

Studies in the Fifth Book of Psalms

Psalms 107–150

David Gooding

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Three Psalms and Three Events in the Life of the Lord Jesus

You have asked me to talk during these two nights on the fifth book of the Psalms. Let us begin by reading some extracts from that book and certain parallel passages from the New Testament. So, first of all in Psalm 109:

Hold not your peace, O God of my praise; For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of deceit have they opened against me. They have spoken against me with a lying tongue. They compassed me about also with words of hatred, and fought against me without a cause. For my love they are my adversaries: but I give myself unto prayer. And they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love. Set a wicked man over him: and let an adversary stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him come forth guilty; and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; and let another take his office. (Ps 109:1–8)

Put your finger in the Psalms at that point for a moment and turn over to the Acts of the Apostles:

And in these days Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren, and said (and there was a multitude of persons gathered together, about a hundred and twenty), 'Brethren, it was needful that the scripture should be fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost spoke before by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who was guide to them that took Jesus. For he was numbered among us, and received his portion in this ministry.' (Now this man obtained a field with the reward of his iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch that in their language that field was called *Akeldama*, that is, 'the field of blood'.) For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his habitation be made desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and, his office let another take. (Act 1:15–20)

Then Psalm 110 please, and here we read the whole psalm:

The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' The LORD shall send forth the rod of your strength out of Zion: rule in the midst of your enemies. Your people offer themselves willingly in the day of your power: in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning, you have the dew of your youth. The Lord has sworn, and will not repent, 'You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.' The LORD at your right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the nations, he shall fill the places with dead bodies; he shall strike through the head in many countries. He shall drink of the brook in the way: therefore shall he lift up the head.

And alongside of that let's read from Matthew's Gospel:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, 'What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him, 'The son of David.' He said to them, 'How then does David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying, "The Lord said unto my Lord, sit at my right hand till I put your enemies underneath your feet?" If David then calls him Lord, how is he his son?' No one was able to answer him a word, neither did any man dare from that day forth ask him any more questions. (Matt 22:41-46)

Then again from the New Testament, the Epistle to the Hebrews:

And inasmuch as it is not without the taking of an oath (for they indeed have been made priests without an oath; but he with an oath by him that said to him, 'The Lord has sworn and will not repent himself, you are a priest for ever'); by so much also has Jesus become the surety of a better covenant. And they indeed have been made priests many in number, because that by death they are hindered from continuing: but he, because he abides for ever, has his priesthood unchangeable. Wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:20-25)

Then back to Psalm 118:

Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will enter into them, I will give thanks unto the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter into it. I will give thanks unto you, for you have answered me, and have become my salvation. The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. Save now, we beseech you, O LORD: O LORD, we beseech you, send now prosperity. Blessed be he that comes in the name of the LORD; we have blessed you out of the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light: bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks unto you: you are my God, I will exalt you. O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endures forever. (Ps 118:19-29)

Then in the New Testament once more and the gospel by Matthew:

But afterward he sent unto them his son, saying, 'They will reverence my son.' But the tenants, when they saw the son, said among themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and take his inheritance.' And they took him, and cast him forth out of the vineyard, and killed him. When therefore the lord of the vineyard shall come, what will he do unto those tenants? They say unto him, 'He will miserably destroy those miserable men, and will let out the vineyard unto other tenants, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.' Jesus said unto them, 'Did you never read in the Scriptures, "The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner: This was from the Lord, and it is marvellous in our eyes'?' (Matt 21:37-42)

Then Matthew 23:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that kills the prophets, and stones them that are sent unto her! How often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, you shall not see me again, till you shall say, 'Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.' (Matt 23:37-39)

And finally, for the moment, Acts 4:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, 'You rulers of the people, and elders, if we this day are examined concerning a good deed done to an impotent man, by what means this man is made whole; be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even in him does this man stand here before you whole. He is the stone which was set at nought of you the builders, which was made the head of the corner. And in none other is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, by which you must be saved.' (Acts 4:8-12)

God give us good understanding of his holy Word.

The goal of these studies

Now you have given me the great honour and pleasure of coming and conducting your last two studies in the Psalms for this particular series. And you have given me Book Five; that is the last book of Psalms. Of course to deal with Book Five of the Psalms properly I should really have needed to have been present in your earlier sessions, to make sure that in these two final sessions I don't needlessly repeat all the things that you have been learning; which things were set out by your previous speakers far better than I could set them out. And then, to be frank with you, I would have liked to have been at your previous sessions so that I would know what to say in these two sessions anyway. Because already you have been given the expert answers to most of the problems that we shall meet once again in this final book of Psalms. And it would have been a great help had I been able to be present and hear what the answers were so that I could now repeat them!

It is certain that it will be difficult, impossible in fact, to cover Book Five in just these two sessions. It is, after all, the largest of the five books of Psalms. Let me tell you therefore what I propose to do. Tonight I shall take certain short passages from three of the psalms that speak to us about the Lord Jesus. We know they do because the New Testament tells us they do. Whatever these psalms meant originally as they were given by their original author, inspired by the Holy Spirit, nevertheless in their fullest sense they find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ our Lord. So, tonight I want to deal with these passages that tell us of him. After all, the Psalms, like all the rest of the Old Testament, tell us of the Lord Jesus; he is their principal subject. And in all our worship of God, our deepest and highest and profoundest worship will be provoked by our consideration of the Lord Jesus.

As we think of him tonight, I suspect the question that will rise in our minds at the end of the session is how it is that these Scriptures that speak so glowingly and clearly of the Lord Jesus come to be embedded in these particular psalms, and in this particular book of the Psalms. Are they just arbitrarily put in and have nothing to do with their context at all, or is there some rhyme and reason why these particular prophecies of our Lord should spring out of Book Five of the Psalms? Why are the psalms of this book selected and put together? Do they have any common theme and, if so, what is that theme?

That is for next week, God willing. For this week we will consider these Scriptures that speak to us about our Lord, for he is the key to Scripture. What is said about him we shall find to be very clear and very interesting and very practical. And this will help us take our bearings in this large book of Psalms. I shall proceed from the obvious and easy to the not quite so obvious and to the more difficult.

Three psalms and three major incidents

We have read from Psalm 109, Psalm 110 and Psalm 118. The New Testament tells us that these three psalms refer in part to three major incidents in the life of our Lord Jesus.

Psalm 109

Psalm 109 contains a part of a verse that refers to Judas Iscariot, the traitor who betrayed our Lord Jesus to gain his thirty pieces of silver. We notice at once that it refers therefore to an incident late on in the life of our Lord Jesus, just before he went to the cross of Calvary. It tells us how he was betrayed by Judas who rewarded him evil for good. Psalm 109 says, 'let another take his office' (v. 8).

This was the scripture, as you'll remember, that Peter appealed to when he was in the upper room as part of the one hundred and twenty people awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. He suggested that they should choose another apostle from among those who had travelled about with the Lord Jesus right from the beginning, from the baptism of John onwards until the resurrection, so that the number of twelve apostles might be complete as an adequate witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Psalm 109 refers to Judas then, so Peter tells us in Acts 1.

As we read Psalm 109 we hear David complaining about the experience that he suffered in his lifetime, when people rewarded him evil for good. What a bitter, bitter experience that must have been to have prayed for others; to have done his best to do them good, only to find them turn round upon him and reward him evil for good. And one man in particular committed base and foul treachery.

As we discern the hurt that David felt, that made him cry out upon the justice of God to deal with this foul behaviour, we begin to perceive perhaps something of the sorrow and bitterness of our Lord's experience. Having chosen Judas to be his friend and companion and apostle (he fed him many times with his own bread), he found Judas had then lifted up his heel against him and betrayed him for a paltry thirty pieces of silver.

That is all I want to say tonight about Psalm 109, except once more to observe that it does not only talk about something in the life of our Lord. Let's also notice the position in his life that it refers to; it refers to those days and hours just before his suffering at Calvary.

Psalm 110

This is a psalm that our Lord quoted himself. Notice when he quoted it. It was in the last two days before he suffered at Calvary. This is the psalm that reads, 'The LORD said unto my lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet.' In those last days of Holy Week our Lord finally silenced his adversaries by demanding to know of them what they thought of the Messiah and whose son he was. And he finally answered the question himself by pointing to Psalm 110.

We shall come back to that in a moment, but just notice here that Psalm 110, when quoted by our Lord Jesus, must have made a profound impression not only upon the Jews who heard it, but more particularly upon the disciples. For it is one of the verses in the Old Testament most quoted in the rest of the New Testament. So if you get hold of this verse and this psalm, and you forget everything else you know, you will have a summary of all the more important Christian doctrines.

Psalm 118

This is a very interesting psalm because two parts of it are quoted by our Lord. The first part is quoted in Matthew 21:42: 'The stone which the builders rejected, the same has been made the head of the corner,' said our Lord to the crowds that were around him in Holy Week. Please notice once more what part of our Lord's life it comes from. It comes from those last few days just before he suffered. He quoted it in his arguments and conversations with the Pharisees.

The second part is quoted in Matthew 23:37-39. Again it is quoted by our Lord Jesus, perhaps a day or two later, before he suffered. Just before he finally turned from the Jews and went to Gethsemane and Calvary he said, 'Oh Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you but you would not. Now your house is left unto you desolate. You shall not see me until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord".'

This scripture is also referred to in the rest of the New Testament, notably by the Apostles in when they have occasion to remind the Pharisees of our Lord's quoting of this psalm: 'This is the stone which you builders rejected', says Peter to the Sanhedrin, 'and God has made it the head of the corner' (Acts 4:11).

From this fifth book of the Psalms then, we have a cluster of psalms that prove prophetic and, in their fullest meaning, refer to our Lord Jesus. They refer in particular to what happened to him in those closing days of his earthly life, and subsequently. We shall have to consider next week why they come in this fifth book.

Psalm 110 and the Messianic programme

Now let's turn to Psalm 110. We've already seen how Judas was to betray him, and did in fact betray him. When our Lord quoted Psalm 110 he would of course already have known Judas

would do this; he was not taken by surprise. Now the nation as a whole was going to turn against him. The Pharisees and the Sadducees had got together to try the best they could to prove that he could not possibly be the Messiah. Within a day or two they were to condemn him before the high priest, then lead him to Pilate and have him crucified by the Gentile imperial authority. This would, they thought, disprove once and for all his claim to be the Messiah. So, in these days of Holy Week, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were constantly around him, constantly questioning him, trying to prove to the crowd that this Jesus that they were following in their thousands was not the Messiah. Finally Matthew tells us that the Sadducees flung at him their last argument.

The Sadducees' argument (Matt 22:23-28)

Consider those scheming men. They were the leaders of the government in Israel, the leaders of the temple in the Jewish religion. These were the men who finally would sit to condemn him and hand him over to the Romans to be crucified. By then they'd already made up their mind; they were going to crucify Jesus. And now they were going to add the last argument that would make his claim look absurd.

They got the impression by listening to him preach that this Jesus believed that there was going to be a resurrection. And he was telling his disciples that even if the Jewish authorities crucified him and put him to death, he would rise again and be king. So, of course the Sadducees had got to try and stop that one, hadn't they? And they set about it, says Matthew.

They came one day to our Lord Jesus and, in front of the crowd, asked him what they thought was the final question: 'Oh,' they said, 'you believe in the resurrection, don't you? So, you answer us this one. You say there's a resurrection. Well now, there was a woman once and she had a husband (nothing unusual in that), but the man died. Well, subsequently another man married her. Alas, he died too. After that she married a third and the same thing happened. In the end she had seven husbands, and at last the seventh died.'

'Now,' said the Sadducees, with their final decisive argument, 'come on, come on, tell us! In the resurrection whose wife shall she be? For all seven had her.' And then they thought they had set him a puzzler and finally proved the resurrection wasn't possible and that, therefore, if they crucified Jesus and put him to death that was the end of his claim to be the Messiah!

Poor little Sadducees: it was a stupid argument, wasn't it? But suppose it had been true and there was no resurrection. Do you suppose that they would have won, so to speak? It was Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, to be the fulfilment of all the Old Testament prophecies, the very saviour of Israel. In order to prove that he was wrong and they were right, and to win the argument, they were trying to prove there was no such thing as the resurrection. If there is no such thing as a resurrection then nobody has won. Well, yes, the Sadducees would keep their little political power for a few more years until they were in their seventies or so, and then they would go into the grave and get eaten up with worms. Do you call that winning? With the Old Testament in their hands, talking about great salvation and all the glories of redemption, here were Sadducees who wanted to prove that God's redemption doesn't go beyond the grave. They wanted to prove that all that God's redemption could do for you was to land you as a corpse rotting in a grave, eaten up with worms and turning to

dust. Well, if that's your idea of redemption, so be it, but that's a pretty poor redemption, isn't it?

How many a man there is nowadays who has that view of life or wants to take that view of life. You've met him haven't you, talking over the garden fence when you've been hanging out linen, or down in the cafeteria, or at the supermarket? You've been talking to Mr Sykes or Mr Jones and urged him on to trust the saviour. And he says, 'I don't believe these things. I think that when you're dead you're done for.' And he thinks he's very clever. Poor little man: if there's nothing left for us but the grave, that's nothing to shout about.

The Lord Jesus' argument

Hear therefore our Lord's argument. He summons their attention to Psalm 110. What is it about? Well, this psalm is about God's programme for Messiah and his ultimate victory. How is God's programme for ultimate redemption to be achieved? Let's first notice the detail and then sum it up. He now addresses the Pharisees who had come up when they'd heard he had silenced the Sadducees (see Matt 22:34-45).

Question 1: The identity of the Messiah

Our Lord Jesus said to them that, to start with, if they wanted to understand God's programme of redemption, they must ask a question about the Messiah. 'Tell me now,' he said, 'about the Messiah, whoever the Messiah is going to be. The Old Testament talks about the Messiah, doesn't it? Alright, well now, gentleman, you tell me, what do you think about the Messiah? Have you read all the Old Testament's got to say? What do you think about the Messiah? When he comes, whose son will he be?'

And they said, 'He will be the son of David.'

'Is that all?' said Christ. 'Then how is it, if the Messiah is only the son of David, that David, by the Spirit, calls him "Lord", saying, "The LORD [that is God Almighty, God Jehovah] said to my [that is, to David's] Lord . . ."' (Ps 110:1).

There is God talking to David's *Lord*. Our Lord Jesus says, 'The psalm was written by David. So here is King David saying that God spoke to somebody, and that somebody was David's Lord.' Who was David's Lord? Well, it must be the Messiah. So, the Messiah is David's Lord then, according to Psalm 110? Yes, that is perfectly so.

Let's ponder that a moment. If the Messiah is simply David's son, how does David call him 'Lord'? The point of that question would be clearer to a man living in Palestine than it would be perhaps to a man living in Belfast, though I don't know how you gentlemen carry on. Did you ever find yourself addressing your son, Jim or Tom or whoever he is, in this way? 'Lord Tom, where have you been tonight?' 'Lord Jim, no you can't take the car tonight.' You don't normally call your sons 'Lord', do you? I can tell you that a Middle Easterner never did! In the time of the Saviour, in the Middle East, fathers in the family were very dignified and exalted figures. You certainly didn't get the boys answering their fathers back. Children didn't rule the household then (even if they do now). In those ancient days the father was the head of the house and every son in the family was to reverence him. No Middle Eastern father would ever have called his son 'Lord'. I should think not. But David is calling Messiah his Lord. You just imagine that.

When Father Jacob was eventually persuaded to come down to Egypt to see Joseph, he found that Joseph, his own son, was head of all the granaries in Egypt, second only to pharaoh. Everybody in Egypt bowed the knee to Joseph, but not Jacob. Never would Jacob have considered bowing to Joseph, and not once does Jacob call Joseph 'Lord', exalted though Joseph was. But David calls Messiah 'Lord'. 'Then whose son is he?' asks Christ. Our blessed Lord who asked the question, based here on Psalm 110, eventually gave us the answer himself.

Speaking to his churches through the Apostle John in the last chapter of the Revelation, our Lord Jesus points out: 'I am the root and offspring of David, the bright and morning star' (Rev 22:16). In one sense, yes, the Messiah is to be son of David: he is the offspring of David. In another sense, he is the root of David. That is marvellous and will help us in one of our questions about the Psalms.

How is it that many of the psalms, and many of the other Old Testament passages, come to be a pre-figurement of the Messiah? Because the Messiah existed before they were written. The great plan of redemption that you find in that Old Testament scripture came from our blessed Lord in his pre-incarnate days. He was the Word of God, the root of David! *He* designed that David should be. *He* moved in history until David came. *He* sustained David and made him the very conqueror and deliverer of Israel who delivered Israel from her enemies and brought her to be one of the leading nations of the day. It was the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, who designed David and designed his history. He designed it in such a way that, in the end, it should be a picture of a greater than David—David's greater son—the Messiah himself.

Question number one is answered then. If you're going to think about God's plan of redemption you must first answer the question: 'Who is the Messiah?' He is not simply a son of David; he is David's Lord; he is David's God.

Question 2: The programme for the Messiah's Kingdom

The psalms answer a second question in light of the answer to the first. What is God's programme for the redemption of Israel, for the bringing in of the glorious millennial kingdom of the Messiah? The Sadducees and the Pharisees were working together to bring about the death of the Lord Jesus, and they thought that would put an end to his Kingdom. Then our Lord referred them to this psalm.

What was the programme going to be according to this psalm? What was the timetable going to be? Well, listen to it: 'The LORD said unto my lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet' (Ps 110:1). Only a few words, but they are crammed full of meaning. Let's take them slowly, guided by the New Testament.

Sit at my right hand

God, the Lord, Jehovah, said to 'my Lord', that is, the Lord Jesus: 'Sit at my right hand'. What did he say that for? If one of these days you're pleased to invite me home to give me a cup of tea or something, and I walk into the room you would probably say, 'Well, have a seat.' So, instead of continuing to stand, I would sit down. But if you came into the room, and I was already sitting there, you wouldn't say to me, 'Sit down', would you? If I was already sitting

down that wouldn't make any sense. When God says to the Lord Jesus, 'Sit at my right hand,' that must mean that before then he wasn't sitting there.

How did it come to be that he who was the root of David, the Word of God, who existed before the world began and was with the Father in the beginning, wasn't always sitting at the right hand of God and had to be asked to sit there? Well, you know the answer. Though he was with God in the beginning, and all things had been made by him, for our sakes and our redemption he left the Father's side and came down to our world and was born in a manger. And though he was in the form of God, he did not think it to be a thing to be grasped at to be on equal terms with God, but humbled himself and took the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men and was obedient unto death, the death of the cross. For this reason God also highly exalted him (see Phil 2:6-9).

The psalm is telling us that now God is saying to the Lord Jesus, who has become a man and died, 'Sit at my right hand! Come up and sit there!' The very command implies the incarnation: Christ's life on earth, his death, his burial, his resurrection, and now finally his ascension to God's right hand.

Notice that there is no explicit mention of his death in those verses. They describe an event beyond his death, beyond his grave and beyond his resurrection. We are now thinking of his ascension to the right hand of God. The point is to answer the question: how is God going to bring in the great age of the Messiah? It will be the exaltation to God's right hand of him who from eternity was there, who for our sakes came down to earth, but who has gone back to heaven: 'Sit at my right hand'.

Until

What is next? Well, the verse says, 'Sit down at my right hand *until* I make your enemies the footstool of your feet.' What does that tell us? It tells us that the programme for bringing in the great millennial age and to complete redemption is the ascension of Christ followed by a period of time, here referred to by the word 'until'.

Oh, so the enemies aren't going to be made the footstool straight off then? No, there's going to be a period (how long we're not told) between the time when he ascended and sat at the Father's right hand and his coming again to put down his enemies. There's going to be a period of time in between: 'Sit down at my right hand *until* I make your enemies the footstool of your feet.' Why is it important to know that?

In my student days I used to have a friend who was a Jew, and we were trying to learn Hebrew together. He used to say to me, 'You see, David old boy, your Jesus isn't the Messiah; he couldn't be.'

I said, 'How's that?'

'Because,' he said, 'the Old Testament says that, when he comes, the Messiah will put down all evil. He will destroy evil men. He will deliver his people. And your Jesus hasn't done anything of the sort, has he? Evil is everywhere you look.'

And of course my friend felt it keenly because he was born in Germany, and his parents were gassed by Hitler in the concentration camps. 'Your Jesus hasn't stopped evil, has he?' he asked. 'How can he be the Messiah?' Then he added for good measure, 'It's no good you saying that Jesus has started a spiritual kingdom; that's no good at all. The Old Testament

doesn't know anything about setting up spiritual kingdoms. It says that when the Messiah came he was going to put down his enemies, destroy the enemies of Israel, destroy evil from the face of the earth and set up the great millennial kingdom. And your Jesus just has not done it! You keep talking about when he set up a spiritual kingdom. That's only a yarn that you Christians invented to cover your disappointment when your Jesus got crucified.'

And, alas, I didn't know my Psalms in those days, so I didn't know quite what to say. You would have known, of course, to have quoted Psalm 110:1 to the dear man. And when he said to you, 'Your Jesus has not put down evil', you could have answered, 'Well, I didn't expect him to, at least not at once.' Because Psalm 110 has the programme, the timetable:

'Sit at my right hand . . .' That's his ascension.

'Sit at my right hand until . . .' He's not going to put them down at once; there's going to be a period of waiting until his enemies have been made the footstool of his feet. One day he shall come; one day he shall put down evil: 'For yet a little while and he that shall come will come and will not tarry' (Heb 10:37). His enemies shall all be put under his feet. But until then we wait.

Who the Lord is speaking to

Who is this verse referring to? I once asked another Jew about this. I said, 'What does this mean here when it says, "The LORD said unto my lord, 'Sit down at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool"'.'

He said, 'I'll tell you who that verse refers to.'

I said, 'Oh? Go on then.'

He said, 'That's Abraham.'

'Abraham?' I said. 'How on earth do you get that interpretation?'

'Well,' he said, 'you take the first reference in the Old Testament to someone calling someone else 'lord', and the first time you read of 'my lord' in the Old Testament that's Sarah talking. She said, "Abraham, my lord". So, that refers to Abraham here.'

That's a funny little way of doing things, isn't it? Abraham? I think not. You remember what the Epistle to the Hebrews would say to this man. In Hebrews 1:13 it says, 'For to which of the angels did he say at any time, "Sit down at my right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet?"' God never talked like that to any angel, nor to Abraham.

You just imagine it. Can you visualise it? It's God, the Almighty, and he's speaking to someone. He says, 'Come and sit at my right hand. You're not completely comfortable? Let me get that footstool then, and I'll put it under your feet.' You've perhaps seen it done when some venerable lady has come into the meeting perhaps, and her legs are not quite long enough to reach the floor, and the elders or the deacons or the young men get hold of a big coat or a something and put it under the dear lady's feet. 'Are you comfortable now?' And rightly so that they do it, for she's a senior citizen and worthy to be treated honourably.

Well here is God Almighty getting the footstool and adjusting it under somebody's feet. Who is the 'somebody'? Well, it isn't an angel; God doesn't go around serving angels. Here is none other than the very Son of God. One day God will get the footstool and put it under his feet. He will make 'his enemies' the footstool of his feet.

What the early Christians discovered

We could stop with that verse just a wee bit longer, couldn't we? Because once the Lord Jesus had pointed it out to the disciples they weren't slow in thinking about it, helped by the Holy Spirit. And they said, 'You think of all the things we've got in that verse. First it tells us the deity of the Lord Jesus. Then it implies his incarnation, his death, his resurrection and his ascension, and now he sits at the right hand of God. Then it tells us there's going to be this in-between period, and then it tells us he's coming again and his enemies are going to be made his footstool.'

'Yes, it contains his first coming, his death, resurrection and his ascension, the present period and the second coming!'

'Yes,' they said, 'and did you notice what else? He said, "Sit at my right hand", not, "Stand at my right hand".'

'What does that indicate?'

'Well,' says the writer to the Hebrews, 'that reminds us that his work of sacrifice is finished and perfectly complete. For every Jewish priest *stands* daily offering repeatedly the same sacrifices that can never take away sin. But this man, when he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, *sat down*' (see Heb 10:11–12). The work was complete; no more sacrifice was needed. He sat down and, Hebrews continues, from that time he is waiting. Waiting for what? No, not for another instalment in the sacrifice! He is waiting simply for this: 'until his enemies be made the footstool of his feet' (v. 13). And since the work is complete and the sacrifice finished, and our Lord ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father, then your sins and iniquities are all forgiven, and he shall not remember them again. This is the completed work of Christ.

The place of highest honour

Then the Christians would have noticed another thing. They couldn't help sitting back for a moment and thinking about *where* he was seated. What does it mean to be seated at the right hand of God? Where is that? Well, whatever it means, it means in the place of honour and power and glory.

Many of the believers, the Jewish Christians, were poor; many of them were persecuted. They met wherever they could meet. In the end they got thrown out by their fellow Jews who went up to the great temple in Jerusalem to worship; the Christians had to worship where they could, very often in upstairs rooms and funny little pokey places, under threat of persecution. And the writer to the Hebrews, to comfort them, reminds them of these verses: 'Ah yes, the Jewish priests, they serve in that glorious temple, don't they? But it's only a temple made with hands. Our Lord serves, not in a temple made with hands; he's passed through the heavens, and he's on the right hand of the Majesty on high. He serves and ministers in the true tabernacle that the Lord has pitched and not man' (see Heb 8:1–2).

A king-priest after the order of Melchizedek

And what does he do in the meanwhile? Well, again this psalm will tell us, for it reminds us: 'The LORD has sworn and will not repent, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek"' (Ps 110:4). Again, what an interesting part of the programme it is. Messiah was to come to our earth; he was to ascend and go back to heaven. He was to wait there for

this 'until' period; until his enemies were made his footstool. In that period he would be exercising a ministry as the great king-priest, a priest 'after the order of Melchizedek.' That's what he would be doing.

That is interesting from a prophetic point of view. And how well the early Christians learned to use it against the unbelieving Jew. Imagine what it would have been like if you were a Jew who got converted to Christ. And you have gone home and talked about your great high priest to your mother and father who aren't Christians. They are still Jews and worship in the temple, and now they have got the rabbi along. You can imagine it can't you? Here comes the rabbi, because mum and dad have asked him to step in and have a word with their daughter, Rebecca, who's got converted to these Christians.

'Now,' the rabbi says, 'Rebecca, my dear, I hear you've got caught up with these Christians.'

'Yes.'

'And is it so that you say that Jesus is your priest?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Dear, dear. This is terrible. Don't you know what the Old Testament says? The only priest is after the order of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi. Now, what tribe did your Jesus come of? Was he of the tribe of Levi?'

'No, sir.'

'What tribe was he?'

'Of Judah.'

'There you are! How can you say your Jesus is a priest when he didn't even come of the priestly tribe?' The rabbi would stroke his beard and say, 'Now, you should remember, shouldn't you, what happened in the book of Numbers. Do you remember that?'

'No, sir.'

'Well, in the book of Numbers, when God appointed Aaron to be the high priest, there were some wicked men—Korah, Dathan and Abiram—who rose up against Aaron and disputed his priesthood and wanted to make themselves priests. Do you know what God did to them? The earth opened and swallowed them up. Come now, what is the sense of your saying that Jesus is a priest when he isn't of the tribe of Levi?'

The writer to the Hebrews helps these young converts by reminding them of this psalm. The programme of redemption is that, with the coming of Messiah, specifically with his resurrection, his being seated at the right hand of God, there is going to come a change of the priesthood.

When was Aaron appointed? 'Oh,' you say, 'you read about that in the book of Exodus and the book of Leviticus.' Yes, and so you do, but this is Psalms! And the Psalms were written hundreds of years after Leviticus. Yes, God in Leviticus appointed Aaron, but God in the Psalms is saying there will come a time when Aaron's priesthood will be put aside and the new part of redemption is going to involve another priesthood: 'a priest after the order of Melchizedek.' This is the programme for the redemption that the Messiah shall bring.

The guarantee

Before we leave it, let's just sit back a moment and enjoy the implications. Our Lord has been appointed a priest after the order of Melchizedek. He is a priest who lives forever. Notice what it says: 'The LORD has sworn and will not repent, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."'

'Yes,' says the writer to the Hebrews, 'you see when Aaron was appointed he wasn't appointed with an oath, but when our Lord Jesus was appointed God himself took an oath. The Lord *swore* and will not repent, saying, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.' Why did God swear such a big oath about the appointment of our priest? Well, for this reason. Because when our Lord was appointed priest, he was appointed *surety* of the new covenant (Heb 7:22). Let's try and get hold of that.

What is surety? Well, if you go down the road and want to buy a car, but you can't pay for it all at the time, the car shop might ask you for a guarantee. And if you can't guarantee it yourself they might ask if you have any friend who would guarantee to pay if you fail. That friend becomes a guarantor. So, if you go broke and you can't pay, well then your friend stands in; he's the guarantor, and he pays the lot.

When God appointed our Lord Jesus Christ to be our great high priest he appointed him also to be the guarantor of the new covenant. That is to say, whatever it would cost to bring the believer home to glory at last, whatever it cost, Jesus Christ has gone guarantor.

There are some unfortunate people in life, you know. They want some new furniture, so they go down to the shop and they see a lovely bit of furniture in the window. The man is standing at the door to entice them in and encourage them to buy this beautiful bit of furniture. He says, 'Yes, a small deposit will secure any item in the shop.' So in they go and they put down five pounds and they get a beautiful piece, and there it stands in their home as their pride and joy in the best room. They pay the money, five pounds a week, to pay off the piece of furniture. They've paid off about twenty pounds of it, and the thing cost one hundred and five pounds. Then they lose their jobs, and they can't pay the rest, and so the shop comes and takes it back again. Hard lines, isn't it?

Do you know, if heaven depended on my paying for redemption, oh, dear, dear; wherever should I get? If the great Messianic programme of redemption for the future depended on my paying for it, well, I know what would happen: I would go bust. I couldn't finish the payments, and all God's great promises would have to be taken back. That's not going to happen you know. Why not? Because Christ has been given to us not only as a high priest, but as the guarantor of the new covenant; he's going to pay the lot.

It's good, isn't it? That's the programme of redemption.

Psalm 118 and the Passover sacrifice

Psalm 118 is very interesting because it is one of a small group of psalms that include 113–118, which were sung as part of the Passover celebration. We are told in the gospels that our Lord sang a psalm just before he went out to Gethsemane and Calvary (see Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26). It was doubtless one of these psalms, or perhaps the lot of them, that he would have sung with his disciples. It is the psalm that has those wonderful words, 'bind the sacrifice

with cords, even to the horns of the altar' (118:27). He sang it before he went out as the great sacrifice for sin, to die for us at Calvary.

At the time of a feast

Once more if you read that psalm you will find that, far from being sorrowful and filled with pain and affliction, it is full of rejoicing. It pictures a wonderful time of festival in Israel, perhaps one of the major festivals of the Jewish era.

The procession into the city

You are to think in your mind, if you can visualise it, of a great festive occasion. All the people have come in from all over the dispersion, and the pilgrims have come up to Jerusalem to celebrate this great feast of the Lord. And at the festival they've lined up a vast procession of people. There stand the priests; and there are the people. At the beginning of the singing of the psalms the priests lead the people in thanksgiving, and they say,

O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endures for ever. Let Israel now say, that his mercy endures for ever. Let the house of Aaron now say, that his mercy endures for ever. Let them now that fear the LORD say, that his mercy endures for ever. (vv. 1–4)

Doubtless as the priests intoned those words at the head of the procession and they said, 'Let the people now say,' the people made their full-throated response: 'His mercy endures forever!' And then as the great procession moved on towards the temple, there stands out in front of them one prominent figure, and he's the king. The king now (for the next verse changes to the first person singular) begins to tell us something of his experience:

Out of my distress I called upon the LORD: the LORD answered me and set me in a large place.
(v. 5)

The LORD has chastened me severely: but he has not given me over unto death. Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will enter into them, I will give thanks unto the LORD. (vv. 18–19)

What's happening? Well, the procession is gradually moving towards the temple. The king now steps out in front of the people and rehearses what God has done for him. Apparently, in the king's experience, his enemies came and they surrounded him on every side until it looked as if he were utterly hemmed in, utterly defeated and about to be destroyed when God intervened and set him free from his enemies! He set him free from death. And the king tells his great experience.

And now they arrive at the temple gates, and the king says, 'Open to me the gates and I will come in, your legitimate sovereign and king who has conquered the enemies who tried to put him down.' Then the king himself addresses God: 'I will give thanks unto you, for you have answered me, and have become my salvation. The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner' (see vv. 21–22). It was a psalm therefore that was used, perhaps, at the yearly celebration of one of the great festivities in Israel as they processed toward the temple.

The Lord Jesus rejected

It was from that psalm that the Lord Jesus quoted. When did he quote it? It was in Holy Week. Why so? Because all his enemies had come round him; there were the Pharisees and Sadducees, and there was Judas plotting (just as we read from Psalm 109). They were all around him.

Our Lord had just told the story of the vineyard; and the owner of the vineyard had sent servants galore, and they had been beaten and thrown out. At last the owner of the vineyard sent his son, and the wicked tenants took him and killed him (see Matt 21:33–39). Our Lord was talking about what they were about to do to him. His enemies were going to surround him and hound him to the cross, and it would look as if God had forsaken him. And our Lord points to this very psalm: ‘What is indeed going to happen, gentleman? What is going to happen is this: “the stone which the builders rejected is going to be made the head of the corner”.’

Thus he spoke to his enemies. The doors of the temple should be flung wide open as he entered in his triumph, as he is made the head of the corner. But what happened? They hounded him to death. It looked as if God had forsaken him, but God intervened and raised him from the dead. And the exalted Christ has approached, not merely through the doors in the temple in Jerusalem, but he has entered into the very presence of God in heaven. The stone that the builders rejected has been made the head of the corner.

The Apostles remember the Psalm

After the resurrection and ascension of our Lord the gospel began to be preached, and the Sadducees tried to stop it. They got hold of Peter and John and they put them in prison. Then they brought them out and stood them before the court of the Sanhedrin. And they said, ‘We charge you not to speak to anybody again in the name of Jesus.’

‘You can judge for yourselves,’ says Peter, ‘whether we should obey you or obey God, but as far as we’re concerned we’re going to obey God. We can’t listen to you. Gentleman, you see we’ve performed this miracle: we’ve cured this lame man; we’ve made him walk. We’ve cured him in the name of Jesus who was the stone that was rejected by you the builders. God has made him the head of the corner’ (see Acts 4:1–20).

Let’s think about that now as we finish. There were the Jewish leaders of the temple: the chief priest, the high priest and the captain of the temple. They were responsible for running the temple and the temple services, to lead the praise of Israel. They had rejected the chief cornerstone of the temple, and God had intervened to make that stone that they rejected the very headstone of all. That is God’s plan for redemption. See that lame man at the temple? In the name of Jesus Christ, Peter and John gave him new life, and he went dancing into the temple! ‘There,’ says Peter, ‘let that be an illustration to you of what God is going to do one day. For the times of the restoration of all things is coming, and all things that have been spoken by the prophet will be fulfilled. The great day of millennial glory is coming, and when it comes it will come through this Jesus Christ. There is salvation in no other. There is no other name given among men whereby you must be saved’ (see Acts 3:11–26; 4:12).

Conclusion

Three scriptures then from our fifth book of the Psalms that talks to us about the Lord Jesus, and you should notice that they are all concentrating on that last period just before he died: his death, resurrection and ascension, and the programme for coming glory. Perhaps it's no accident that they come in the last book of the Psalms. We shall find next week that whatever else it talks about, Book Five of the Psalms will concentrate our attention on God's bringing back the captivity of his people and bringing them at length to the glory and the blessing and the enjoyment of the Messianic age.

Themes in the Fifth Book of the Psalms

You have given me the fifth book of Psalms to comment on in two Wednesday evenings, and last week we thought about some psalms that were prophecies of the Lord Jesus. We noticed in particular that they were prophecies about the end part of his life.

So far in our studies

Psalm 109 reminded us of his betrayal by Judas. Psalm 110 reminded us how our blessed Lord left heaven, came down here to earth and was crucified, but God raised him again from the dead and sat him at his right hand, on the very throne of God. And so Psalm 110 points us forward likewise to the time when God will make the very enemies of the Lord Jesus the footstool of his feet. Until then, he is seated at the right hand of God, waiting for his second coming.

Then we noticed in Psalm 118 another prophecy of the Lord Jesus. He was the stone rejected by the builders, but God raised him from the dead and he has become the headstone of the corner. So while both Psalm 110 and 118 remind us of our Lord's rejection, they put their emphasis very solidly on our Lord's triumphal resurrection and ascension, his present position of glory and his eventual coming again.

We noticed at the end that when Psalm 118 is quoted in Acts 4, Peter, standing before the Sanhedrin, reminds the chief priest that the same stone that they have rejected is to be the head of the corner. We noticed that this incident is in the context of Peter's great sermon to the crowd in which he proclaims that God has made this same Jesus Lord and Christ. One day, through him, all things that the Prophets spoke of are going to be restored. Heaven must receive him; his enemies are then made the footstool at his feet (see Acts 2:14-41).

Major themes in Book Five

Now this week I don't propose to read any particular reading to start with, but I'm going to ask you to open your Bibles to Psalm 107, which is the first psalm in the fifth book. We shall just look through Book Five as briefly as we can and pick out some of its major themes as we go. We shall not quote every psalm or every theme (there are many themes in this particular book of Psalms), but we shall notice a few of them and, in particular, the major groupings of the psalms.

Songs of re-gathering the exiles

We meet the first theme in Psalm 107. It is the theme of God's re-gathering of his people from their sad experience of exile. Notice with me where it is stated at the start of Psalm 107:

O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from the hand of the adversary; and gathered them out of the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. They wandered in the wilderness in a desert way; they found no city of habitation. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. He led them also by a straight way, that they might go to a city of habitation. Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good. (vv. 1–9)

So the first part of the psalm is about God's re-gathering of his people from their exile. Notice verse 3 again: 'And he gathered them out of the lands [notice that's in the plural] from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.' This is Israel remembering how once they had been scattered abroad in various foreign countries, and God had delivered them and brought them back to their land of Israel and to their capital city, Jerusalem.

The Lord's people in exile

Let us think for a while then about that business of the exile. What a tremendous shock it was for the people of God when, because of their sins, God had allowed the heathen armies to come up and destroy Jerusalem and take his people away. The Assyrians came first and took them to Assyria. Then the Babylonians came up and took them to Babylon. Then in later years Alexander the Great came and took a lot of them to Egypt. And the Israelites were scattered abroad among the heathen nations because of their sin against God, and that was a terrible shock.

Let's also remember the bitter suffering that many of them endured in those far off countries. Some of them, like Daniel, rose to high office in a Gentile government. Others, in Egypt under Alexander, rose to be generals in the army. But for the most part, particularly at first, the experience of exile had meant slavery, the loss of their home, the loss of their home country and many a privation. It had been a very bitter experience. We shall meet one of those psalms later on. Well, let's meet it now, shall we?

Psalm 137 and the bitterness of exile

To see something of the terrible bitterness the people had experienced in exile, look at Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst of them we hung up our harps. For there they that led us captive required of us songs, and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.' How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember you not; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy. Remember, O LORD, against the children of Edom the day of Jerusalem; who said, 'Raze it, raze it, even to its foundation.' O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewards

you as you have served us. Happy shall he be, that takes and dashes your little ones against the rock.

Here we learn some of the bitterness that the exiles experienced. We read of their weeping (v. 1). They couldn't sing anymore, so their songs are gone (v. 2). And then it is not only the bitterness of being slaves and strangers in a foreign land, but there was the mockery, when the Gentiles came round and mocked them as Jews: 'Go on, sing us one of your songs *to the Lord*. Go on. You worship the Lord, don't you? How did he let you get taken captive and brought down here? Oh, what a nonsense your religion is. Go on, sing us a song of the Lord' (see vv. 3–4).

Then there was the terrible bitterness. Why had God allowed them to be taken captive? Because of their disobedience the Lord had to allow them to be disciplined. How could they explain that to their pagan captors down there in exile? And those of us who know what it is to be mocked for our faith by our colleagues at work will perhaps begin to see some of the bitterness of these people who have now been dragged away from home. And the enemy would say, 'Well God wasn't strong enough to protect you.'

Then there was the homesickness and the longing for home in a strange land. It is nice to go on holiday, isn't it? It's nice to try the dishes of the foreign food sometimes (if you like that kind of thing) instead of fish and chips, but sooner or later there will come the thought: 'Oh, I would like to be home again; it's a foreign country I'm in. Oh, to be home!' Yes, but these were exiles, and they couldn't go home. Jerusalem would dwell in their mind and bring a longing for home.

Then they remembered the terrible days when the enemy had come flooding into Jerusalem, and they had seen them destroy the city; and their spiteful enemies around Edom had been egging on the enemy saying, 'Go on, raze it! Knock it down!' It would have been a terrible flood of memories. They'd dream about it. They'd have nightmares about the time when the enemy chariots and horses and armour came in and razed Jerusalem to the ground.

Then there were the fearful feelings of injustice that rankled in the breast. Some of them, perhaps, would be praying to God that he would deal with his enemy and theirs, namely Babylon.

Then comes a very sorry verse. For the people who wrote the psalm weren't Christians, were they? They didn't know our Lord who prayed for his enemies; they had not heard of him, for he was yet to be born. Now, instead of praying for their enemies, they're praying down God's judgment on them. They're wanting to see somebody get hold of the little babies and smash their skulls in on the rock to get their revenge on their enemies. It all adds up to an exceedingly bitter experience, brought onto Israel because of their sin.

Psalm 107 and the joy of return from exile

Let's go back to Psalm 107. By the time it is written, Israel has been brought back from exile. It is a psalm celebrating God's kindness in bringing them back, and it is a lovely psalm to begin this book with. This fifth and last book of the Psalms reminds us that God is the God who restores his people and, if they will repent, will bring them back again.

You will remember, for instance, that when Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem and finished it, he had a great meeting for prayer and praise in the temple courts. And he prayed to God in this fashion:

Oh God, wherever your people get to, if they turn again and pray towards this house, then hear in heaven and bring them back again. Whether their sin has led to famine, then God, have mercy on them. If their sin has led to blasting and mildew, then God forgive them when they repent and pray towards this house. If they have sinned against you and you have had to scatter them to the far ends of the earth, if they turn and pray towards you to this house, then hear in your heaven and forgive them and bring them back again. (see 1 Kgs 8:27–53)

So this is how Solomon prayed at the inauguration of the temple. Psalm 107 records God's faithfulness to his promises and his answer to his people's prayers, in spite of their sins that have brought upon them the discipline of exile. Now God has brought them back, they're in their land, Jerusalem is in their control and they've got the temple and, as we shall see presently from this book of Psalms, year-by-year they're able to go up and keep the feasts of the Lord in the temple at Jerusalem.

We learn from it, don't we? Who among us has not wandered in heart, since we've known the Lord, and got into all sorts of scrapes and difficulties? Sometimes our testimony among our unconverted work fellows hasn't been too good, and the unconverted have mocked the gospel because of our misdeeds, and God has had to allow us to suffer. We've felt that somehow we've gone astray and lost out and gone a long way away from the Lord. This psalm is here to remind us, not only of Israel's experience and how he brought them back, but that God is a God of new beginnings; he will bring us back too if we repent. And it is there to remind Israel, now once again scattered among the nations for many centuries and trying to get their land back, that one day the Saviour will come, and he will restore Israel.

So this Book Five begins with the praise of God as the one who re-gathers his people from exile.

Deliverance from life's troubles

As Psalm 107 continues, it describes to us a number of different situations in ordinary daily life where God has, from time to time, delivered people who got themselves into trouble.

Such as sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron; because they rebelled against the words of God, and condemned the counsel of the Most High. Therefore he brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help. (vv. 10–12)

Here were men who, because of their rebellion against the word of God, got themselves imprisoned. Then in God's mercy:

He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart. Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! For he has broken the gates of brass, and cut in two the bars of iron. (vv. 14–16)

So now here comes an example of God's deliverance when men sin and rebel. They got themselves into prison, bound and sitting in darkness and in fear. Then God in his mercy delivered them and broke their bonds and set them free. And doubtless God has done that literally for men, from time to time, over the centuries.

Or consider the next stanza:

Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhors all manner of food; and they draw near unto the gates of death. (vv. 17–18)

Here are men who, because of their sin, suffer illness. The first lot suffer imprisonment because of their rebellion against God's law. This second crowd, in their folly, disobey God's word and God brings on them sickness so that they no longer want their food, and they come near to death. And then God in his mercy, when they repent, heals them of their sickness. So we had deliverance from prison and now healing from sickness.

Then, from verse 23 onward, the psalmist pictures seamen that go down to the sea. He doesn't say it's their fault this time; it is simply one of life's experiences that the seamen who go down to the sea in ships come across tremendous storms now and again and are in fear of perishing because of their danger and difficulty on the sea. God in his mercy delivers them and brings a great calm (vv. 23–31).

And then, from verse 33 onward, the psalmist thinks of people who are in the land who are farmers, and they're depending on the rainwater to irrigate their farms to get a living. Presently there comes a terrible drought and, because of men's wickedness, God has to put his hand on their farms. With the drought comes hunger, but then again God is merciful and restores them and turns the wilderness into pools of water (vv. 33–38).

And, finally, people are prospering on their farms when presently the political conditions change, and they come under oppression by evil rulers who make their lives a misery, and then God delivers them (vv. 39–43).

So this psalm started to talk about God's deliverance of his people from exile, and then it goes on to describe these different situations: disobedience leading to prison, and God delivers them; disobedience leading to sickness, and then God heals. It describes men going down to the sea in ships and coming into a terrible storm, and then God delivers them and makes it calm. It describes farmers at work, and there comes a terrible drought because of men's sin; then God has mercy and sends them rain. Finally, it describes people who are brought under oppression by evil rulers, and God has mercy on the poor and delivers them.

Images to describe exile?

There are some scholars who say, 'Look, these other instances: prison and sickness and storm and drought and oppression, well those things have happened to many people and they have known God's deliverance, but the psalmist is using these instances as pictures of the exile in order to help us feel what it was like for God's people when they suffered it.'

So they say that the exile was like being in prison, in bondage. Well it was very often, for they were chained as slaves. 'Our sin against God took us into exile and into bondage, but when God brought us back, in his mercy, he broke our bands and set us free.'

Exile was like being ill. 'Because of our disobedience to God we suffered illness and sickness and were near to death.' That could often happen to literal exiles, as we see now happening around the world.

And again exile was like a terrible storm. 'We were living at peace in our homes in Palestine when the enemy came, and then, like a colossal great storm, we were engulfed; and then God brought us out into calm waters again.'

'Exile was like a drought. Exile was a real oppression, and God delivered us from it all.'

I must leave you to make up your mind whether you think that these little pictures of prison and sickness and storm and drought and oppression are meant to be pictures of what Israel's exile was like, out of which God delivered them. But as I think of the psalm, and I think of ourselves, how vividly those pictures can speak to us of what disobedience to God can bring us to.

Images to describe our condition before God

Those same pictures can speak to the unconverted as well. Disobedience to the word of God lands men in prison, though not always in our local one up the road here. Sin against God will bring men to spiritual prison, chained with the guilt of sin. What a wonderful God our God is; he is the God of forgiveness. Do you know what forgiveness means? One of the words for forgiveness in the New Testament simply means the releasing of your chains: to let you go. For guilt is like a chain around one's hands and feet and around one's conscience, keeping one in prison. And if those chains are never removed by the forgiveness of God, then there must await the unconverted an eternal prison: the chains of darkness. Oh the marvellous mercy of God that when men repent there is forgiveness; there is release from the prison house of sin.

It speaks to a believer and an unbeliever as well, doesn't it? Sin is a sickness, and in our unconverted days we are sick. As Isaiah said, 'There's no soundness in us, from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot; there's nothing but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores' (1:6). Sin is a *sickness*. Thank God for his mercy; by his stripes we are *healed* (53:5).

We could apply it at another level for believers. First Corinthians 11 reminds us that we ought to judge ourselves; and if we judge ourselves, we should not be judged (v. 31). But if we grow careless as believers and we don't judge ourselves and seek the Lord's forgiveness, then the Lord may have to discipline us (v. 32). One of his disciplines can be to allow sickness in our lives, which he allows for our good to bring us to our senses. And if we repent, then he proves himself again to us as our healer.

Then take the storm. Perhaps you take the storm here to be a literal storm, and God is saving literal sailors. Or you may think it was a picture of what the exile was like: it was a rough passage, a storm in Israel's national experience. Either way it remains true for us that sometimes in life we come across a violent storm; we sail very rough seas and we think every minute is going to be the end of us and that we're going to get swallowed up and sent to the bottom; like those disciples did in a very literal storm when they thought the Lord didn't care that they were about to perish and go down and founder on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-41). Oh, how many storms some of us have been through and proved that God can turn the raging billows calm and bring us through.

So with the other two: drought and oppression. We can use these likewise, certainly of Israel's exile and of our own spiritual experience. How many an unconverted man, because of his disobedience to God, has in the end found life like the prodigal found it? He was so hungry that he wanted to fill his belly with the husks that the swine were eating (Luke 15). This is life turned into an unsatisfying desert. And we can see life turning itself into an oppression when our own sinful ways become our master.

From these things God stands waiting to deliver, and Psalm 107 is a psalm of great praise on the lips of the men and women who have found deliverance through repentance and the mercy of God.

The first grouping of psalms in Book Five

So Book Five opens with this psalm of God's re-gathering of his people from exile. And within the same first group of psalms in Book Five we have Psalm 109. As we considered last week, verse 8 is taken by the New Testament and referred to Judas. So Psalm 109 reminds us how Judas sold our Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Now I'm going to ask you to think historically. Nobody knows exactly when Psalm 107 was written, but it must have been written after the exile when God had brought his people back out of the many different countries into which they had been dispersed.

You might have said to yourself, 'Well now they'll have learnt their lesson. Now at last, perhaps, they'll obey the Lord with all that wealth of experience behind them of what sin leads to and what disobeying God's word leads to. Now that they've been brought back the nation will never forget it. As they would sing this psalm, perhaps in the temple or on religious feast days or on the Sabbath, with all the memory of the past and what happens when people disobey, they wouldn't sin again.'

What a sad story it is that Israel, having sung that psalm thousands of times, went back again into sin and betrayed their own Messiah and crucified him. We never seem to learn, do we? How strange that is. With all the lessons of the centuries that show how sin lands you into bondage, and sin lands you into sickness, and sin lands you into storm, and sin lands you into famine and sin lands you into oppression, we go and do it again. What a terrible thing disobedience to God is. So Israel, having come back out of exile and back into her land, eventually fell into such grievous sin that they betrayed Messiah and crucified him.

But then we remember Psalm 110 that we read last week. What a lovely psalm to read in this kind of a context. In spite of the fact that Israel had done the very worst thing they could do and crucified their own Messiah, God raised him from the dead and sat him at his own right hand in glory and has said to him, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet' (Ps 110:1). One day Christ shall reign supreme; every disobedience will be put down and every enemy put beneath his triumphant feet. When at last every enemy is put down, one of the enemies that I shall be delighted to see put finally under his feet is my own disobedience. How about you? Christ shall finally triumph over every enemy and over every disobedience.

Songs of Deliverance—Psalms 113–118

Now let's go to Psalm 113. It is part of another little group of psalms here in Book Five. At first sight this seems to be departing from that story of the bringing back of the people from exile, just for a moment at any rate. Psalms 113–118 are an interesting collection because among the Jews they are styled the 'Egyptian Hallel'. Hallel is simply 'praise' in Hebrew, and this is called the Egyptian praise. The reason why this little collection is grouped together is because these were the psalms that the Jews, over many years, used to sing (and still do) at Passover time.

Whenever the Jews got together at Passover, and they were celebrating the feast and eating the roast lamb and the bitter herbs, then they would sing these psalms. They didn't sing them all at once. They sang 113 and 114 before the meal, before the second cup (for they had a number of cups at the Passover meal). Then after the meal, when they were about to drink the fourth cup in the Passover ceremony, they would sing Psalms 115, 116, 117 and 118.

It is interesting to notice, because the Gospels tell us that when the Lord Jesus kept the Passover for the last time with his disciples in the Upper Room, just before they finished they sang a hymn and went out. In all probability it was this Egyptian Hallel and, in particular, the last of the collection—Psalm 118, that our Lord sang, likely in the Upper Room with his disciples, just before he went out to Calvary.

So let's think about this little group of psalms, the kind of thing the people of Israel would think of when they were celebrating Passover. Interestingly enough, only Psalm 114 actually talks of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt. Other psalms talk of other deliverances, because as the Israelites celebrated the Passover year after year they wouldn't merely look down to the first deliverance from Egypt, they would look through the centuries at other deliverances and recall them as well. Then people would think about their own personal experience of deliverance; how God had intervened in their own personal lives and delivered them from this, that and the other. So they would sing a number of different psalms, and all through the meal there would be this theme of *deliverance*.

The reality of the God who delivers: Psalm 115

What did they think about particularly in God's deliverances? Well, let's read Psalm 115:

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto your name give glory, for your mercy and for your truth's sake. Why should the nations say, 'Where is now their God?' But our God is in the heavens: he has done whatever he pleased. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not; they have hands, but they handle not; feet have they, but they walk not; neither speak they through their throat. They that make them shall be like unto them; so do all who trust in them. O Israel, trust in the LORD; he is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD: he is their help and their shield. You that fear the LORD, trust in the LORD: for he is their help and their shield. The LORD has been mindful of us; he will bless us: he will bless the house of Israel; he will bless the house of Aaron. He will bless them that fear the LORD, both small and great. The LORD increase you

more and more, you and your children. Blessed are you of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. The heavens are the heavens of the LORD; but the earth he has given to the children of men. The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence; but we will bless the LORD from this time forth and evermore.

Notice here the particular emphasis in this group of psalms that celebrate and recall God's deliverance of the people from Egypt. What has deliverance meant to them, whether it's the deliverance from Egypt or, since those days, the deliverance from exile? What have they learned from their experience?

They've learned the difference between the living God and the dead, lifeless gods of the nations around them. So the deliverance for the Israelite as he kept the Passover wasn't merely a historical thing way back there, when God once-upon-a-time brought their fathers out of Egypt and into the promised land. Now they're singing of the reality of the living God that they have proved as the people whom God has delivered.

That's very interesting, for at many a Passover Israel sang this Hallel about the difference between the living God and the idols. It sometimes happened that it was just words that they sang.

Keeping the feast but forgetting its significance

Do you remember what the Gospel of John tells us? In chapter 2 it begins to tell us how there was a feast of the Jews, called the Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Do you recall what he found in the temple? Did he find people singing the wonderful reality of the living God, as distinct from the dead idols? No. John says he found in the temple those that sold oxen and doves and other things. And Jesus got a cord of whips, and he cast them out and said, 'Make not my father's house a house of merchandise' (John 2:16). They had made it a veritable den of robbers, and he turned them all out.

They came around saying, 'Well, what sign do you show? By what authority do you do these things?' He said, 'If you want to know, destroy this temple and I'll raise it up again in three days.' They thought he'd gone a bit crazy. They said, 'You know it has taken forty-seven years to build this temple, and will you raise it up again in three days?' But he was speaking of the resurrection of his body. They hadn't a clue what he meant. He was speaking about the power of the living God, the resurrecting power of God, and they didn't know a thing about it (vv. 18–21). Curious, wasn't it?

Do you know that when their forefathers had first been delivered from Egypt and they'd gone out into the wilderness, God had said to the children of Israel, 'Now, I wonder would you give me gold and silver, some gems, some wood, some cloth and some wool and make me a tabernacle?' And the people had brought the gold and the silver, the precious stones and the wood, the wool and the leather; and they brought so much to make God's house that Moses had to tell them to stop. Somehow or other, when the Lord went to Jerusalem to keep the Passover, the only way they could keep the old temple going was to have a few bazaars and make a lot of money and sell a lot of bric-a-brac, and charge the pilgrims exorbitant prices for the sheep and the oxen and the sacrifices and the other things they would need.

What had happened? Why the difference between the early people, who when they had been delivered out of Egypt gave willingly, and the people now with their colossal great

temple, but scrounging all the money they could to keep the temple going? And the answer is that, though they were celebrating the Passover, they had no experience of the power of the living God in their own lives.

Just listen to what John says happened while our Lord was in Jerusalem. There came to him a ruler of the Jews. It wasn't surprising because this man lived there, and his name was Nicodemus.

Our Lord said to him, 'Nicodemus, you must be born again.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he replied. 'What do you mean: "born again"?'

'I mean being born again of the Spirit of God.'

It didn't mean anything to him, and he was a great theologian. He was keeping the celebration of the Passover, the witness to the delivering power of the living God, but had no experience of the power of God in his own life (see John 3).

That's sad, isn't it? And it could be a little message to us. It's easy to come to meetings, to sing hymns about redemption, to celebrate Easter, to talk of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and still have no experience of the power of God in one's own life. It is possible to do all of these things and not to know what it is to be delivered from the power of Satan or to have an experience of the new birth. Not inappropriately then, the Great Hallel points out to Israel what redemption means and what is the chief lesson to be learned: the reality of the living God who can save his people, and the difference between him and the idols of the heathen that are merely the works of their hands and are lifeless.

The great deliverer delivered: Psalm 118

There is one other lesson we could notice before we pass from this group of psalms, and that is what we were looking at last week in Psalm 118. It is the last of the psalms in the Egyptian Hallel, and it is the last to be sung at Passover time. In the mouth of the speaker in the psalm, it tells of a terrible experience:

All the nations surrounded me; but in the name of the LORD I will cut them off. They surrounded me, yea they surrounded me, but in the name of the LORD I will cut them off. They surrounded me like bees; they are quenched as the fire of thorns: in the name of the LORD I will cut them off. They thrust hard at me that I might fall, but the LORD helped me. The LORD has become my strength and song; and he has become my deliverance. (Ps 118:10-14)

That's a very interesting passage, isn't it? It seems that this someone was surrounded by the nations determined to destroy him, and yet the Lord delivered him. You say, 'That's a picture of Israel, and here was Israel surrounded by the nations again, with all of them determined to destroy Israel, and God delivers his people.'

Well, yes, there have been many occasions like that since Israel came out of Egypt when the Gentile nations had decided to destroy Israel, and sometimes they have come very close to doing so. Hitler would have done it completely if he could. The Arab states would like to do it again now. In the coming days, the nations are going to be gathered together around Israel and try finally to obliterate her, and God will deliver Israel. That's true, but there's another sense, isn't there?

We learn from the end of this psalm that these things were true of the Lord Jesus. When he came to celebrate the last Passover that he ever celebrated on earth, he kept it with his disciples in the Upper Room, and he took the final cup and they sang Psalm 118, celebrating the Passover, and then he went down to Calvary. The Jews, the Romans and Herod all united together to cut off and destroy him. The wonderful story in that Passover is that God intervened and delivered him, not from dying but from death, and raised him again. And as Psalm 118 says, 'The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner.' On that great Passover day, God intervened and saved his own Son from death itself and brought him out again, triumphant and victorious. Now he has been made the head of the corner. Oh, thank God for that mighty deliverance that was Calvary, when God raised Jesus from the dead!

He who comes in the name of the Lord

One other little detail before we leave Psalm 118:

Save now, we beseech you, O LORD: O LORD, we beseech you, send now prosperity. Blessed is he that comes in the name of the LORD: we have blessed you out of the house of the LORD. The LORD is God, and he has given us light: bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar. (vv. 25–27)

Notice those words, 'Blessed is he that comes in the name of the LORD'. Our Lord quoted those words, didn't he? In his last days, when he went out of the temple for the last time he said, 'Your house has been left to you desolate. You shall not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord"' (Matt 23:38–39). What did the Lord mean?

If you look closely at Psalm 118 you'll find it is a hymn that the Jews used to sing in procession. It would appear that certain of them would come and join a great procession and they would slowly march up through the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, and as they came near the temple, the one group would cry out: 'Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!' And the other group would reply: 'We bless you from the house of the Lord', and the temple gates would open. Earlier in the psalm we read:

Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will enter. I will give thanks unto the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter into it. I will give thanks unto you for your great deliverance. (Ps 118:19–21)

So as they came up to the temple, celebrating the great deliverance of God from Egypt, perhaps also from exile and one thousand and one other deliverances, the doors would open and, as they went in, one would say, 'Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord', and the other would say, 'We bless you in the name of the Lord.' Then they would take the sacrifice and celebrate the sacrifice in the temple, binding it with cords to the horns of the altar.

Perhaps they celebrated that very thing at the Passover when our Lord was crucified. With all the pomp and ceremony of their procession, they rejected the only one who could deliver them and sold him to the Gentiles and tried to bring about his death. And he said,

'You'll not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord"' (Matt 23:39). What did he mean? Well, whatever he meant, and however many meanings he may have included in that remark, oh thank God for what it shall yet be!

While they were celebrating in Jerusalem, the blessed Lord who was cast out was dying on a cross to effect the greatest of all Passovers: the deliverance of his people from sin. And we celebrate God's great deliverance of Messiah from the pangs of death and his raising him again, and breaking the very power of death itself, so that the stone that was rejected by the builders has become the head of the corner. Ah, yes, but one day he'll come again and finally deliver Israel from all her foes. And when he comes, God's glorious king (and every eye shall see him), and proceeds to his temple, then indeed shall they say, 'Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.'

This little group of psalms then, the Egyptian Hallel, is celebrating God's deliverance in Egypt from the exile. They were sung by our Lord at his great Passover sacrifice, and they are looking forward to the time when the exalted Lord, the keystone of God's temple, shall come again in glory and publicly be received by Israel in their temple.

Songs of the Word of God—Psalm 119

There follows a big psalm, but you needn't fear that we're going to read it all tonight. In fact, though it is so big, we can deal with it in a few words, but may God print its message on our hearts. Psalm 119, the biggest psalm in all the book of Psalms, is a psalm in celebration of the word of God, its importance, its value and its delight. It is no accident that it comes at this point in the book; somebody knew what he was doing when he put it here.

What have we been considering so far in Book Five? Right from Psalm 107 we have read of God bringing back his people from exile, which they went into because of their disobedience. It highlights the kinds of things disobedience leads to: prison and sickness and storm and drought and oppression. We've been celebrating God's deliverance from them all. Then, from Psalm 113 onwards, in the Egyptian Hallel, we have read of God's deliverance of his people from Egypt, at Calvary, and in the coming day. And what has Psalm 119 got to say for people who have learned the folly of sin and the difficult circumstances into which disobedience can lead you? It says, let them surely observe how vastly important obedience is to the word of God.

People of the book

Now, of course, Israel had always been told to obey the word, but this much can be said historically: that when, through their disobedience, they were taken down into exile and then eventually came back into the land, there began a period of study of the Bible perhaps never surpassed in the whole of Judaism. It started with people like Ezra the scribe and his careful rewriting of the manuscripts of the Bible. He was a ready scribe and was known for collecting the books of the Bible and carefully writing them out. Not only that, he was known for standing up and calling all the people to come together, and reading the law in front of them, and encouraging the nation to obey the word of God.

When the people came back from exile, I repeat, there was a tremendous emphasis upon the word of God. I know it slipped, and there came days of desperate apostasy under Antiochus Epiphanes. There were Jews in Jerusalem in the years from about 170 BC onwards who virtually denied the word of God and joined with the Gentiles in putting an old idol on the very altar in the temple of Jerusalem. They joined with the wicked Antiochus Epiphanes in banning the word of God and banning obedience to it.

As a result of the Maccabees' wars Israel found deliverance from that and, after that time, there was an increased emphasis of obedience to the word of God, and you will read in the books of the Maccabees of the people saying from Jerusalem to the Jews of the dispersion, 'Now, look, if you want copies of the Scripture, we have new copies of the Scripture here in Jerusalem, and you can come and get them from us.' In those days, the people who came to be known as the Pharisees began their great and meticulous study of Scripture, having been taught by experience the need to put God's word central in the life of the individual and central in the life of the nation.

We know this truth about the importance of the word of God in our youth, don't we? Then we come to see it again at our conversion, I suspect. What fools we've been to waste our life disobeying the word of God; and now we come back to God, we've been converted and we're going to obey his word. It can happen that, later on, as God's people, we get a little bit careless about obeying God's word and run ourselves into all sorts of trouble, individually and as churches. Then let experience teach us, as it taught Israel, the value, the delight, the glory, the absolute centrality and the fundamental importance of the word of God and obedience to it in our lives and in our churches.

Songs of Ascent—Psalms 120-134

Two other small groups of psalms remain. From Psalm 120 through to Psalm 134 you will find every psalm labelled with the same label. I don't know what it's called in your translation, but in some they're called a 'Song of Degrees' and in other translations, 'Songs of Ascent' or 'Songs of Going Up'. Then come two other psalms, and the last, Psalm 136, is also called the 'Great Hallel'. That is, it is so called by some Jewish authorities to distinguish it from the Egyptian Hallel. Other Jewish authorities tell us that they originally called all that group, from Psalm 120 right through to Psalm 136, the Great Hallel, and there's nobody that can tell us which is which anyway, and so you can call it what you like. Certainly Psalm 136, the great psalm of praise, is the Great Hallel. Whether you extend that term to cover the Songs of Degrees or not, well, you have your choice: you follow some Jews and do it, or you follow other Jews and you don't.

What the label means

The main interest is in these 'Songs of Degrees'. Whatever do they mean by that? Again, no one can say with absolute certainty what that title originally meant.

Degrees and steps

Some people say the title goes back to King Hezekiah. Remember the story in 2 Kings 20 of how King Hezekiah was ill, and he was told he was going to die. He turned his face to the wall and was sorry for his sins and pleaded with God to spare his life a while. And Isaiah the Prophet was sent to him with the message that God was going to spare his life and going to give him another fifteen years. The sign of that was that the sun's shadow went back so many *degrees* on Ahaz's sun clock.

In those days, the ancients had clocks for measuring the length of the day, only they weren't like our clocks; there were no springs or anything. They were simply a series of bricks, built up with a step here and another step here and another step on top, and the sun's shadow moved and you knew, according to which step it had got to, how far the day was along. It was a kind of a sundial, and those things were called degrees ('steps' if you like). So the sign to Hezekiah that he was going to recover was that the shadow went back on the degrees (or on the steps) of Ahaz's clock (see Isa 38:7-8).

Other people say, 'No, that may be true, but the psalms are not connected with that. The reason why they're called Psalms of Degrees or Ascent is that in the temple of Jerusalem, between one court and another, there were a number of steps and, according to the ancient Jewish authorities, the priests or the Levites used to stand in a series on those steps, and they used to sing psalms.' Unfortunately those same Jewish authorities didn't tell us what psalms they were that they sang on the steps. So we can't be sure that these were the psalms that they sang on the steps; and we can't be absolutely sure therefore that the psalms actually were sung on the steps in the temple. But if you think they were, well, you have your choice.

Going up to Jerusalem at the time of the feasts

There are two other explanations. One is that the Songs of Ascent ('the Songs of Going Up', as the Hebrew says) were the songs that the pilgrims used to sing in their caravans as they went on their pilgrimage up to the temple to keep the major feasts of the Lord in Jerusalem.

Three times a year, at least, all the men folk were supposed to appear in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem to keep the Feast of Passover or Tabernacles, or whatever it was; and if you lived in northern Galilee (there being no buses or anything like that) you had to walk or go on your donkey, and it would take you three or four or maybe six days. And what you did was to gather with the other pilgrims gradually converging on the main road, and at night time you would gather round your fire in caravansary.

And you would sing of course. Young chaps had their equivalent of their guitars. At night time, to pass time on the road, they'd strum on the old guitar and sing a few psalms on the way up. And this grew into a habit. Then certain psalms that they used to sing more frequently than others were collected together perhaps, and these were the Psalms of Ascent that you sang as you went up on the pilgrimage.

That seems to make some sense because, as you'll notice, Psalm 120 is a psalm that somebody wrote about his experience amongst his enemies in Meshech and Kedar, but then as you go on you read in Psalm 122: 'I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go up into the house of the LORD"' (v. 1). Then comes the exciting moment when the pilgrims who have come from Meshech or from Kedar, however far they've come from, they've at last arrived in Jerusalem: 'And our feet are standing in thy streets, inside thy walls, O Jerusalem!' (v. 2).

Imagine the excitement of coming to Jerusalem, particularly if it was the first time, and now you're actually standing inside at the time of the feast!

Then as you read on you'll come across other psalms, such as Psalm 125, spoken from the perspective of someone who is standing in Jerusalem and they look at the mountains surrounding the city. (Anybody who goes there can still see it.) There are the mountains around about Jerusalem, even so is the Lord around his people (see v. 2).

Then finally we could look at Psalm 134, when the pilgrims have got to the actual temple: 'Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the sanctuary and bless the Lord!' And then the reply comes: 'The Lord bless you out of Zion, even he that made heaven and earth!' These are the pilgrims who've got right to the temple, and they're blessing the priests in the temple, and the priests in turn are blessing them. It's a likely explanation, isn't it, that this section of psalms reflects the journey of the pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to keep the feast?

Why would God have them do that? I suspect that it's because our human hearts easily wander from the Lord; we do so easily forget. Therefore God arranged it for the Jew that, from time to time, he had to leave everything and go back up to Jerusalem to keep the great feast, to remember Passover and what God had done. He had to keep the Feast of Tabernacles and to remember how God had brought his people out of Egypt, and they had lived in tents in the wilderness until they had come into the promised land. The people had to go up to remember God's deliverance.

Then of course they were going up to the temple, and this is where God the Almighty deigned to presence himself in a very special way. Jerusalem was the very heart of the nation for God was there. Here was the nation's centre, the nation's heart. God, who knows how easily we go astray and forget him, brought his people back up to remember him, to remember their redemption and to praise the Lord.

We don't have a centre on earth to come to, do we? But before he left, the Lord Jesus, who knew how our hearts would get cold and wander, said, 'You meet together, and where two or three are met together, there I am in the middle, and when you meet together, I want you to take bread and wine and remember what I did for you at Calvary' (see Matt 18:20; 26:26-29; 1 Cor 11:23-26).

Does the Lord see you, my brother, my sister, coming to meet with the Lord's people, and to remember the Lord and his great redemption? Do you not think it's necessary? Oh, now, you take a lesson from Israel. How easily we forget. And when we forget we wander.

Coming back

There's another possible meaning to the Psalms of Ascent. When Israel sinned against God, God banished them to the nations. We've been thinking about that and how, after exile, God brought them back again. The Hebrew word for coming back from exile is this very word: *ascent*.

The first ascent was when they came out of Babylon, and if you go to Israel today and listen very carefully to the Jews talking, they'll talk about the first ascent, and they'll talk about the second. When they talk of the second ascent they're talking about the way Jews are coming from all the nations of the earth and coming back once more to Palestine, to their

land. It could be that these Psalms of Ascent are not merely the songs that the pilgrims would have sung as they went from various places in Palestine up to the temple, but the songs that they sang when they were coming from Babylon and Egypt and Persia and Rome and from Greece! They'd been scattered; they were the Jews of the dispersion who had been scattered because of the nation's sin, but at least once a year (or once in a lifetime) they made the effort to come back to Israel. They came in hope that one day God would bring the whole of the nation back to Israel. They sang these Songs of Ascent, coming back to the heart of Judaism, to remember God's redemption of his people.

And as I think of that, I think of us. There's a lovely hymn that we sometimes sing of a Sunday morning when we come to remember the Lord, and we tell the Lord how we regain 'our lost centre through faith in Jesus' blood'.¹ How easy it is to wander from the Lord. It is so important constantly to seek the Lord and regain our centre in God himself.

A song of God's presence—Psalm 139

I'm only going to mention one more psalm and, to your great relief, I'll be finished. The Israelite came back to Jerusalem, or he came up on the feasts and celebrated God in his temple and has come back to the centre and thought about redemption. When you come to Psalm 139, the psalmist has gone even beyond that. There you'll hear the psalmist celebrating a wonderful thing that has just struck him, and he puts it down in poetry.

Yes, of course God is in the temple at Jerusalem; but God is everywhere, isn't he? You couldn't get away from the presence of God: though you ascend to heaven; he's there. If you go down to hell, he's there. If you went to the far reaches of the universe, he'd be there. You could not possibly escape him; God is everywhere (see vv. 7–12). What a thing it is to wake up to: wherever I am, God is there. Sometimes I've forgotten it; sometimes I'm wandering from the Lord in heart, but this is a lovely thing to remember. Suppose I wandered in heart from the Lord; I don't have to go to Rome or Jerusalem or Canterbury or anywhere else to get right with him. The Lord is right here.

Then the psalmist thought about it and said, 'And do you know what? It's not only that the Lord is right here where I am but, long before I was conscious, when I was being formed in my mother's womb, even then your hand covered me, and all my members were written in your book' (see vv. 15–16). The psalmist has woken up to the wonderful thing of the omnipresence of God.

What a gospel that is to finish on. Wherever I get to in life, God is there. However long I live, God is there. He was there before birth, sheltering me when I was conceived in the womb. When I began to grow, and my members were put together, then he recorded them in his book. 'And, do you know,' says the psalmist, 'when I wake up in the mornings, I am still with you' (see v. 18).

I don't know how you feel when you wake up in the morning. It takes me a little while; sometimes I think 'Where on earth am I? And what day is it? Is this Friday or is it last Monday? Where am I now? Oh, yes, this is such and such a day, and it's the day I have to do

¹ Mary Bowley Peters (1813–56), 'The Holiest We Enter.'

that one task.' It's a lovely thing to be able to say when you wake up in the morning, 'Lord, you're still here; I am still with you.'

It's not merely in the meetings and not merely in the great crowd of pilgrims. It's not merely in the colourful services in the temple, but on a cold Monday morning when you've got to wake up and face the world once more that you can say with the psalmist, 'I am still with you', and you'll be able to say it honestly. In a sense, this is all that the psalms were talking about; we've regained our centre and found it in God.

They are just some of the themes. Thank you very much for your patience. May God use our studies to stimulate our minds and our hearts.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.