of these “gods” would be deserving of worship. Only a just God can be loved and trusted. An infinitely

⁴ Dean, Kenda C. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. p. 17. Oxford University Press, 2010.

just, infinitely passionate God can be trusted and loved with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. When you are insulted, when you suffer as Jesus did, you can entrust yourself to a God who judges justly (1 Peter 3:23). If you suffer as a Christian, you can “commit yourself to your faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Peter 4:19). You can “cast all your anxieties” on a God who cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

The Father’s passion rests on His character. “The LORD is righteous; He loves righteous deeds.” The persecutor and the oppressor are willfully ignorant of this simple truth. Their folly will one day spell disaster for them. But the upright are deeply aware of God’s righteousness. They hunger and thirst for it (Matthew 5). They seek it, along with God’s Kingdom, as their primary goal in life (Matthew 6). God’s righteousness draws them closer and closer to Him. And so “the upright shall behold His face.” The pure in heart will see God.

Here at last, then, at the end of Psalm 11, is the response to the question posed at the beginning: “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the upright do?” The solution to the dilemma: the righteous can *behold God’s face*. Turn your face towards His! In His infinite depths you will discover the courage and peace to face the facts of your own situation with unwavering trust. You may not find “answers” as such, but you will find wisdom. Answers are cheap anyway; wisdom is costly. You may discover that He intends you to stand firm; you may find that He wants you to redeploy your resources elsewhere and like Jesus, leave that region. But you will never “flee like a bird” in panic. Beholding God will save you from ever becoming embittered or persecution-centered. You will certainly have to fight for that place of peace at times, maybe through pain and tears, but being Christ-centered will satisfy you to the very core of your being. And no devil in hell or on earth will ever be strong enough to take that privilege from you. That’s a promise! (Romans 8:35-39)

Courage of the Abandoned Heart

Psalm 27

Of David

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.

One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in His temple.

For He will hide me in His shelter
in the day of trouble;
He will conceal me under the cover of His tent;
He will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in His tent

sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
 be gracious to me and answer me!
“Come,” my heart says, “seek His face!”
 Your face, LORD, do I seek.
 Do not hide your face from me.

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
 you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
 O God of my salvation!
If my father and mother forsake me,
 the LORD will take me up.

Teach me your way, O LORD,
 and lead me on a level path
 because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
 for false witnesses have risen against me,
 and they are breathing out violence.

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
 in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD;
 be strong, and let your heart take courage;
 wait for the LORD!

“Whom Shall I Fear?”

What is the birthplace of courage?

David discovered its source early in life. We should not let our familiarity with his remarkable story blind us to the gritty reality of it. When the sun beat down on David, when pain or hunger or disease wracked his body, or when danger threatened his life, it

was just as real to him as it would be to us. Goliath, for example, was intensely *real*. David encountered a living, breathing, cursing monstrosity encased in 200 pounds of bronze armor and carrying a spear with a fifteen-pound tip. Twice a day for forty consecutive days, Goliath had mocked Israel, daring the army to produce a champion to fight him in single combat. Each time when the soldiers heard Goliath's challenge, they "fled from him in great fear" (1 Samuel 17: 24). Facing this Philistine warrior in battle should have been Saul's job. Although he was aging, Saul was still an impressive physical specimen, a head taller than the rest of the Israelites, and as their king he should have been their defender. But Saul, like the rest of his army, was "dismayed and terrified" (1 Samuel 17:11). When David heard Goliath's mockery, however, he volunteered on the spot to fight him. As David explained to Saul, this combat was simply one more event in a long history with God. Facing danger with poise and trust had become a habit.

Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine (1 Samuel 17:34-37).

Inspiring speeches are easier to utter in a tent than on the battlefield. But these words went far beyond bravado. When he saw the Philistine giant approaching, David stayed true to his convictions:

You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of

the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and He will give you into our hand (1 Samuel 17:45-47).

This attitude of reckless abandonment to God and utter confidence in His provision had kept David's hand steady and his arm strong when he rescued his father's lambs from lions and bears. He acted from that same attitude of faith when he refused Saul's armor, picked up his shepherd's sling, and ran towards Goliath. And he would embrace that same outlook for the rest of his life, whether he was attacking enemy armies, dodging a mad king's spear, or hiding from assassins in a desert cave. This Psalm is brimming with that same faith.

When David composed this song, he was facing persecution and personal attack from an unnamed enemy. He declared once again that God was his light, salvation, and stronghold. *Light*, because David looked to God for guidance and wisdom. *Salvation*, because he counted on God for deliverance and vindication. *Stronghold*, because he found in God a place of shelter and protection in times of danger and overwhelming pressure. That affirmation wasn't just David's theology *about* God; it was his experience *of* God. In view of those facts, he asked, "Whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?" The clear answer: No one!

The persecutors were very real, just as Goliath had been. David was under no illusions. The enemies and adversaries attacking him were evildoers in the grip of dark spiritual forces that had marked him as a man after God's own heart and targeted him for destruction. To a later generation of God's people who were experiencing similar persecution, Peter would write, "Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). David understood. These enemies likewise wouldn't be satisfied with just hurting him; they wanted to *devour his flesh*. But David had such a confidence in God's provision and protection that he was certain the attackers would eventually "stumble and fall," just as Goliath once had.

To many people in his situation, the future would have seemed frightening and uncertain. David could face it with unshakable courage. What if it weren't just a small pack of enemies who attacked him? Suppose an entire *army* encamped against him. No matter; his heart would not fear. Suppose war rose up against him. It would make no difference; he would be confident.

“One Thing I Asked of the LORD”

So again we ask, what is the birthplace of such courage? When we are attacked with supernatural hatred in the form of human adversaries, where can we discover this kind of confidence? When we must confront our fear for our loved ones, when we have to deal with pain from personal loss, how can we find God? How can we experience Him as our light, our salvation, our stronghold? What was David's secret?

We don't have to guess. David sang his answer to us.

“One thing I asked of the LORD; that will I seek after.” One thing! *The secret to his courage was his single-mindedness.* Ambitious people have a lot to lose. Possessions can be stolen. Positions can be taken away. Agendas can be thwarted. Plans can be frustrated. Desires can be crushed. But what if we channeled all of our energies into a single goal? What if we focused all of our desires on one object? And what if that goal lay on a different plane entirely than “success” or “failure”? What if it was completely beyond the reach of any enemy in hell or on earth who opposed us? Then we would experience true freedom, genuine peace.

David had chosen his “one thing” carefully: “To live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple.” As a young shepherd in the Judean hills, David had spent many a night out under a clear, starlit sky. He marveled at the beauty and majesty of the heavens and later composed songs describing them. But he grasped that the skies were merely “telling the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1-4). With the eyes of his heart he saw through the glories of the physical heavens into the splendor of the Mind that created them. David longed to experience God's beauty, and the house of the LORD

was where God could be found. God's house was also where one could inquire of the LORD and learn His desires. David wanted to do more than *enjoy* God; he wanted to *submit* to Him in everything. This yieldedness was not just poetry. In the Biblical account of his life, we read that David did in fact continually "ask the LORD" what he should do.⁵

So David was gripped by one controlling desire: to abandon his life in full surrender to a God so beautiful He was worthy of whole-hearted worship. How could he fail if that was his goal? How could any oppressor deprive him of that privilege? A man like that can afford to be fearless. He has nothing left to lose!

Of course in his day, the Ark of the Covenant—the physical manifestation of God's presence—rested in a tent that David had pitched for it in Jerusalem. He could not literally, physically live inside that tent all the days of his life. He could sacrifice and inquire there often, but responsibilities would require him to leave and reenter the world of men. He could and did, however, maintain the posture of worship and dependence wherever he found himself.

But the glorious truth is that it is possible for us, "on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come," to live in God's house all the days of our lives! Our temple is the church, the *ekklesia* of God, and His presence is manifested in His church by His indwelling Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5). By "church" we of course do not mean a religiously-purposed building, a denominational entity, or a "service" that one could "attend." Those concepts are completely foreign to the New Testament! No, the *ekklesia* is an interwoven fabric of lives that are "joined and knitted together." It "builds itself up in love" as "each part does its work," until it "grows up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:7-22). The people of God are truly living as a church when they are intimate-

⁵ 1 Samuel 22:10; 23:2,4,12; 30:8; 2 Samuel 2:1; 5:19,23; 21:1; 1 Chronicles 14:10,14. In contrast, Saul "did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse" (1 Chronicles 10:14).

ly joined into an organic whole, just as the members of a physical body are merged into a single life. In the *ekklesia*, each person is “given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The members value each other and would never dream of dismissing one another with an attitude that “I have no need of you” until the next meeting. When Believers are joined in *ekklesia* life, there is “no dissension within the body, but the members have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:4-26). Those who have lived in a House of God as described in those passages can testify that they *do* behold God’s beauty there and that His wisdom is richly available in it. They agree wholeheartedly with David that there is nowhere else they’d rather be.

So how can we translate David’s “one thing” from a covenant in which God’s Presence lived in a tent of animal hides into a covenant in which His Spirit lives in the joined lives of His people? Paul shows us the way:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to His saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is He whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that He powerfully inspires within me (Colossians 1:24-29).

The same single-minded focus on the House of the LORD that dominated David’s heart had captivated Paul’s as well: “For this

I toil and struggle with all the energy that He powerfully inspires within me.” David was gripped by a vision of the beauty of God in a House made by human hands; Paul was captivated by a vision of the glory of God in a House built from human hearts. David longed to build a magnificent temple for God; Paul burned with desire to present everyone mature in Christ. As David cast off all other ambitions, he found the strength to face persecution with great courage. In the same way Paul discovered a capacity to *re-joice* in his sufferings for the House, to receive willingly into his own body the sufferings of Christ for His Body.

So you and I can lose ourselves--and lose our instability and fear at the same time--in a single-minded focus. We can live to proclaim the “riches of the glory of the mystery” of a God who makes his home in human beings: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” And we can spend ourselves “warning everyone and teaching everyone” with a vision towards presenting them mature in Christ. Our desire, like David’s, can be to “behold the beauty of the LORD” in His temple and to see His wisdom manifested among His people. That one controlling thought can be the underlying motivation for all we do, from the time we wake each day until the time we sleep again--and throughout the watches of the night if sleep eludes us.

Persecution need not intimidate or embitter us. It can clear our vision and sharpen our focus as it refines us from competing ambitions. In the face of suffering, a courageous love and joy can take root in our hearts. As Peter put it,

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy (1 Peter 1:6-8).

“Now My Head is Lifted Up”

David knew what it meant to have “indescribable and glorious joy,” despite all the hatred heaped on him and the genuine physical danger that he endured every day.

For one thing, David knew that his devotion to God’s house meant protection: “For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble; He will conceal me under the cover of His tent.” Usually, David wouldn’t literally hide in the tabernacle when in danger—although once when Saul was trying to kill him, David fled there and received food and a sword from the high priest Ahimelech (1 Samuel 21:1-9). For the most part, though, David was speaking metaphorically of his confidence in God’s protection. For us who have the privilege of knowing a temple made from intertwined human lives, however, that shelter and covering are quite literally real. The encouragement, nourishment, and wisdom that we can receive from another believer during our “day of trouble” can be supernaturally strengthening, as many a persecuted Christian over the centuries could testify.

But David’s experience wasn’t just one of *surviving* persecution. He knew what it meant to *overcome* it. And so he sang, “God will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me.” An army of haters had surrounded him and attacked him. God could have simply wiped them out, of course. But instead, He chose to lift David up and set him out of their reach, with his feet stably planted on an unshakable rock. The enemies were still surrounding him on all sides, but David could now lift his head victoriously in spite of them.

Our first reaction when persecution threatens is usually to ask God to remove it. Sometimes He does so, and we praise Him for it. But sometimes for His purposes God chooses to allow it to continue, at least for a season, and instead give us Grace and Provision to rise above it. We should also praise Him for that grace, for in many ways it is deeper, richer, and more glorious than a quick deliverance. Paul discovered this truth when he received a painful “thorn in his flesh,” quite possibly meaning a persecutor:

Three times I appealed to the LORD about this thorn, that it would leave me, but He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

Those who, like David and Paul before them, choose to live for "one thing" receive from God indomitable courage and unconquerable joy. They experience fear, pain, and loss just as anyone else would. But they also receive divine Provision to "lift their heads" above their circumstances. And so they "offer in God's tent sacrifices with shouts of joy" and "sing and make melody to the LORD."

"I Shall See the Goodness of the LORD"

Psalm 27 is a song of victory. But interwoven throughout its melody of forceful confidence are notes of deep humility. Persecution should teach us both. It requires us to realize our utter need for God and to abandon ourselves into His hands. That abandonment strips away our self-life. We are no longer under the illusion that we can manage our own lives with our own wisdom and strength. Leaning all our weight on God, we gain freedom and confidence, but we never lose our sense of total dependence on Him.

So David's heart said, "Come! Seek His face!" And he did seek the LORD's face continually. There was not a hint of presumption here. There was certainly no shallow "name it and claim it" attitude based on a naïve assumption that God somehow owed him something. He implored God to hear him when he cried aloud. He pleaded for God not to hide His face, not to turn him away in anger. He begged God not to cast him off or forsake him. David reminded the LORD that He had been his help, that he could not have survived without Him. He called the LORD the "God of my salvation." If David was going to experience any deliverance from his enemies, any vindication of his life, God would have to act.

But in this humility, there was still confidence: “If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.” One of the heart-breaking aspects of persecution is that it can rob us of the understanding and support that should come from those who are supposed to be on our side. Physical family members may actually side with the persecutors. God is not unsympathetic, but He does not promise us that if we obey Him, our biological family relationships will be peaceful. Quite the contrary. His word is a boundary line that divides the human race. It forces people to a decision. Each person must make an individual choice. A shared genetic makeup or family name or place of residence does not in any way ensure that two people will wind up on the same side of that line. In fact, Jesus proclaims:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Luke 12:51-53).

There’s no denying the fact that this kind of division is painful. Some have even betrayed the Father and His Kingdom to try to avoid the pain, and in so doing have shipwrecked their faith. Not David. He unflinchingly faced the possibility of being forsaken by the very people who brought him into the world, his father and mother. Such rejection could happen. But that knowledge drove him towards God, not away from Him. For he could imagine his earthly father forsaking him, but never his heavenly Father!

David’s trust in God drew him back to the Father in both confidence and humility. The prayer of a persecuted child of God is always, “Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.”

Even on a good day life can be confusing. On a hard day, oppressors can make it seem hopelessly perplexing. No matter. We

can always rest on the knowledge that God does have a way for us to get through, and that He is willing to help us find it. He is a generous and gracious Father, willing to give us wisdom for the asking if we trust him (James 1:5-6). If we present our bodies to Him as a living sacrifice, if we refuse to be controlled by this world's pressures and expectations, if we instead renew our minds with His truth, we will be able to discern His "good and acceptable and perfect will" (Romans 12:1-2).

If those words describe us, we have every reason, like David, to believe that we "shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living." And our final declaration, like his, can be: "Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!"

Refrain of the Fearless Heart

Psalm 56

To the leader: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. Of David. A Miktam, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;
 all day long foes oppress me;
 my enemies trample on me all day long,
 for many fight against me.

O Most High, when I am afraid,
 I put my trust in you.

In God, whose word I praise,
 in God I trust; I am not afraid;
 what can flesh do to me?

All day long they seek to injure my cause;
 all their thoughts are against me for evil.

They stir up strife, they lurk,
 they watch my steps.

As they hoped to have my life,
 so repay them for their crime;
 in wrath cast down the peoples, O God!

You have kept count of my tossings;
 put my tears in your bottle.
 Are they not in your record?

Then my enemies will retreat
 in the day when I call.

 This I know, that God is for me.

In God, whose word I praise,
 in the LORD, whose word I praise,
 in God I trust; I am not afraid.

 What can a mere mortal do to me?

My vows to you I must perform, O God;
 I will render thank offerings to you.
 For you have delivered my soul from death,
 and my feet from falling,
 so that I may walk before God
 in the light of life.

“What Can Flesh Do to Me?”

As it so often does, the persecution began with the jealousy of a weak, insecure man.

Saul had witnessed David, armed only with a shepherd’s sling, run out to confront Goliath and had watched incredulously as David killed him with a single stone. Scarcely had the giant’s corpse hit the ground when the Israelite army rallied and routed the fleeing Philistines. Saul’s own son Jonathan became “bound to the soul of David” and grew to “love him as his own soul.” Jonathan even stripped off his robes, armor, and sword and gave them to his friend. David joined Saul’s service, and he “went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him.” Popular demand forced Saul to place David over his army, and “all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.” Then came the final blow to Saul’s large but fragile ego. As the army was returning from battle,

The women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they made merry, ‘Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’ (1 Samuel 18:6-7).

We are told that “Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly.” His pride was severely wounded. He realized that in fighting Goliath, David had done a job Saul himself was afraid to do. That day the army had united behind a shepherd boy, not their king. Saul’s own son had joined his heart to David in a bond far deeper and more genuine than he had ever shared with his own

father. And now the people were ascribing to the young man *ten times* the battle prowess of their ruler. The poison of envy entered Saul's veins and penetrated deep into his heart and mind.

Of course Saul actually had nothing to fear from David, who had no ambition but to offer the king his loyal service. Saul, however, had convinced himself otherwise. Doubtless in his mind he justified his growing hatred of David, blaming the young man for the problem. But the truth was, "Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him but had departed from Saul" (1 Samuel 18:12). Saul had broken faith and disobeyed God during some key tests in his life (1 Samuel 13, 15). A guilty conscience had turned into fear, and fear had turned into a murderous jealousy.

This kind of jealousy lies at the root of many tragedies. It is why Cain murdered his brother Abel, after realizing that "the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering He had no regard" (Genesis 4:4-5). It is why the chief priest and the Pharisees handed Jesus over to be tortured and executed by the Romans (Mark 15:10). It is why these men, along with the Sadducees, arrested the apostles and put them in a public prison (Acts 5:17). This same jealousy has continued to fuel persecution of God's children to this very day.

So "from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David"—and from that time on, David's life became a nightmare.

On two different occasions, as David played his lyre for Saul, the king tried to pin him to the wall with his spear. When the direct approach failed, Saul set a trap. He offered David his daughter in marriage, on the condition that David would first kill a hundred Philistines. David killed two hundred and claimed his bride. As David's fame continued to grow, so did Saul's cancerous jealousy. We are told that "when Saul realized that the LORD was with David, and that Saul's daughter Michal loved him, Saul was still more afraid of David. So Saul was David's enemy from that time forward" (1 Samuel 18:28-29).

Saul became obsessed with killing the man he saw as a rival. Unfortunately for Saul, God still loved David. Even Saul's own children, when forced to choose, sided with David. Jonathan

repeatedly risked his own life to intercede with Saul on David's behalf. Michal helped David escape from a trap when Saul sent messengers to their home to arrest him. David fled to the prophet Samuel. Saul sent his henchmen to kill David, but this time God Himself intervened, sending first the assassins and then Saul himself into a prophetic frenzy, allowing David to escape once more. David next fled to the tabernacle, receiving food and a sword from the high priest. When Saul found out, he massacred not just the high priest, but eighty-five men of the priestly order, along with their families.

David had little choice now but to flee from Israel altogether. He threw himself on the mercy of the Philistines, seeking exile in Goliath's hometown, Gath. Apparently David reasoned that they were strong enough to protect him from Saul and that they would welcome the defection of their most feared enemy. David, unfortunately, had badly misread the situation. The Philistines remembered the Israelites celebrating that David "had killed his tens of thousands" of their soldiers. They seized him. David, now completely desperate, pretended to be insane, scribbling on the city gates and drooling down his beard. He barely managed to convince the Philistine king that he was no longer a threat.

Humiliated, alone, despised, and hunted like an animal, David had seemingly reached rock bottom. He was a broken man. His physical strength and natural charisma were worthless to him. All of his past victories meant nothing now. Everything that David might have relied on in the natural realm had been shaken and removed, "so that what cannot be shaken could remain" (Hebrews 12:27). At this bleak, seemingly hopeless moment, David discovered Someone who could not be shaken: God. David had not slipped out of the Father's hand. He had merely reached the point where God could do His best work.

It was then, during those desperate days in the Philistine city of Gath, that David wrote the song we call Psalm 56. In light of his circumstances, we can easily understand the opening lines of the psalm: "Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me; all day long foes oppress me; my enemies trample on me all day

long, for many fight against me.” The Hebrew word David chose to describe his life can be translated either “trampled on” or “devoured.” Both meanings fit. His enemies were crushing him under the sheer weight of their animosity; they were tearing him apart with the ferocity of their hatred. Every persecuted child of God knows exactly how David felt.

But it was here, at his lowest point, that David proclaimed his trust in the Most High God. He chose to rely on the fact that God is enthroned on high, far above any earthly persecutors and infinitely exceeding their power and authority.

God is called by many Names in the scriptures. But there is something about “Most High” that captures His ability to humble proud mortals. Melchizedek had called on this Name when Abraham defeated the five kings, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” (Genesis 14:19-20).

Hannah likewise grasped this aspect of God, when she prayed, “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth” (1 Samuel 2:9-10).

Proud Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way that God, not he, was Most High. God for a season had given him the mind of an animal. The humbled emperor testified: “When that period was over, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me. I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored the one who lives forever. For His sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation” (Daniel 4:34).

In his humiliation and pain, David remembered that God was Most High. Seeing God as Most High transformed David’s view of human adversaries as well. They were only flesh, mere mortals. While the enemies pursuing him were many and fierce, the power of this God was infinitely greater. David made a deci-

sion. He could deliberately, intentionally choose to trust God in the face of human oppression. “O Most High, when I am afraid, I put my trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?”

The path from “when I am afraid” to “I am not afraid” must always pass through “I put my trust in You.” Whatever our circumstances, that path is open for us.

“This I Know, That God is For Me”

“What can flesh do to me?” David asked. What they *wanted* to do to him was clear: “All day long they seek to injure my cause.” David’s faith in God did not automatically bring his suffering to a stop. His oppressors remained infatuated with their evil plans. David went on to sketch the anatomy of a typical episode of persecution in a few strokes.

- ◆ “All their thoughts are against me for evil.” Persecutors begin by losing perspective and then become progressively obsessed with harming their victim. Hatred twists their minds and mutates their personalities. They become increasingly fanatical, even conspiratorial, in their fixation. You can see this ugly transformation in Saul’s paranoid jealousy of David, in the Pharisee’s cold-blooded scheming against Jesus, in the Jews’ melodramatic plot against Paul in Jerusalem. Haters always become casualties of their own hatred.
- ◆ “They stir up strife.” Persecutors often begin with an indirect approach, spreading rumors and passing on gossip. They try to isolate their prey from other relationships, endeavor to create confusion and chaos in their environment, and attempt to manipulate popular opinion against them. Their goal is simply to create strife in whatever way possible.
- ◆ “They lurk.” Persecutors do most of their dirty work in the shadows, only emerging in the light of day when they have laid the groundwork for a direct attack. In David’s time, they might literally hide by the side of the road, waiting in ambush. In our day, the lurking is more sophisticated. Persecu-

tors skulk around in the anonymity of secret meetings, chat rooms, social media pages, and bulletin boards, often hiding behind fake names and sock puppet identities. No matter. Their goal, just as in ancient times, is to damage the object of their hatred while guarding themselves against possible repercussions.

- ◆ “They watch my steps.” Persecutors place the object of their hatred under intense scrutiny. They become stalkers, whether physically or virtually. They probe and test, looking for some possible vulnerability. They attempt to extract useful information from their intended victim’s relatives, friends, neighbors, or coworkers, often approaching them with flattery and disguised motives. If they find a weakness or plausible-sounding ground for accusation, they move in for the kill, whether their aim is physical death or social death.

David had pressed through his fears and come to a place of poise and stability. But in response to the ongoing persecution, he did not adopt an attitude of passivity. Instead he prayed: “As they hoped to have my life, so repay them for their crime; in wrath cast down the peoples, O God!” Expressions like this prayer in the Psalms have troubled some. God has in effect even been called “unchristian” for including these words in the Bible. But there is nothing here that isn’t Christlike. David *trusted* God implicitly. His faith was active, strong, forceful. He looked to God Most High and reasoned that there was nothing too difficult for Him. He even dared to believe that God was willing and able to cast down an entire people—in this case, the pagan Philistine nation—to rescue a single one of His own.

And David believed that he *was* one of God’s own. He wasn’t going to allow his troubling circumstances or the hateful rants of his enemies to convince him otherwise. He saw past his own pain, grasping by faith that his cherished relationship with the Father was in no jeopardy. David had groaned, yes, but there had been One who had kept count of his cries. He had wept, certainly, but there had been One who had captured each tear in a bottle and recorded it in a scroll. It was this intimate faithfulness of God that

convinced David that “his enemies would retreat in the day when he called.” His world might be confusing. His future might look bleak. His enemies might seem formidable. But David chose to base his attitude on truth, not feelings. And he rested especially on one fact: “This I know, that God is for me”!

Child of God, if indeed you have been born a second time and His seed now lives in you, you can take your stand on the fact that He loves you. And “if God is for us, who is against us?” We may have to endure “hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, or sword”—and according to Jesus’ own word, some of those painful experiences *will* be ours. But they will never separate us from His covenant love.

David’s forceful faith did not stop with his deliverance from immediate danger. He had no interest in making a bargain with God. What he wanted was a covenant. There is a universe of difference between the two! A bargain attempts to barter with God, offering Him some service in return for His help—as if the King of the Universe somehow could be bribed! But a covenant—that is an ongoing relationship of the closest kind, sealed by mutual love and selfless devotion. Bargains are for a crisis; covenants are for eternity. So David sang, “My vows to you I must perform, O God; I will render thank offerings to you. For you have delivered my soul from death, and my feet from falling, so that I may walk before God in the light of life.”

May the privilege and honor of “walking before God in the light of life” be yours and ours! And may the rest of our days, whether short or long, be a constant offering of thanks to Him!

Anthem of the Upright Heart

Psalm 64

To the leader. A Psalm of David.

Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint;

 preserve my life from the dread enemy.

Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked,

 from the scheming of evildoers,

who whet their tongues like swords,

 who aim bitter words like arrows,

shooting from ambush at the blameless;

 they shoot suddenly and without fear.

They hold fast to their evil purpose;

 they talk of laying snares secretly, thinking,

“Who can see us?

 Who can search out our crimes?

We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot.”

 For the human heart and mind are deep.

But God will shoot His arrow at them;

 they will be wounded suddenly.

Because of their tongue He will bring them to ruin;

 all who see them will shake with horror.

Then everyone will fear;

 they will tell what God has brought about,

 and ponder what He has done.

Let the righteous rejoice in the LORD

 and take refuge in Him.

Let all the upright in heart glory.

“The Human Heart and Mind are Deep”

David was never one to back away from a fight.

A man of enormous personal courage, David was always willing to face enemies head on. A band of warriors with a kindred spirit had joined their hearts to him. The scriptures call them “David’s mighty men,” and for good reason. Their exploits were astonishing. The chief of David’s officers, a man named Joshebbashebeth, once “wielded his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time.” The second in command, Eleazar, was not to be outdone. He stood side by side with David against the Philistines even though the rest of the Israelite army withdrew. He “struck down the Philistines until his arm grew weary, though his hand clung to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day.” Another of the mighty men, Benaiah, “went down and killed a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen.” When he met an Egyptian warrior in single combat, Benaiah snatched the spear from the Egyptian’s hand and killed him with it. Three of David’s mighty men once fought their way through enemy lines just to get David a drink from the well in his hometown of Bethlehem. No, David was not afraid to take to the field surrounded by friends like these.

There was an enemy, however, that David dreaded. To be sure, he faced their hostility with faith and courage, as had been his habit in threatening circumstances even from his youth. Still, this particular enemy was especially frustrating and exhausting to combat. In response, David poured out his agony to God in a “complaint” or “lament.” He *pleaded* with the LORD to preserve his life from this “dread enemy.” The identity of this foe? It wasn’t a Philistine giant. It wasn’t a band of assassins led by Saul. It wasn’t an army of Amorites or Syrians.

The enemy were slanderers. Their weapons were rumor, gossip, and defamation, their tactics the smear campaign.

What frustrated David so deeply about facing slanderers was doubtless how difficult it was to defend himself against their attacks. Against a Philistine army, David at least would have a helmet, a shield, and a weapon of his own. He liked his chances in a

fair fight. After all, his head had received the anointing oil of God! But slanderers never fight fair. Then as now, the smear campaign relied on the “secret plots of the wicked” and the “scheming of evildoers.” This enemy refused to show its head. Instead, it lurked in darkened corners. It wrapped itself in a cloak of secrecy and hid itself in shadow.

Slanderers do not fight with bow or blade. They wound with words. As David put it, they “whet their tongues like swords and aim bitter words like arrows.” James calls the tongue “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8). And in the mouth of slanderers, this venomous evil becomes a lethal weapon. Slanderers hope to marginalize a human being by abusing the power of language. Their motive is bitterness. Their goal is to injure others’ reputations—and if possible to destroy their relationships, their freedom of action, and their peace of mind.

David described his battle with slanderers in vivid military metaphor: “Shooting from ambush at the blameless, they shoot suddenly and without fear.” Anyone who has been similarly attacked with malicious gossip and fabricated rumors can recognize the description immediately. Each phrase is packed with painful meaning.

- ◆ Slanderers “shoot from ambush,” doing their dirty work in secrecy.
- ◆ Slanderers shoot “at the blameless.” Malicious speech does not need its target to be guilty of any terrible crime or deserving of any punishment. It only requires that its victims are visible and vulnerable, that they are risking and extending themselves and *doing* something.
- ◆ Slanderers “shoot suddenly.” Verbal attacks are most effective when the unsuspecting victim is blind-sided by the destructive words.
- ◆ Slanderers attack “without fear.” Because they prefer to operate covertly, they have little concern about being detected. And if they are found out, any reaction from their victim can

be spun as presumptive evidence against him. Slander is the ideal weapon for a coward.

- ◆ Slanderers “hold fast to their evil purpose.” They become obsessed with destroying their target. Each time they cross a barrier of civility and decency, they become emboldened to go still further.
- ◆ Slanderers tend to be conspiratorial, forming alliances with others to “lay snares secretly” and to think out “carefully conceived plots” to harm the object of their hatred.
- ◆ Slanderers cover their tracks, thinking, “Who can see us? Who can trace out our crimes?”

Little wonder, then, that David found fighting this enemy so painful and fatiguing.

As difficult as slander was for David, however, he had a distinct advantage over the child of God in the twenty-first century. He lived in a pre-technological age. Slander—like most communicable diseases—could only be transmitted by person-to-person contact. Simple geography slowed its spread. A hurtful rumor might percolate through a town or village, but it took a major effort to spread it beyond a small area. The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century increased the spread of slander considerably. The development of newspapers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries opened a new avenue for hateful attacks. And once the telegraph, telephone, and typewriter were invented in the nineteenth century, rumor was off to the races. Radio and television, products of the twentieth century, made it possible to spread deadly words at the speed of light—and these developments played major roles in instigating that century’s unthinkable cruel genocides.

It isn’t that technology is inherently evil. Technology is neutral. But evil people use technology for evil purposes. As David put it, “The human heart and mind are deep.” In Paul’s thundering indictment of the fallen human race, he wrote:

Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Did you catch that? Paul said that those who do not acknowledge God—who refuse to honor Him or give thanks to Him—become “inventors of evil.” That means that the human race is always looking for ways to exploit technological advancement to do evil more efficiently. And that includes using technology to carry out other wicked things on Paul's list—malice, strife, deceit, gossip, slander, and ruthlessness.

Which brings us to the twenty-first century.

As computers began to proliferate in the 1960s, so did visions of linking them together in communication networks. Throughout the '70s and '80s, these “inter-networks”—shortened to “internet” in computer lingo—developed and grew. Mostly this internet linked government institutes and universities, so they could share information and collaborate on projects, but more and more people began using them for recreation and communication, and increasingly for darker purposes as well. By the late '80s, the first private “internet service providers” began to appear. Finally on April 30, 1995, the US National Science Foundation ended its sponsorship of a key component of the internet, and the remaining restrictions to commercial exploitation of the system were removed. The World Wide Web was born. And it truly has become “worldwide.” At the time of this writing, there are 1.1 billion people on the planet with regular internet access, not to mention millions more who access it through smart phones or at internet cafes. And it has expanded beyond the globe: in 2010 an

astronaut at the International Space Station updated his Twitter account from low earth orbit.

The “inventors of evil” have not been idle all this time. The internet has revolutionized pornography, terrorism, fraud, and organized crime. It has also transformed slander. The English dictionary now must include new definitions of “troll” (a person who deliberately posts inflammatory remarks to disrupt an online discussion), “flaming” (hostile, emotional attacks between internet users), “cyber-bullying” (use of the internet for deliberate, repeated, hostile behavior against an individual, especially against a child), and “cyber-stalking” (use of the internet for harassment of an individual or group through threats, false accusations, monitoring, hacking, or gathering personal information). Because the internet is truly global in reach, even amateur slanderers can have a dramatic impact on a victim’s life. The internet has made the smear campaign accessible to nearly anyone with an attitude. Usually there is very limited legal recourse available for the injured party.

Perhaps the most damaging and frightening of these developments is the phenomenon of the “online mob.” One legal scholar notes that “social networking sites and blogs have increasingly become breeding grounds for anonymous online groups” that show mob-like dynamics:

These destructive groups target individuals with defamation, threats of violence, and technology-based attacks that silence victims and concomitantly destroy their privacy... Attackers manipulate search engines to reproduce their lies and threats for employers and clients to see, creating digital “scarlet letters” that ruin reputations. Today’s cyber-attack groups update a history of anonymous mobs coming together to victimize and subjugate vulnerable people.⁶

⁶ Citron, Danielle K. 2009. “Cyber Civil Rights.” Boston University Law Review 69:61-125

This scholar lists characteristics of mobs throughout history and then insightfully concludes:

The Internet magnifies the dangerousness of group behavior in each of these respects. Web 2.0 platforms create a feeling of closeness among like-minded individuals. Online groups affirm each other's negative views, which become more extreme and destructive. Individuals say and do things online they would never consider saying or doing offline because they feel anonymous, even if they write under their real names. Because group members often shroud themselves in pseudonyms, they have little fear that victims will retaliate against them or that they will suffer social stigma for their abusive conduct. Online groups also perceive their victims as "images" [rather than human beings] and thus feel free to do anything they want to them.⁷

Blood-bought believers are not immune from these attacks. They are, in fact, common targets. One popular bulletin board full of hateful "flames" and outrageous fabrications boasts over a *quarter of a million* posts attacking members of "Christian-based groups." And the number of mercilessly slanderous assaults against professing Christians to be found on blogs, social networking pages, "tweets," and hate websites is impossible to calculate.

We could go on, but you get the point. Disciples of Jesus Christ have never been popular in any age, nor do they expect to be. To use Paul's phrase, the world has been crucified to them and they to the world. But in this new millennium, genuine Christians find themselves living in a "brave new world" of slander and hatred. It is now an inescapable part of existence. There is nothing any of us can do to prevent it from happening to us—unless we want to betray our allegiance to Jesus and conform ourselves to this world. May that never be! And once an attack begins, there is usually very little we can do to stop it or to protect ourselves from the harmful consequences.

⁷ Ibid.

But we are not without hope! *We are never, never without hope.* This is absolutely certain: If we approach any challenge from the right perspective, we will be able to say,

“Thanks be to God, who in Christ *always* leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing Him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Always and everywhere, we can triumphantly spread the fragrance of knowing Jesus! Some we meet will appreciate it; many won't. But persecution, including slander, cannot stop us from playing our part in this glorious life, if we will only see the challenges with eyes of faith.

“A Disciple is Not Above the Teacher”

For starters, when you are slandered for Jesus' sake—and if you truly belong to Him, it is a matter of “when” and not “if”—you are in some very good company.

We can begin with Jesus Himself. The gospels record *over thirty different incidents* when people slandered Jesus during three and a half years of His public life. And because the gospels are only selective accounts of His days, these episodes must represent only the tip of a very large iceberg.

The word on the street—carefully planted there by His enemies—was that despite Jesus' delusions of grandeur, He was just a backwater hick, totally unqualified to be the Messiah or anything else of value. He was an overly ambitious man who dreamed of setting Himself up as a rival to the emperor. But Jesus was of dubious moral character, or so it was alleged. He had grown far too chummy with notorious sinners and far too careless in observing the Jewish laws and traditions. In fact, He was a sinner Himself, a glutton and a drunkard. It was true that Jesus had gained some popularity as a teacher, but He behaved rather unpredictably and

often said laughably ridiculous things. He was quite probably out of His mind. Although He was famous as a miracle worker, He was powerless to help His friends or even Himself when it counted. Jesus was nothing but a deceiver and an imposter, even a criminal. Why, there was a strong possibility that He was actually a half-pagan Samaritan. For sure Jesus was a blasphemer—the experts all agreed on that. And His alleged supernatural powers were only evidence that He was demon-possessed.

The previous paragraph was painful even to write. But according to the gospels, *all* of those things were said about Jesus. And if you had lived during that time, and you were the type of person who entertained slander in the name of giving every point of view a fair hearing, then you almost certainly would have wound up distancing yourself from Jesus. Hanging out with Him wasn't *safe*.

It was the charge that Jesus was demon-possessed—a rumor started by the Pharisees—that seemed to gain the most traction. If we dissect it, we can see why this was an especially effective slander. Jesus obviously had miraculous powers, including the ability to cast out demons. His signs and wonders left no room for doubt. The Pharisees found themselves backed into a corner. They couldn't deny the miracles; that would have made the Pharisees seem foolish. But they also were quite unwilling to accept Jesus on His terms. The accusation of demon possession gave them a clever way out. In the same breath they could admit Jesus' miracles and thoroughly discredit Him. They could use Jesus' own deeds of power as evidence against Him. By pinning the "demon" label on Him, the Pharisees effectively dehumanized Jesus. It was a major advance towards their ultimate goal of liquidating Him. Of course the rumor wasn't actually *true*, nor did it hold up to logical examination. But these Pharisees already knew what twentieth century dictators and twenty-first century bloggers would later rediscover: a lie repeated often enough will eventually be accepted unquestioningly as common knowledge.

This cruel, incessant hate-speech must have been painful to Jesus. He was, after all, "in every respect tested as we are, yet without sin." And it played a major role in getting Him crucified.

But do take note: however persistent it might have been and however unbearable it must have felt, in no way did slander prevent Jesus from accomplishing *any* of the Work that the Father had given Him to do. Despite the cruel suffering He endured, Jesus showed us the Father and purchased eternal salvation for us; He triumphed over the grave and humiliated the evil one, stripping him of his power; He secured a Kingdom that He could one day hand over to the Father; He ascended to the Father's right hand and sat on the throne in Glory. There were many "loud cries and tears" along the way, but that is Victory!

Jesus assures us, His disciples, that we will emulate Him both in the slander we endure and the triumph that we experience despite it: "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! So have no fear of them" (Matthew 10:25-26).

We need to decide: do we want to be like Jesus? Is it enough for us? It is a package deal. We can journey as far as we are willing into His character and heart and consecration and life. We can follow the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith, who has gone before us to blaze the trail and who will walk it with us now. But we can't have Him without earning the world's contempt. As they maligned Him, they will malign us. If they called Him Beelzebul—the lord of the flies—they will call us the same, or worse.

So it is that every faithful child of God endures slander. Every genuine church that follows Jesus wherever He goes will find itself standing in the line of fire. Near the end of his life, Paul went to Rome. The Jewish leaders there called the church of the first century a "sect" that "everywhere is spoken against" (Acts 28:22). We are inspired when we read that one local church's faith became known everywhere as the message of Jesus rang out through their testimony (1 Thessalonians 1:8)—and well we should be. But we need to realize that just as reports of their faith spread, so did the slander against them. It is impossible to have one without the other.

In AD 64, for example, a fire broke out in Rome, which according to the historian Tacitus destroyed about a fourth of the city and damaged another half of it. No one knows how the blaze started, but some of the populace blamed the emperor, Nero. To shift the focus from himself, Nero claimed that Christians were arsonists.

As a consequence, to get rid of the report [that he himself started the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace...In accordance, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty [under torture]; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not as much of the crime of firing the city as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.⁸

There is a nineteenth century English nursery rhyme claiming that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” But anyone who thinks slander can’t hurt a person very deeply has never read their Tacitus!

Up until nearly the end of the second century, the church was faithful enough to her calling that she still fulfilled Jesus’ prophecy and endured widespread slander for His name’s sake. Christians were alleged to commit cannibalism and incest. They were supposedly atheists and therefore to blame for every natural disaster. Of course when believers spoke of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking His blood, when they talked of marrying brothers or sisters, and when they admitted that they did not believe in the Roman “gods,” they meant something very different than these allegations. But that fact did not deter the slanderers. As Tertullian, a North African Christian writing around AD 200 put it,

⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* XV,44.

Why is rumor a curse? Because she is so swift? Because she is an informer? Or because she is generally a liar?... However widely rumor has been put about, with whatever assurance it has been contrived, it must necessarily have originated at some moment with a single person who started it. After that it creeps through ramifications of tongues and ears; and something wrong in the little seed, whence it sprang, so obscures all else in the rumor, that no one reflects whether the first mouth sowed the lie, as often happens, from an envious nature, from wanton suspicion, or from that mere pleasure in lying which with some people is no new thing but inborn in them...Rumor alone all this long time is the authority for the crimes of the Christians. Rumor is the informer you bring forward against us. Yet what she once launched and in this interval has hardened into general belief, to this hour she has not been able to prove.⁹

In every age, every true disciple of Jesus and every genuine church has been the subject of hateful, hurtful rumors. We could multiply examples drawn from every historical era up to the present day, but those will suffice. The point is that Jesus is always true to His word. He told us that if the Teacher was slandered, the disciples would be, too. History has proved Him right.

That realization is one key to overcoming slander in our own lives. Attacks from this “dread enemy” will always be painful. But we must not think that something strange has happened. There is no need to second guess ourselves and assume that we must be doing something wrong. There is no reason to be embarrassed or afraid. We are only emulating our Teacher. We must not withdraw into hurt or bitterness. And we must never be shamed into silence. *Never.*

In fact, slander is our cue to proclaim the Truth with even greater boldness!

⁹ Tertullian. *Apology*. VII, 8-13. With an English Translation by T. R. Glover. 1931. New York: Putnam

“Proclaim It From the Housetops!”

When Jesus prophesied that we would be maligned just as He was, in the same breath He exhorted us not to be afraid. Instead, we are to respond to slander with great boldness and faith:

For nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows (Matthew 10:26-31).

We will have the right perspective on slander if we keep the right perspective of *God*.

Persecution is aimed at the outer person. It can destroy the body, but it can only grieve the soul. There has never been a persecution so fierce that it could destroy the inner person. Slanders are only human, after all. *But God!* From His throne of power, with His mighty outstretched Arm, God is able to execute divine judgment, cosmic in its scope and eternal in its power. Body, soul, and spirit are completely at His mercy. If you want to fear someone, fear God!

But this awe-inspiring Divinity is also a loving Father. He places enormous value on you, His child. He is also completely aware of every detail of your life—the hairs of your head are all counted. He is powerful enough to intervene in our lives and overrule the scheming of mere mortals. In our knowledge of our Abba, we can live peaceful, dignified lives, even during the storms of slander and persecution.

Because of God we dare to be bold. As Jesus’ disciples, we have been privileged to hear the intimate counsels of the Father’s heart. Jesus exhorts us, then, to be aggressive and unflinching in

our testimony. When people speak lies about us, we are to respond by proclaiming the Truth about Him. We are to be determined and unapologetic about it. Instead of shrinking back when we are slandered, we are to press forward. In broad daylight, we are to declare the Truth of God from our very housetops.

We can fight back against slander—not by defending ourselves, but by defending the Gospel. When someone tells a lie against us, we can tell ten truths about Jesus. When one person tells another something vile or base about us, we can tell “thirty, sixty, or a hundred” people something noble and pure about our Master. When someone whispers about us behind our backs, we can proclaim God’s Truth right out in front of everyone. When someone falsely accuses us of evil, by the Holy Spirit’s power we can truthfully convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. When someone pollutes the world with the word of satan, we can cleanse men’s hearts with the Word of God.

Jesus calls us out of our pain and discouragement and invites us to His own perspective of courage and faith. After enduring lies and mockery and abuse, Jesus made the good confession before Pilate. He calls us to make the same confession when we are maligned and slandered. Our persistent testimony of life-giving Truth will make Father smile. It will also make satan wish that he had kept his filthy mouth shut. For a sword is a weapon of attack, and the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God.

“Because of Their Tongue He Will Bring Them to Ruin”

Responding to slander in a godly way, then, is so very dependent on us keeping our perspective despite the chaos. We must look at the hateful words and vile rumors aimed at us as part of our identification with Jesus. We must also see these attacks, no matter how painful they feel and how far-reaching their effects on our lives, as opportunities to press forward boldly in proclaiming the truth of the gospel.

David provides us with an additional perspective to cling to. The slanderers he wrote about in Psalm 64 were arrogant in their self-confidence, but they were doomed. They reveled in their

“carefully conceived plot.” They boasted that they had covered their tracks and feared no retribution. But like all persecutors, the slanderers made a fatal mistake: they forgot God.

And God *hates* slander.

God’s word is crystal clear on the subject: “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:16). God’s opinion is the only one that counts, and He says that “lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool” (Proverbs 10:18). It is impossible for an unrepentant slanderer to have a relationship with Him. The only ones who can “abide in His tent” or “dwell on His holy hill” are those “who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors” (Psalm 15:1-3).

Jesus upheld the same standard: “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” (Matthew 15:19-20). That is why in the early church, “revilers” were numbered with “fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, and robbers” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Slanderers were excluded from all fellowship with the church. In fact, Christians were not to associate with them or even eat with them (1 Corinthians 5:11).

David knew God. He understood God’s hatred of slander, so he saw the proud boasting of the revilers attacking him as merely a prelude to their demise. He predicted: “God will shoot His arrow at them; they will be wounded suddenly. Because of their tongue He will bring them to ruin; all who see them will shake with horror.” No temporary “success” in the slanderer’s smear campaign could convince David that God would overlook their crimes. They would reap God’s judgment. And when innocent passers-by witnessed the smoking ruins of their lives, God Himself would be feared and respected: “Then everyone will fear; they will tell what God has brought about, and ponder what He has done.”

“Let the Righteous Rejoice in the LORD”

It was no shallow sentimentality, then, that led David to conclude his psalm, “Let the righteous rejoice in the LORD and take refuge in Him. Let all the upright in heart glory.” *If* we regard slander for the sake of Jesus as a bond that links our hearts to His; *if* we respond to it by throwing ourselves with joyful abandon into the proclamation of Truth; and *if* we wait expectantly for God to render His righteous judgment on our behalf...we will come to the same conclusion!

We have no desire to trivialize the pain caused by slander, and we realize from personal experience that it may be quite costly for you to bear. But we also affirm to you that Jesus is Alive. In the midst of a firestorm of hatred and malice, He is still near to you. As Paul said, the Word is in your mouth and in your heart: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is LORD and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” This passage was gloriously true about your salvation from sin. But it is just as true about your deliverance from fear, discouragement, and pain. Believe that the same God who raised Jesus from the grave is unwilling to see your life buried by slander, and that He can give life to your spirit in the midst of the trial. Confess boldly with your lips the Lordship of Jesus, no matter what hatred and lies are being reported about you. You will find deliverance.

Where are the slanderers who attacked David? Where are the Pharisees who defamed Jesus? Where are Nero and the other rulers who maligned the early Christians? Where are all those who lied about reformers and prophets throughout the ages? They are all on the ash heap of history now. But the Truths of the King and the Kingdom are growing brighter as the Day approaches.

So in your pain, consider Jesus. Then rejoice. Take refuge. *Glory.*

Cry of the Undivided Heart

Psalm 86

A Prayer of David.

Incline Your ear, O LORD, and answer me,
 for I am poor and needy.
 Preserve my life, for I am devoted to You;
 save Your servant who trusts in You.
 You are my God; be gracious to me, O LORD,
 for to You do I cry all day long.
 Gladden the soul of Your servant,
 for to You, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
 For You, O LORD, are good and forgiving,
 abounding in steadfast love to all who call on You.
 Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer;
 listen to my cry of supplication.
 In the day of my trouble I call on You,
 for You will answer me.

There is none like You among the gods, O LORD,
 nor are there any works like Yours.
 All the nations You have made shall come
 and bow down before You, O LORD,
 and shall glorify Your name.
 For You are great and do wondrous things;
 You alone are God.
 Teach me Your way, O LORD,
 that I may walk in Your truth;
 give me an undivided heart to revere Your name.
 I give thanks to You, O LORD my God, with my whole heart,
 and I will glorify Your name forever.
 For great is Your steadfast love toward me;
 You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

O God, the insolent rise up against me;
 a band of ruffians seeks my life,
 and they do not set You before them.
 But You, O LORD, are a God merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithful-
 ness.
 Turn to me and be gracious to me;
 give Your strength to Your servant;
 save the child of Your serving girl.
 Show me a sign of Your favor,
 so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame,
 because You, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.

“To You Do I Cry All Day Long”

The riches of God can only be discovered by a needy heart.

If you have been born from above, you already understand that Truth. There must have come a time when you realized that you were powerless to save yourself from your own sin and deliver yourself from God’s judgment. In your abject need, you threw yourself on His mercy. You discovered something wonderful and precious about the Father then: He does not despise a broken and contrite heart. He led His Only Begotten through the fires of torment so that He could both forgive you and transform you into a new creation. And as you have followed Jesus, you have doubtless rediscovered the riches of God’s kindness on each step of your journey. Whenever you have mourned over your insufficiency and turned to Jesus, you have found in Him an all-sufficient Grace and Provision.

Nowhere is this connection between human need and Divine Grace seen more clearly than in the midst of persecution. Nothing else can make us feel quite so helpless, so vulnerable, so inadequate. But there is wonderful news for the persecuted: God has not abandoned you. Far from it! From the start of your new life, whenever you have seen your lack and called out to God, He has been there. He still is! Absolutely nothing has changed. In truth,

there are special mercies reserved in His heart for those who suffer for His sake, if they will only turn their faces to Him in complete trust. Persecution can actually be a doorway into the heart and mind and character of God. And since persecution is a reality for every faithful child of God (2 Timothy 3:12), it is an opportunity that each of us will have to come to know Him better. He can become for us on a deeper level than ever before our Peace, our Refuge, our Deliverer, our Friend.

Paul once said, “I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of His sufferings by becoming like him in His death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11). These are amazing words. Who would even dare to say them, had they not been revealed by the Holy Spirit? When we suffer for the sake of the One who suffered for us, we enter into a fellowship with Him. We become like Jesus in His death, but we also become like Him in His resurrection. We touch the Life that shook off the grave clothes and burst triumphantly from the tomb. We come to know Christ, not as an historical figure or a theological abstraction, but as a Person we have experienced in reality.

Peter had learned the same Truth. He wrote to believers living in the fires of persecution, “Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when His glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of Glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you” (1 Peter 4:13-14). There it is again—the thought of *sharing Christ’s sufferings*. And we are to *rejoice* to the degree that it is happening in our lives! Joy in the midst of persecution prepares us for even greater joy when we see the eventual triumph of Jesus. Peter goes on to assure us that there is a special intimacy with the Godhead available to us whenever we are slandered, mocked, and ridiculed for the name of Jesus. God’s own Spirit, the Spirit of Glory, “rests” on us. We are blanketed and enfolded with the transfiguring Glory of God, if we only have eyes to see.

Like Paul and Peter, David knew that the path to intimacy with God often merges with the way of suffering. That is why he turned to God in the “day of his trouble.” We do not know the exact setting of Psalm 86, but we do know that insolent, arrogant men had attacked him. They were filled with personal hatred for him. A “band of ruffians” or “gang of ruthless men” was seeking his life. The exact identity of these men is relatively unimportant. What matters is that in his time of great need, David cried out to God.

Line after line, we read phrases like, “To You do I cry all day long...To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul...Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer...I call on You...Listen to my cry of supplication.” The words “You” and “Your” appear *thirty-three* times in this psalm, and each time they are addressed to God.

Meanwhile, David took the place of utter dependence. “I am poor and needy...I am devoted to You... Give Your strength to Your servant ...Your servant trusts in You...Save the child of Your serving girl.” David wasn’t adopting some sort of liturgical language here. He wasn’t mouthing trite phrases. These words were his *heart*. They were his *reality*. In a time of trouble, when David was feeling the brunt of human hatred and facing the possibility of life-threatening danger, he realized his utter dependence on God. He turned to the LORD, his Shepherd, and looked to Him for protection, help, and guidance.

When we read the lines of this psalm, we realize that after a lifetime of abandoning his heart to God in this way, David had come to know Him in reality. The need was real, the trust was real, and so the intimacy was real.

The key decision we too must make when humans oppress us for our faith is to turn upward towards Jesus rather than inward towards our pain. We must choose courage and trust rather than fear or despair or bitterness. We must abandon ourselves into the Father’s hands. This abandonment is what the Bible means by *faith*. In drawing near to God, we will find fellowship, and in His fellowship we will find His glory.

David knew this fellowship of suffering, and he sang it for us from the depths of his heart.

“Great is Your Steadfast Love Toward Me”

Because he deliberately turned his face towards Father during times of persecution, David was able to see God ever more clearly. Suffering deepened his revelation¹⁰. As he composed this psalm, David was especially gripped by God’s *steadfast love*.

The word rendered “steadfast love” in some English translations and “lovingkindness” or “mercy” in others is a special description of God’s covenant commitment to us. It is a word-picture of someone great who bends down to show mercy on someone small. It implies a determined conviction to seek the good of another who has no claim on your kindness. “Steadfast love” is goodness that never fails.

Yet how could David hold onto a revelation of God’s tenacious love when he was surrounded by evidence of man’s tenacious hatred?

For one thing, David was resting his conviction on God’s revelation of Himself through His word. On Mount Sinai, the LORD had declared His Name to Moses. “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). In this psalm, David made reference to this self-revelation of God three times, once quoting Exodus verbatim. No matter how pressing his circumstances seemed, he resolved not to let anyone or anything talk him out of believing what God had declared about Himself. By trusting God’s word when it counted, David saw these words transformed

¹⁰ By “revelation” here and in the pages that follow, we are not talking about the revelation of God’s inspired word through His Spirit enabling human beings to write down the God-breathed scriptures. Of course David had revelation in that sense, too. But we are here referring to the inner apprehension of Who God is, a very personal conviction that what He said of Himself is true. A heaven-birther knowledge of God is what we are after. And suffering can actually be a stepping stone to that knowledge, if we will allow it to do its work in us.

into living, breathing reality. God would show unwavering love to him. How could he despair?

What is more, David had a history with God. He declared, “You have delivered my soul from the depths of the grave.” Time and again God had proved Himself to be David’s Shepherd, capable of leading him safely through the valley of the shadow of death. What more did God have to do to prove His faithfulness? David refused to panic in the face of the latest crisis. Instead, he acted on the basis of revelation. God had proved Himself to be “good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on Him”—so that’s exactly what David did. The LORD had shown Himself to be “a God merciful and gracious,” so David implored Him to “turn to me and be gracious to me.”

On the basis of God’s words and deeds, David had received a revelation of a Father who loved him steadfastly. This conviction was a stable foundation where David could find his footing and then stand strong in the midst of this trial.

“You Alone Are God”

Another rock-solid revelation for David was the greatness and wonder of God. Yahweh had no rivals among the gods of the pagan nations. His mighty works were unmatched by any other deeds ever performed in heaven or on earth. With the eyes of his heart, David envisioned all the nations one day bowing their knee in worship to this transcendent God. Perhaps he was seeing dimly the day when a “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” would worship before God’s Throne (Revelation 7:9-10).

Godly men and women of every age have been gripped by a similar sense of God’s majesty, and this vision has changed them forever. It was seeing the LORD “sitting on a throne, high and lofty, the hem of His robe filling the temple” that deeply convicted Isaiah of his “unclean lips” and then caused him to volunteer, “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:1-8). It was seeing divine power in the form of an unassuming carpenter that caused Peter to beg, “Go away from me LORD, for I am a sinful man!”—and then to leave

everything and follow Him (Luke 5:8-11). It was seeing the brilliance and glory of the ascended Christ that caused John to “fall at His feet as though dead” and then empowered him to serve as a vessel to spread that revelation to the churches.

But this vision of God’s majesty and holiness is not just for apostles and prophets. Every true child of God has been struck by the worthiness of Jesus. Usually it is through an inner revelation to the spirit rather than some outward vision. But no matter; this revelation is what keeps them going when circumstances are trying. Unlike the seed that fell on rocky soil in Jesus’ parable, their roots go deep, so they can withstand the sun’s heat. Whether it currently feels good or not, following Jesus is simply *right* because He is worthy. A life built around that conviction is stable, secure, sustainable.

The revelation of God’s worthiness was deeply ingrained in David. That vision, together with the apprehension of God’s steadfast love, gave David both the desire to rise above the persecution and the courage to do so. And as he turned his face towards God right in the middle of his suffering, these convictions grew in depth and power. A faith-filled response to persecution resulted in an upward spiral of revelation and intimacy with the Father. It will do the same for us!

“Give Me an Undivided Heart”

It is important that we look closely at how David turned his face towards God. What did it mean? Clichés won’t help us in the day of trouble. We need substance.

To be sure, David asked God for deliverance from the trial. “Preserve my life,” he pleaded. “Save your servant...Be gracious to me...Gladden my soul.” There is nothing unspiritual about asking God for help! Three times Jesus asked the Father to take away the cup of suffering—and three times He conformed His own will to the Father’s and went forward. Three times Paul asked God to remove his thorn—and three times he accepted God’s answer that His grace was sufficient. Spiritual men do ask in humility for God’s deliverance. But they never stop there. They always go

deeper. They are always looking for something beyond their own safety and well-being. In David's prayer recorded in this psalm, there were several other requests and pledges that he made to God in response to the persecution:

- ◆ “Teach me Your way, O LORD, that I may walk in Your truth.” This appeal was not a bargain with God, as when people offer Him promises—usually empty ones—in return for some blessing. No, these words expressed David's genuine desire from the core of his being. We declare again that biblical faith is *abandoning ourselves into the Father's hands*. Certainly such faith means entrusting Him with our troubles, casting our cares on Him in the knowledge that He cares for us. But it also means submitting to His ways and walking in His truth. It means not just *saying* “Lord, Lord,” but actually doing the Father's will. It is an utter conviction that if we focus our passion on looking to God's interests, then He is well able to look to our own. It is resting and reveling in the fact that “as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9). So in his day of trouble, David instinctively desired to put his life in the safest place he could imagine, the hands of God.
- ◆ “Give me an undivided heart to revere Your name.” David wanted to maintain a single-minded devotion to God and a pure focus on things above. Wrapped up in this request we again see the full surrender that is faith. Further, an undivided heart is very much a practical need during times of persecution. We can so easily get distracted by what is happening to our *own* name that we forget to revere *His* name. But that way leads to doubt and double-mindedness, making us “unstable in all our ways” (James 1:8). In contrast, an undivided heart leads to poise and stability. It frees the soul to rise above the circumstances and worship in Spirit and truth.
- ◆ “I give thanks to You, O LORD my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify Your name forever.” The persecutors were

still out there; the band of ruffians still sought his life. But David made a decision to be thankful, even *before* God acted to deliver him from danger. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). This command can be obeyed. It is possible to choose wholehearted thankfulness in any situation, even in the face of human hatred and rejection and slander. It may not be possible to *feel* happy in every circumstance, but we can still choose to *rejoice* anytime in any place. Happiness is a fleeting state of mind. Rejoicing is active and substantial. Whether or not demons submit to us, we can always rejoice that our names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20). And as anyone who has chosen thankfulness can attest, turning towards God with verbal expressions of gratitude can quiet the spirit and steady the soul as nothing else can.

- ◆ “Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because You, LORD, have helped me and comforted me.” This request is very revealing of David’s heart. He did not ask for personal vindication. He did not hope that those who hated him would admit that they had been wrong about him and acknowledge that he was a good person. Instead, he wanted them to see undeniable evidence that God loved him. The only validation that David desired was for God to help and comfort him in response to their hatred. David wanted them to be ashamed that they had opposed God. It is striking that in the midst of his “fellowship of suffering” with the Father, David’s greatest concern was that his *relationship with God* would be vindicated. The upward spiral of intimacy and revelation had led David to a place where God’s love was truly better than life.

A millennium later, the Hebrews writer would urge his readers to remember those who had spoken God’s word to them, to “consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” We may apply these words to David as well. He was a hated man, often attacked and sometimes pressed almost to the point of death. Yet

what was his way of life? When he was persecuted and oppressed by enemies, he turned his face to God. He viewed his circumstances through the eyes of faith, never losing sight of God's revelation of His steadfast love and faithfulness. What was the outcome of that way of life? David grew in knowledge of and intimacy with the Father. He found a place of stability and strength. He fulfilled his destiny of being a "man after God's own heart" (Acts 13:22) and "served the purposes of God in his generation" (Acts 13:36).

Is that the outcome you would choose for your life, to be a man or woman after God's heart who serves His purposes and accomplishes His work? *Then imitate David's faith.* In your day of trouble, especially during times of persecution, cry out to God, not simply for deliverance, but for fellowship. Place yourself fully in His loving hands, with a heart of complete surrender and abandonment. And if you failed to respond that way in the past? It isn't too late to begin.

Start now.

Battle Hymn of the Selfless Heart

Psalm 94

O LORD, you God of vengeance,
 you God of vengeance, shine forth!
Rise up, O judge of the earth;
 give to the proud what they deserve!
O LORD, how long shall the wicked,
 how long shall the wicked exult?

They pour out their arrogant words;
 all the evildoers boast.
They crush your people, O LORD,
 and afflict your heritage.
They kill the widow and the stranger,
 they murder the orphan,
and they say, "The LORD does not see;
 the God of Jacob does not perceive."

Understand, O dullest of the people;
 fools, when will you be wise?
He who planted the ear, does He not hear?
He who formed the eye, does He not see?
He who disciplines the nations,
He who teaches knowledge to humankind,
 does He not chastise?
The LORD knows our thoughts,
 that they are but an empty breath.

Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD,
 and whom you teach out of your law,
giving them respite from days of trouble,
 until a pit is dug for the wicked.
For the LORD will not forsake His people;

He will not abandon His heritage;
 for justice will return to the righteous,
 and all the upright in heart will follow it.

Who rises up for me against the wicked?
 Who stands up for me against evildoers?
 If the LORD had not been my help,
 my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.
 When I thought, "My foot is slipping,"
 your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.
 When the cares of my heart are many,
 your consolations cheer my soul.
 Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
 those who contrive mischief by statute?
 They band together against the life of the righteous,
 and condemn the innocent to death.
 But the LORD has become my stronghold,
 and my God the rock of my refuge.
 He will repay them for their iniquity
 and wipe them out for their wickedness;
 the LORD our God will wipe them out.

"Rise Up, O Judge of the Earth!"

A popular theme of Christian devotional literature has been the revelation of God through His Names in Hebrew scripture. Many beautiful words have been penned on Yahweh's identity as *El Shaddai*, the All-Sufficient One, and *Jehovah-jireh*, the One Who Provides. There have been many inspiring meditations written on *Jehovah-nissi*, the LORD My Banner, and *Jehovah-raah*, The LORD My Shepherd. To be sure, there are wonderful truths in these Names that genuinely strengthen and deepen our understanding of our God. But in Psalm 94, David calls on a Name rarely mentioned in worship songs or devotional books: *El N'Qamah*, the God of Vengeance.

Some have recoiled at language like this in the Psalms, thinking it harsh, primitive, and somehow “unchristian.” It reflects a different view of God, they would allege, than the God of grace and mercy and love offered by the New Testament. How could Christians ask God for vengeance, they wonder, when Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies? Even among some self-described evangelical teachers, Psalm 94—along with many other passages like it—has been pushed back on some dusty shelf reserved for scriptures that are inspired in some different (and presumably lower) sense than the Sermon on the Mount or the Letter to the Romans.

This view is dangerously wrong.

Rather than judging God with our feeble reason, shouldn't we renew our minds by judging *our thoughts* with the standard of God's word? Instead of trying to trap God in a theological box of our own construction, shouldn't we allow *Him* to tell us who He is? If we pick and choose the aspects of God we are willing to accept, we are trying to make God in our own image. We should be submitting *ourselves* to be re-formed in *His* image. Believers must believe! We should approach any passage of scripture, even a so-called “hard saying,” with open hearts and minds. We should begin with the solid conviction that “*all* scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). If we consider Psalm 94 in that light, our lives will be enriched by its hidden treasures.

In truth, only those who see the LORD as a God of Vengeance can truly learn to forgive; only those who see Him as Judge of the Earth can live sane, stable, and fruitful lives on such a fallen planet.

What does Paul, who quite literally wrote the book on grace, have to say about God's vengeance?

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath

of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:14-21).

We read here a beautiful exhortation telling us how to respond to persecution. We must never become embittered, hateful people. Our minds must be filled with nobility and our mouths with blessing. We must live peaceable and generous lives, no matter how badly we have been treated. But notice what lies at the heart of this response: an affirmation that our Lord is a God of Vengeance.

Psalmist and apostle alike assure us that God will repay the wicked for their crimes. Expecting Him to take vengeance on our persecutors is the only way that we can release the need to avenge ourselves. Just as human beings are born with physical needs, they are born with social needs. There are factors that must exist in their relationships with other people if they are to remain safe and sound and rational. One of these needs is for justice. People long deprived of it descend into a twisted rage. Even perceived injustice can breed vigilante actions, blood feuds, and outbursts of violence.

But disciples of Jesus are free. They believe and know that their loving Father is also Judge of the earth. Just as they can trust Him for their physical needs—"What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?"—they trust Him with their need for justice. They no longer have to run after any of these things like the Gentiles. They are liberated to "strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness," trusting that all these things will be given to them as well (Matthew 6:25-33).

To one persecuted church, the Thessalonians, Paul wrote,

We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring. This is evi-

dence of the righteous judgment of God, and is intended to make you worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering. For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:5-11).

According to Paul, the focus of mistreated Christians should be steadfastness and faith, with a firm hope that even the most painful of trials can hasten their growth into worthy citizens of God's kingdom. They should know and trust that their Lord is both a Loving Father and a God of Vengeance, and that in His time He will repay their persecutors for their crimes against His beloved ones. They can unapologetically take courage in that truth.

It is certainly right in this sense for a believer to look to God for justice. Even our martyred brothers and sisters who already enjoy the presence of Jesus pray with words quite reminiscent of David's psalms. In his revelatory vision, the apostle John heard them and recorded their words:

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?' They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow-servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed (Revelation 6:9-11).

So it is hardly "mean" or "harsh" or "unchristian" for a persecuted believer in this life to implore the Judge of the earth to rise up and judge the wicked. It is an act of faith, and it frees the heart to be peaceful, worshipful, and untainted by selfishly vengeful

thoughts. In fact, our conviction that God's wrath will be poured out on our persecutors makes us pity them and truly hope that they will repent and escape their coming judgment. We are freed to ask Father to lead them into a valley of decision, to give them one more chance to repent. We are able to weep over our Jerusalem, as Jesus did, rather than simply call down fire on it in anger.

A word of encouragement, then, to our persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the world: let's not be afraid to believe that our Father will act justly on our behalf when we feel helpless at the hands of our oppressors. Let's not be ashamed to cry out to the God of Vengeance and Judge of the earth for both justice and relief. Then let us rise from our knees ready to move forward with renewed, cleansed minds so that we can focus on our responsibilities to seek first God's Kingdom and His righteousness, confident that His wrath and His mercy will together accomplish His work.

"The LORD Will Not Forsake His People"

One strong piece of evidence in favor of the righteousness of David's prayer is its utterly unselfish character. In other psalms he poured out his personal agony to God, and it was right for him to do so. But in Psalm 94, he paid little attention to his own sufferings. David's deep concern was for the LORD's people, for God's heritage. He looked around him and saw arrogant, boastful evildoers crushing and afflicting God's people. He was horrified to see them attacking the most vulnerable in Israel—the widow, the stranger, and the orphan.

Sadly, it has been our observation as well that persecutors in our day often single out the most vulnerable as targets for their oppression. Without conscience, they try to pressure mothers who have been abandoned by their husbands to deny their convictions, coercing them with threats to their financial resources. They quite literally take food and clothing and shelter from fatherless children. They target believers residing in difficult situations overseas and through manipulation and lies attempt to separate them from needed Christian relationships. They even stoop to spreading slander to unbelieving parents and siblings of Chris-

tians, cutting them off from their best chance to hear the Good News of Jesus. God “sets the lonely in families.” Satan incessantly works to isolate them through flattery, fear, and innuendo.

Persecutors’ attacks on those they perceive as “strong” are usually indirect, through slander and rumor and electronic media. Often the attacks on the widow, the stranger, and the orphan are quite direct, however. As the deeds of persecutors prove, there is a huge difference between malice and courage.

Adding to David’s indignation was the sheer egotism of the oppressors. They acted as if their crimes had no consequence. They may have been religious for all we know—persecutors often are—but they were *practical atheists*. They had no fear of God. They arrogantly assumed that God would not notice their oppression, or if He noticed He would not care, or if He cared He would not act. They blasphemously treated God as if He were deaf and blind.

But they were wrong. Dead wrong.

God cares *deeply* for the vulnerable in His kingdom. Hear how Moses described Him: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:17-18).

It is a fatal mistake for persecutors to ignore a God like that! He warned the Israelites,

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to Me, I will surely heed their cry; My wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans (Exodus 22:21-24).

Similarly, one of the twelve curses the Israelites were to recite when they entered the Promised Land was this: “Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice”

(Deuteronomy 27:19). And once they were established in the land and had planted orchards, vineyards, and fields, they were told not to harvest all of their crops. They were to leave some olives on the trees, grapes on the vine, and wheat in the field for “the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow” (Deuteronomy 24:19-21).

The New Testament writings echo these same priorities. James summed up the topic well when he wrote, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). Yes, God cares for the vulnerable!

Lest we misunderstand, Jesus explained that this care for the orphan, widow, and stranger extends beyond physical needs only. Once He called a child into the midst of His disciples, put His arms around it, and warned them soberly: “If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in Me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6).

This God is perfectly aware of any oppression or injustice against the “least of these.” In his psalm David exclaimed, “Understand, O dullest of the people; fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does He not hear? He who formed the eye, does He not see?” He *does* hear. He *does* see. He *does* care. And He *does* act. Anyone who forgets those truths really is a fool.

David knew what life should look like in Israel for the outwardly strong and vulnerable alike: “Happy are those whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, giving them respite from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked.” That is true justice. The birthright of every citizen of the kingdom, David believed, was to know God and be taught by Him. He likewise wanted to see them protected from oppression until punishment could be meted out for their persecutors. He committed himself to seeing “justice return to the righteous,” in the knowledge that “all the upright in heart would follow it.”

David’s underlying conviction was that “the LORD will not forsake His people; He will not abandon His heritage.” If that was

God's commitment, then David believed it needed to be his also. It must be ours as well. In this way, our vision will be raised beyond ourselves; our purposes will be joined with God's.

A brother long ago gave this analogy. Suppose a boat needs to sail down a river, but the rocks in the water are too high. There are two solutions to the problem: you can remove the rocks, or you can raise the level of the water. When we are suffering, we are prone to ask God to remove the rocks. There is nothing wrong with that request, but it may be even more glorious if He leaves the rocks but increases our supply so that we can rise above them. In the same way, when we are persecuted, we are apt to ask God to remove our oppressors. Again, there is nothing wrong with that prayer, and in general that is His desire. But first He may wish to raise the level of our supply so that we can strengthen, protect, and nurture those around us who are likewise suffering. God will eventually restore justice to our lives. How much greater the miracle if He also teaches us to lay those lives down for our brothers and sisters.

Like David before us, we who are persecuted in our day have to find the Provision to rise above our own suffering. Loving others as ourselves, looking to their interests and not just to our own, is a foundational lesson for Jesus' disciples. One of the most important decisions we will ever make when we are persecuted is to look up and look around us and see who else is suffering, and then to make it our goal to help them not just to *survive* but to *thrive*. Let us commit to Jesus and to each other to be free men and women who use our freedom to serve others in love!

In Psalm 94, David's voice cries out to us across the centuries and summons us to action: "Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers?" He had found himself in that lonely place where all human help had vanished. God's support alone had stood between David and death. Only God's steadfast love had kept his foot from falling. Paul's experience in prison would be heartbreakingly similar. He would later write, "At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord

stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth" (2 Timothy 4:16-17).

The blood-bought brothers and sisters in our lives deserve better from us. Let us resolve to lay aside our own troubles and courageously stand by them in theirs!

"The LORD Has Become My Stronghold"

In the last few lines of this prayer, David turned his attention to a fact of life that we have yet to consider in this writing: the role of civil government in persecution. David asked God, "Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who contrive mischief by statute? They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death."

Normally rulers do not start persecutions of God's people without some prodding. Rulers tend to be pragmatic. If something increases the stability and security of their reign, they are in favor of it. God's people are not troublemakers. They have no "philosophical" problem with submitting to human authority. Paul urged the believers in Thessalonica "to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly towards outsiders and be dependent on no one" (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). Presidents and princes long for citizens like that! And when God's children find themselves in positions of civil service, they carry out their duties efficiently, with wisdom and integrity and self-discipline. They make their bosses look good. Think of Joseph, so trusted by Pharaoh, and of Daniel, so respected by Nebuchadnezzar and appreciated by Darius. No, rulers of civil governments usually value what genuine believers can do for them, whether as citizens or servants. They have no reason to persecute them.

That is, they have no reason to persecute God's children until ambitious people manipulate them into it.

In any institution of society—whether it be civil or religious in nature—there are ambitious people who wish to use their position to gain prestige or power or wealth for themselves. Once

they have a stake in the system, they jealously guard their position against perceived threats, all the while scheming to take away someone else's position. These opportunists almost invariably view God's children as enemies. They know exactly where they themselves lie on the organizational chart, and they feel threatened by believers below them and jealous of those above them. They watch with envy as God's people, who have no selfish ambition at all, receive promotions and new responsibilities because of their competent, steady achievements. The ambitious people have a lust for power, but they lack the character and ethical standards to compete with the child of God in the area of practical service. These "wicked rulers," as David accurately calls them, invariably frown suspiciously at any tightly knit group of believers. They correctly sense that the group owes its highest loyalty to Someone above all human authority. They wrongly perceive this fact to be a threat to their power. Usually these ambitious people lack either the authority or the courage to destroy the objects of their malice directly. They must somehow convince the one at the top of the power pyramid to do their dirty work for them.

There are many examples of this phenomenon in the scriptures.

Daniel comes readily to mind. Darius the Mede had organized his government around one hundred and twenty administrators called satraps. He appointed Daniel as one of three presidents to oversee the satraps. What happened next was actually quite predictable.

Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent Spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. The men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint

against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God” (Daniel 6:3-5).

We know the rest of the story. They conspired to manipulate Darius into a proclamation that they knew contradicted God’s law, and when Daniel disobeyed it, they moved to destroy him. God of course delivered Daniel miraculously, but not before Darius spent a very anxious night!

Another clear example is the intended extermination of the Jews by Haman, the second in command to Ahasuerus, a later Persian king. Mordecai, one of the Jewish exiles, was a loyal subject of Ahasuerus. In fact, he had once learned of a plot against the king and had acted quickly to save his life. That loyalty was not enough to satisfy Haman, however. He wanted the honor that came with his rank in government, but Mordecai failed to bow to him.

All the king’s servants who were at the king’s gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance. Then the king’s servants who were at the king’s gate said to Mordecai, ‘Why do you disobey the king’s command?’ When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai’s words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was infuriated. But he thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai’s people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus (Esther 3:2-6).

God’s miraculous intervention again saved His people. But the event is a classic case of civil persecution fueled by ambition.

Not all government-sponsored persecution can be traced to frustrated bureaucrats, however. Much of the time it springs from the jealousy of clergy and officials in the religious institutions of

society. We could multiply examples, both from scripture and from the sad history of human civilization. But the most telling example is the crucifixion of Jesus Himself.

The religious leaders in the Jerusalem establishment were insanely jealous of Jesus. Even very early on after He appeared to Israel, we learn that “the crowds were astounded at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22). This fact—and the crowd’s reaction to it—did not escape the scribes’ notice. After a while, “So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them” where Jesus was staying (Mark 2:2). It was there that the grumblings and whisperings against Jesus began among the religious elite (Mark 2:6-7,16,24). They began stalking Him, trying to find some grounds to accuse Him. They seized on the issue of healings on the Sabbath. But Jesus refused to back down, even calling a man in need of curing into their presence so they would have to witness the miracle (Mark 3:1-5). After this public embarrassment, “the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against Him, how to destroy Him” (Mark 3:6).

The elites began by launching a vicious slander campaign (Mark 3:22). Jesus again refused to be intimidated, publicly rebuking the Pharisees and scribes to their faces for their hypocritical religiosity (Mark 7:6-16). The Pharisees began to test Him, trying to trip Him up with their doctrinal subtleties (Mark 8:11; 10:2; 11:28; 12:13,18), but Jesus always seemed to sniff out the trap and seize control of the situation. When all their efforts to discredit Jesus to the crowds failed, the religious leaders became desperate. “They kept looking for a way to kill Him; for they were afraid of Him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by His teaching” (Mark 11:18). As Passover neared, “The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill Him; for they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people’” (Mark 14:1-2).

The religious leaders finally realized that they would need the help of the Roman civil authorities if they hoped to be rid of Jesus once and for all. So they arrested Jesus at night, held a mock trial

in their religious court, and then dragged Him before the Roman governor, Pilate (Mark 15). Their trumped-up charges failed to persuade the governor. But he did feel backed into a corner. He was convinced of Jesus' innocence, but he lacked the courage to act on that conviction. Like all government officials, Pilate feared disorder. Eventually, against his better judgment, Pilate capitulated to the Pharisees' and priests' demands. He handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and judicial murder set the pattern for countless episodes of religious persecution throughout the ages. Jealous religious leaders, insecure in their hold on power, perceive a genuine child of God to be a threat to them. They begin with whisperings, move on to public criticisms, take aim at character assassination, and if that fails, turn to the civil government. They call in old favors, make veiled threats, or appeal to the paranoia of government officials. It may not end in physical death; the result may simply be harassment of the believer. Yet the persecution is real. The children of God suffer. And the believer's only "crime" is exposing a religious leader's pretense or thwarting his ambitions.

So what are we to do if we find ourselves subjected to persecution from "wicked rulers"?

David has been there, and he offers us this inspired advice. We must get our eyes off of our own personal troubles, and look to strengthen and uphold the children of God around us who are most vulnerable to this persecution. As for ourselves, we must cling to God as our Stronghold and the Rock of our refuge. And we may take courage that our Father, the King of the Universe, is Judge of the Earth. We should remain fully confident that "He will repay them for their iniquities and wipe them out for their wickedness." The satraps who accused Daniel found themselves thrown in the lions' den. Haman found himself hanged on the gallows he had built to kill Mordecai. And the Jerusalem religious elite found themselves staring at an empty tomb, on the wrong side of the greatest miracle in history.

By trusting *El N'Qamah*, the God of Vengeance, our hearts will find strength for the present and hope for the future!

Praise from the Overcoming Heart

Psalm 146

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in princes,

in mortals, in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs, they return to the earth;

on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the LORD their God,

who made heaven and earth,

the sea, and all that is in them;

who keeps faith forever;

who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the strangers;

He upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked He brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

“Happy Are Those Whose Help is the God of Jacob”

It is only right that we close these thoughts by focusing on a psalm praising God for His faithfulness. The persecuted disciples of Jesus are painfully aware of the jealousy, treachery, deceit, and cruelty of unredeemed mankind. But if they have turned their faces towards the Father, they have discovered in Him a reason to rejoice even in the midst of pain. Humans are not infinitely evil, but God is infinitely good. Human hatred has its limits, but the love of God is boundless. Human life is a mist that quickly vanishes, but the Uncreated Life of God reaches from eternity past to eternity future. The children of God carry in their hearts a testimony of His goodness, a proof of His love, and a deposit of His Life, no matter what this world does to them. And so they learn to praise!

In contrast, mere religiousness will never teach anyone to praise. Picture someone living an outwardly pious life, at least by this world's standards. They work, they eat, they sleep, they clean the house, they obey the laws and pay their taxes. Each day the sounds of commercially-packaged “positive and encouraging” tunes and lyrics fill their houses and cars and earbuds. Once a week the notes of a “praise and worship” band fill an auditorium where they sit and listen. They sing along. They sway to the beat. They lift their hands. Then they return home to their cycle of working, eating, sleeping, and cleaning, accompanied by their playlist. Sometimes, though, life feels hard. Work is too stressful. Food is too expensive. Sleep is too short. Cleaning is too tiring. Taxes are too high. Perhaps they respond by taking a vacation, eating and sleeping more, cleaning less, and grumbling about the government. Perhaps they “cope” by turning to vices. Then the weekly singing, swaying, and hand-lifting provide an emotional release, and life goes on.

Now picture someone who wants to live a “godly life in Christ Jesus,” not just a moral one. They work and eat and sleep, too, but as they do the stuff of daily life they stand for something. They represent Someone. They join their hearts and lives to others who are also living for Him. They help each other to offer Jesus the gift of simple, cheerful, trusting obedience moment by moment. They

build their lives on the Rock by hearing Jesus' words and putting them into practice. "The world is crucified to them, and they to the world." The very existence of such people stirs up the wrath of hell. They endure satanic opposition, often expressed in hateful words and actions directed against them by worldly people, whether secular or religious. As a result, they sometimes face dark days and long nights. In the midst of uncertainty and struggle and pain, they look to Jesus. They experience the fellowship of suffering with Him. Their hearts expand to receive a greater and more intimate knowledge of all that He is. They write and share poetry and music with each other, celebrating Jesus' Life together. The day comes when they receive from His hands deliverance from their trials. They burst into praise together.

Now ask yourself: Which of these two people knows the meaning of worship? Which of these two people knows Jesus intimately and experientially? And most importantly, *which of these two people do you want to be?*

The truth is, you cannot be both.

Some may think that we are oversimplifying the situation, but many who read these words will realize that we are not. There is a fork in the road in front of us, and two paths diverge from it. The path on the left is well worn. On it you can be comfortably religious. You can have your claim on the world and its riches, worries, and pleasures while still *saying* "Lord, Lord" to Jesus. The path on the right is more costly. It is for those who have given Jesus everything, and by His word they are to receive "a hundred-fold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, *with persecutions*—and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:30-31). On the road sign pointing left is written, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it." On the sign pointing right is written, "Whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). If you follow the easier path, you may not be taken very seriously, but at least you will never be persecuted. If you follow the less popular way, you are guaranteed to face hell's hatred. But you will also come to *know Jesus* in a real

and living way. And you will learn to worship Him, not with contrived emotion, but with deep conviction and sincere gratitude.

The choice is yours.

The poet who composed Psalm 146 had chosen the road less traveled by. He had known difficult days, but he had also experienced divine deliverance. He had turned his heart towards heaven, and in the process had learned to praise God. Worship was a permanent change, right down to the very core of his being. The psalmist knew beyond any doubt that he would “praise the LORD as long as he lived” and “sing praises to his God all his life long.” He didn’t have to follow some formula to turn out lyrics. He had come to know God as both awesome King and comforting Friend. Out of the overflow of his experience of this marvelous God, his mouth spoke praises.

The psalmist had emerged from these experiences with a deep conviction. *Never rely on mere mortals for deliverance in times of trouble.* The world has its leaders in the government and business and religious systems. The question is, if these so-called leaders suddenly stopped breathing, how much help would they be? If mortals are so unreliable in death, imagine how fickle they must be in life! Help instead must come from the Immortal God, whether through direct intervention in the affairs of men or through the shared life of His people. The psalmist had seen that those who relied on the God of Jacob for their help and their hope were blessed indeed. He had seen the miraculous works of God on behalf of His children, and he pulled back the veil to allow us to see them, too.

“The LORD Loves the Righteous”

The psalmist went on to highlight twelve aspects of God’s mighty work, truths that should encourage us, even as we suffer on this fallen planet. These are far more than just line items on some divine resume. They are revelations of God’s power, love, and faithfulness. They are motivations to trust Him in times of trouble. They are reasons why we praise Him. They are calls to worship.

God *made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them*. He spoke the universe into existence and then populated it with 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars. Around our own He placed a tiny blue sphere, the earth, which shimmers like a jewel against the blackness of the cosmos. He formed our planet with vast plains, deep forests, towering mountains, surging seas. He filled the earth with millions of species of plants, animals, and microscopic creatures, so that everywhere around us there is life. We gaze at the night sky, watching the stars dance to a song we cannot hear. We stand on the shore of the sea, listening to the waves break over the rocks to a rhythm we cannot comprehend. So we worship the Creator. And we ask: Can our Father Who made these wonders not take care of us? Can we who see these marvels not trust Him? Are our futures for all eternity not safe in His Hands? He is our hope!

It is this Almighty Creator who *keeps faith forever*. What God promises, He never forgets. What He covenants to do, He never fails to accomplish. His loyalty is eternal. It is utterly impossible that He could ever forsake those who have abandoned themselves into His will. He has promised to work all things together for our good if we are called according to His purposes. As part of His faithfulness, God *executes justice for the oppressed*. As Jesus put it, “Will not God grant justice to His chosen ones who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long in helping them? I tell you, He will quickly grant justice to them” (Luke 18:7-8). Our part is to cry out to Him day and night; He will be faithful to execute justice.

God feels a deep compassion on us, His children. And so He *gives food to the hungry*. In the physical realm, He invites us to ask Him for our daily bread (Matthew 6:11) and to trust Him for our provision (Matthew 6:25-33). In the spiritual realm, He promises that if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will be filled (Matthew 5:6). He urges us “like newborn infants” to “long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:2). Jesus calls to us, “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to Me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty”

(John 6:35). In all these ways, God is saying that He is delighted when we place ourselves in utter dependence upon Him. He is overjoyed to fill our deepest needs. He does so by pouring His life into us. When we give all of ourselves to God, He gives all of Himself to us! God's invitation stands:

Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to Me; listen, so that you may live (Isaiah 55:1-3).

Our compassionate LORD also *sets the prisoners free*. Sometimes God miraculously intervenes to release His persecuted children from political prisons. The night before Peter was to be executed, an angel appeared and broke the chains from Peter's wrists, led him past the guards, and opened an iron gate without touching it—all to set him free in answer to the church's prayer. A few years later, Paul and Silas were lying beaten and bloodied in a dank Philippian dungeon, praying and praising through the watches of a long night—when God sent an earthquake to shake the prison to its very foundations, breaking the prisoners' chains and opening the door to freedom. Sometimes, though, God leaves the oppressed believer in prison, choosing instead to unchain His word (2 Timothy 2:9), freeing His child's heart to testify boldly before governors and kings (Matthew 10:18-20). Either way, God has been faithful to set the prisoners free.

Just as wonderfully, the LORD *opens the eyes of the blind*. Many times during Jesus' life, we are told that He healed blind eyes. One man, blind from birth, had scratched out a meager existence day by day begging on Jerusalem's dusty streets. Jesus recognized that this man had been born blind "so that God's works might be revealed in Him" (John 9:3). Jesus mixed the dust with His own saliva to make mud and then spread it on the man's closed eyes.

After the man obeyed Jesus and washed in the pool of Siloam, he could see. When he had been blind, the Pharisees had ignored the man. But now that he was rejoicing in his healing, they began to persecute him. Because he refused to repudiate Jesus for healing him on a Sabbath, they threw him out of the synagogue.

Jesus was faithful to find the man, and He opened his eyes a second time—only this time, they were the eyes of his spirit. Jesus asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is He, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in Him.” Jesus said to Him, “You have seen Him, and the one speaking with you is He.” He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshipped Him” (John 9:35-38). In a miracle that far surpassed his physical healing, the man’s spiritual blindness was removed. He saw Jesus and believed. We who are persecuted for the sake of Jesus can take great courage in this man’s experience! If we are faithful to speak the truth we know about Jesus, and if we refuse to back down when others reject us for it, Jesus will not abandon us. He will show us more of Himself. He will open the eyes of our hearts to know Him better in His glory and goodness.

Our merciful LORD also *lifts up those who are bowed down*. The world tries to lay heavy burdens on us, to crush us under the weight of rejection and oppression and criticism. But Jesus’ call to us is always to come to Him and find rest for our souls. He has a yoke, but it is easy. He has a burden, but it is light (Matthew 11:28-30). He invites us to cast all of our anxiety on Him, because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). There is no way for you to avoid suffering and persecution while remaining faithful. But “after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you” (1 Peter 5:10). You will be able to say with David, “When the cares of my heart are many, Your consolations cheer my soul” (Psalm 94:19).

Truly the LORD *loves the righteous*. One thing is absolutely certain in the gospels: the Father loves the Son¹¹. He opened the heavens and proclaimed His love at the Jordan River. He blanketed the earth with glory and declared that love at the Mount of Transfiguration. And now the Father has welcomed us into that same love. He has “rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14). If we have surrendered ourselves to Jesus in faith, then God reckons us as righteous. If we have hidden ourselves in Jesus, then God accepts us as His children. The mighty love of the Father for the Son is ours as well. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 John 3:1).

The hatred of man cannot cancel the love of God for His righteous ones, who live by faith in His Son. Persecution cannot possibly separate His children from His love. In fact, it only propels us into greater glory! “You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:15-17).

We can be certain that the LORD *watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow*. We have already seen in Psalm 94 that God is deeply concerned about the well-being of the most vulnerable among His children and is fully committed to protecting them from exploitation. But we should also realize that *all* disciples of Jesus are truly strangers on earth and so are included in this promise. There are two kingdoms, two diametrically opposed cultures existing side-by-side on this planet. No one can be a citizen of both. Within the Kingdom of God, the disciples experience all of what belonging to Him means:

¹¹ Matthew 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 20:13; John 3:35; 5:20; and see 2 Peter 1:17

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Within the kingdoms of men, however, we are aliens and exiles. We live and work side by side with the world's citizens. We are productive contributors and law-abiding residents of their communities. But we are in this world, not of it. Our citizenship belongs to a different country, the New Jerusalem. Our highest loyalty belongs to our true King. We serve as ambassadors for His Governments, so we are careful not to get entangled in the affairs of this realm.

As foreigners and strangers, we frequently find ourselves targets of suspicion and ignorance. The world tolerates us for our contributions but hates us for our differences. Still, we keep our poise and our honor, taking to heart Peter's words: "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when He comes to judge" (1 Peter 2:11-12).

The life of a sojourner can be difficult. But we have a Purpose and a High Calling, a reason for being here. And we have One who knows us and watches over us—we are no strangers to Him. Daily we can experience His love and care within the *ekklesia*, a colony of Heaven on planet earth, provided the *ekklesia* is true to its name. So we have much to be thankful for and ample reason to praise God!

Finally, *the way of the wicked He brings to ruin*. This fact is permanently a part of our perspective. In the end, our courage and peace can rest on the sure knowledge that God is enthroned as Judge over all humankind. He takes note of all we do outwardly but also examines who we are inwardly:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before Him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the One to whom we must render an account (Hebrews 4:12-13).

The genuine children of God have abandoned themselves to His purposes and have entrusted their past, their present, and their future to His care. They anticipate the Day of Judgment not with terror, but with confidence that God's work in them is genuine and that His plans for their future are certain. As evidence that they truly belong to God, they hate sin. As God is, so they are, in all their attitudes regarding the world, the flesh, and the devil. If sin happens, they have an Advocate to speak on their behalf and a Sacrifice to atone for it (1 John 2:1-2). But through God's mighty power, they are no longer slaves to wickedness. Their love for the Father and for one another grows to maturity in Him, a reflection of His perfect love for them. For all these reasons, they have confidence (1 John 4:16-18). In fact, Jesus has delegated to His people the authority to judge. In this age, they are to judge matters within the *ekklesia*; in the next, they will judge both the human and the angelic worlds (1 Corinthians 5:12-6:3). So they do not fear Jesus' return; they *long* for it, with a heart cry of *Maranatha!*

Not so the wicked. It will not end well for them.

Part of the ruin of the wicked is a direct consequence of their sin. "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh" (Galatians 6:7-8). Sin sows the seeds of decay in body, soul, and spirit. If anyone thinks he is the exception, he is self-deceived. He is not wiser than the Mind that created the universe. But God need not merely wait for a person's own sins to destroy them. He is not passive, but active. The entire 4000 year history that we call the Old Testament bears witness to the fact that God is longsuffering, but that when He decides to bring judgment, He acts swiftly and decisively. God is the same today. Perse-

cutors of God's people in particular have not often lived to a happy old age. And in the end, the wicked have only eternal judgment to look forward to. "The Son of Man will send His angels, and they will collect out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:41-43).

Because of these truths, Christians endure suffering and persecution with patience, courage, and hope. We are absolutely certain that just as Jesus triumphed over sin and the grave during His first coming, He will triumph over the forces of wickedness during His second. "The God of Peace will shortly crush satan under our feet" (Romans 16:20). In the meantime, we have much to do to prepare the Bride in anticipation of Jesus' return. We focus on the Work, not on the world's opposition to it. For in just a little while, we will witness what John prophesied come to pass:

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems; and He has a name inscribed that no one knows but Himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; He will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On His robe and on His thigh He has a name inscribed, 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (Revelation 19:11-16).

"The LORD Will Reign Forever"

With these words, we come not simply to the conclusion of this psalm, but also to the culmination of all history. Eternity will not so much be about man receiving his reward, but about God re-

ceiving His. In the end, what will we have done except what He has done in us? The treason of satan and his angels will be over. The waywardness and rebellion of the human race will be a thing of the past. All sin will have vanished into the abyss. The curse that has hung over all creation will be lifted. The memories of the persecution and hardship and hatred we have endured will melt away when He wipes the tears from our eyes with His nail-scarred hand. All that will remain will be a triumphant King, seated on His throne, and joining Him there a Bride, composed of all who willingly surrendered to His Kingship during this life. We will be so enthralled by His beauty, so fascinated with His wisdom, so awestruck by His glory, so thrilled by His love, that we will never tire of praising Him.

Paul, who suffered much for the Name of Jesus, also received surpassing revelations of God's great purpose in history. Paul lifted up the corner of the curtain hiding these mysteries, and showed us a glimpse of the drama's final act:

Then comes the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after He has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For 'God has put all things in subjection under His feet.' But when it says, 'All things are put in subjection,' it is plain that this does not include the One who put all things in subjection under Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the One who put all things in subjection under Him, so that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

All things submitted to the Son...the Son submitted to the Father...God our all in all. That is something worth suffering to see!

In the meantime, as we are waiting and working for that Day, we can already experience its realities in our hearts. Persecution can never stop us. In fact, we can let it thrust us into that Reality. The end of all history—all things submitted to the Father through

the Son—can also be, for us, the outcome of any experience of persecution. We can enthrone Jesus more in our lives and exalt Him higher in our hearts each time we must suffer. We can find Him in any situation, and once we have found Him, worship Him. The end of the matter can always be:

“The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!”



About the authors...sort of!

You may have noticed that we have not tried to list the authors of this book. There are at least three reasons why. First, the volume that you are holding in your hands or reading on your screen—from the cover design to the text itself—was created as a collaboration of many people. God has an amazing vision for the church: “Practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. From Him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16, NET). We want everything we do, including writing books, to reflect this Reality.

What’s more, on an even deeper level, anything good and right and true that may be contained in this book was a gift of God, not of ourselves. It was learned in the context of genuine life in the Body of Christ, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. Even members of this Body who weren’t directly responsible for this book’s text were nevertheless instruments that God used to teach these truths. They are no less “authors” than those who put the teachings into written words.

And none of us who are “authors” would want to do anything to draw attention to ourselves. With our whole hearts we want you to be encouraged to live a vibrant, courageous life of faith in Jesus, and we want Him to be honored in all things. “For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:5).

For all these reasons we hope you won’t mind that we omitted a list of authors’ names from this book. But if you want to get in touch with us, we’re available. You can write us any time at the following address: realpeople@JesusLifeTogether.com.

“Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.”

