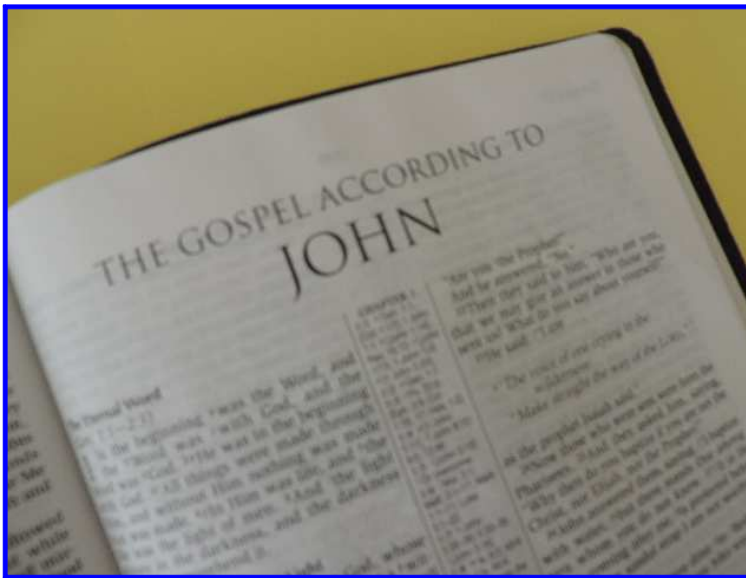


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



June 2018

Bible readings from The Gospel of John chapters 15 to 21
Psalms 135 to 141

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Therefore the world hates you

The Lord Jesus now turns from the subject of love to that of hatred – the hatred of the world towards the child of God. We need the precious friendship of Jesus in this world which is hostile to the gospel. Why does the world hate the believer?

- Because we no longer belong to the world. Jesus said, *‘Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you’* (19). We once belonged to Satan, the ruler of this world (14:30; Ephesians 2:2–3) but we have been taken out of his kingdom (Colossians 1:13) and he stirs up his subjects to hate us. ‘The world would not hate angels for being angelic, but it does hate men for being Christians. It begrudges them their new character; it is tormented by their peace; it is infuriated by their joy’ (William Temple).
- The world persecuted our Master and it will surely persecute his servants (20). When Jesus walked this earth they heard his words and saw his works, but they still hated him and the Father. They had no excuse for their hatred (22–25). Have you read John Bunyan’s ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’? This is a book that every Christian should read. Bunyan’s account of Christian and Faithful passing through Vanity Fair vividly illustrates the hatred of the world for the child of God.

Jesus also warned the disciples of the hatred of the religious establishment which thinks that it is serving God when it persecutes his people. He warned that we will suffer reproach for his sake and this will help us to be prepared for suffering when it comes to us (16:1–4).

What are we to do when we are persecuted? We must not be driven into retaliation or into isolation, but rather engage in evangelism, bearing witness to Christ. The Thessalonian church was a fine example of receiving God’s Word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit and of proclaiming it (1 Thessalonians 1:6–8; 2:14). We too have the Holy Spirit as our Helper (15:26–27) and he will not forsake us. **The world may hate us, but God loves us, and that makes all the difference!**

The Spirit of truth

The disciples were filled with sorrow when Jesus told them that he was going away. None of them responded by asking him what his return to the Father would mean for him and for them (5–6). Peter had asked Jesus where he was going but had not thought of anything beyond death and had spoken of his own willingness to die for Jesus (13:36–37). The Lord Jesus explained that if he did not go to the Father, the Holy Spirit would not come to them (7). The Holy Spirit is our *Helper* and we need him to enable us to witness to a hostile world (15:27). The disciples certainly needed him in their witness to the world of unbelieving Jews. Before his coming at Pentecost, they were weak and pathetic (think how they all forsook Jesus and fled in fear in Gethsemane, Mark 14:50). After Pentecost they were bold, fearless and powerful in their witness.

The Holy Spirit does what we cannot do. He convicts (convinces) the world of three things of which it is ignorant (8–11):

- The seriousness of sin, especially the sin of rejecting Christ.
- The necessity of righteousness, which can only be obtained through the work of the risen, ascended Christ.
- The reality of judgement. The defeat of Satan, *the ruler of this world* (12:31; 14:30), at Calvary is a forerunner of the final judgement.

Jesus promised his disciples that when the Holy Spirit came, he would guide them into all truth. Notice that the Holy Spirit is called '*the Spirit of truth*' (13). Some movements claim to have the Holy Spirit but do not hold to the truth of the gospel and the sole authority of God's Word for Christian doctrine and practice. The Holy Spirit will never lead us into fellowship with those who deny the truths of the gospel. He glorifies Christ (14). **Has the Holy Spirit worked in your life? If he has, you will have a great concern for truth and will seek to honour Christ in all that you do.**

Your joy no one will take from you

The statement of Jesus in verse 16 puzzled the disciples and it may puzzle you. Bishop J.C. Ryle took the second part of the verse to mean that we shall see Christ when he comes again at the end of the world. Hendriksen's interpretation of the verse is to be preferred. Jesus was saying that after he had died, risen and ascended to the Father, the disciples would experience him in a new way, seeing him spiritually, not physically. Two different Greek words are used for 'see' in this verse. The first ('theoreo') means to see with our eyes, to observe; the second verb ('horao') means to discern, to experience.

Jesus warned the disciples that they would weep and lament (because of his death and absence from them) and the wicked world would rejoice. Just as a woman in labour experiences pain and sorrow which gives way to joy at the birth of her child, so the sorrow of the disciples would be short-lived and would be turned into joy (20–22). In that day they would no longer be confused and they would no longer need to ask questions (that is the meaning of the word translated 'ask' in verses 19 and 23). They would also bring their requests to the Father in the name (on the authority) of the risen, conquering Christ, and those requests would be granted (24).

The promises of the Lord Jesus to the disciples are for all believers now that the Holy Spirit has come (see verse 7). We do have sorrow in the world, but we have lasting joy in Christ who said, '*Your joy no one will take from you*' (22). No one can take this joy from us because our risen Saviour is with us and the Father answers our prayers. This joy is so different from the fleeting joys of this world which soon evaporate in adverse circumstances. **Christian joy comes from the peace, serenity, hope and confidence of knowing that God is in control of all our circumstances, working out his purposes for his glory and for our good.**

*I would not change my blest estate
For all the world calls good or great.*

(Isaac Watts)

Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world

Jesus told his disciples that he had been speaking in figurative language to them, but a time would come when he would speak plainly to them about the Father (25). *'In that day'* (26) refers to the time when the Holy Spirit would come ('the dispensation of the Spirit' – Hendriksen). The Lord Jesus was going to the Father who loved them and who delighted to answer their prayers brought to him in the name of Jesus (26–28).

The disciples said that they could now understand him because he was speaking plainly to them (29–30). They confessed that they believed that he had come from God. Jesus asked them, *'Do you now believe?'* (31). He was warning them against self-confidence. They would be scattered and dispersed to their own homes and leave him (after his arrest in Gethsemane, 29–32). Jesus said that he would not be alone, however, because the Father was with him but he was soon to feel forsaken by the Father as he bore the wrath of God when being punished for our sins on the cross (Matthew 27:46).

Jesus said, *'In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world'* (33). The Greek word for *'tribulation'* means 'affliction' or 'pressure' and is also translated *'anguish'* (21). Jesus went to Calvary not only to suffer for our sins, but also to defeat Satan, the ruler of this world. He has overcome the world. *We are more than conquerors through him who loved us* (Romans 8:35, 37).

The Lord Jesus had spoken to his troubled disciples so that they might have peace (33). We must expect tribulation and trouble as long as we are in the world but in Christ we have peace. How wonderful! **If you are passing through trials and are feeling the attacks of the enemy, be of good cheer; look to your great Saviour who will surely bring you through.**

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God

This is one of the most profound chapters in the whole of the Bible. We are here permitted to see the Son of God pouring out his heart in prayer to the Father. The next chapter indicates that this prayer was not uttered in Gethsemane (18:1). Jesus had told the disciples to prepare to leave the upper room (14:31) and the words and prayer recorded in chapters 15 to 17 may have been spoken in the upper room or on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. Jesus first prayed for himself (1–5), then for his disciples (6–19) and finally for the church (20–26). This prayer is sometimes called ‘the great high priestly prayer of Christ’ because it was uttered just before Jesus died on the cross to save his people from their sins. In the Old Testament the high priest entered the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle (later, the temple). There he prayed for the people before offering a sacrifice for them.

In the first part of his prayer Jesus prayed that the Father would glorify him. There was nothing selfish in this prayer. How was he to be glorified and to glorify the Father? It was to be through his death on the cross (cp. 12:23–24; 13:31) and the hour had come for him to die (1). Jesus spoke as if his work were completed because there was no doubt whatever that he would finish the work given to him by the Father (4). He also looked forward to being glorified together with the Father in his ascension to heaven and in his exaltation (5). His glory is an eternal glory which he shared with the Father before the creation of the world. God says that he will not give his glory to another (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11). Only those who are spiritually blind can read verse 5 without seeing that the eternal Son of God is God himself.

The Lord Jesus is also glorified in the salvation of God’s elect (those given to him by the Father, 2) in giving them eternal life. This eternal life shows itself in knowing God and his Son and in having fellowship with them: Jesus said, ‘*This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent*’ (3). **It is not enough to know about God; we must know him.**

Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth

The Lord Jesus not only taught his disciples but he also prayed for them. He knew that they would forsake him that very night and that Peter would deny him, and yet he was so kind and generous in the way he referred to these men who were so frail in faith (6–8). Jesus prayed for them that the Father would:

- Preserve them and their unity (11). Jesus spoke to God the Father as if he had already died and left the world. He prayed, ‘*Keep through your name those whom you have given me.*’ He also prayed that they would be kept from the evil one (15; cp. Luke 22:31–32). They knew defeat, but God kept them. He will preserve us too.
- ‘*Sanctify them by your truth. Your word is truth*’ (17–19). Sanctification means ‘separation’. The Father had given the disciples to the Son *out of the world* (6; cp. 6:37, 39) and now the world hated them (14). Being set apart to God means being separated from all that displeases him. Sanctification here is linked with truth and God’s Word is truth. We dishonour God if we are not concerned for the truth revealed in the Bible. Jesus set himself apart to die on the cross so that we might be a sanctified (holy) people, pleasing him (19; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 2:24).

As followers of Jesus we are not of this world, but he has sent us to live in the world to be witnesses for him (18; 15:27). We are continually pressured to be worldly in our thinking and in our attitude to sinful practices, and to live for pleasure and material things. We must always remember that our culture is being shaped by godless people, many of whom scorn and hate the Bible. It is our reasonable service to present our bodies as living sacrifices so that our thoughts and actions are directed by the word of God (see Romans 12:1–2). **Moreover, we must not be like the world in order to win the world to Christ. The church is most victorious in the world when it keeps itself separate from the world.**

That they all may be one

Jesus prayed for future believers as well as for his disciples and you are included in this prayer if you are a Christian (20). Verses 21 to 23 are wrongly used by those in the ecumenical movement to justify their pursuit for unity, regardless of truth. The Lord Jesus here prays for the unity of believers (20) who are in Christ: *‘That they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us’* (21). Unity must never be at the expense of truth and we must *contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* (Jude 3). Jesus warns us, *‘Beware of false prophets’* (Matthew 7:15) and the apostle Paul denounced those who perverted the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6–10). We cannot have any meaningful fellowship with those who deny that Christ died to save sinners and that he rose from the grave. There can be no unity with those who reject the authority of the Bible.

The starting point for unity between true believers must always be unity within our own local church. We must do everything possible to maintain the unity of the Spirit among ourselves (Ephesians 4:1–6; Philippians 2:1–4). Such unity is essential for effective witness to the world (21). If we do not love our fellow believers, we are no better than those who seek unity with those who deny the gospel.

The intense love of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ for the church is shown in this prayer. The love of the Father is so great that he loves us as he loves his Son (23). He loved us so much that he gave his Son to die for us (Romans 5:8). **Doesn’t this fill your heart with great gratitude and praise? The Lord Jesus loves us and greatly desires that we will be with him in heaven when we will gaze on his glory (24).** We can look forward to receiving a wonderful welcome when we leave this world. Heaven will bring many joys – freedom from sin, no more sorrow, pain or death, but best of all we shall see him and be overwhelmed with his majesty and beauty, and we shall adore him and worship him as never before.

Judas ... stood with them ... Peter stood with them

After he had finished praying, the Lord Jesus and the eleven disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane. The Kidron valley lay between the eastern wall of Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives (1). Judas had often been with Jesus in Gethsemane and he went there with a detachment of soldiers and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees (2–3). Jesus was not taken by surprise. He knew that he would be betrayed by Judas in Gethsemane and he went forward to meet his enemies (4). He asked them who it was they were seeking and when they replied, '*Jesus of Nazareth,*' he said, '*I am he.*' They fell back to the ground and he again asked them whom they were seeking and told them that he was Jesus and that they should allow the disciples to go their way. He lovingly protected them to the end (5–8).

Imagine the anguish of the Lord Jesus as he was betrayed in Gethsemane. *Judas ... stood with them* (5); the traitor had been a constant companion and friend for over three years but he was now standing with those who hated Jesus. What can be more heart-rending than seeing one, who once seemed so genuine in his faith now standing with the enemies of Christ (cp. Philippians 3:18)?

Later that evening the same words are said of Peter. *And Peter stood with them* (18). His motives were very different from those of Judas; he was standing there out of deep concern for his Master and wanted to know what these evil people were planning to do with his Lord. Peter's courage gave way as he was challenged about his relationship to Jesus. He had been so presumptuous in his protests that he would never deny the Lord (Matthew 26:33–35). However sincere his motives Peter should never have '*stood with them*'. He thought that he was strong, when really he was weak, and he denied the Lord Jesus three times (17,25–27).

Judas is a frightening example of sham religion. Peter is a warning against self-confidence (cp. 1 Corinthians 10:11–12). Where are you standing?

*The high priest then asked Jesus about his disciples
and his doctrine*

Those who arrested Jesus first took him to Annas, the father-in-law of the high priest, Caiaphas (12–14). Annas had been high priest from AD 6 until removed from office by the Romans in AD 15. He still retained the title of ‘*high priest*’ (19; cp. Acts 4:6) and was the power behind the Sanhedrin (the seventy-member Jewish council which could sentence a man to death, but needed the Roman authorities to confirm their judgement and to execute the prisoner).

The high priest (Annas) then asked Jesus about his disciples and his doctrine (19). We are not told what Jesus said about the disciples, but we know that he was concerned to protect them (8). He could have answered, ‘One of them has treacherously betrayed me, another is presently denying me, and the others have forsaken me.’ Jesus told them that he had openly taught in the synagogues and in the temple and they could ask those who had heard him about his teaching. One of the officers was angered by the response of Jesus to the high priest. He struck the Son of God with a blow from his hand, but Jesus answered this wretch of a man in a gracious manner (22–23). **We too must follow the example of Jesus when we are treated unjustly. We must bear it patiently and commit ourselves to God (1 Peter 2:19–23).**

Annas sent Jesus to Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin to be tried. This trial was a travesty of justice. These religious men insulted, beat and spat upon the holy Son of God and used false witnesses against him (see Matthew 26:57–66 for a description of this trial). Those religious men with hatred and murder in their hearts led Jesus to the governor’s palace (*‘the Praetorium’*) early the next morning. They would not enter the building however; to go into a Gentile dwelling would render them ceremonially unclean and so disqualify them from any further involvement in the remaining Passover celebrations (28). What nauseating hypocrisy! Let us be determined to *hate every false way* (Psalm 119:128).

What is truth?

Pontius Pilate was a proud man (19:10) and cruel (Luke 13:1). Roman historians and the Jewish historian Josephus record that he hated the Jews. He was eventually removed from office after ordering the massacre of some Samaritan religious extremists. Our reading today reveals something of Pilate's disdain for the Jews and of his impatience with those who brought Jesus to him at this early hour. They accused Jesus of being an evil-doer who had urged the people not to pay taxes to Caesar and who had proclaimed himself to be Christ, a King (29–30; Luke 23:1–2). They were lying (cp. Luke 20:22–25). Jesus had prophesied that he would die at Roman hands (by crucifixion), and these men were determined to have him put to death (31–32; Luke 18:31–33).

Pilate asked Jesus if he were the King of the Jews but Jesus told him that his kingdom was not of this world. If he ruled an earthly kingdom his followers would have fought to prevent the Jews from arresting him (33–36). The Roman governor must have been puzzled and he then asked Jesus, *'Are you a king then?'* and Jesus told him that he was a king and that he had come into the world to bear witness to the truth (37).

Pilate then asked, *'What is truth?'* but it appears that he did not wait for an answer to what is a most important question. He told the Jews that he could find no fault in Jesus and he taunted them by calling Jesus *'the King of the Jews'* (39). He gave them a stark choice – he would release Jesus or the notorious criminal Barabbas. Such was their hatred for Jesus that they called for the release of Barabbas (39–40).

We are all faced with a choice that will determine our eternal destiny. If we refuse to trust in Jesus to save us from our sins, if we will not joyfully yield to him as our King, we will be condemned and lost for ever. Jesus said, *'Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice'* (37). Are you of the truth? If you are, you will obey the voice of Jesus and will not brush aside truth as Pilate did.

Where are you from?

The Roman scourge was a whip which had several thongs, with pieces of bone or lumps of lead knotted into them. Scourging tore open the victim's flesh and Pilate had Jesus scourged, though he acknowledged that he was innocent. He brought Jesus back to the Jews saying, '*Behold the Man!*' (1–5). He may have thought that no one would have considered this man a threat to Caesar as they looked at him. He was dressed in mock royal robes, his head torn by the crown of thorns, his face swollen and bruised from many blows, his body bleeding from the scourging.

The chief priests and their allies had not an ounce of pity for the battered prisoner but demanded that he be crucified (6). Pilate stated for the third time that he could find no fault in Jesus. The Jews then said that according to their law he should die because he had blasphemed by claiming to be the Son of God (7–8). Pilate was afraid. Perhaps he wondered whether this mysterious prisoner were a son of the gods. His wife had already suffered nightmares because of him (Matthew 27:19).

Pilate asked Jesus, '*Where are you from?*' but Jesus did not answer him (9). Throughout his Gospel John stresses that Jesus had come down from heaven (eg. 1:14–18; 3:13,16; 6:41). Pilate reminded Jesus that he had the authority to order his release or crucifixion, but Jesus replied that he could have no such power unless it were granted by God (10–11).

Pilate wanted to release Jesus, but did not have the courage to do so. This was because the Jews said that, by making himself a king, Jesus was speaking against Caesar. Pilate could therefore be no friend of Caesar if he released someone who claimed to be a king (12–13). Pilate sacrificed his soul to please men! He refused to do what he knew to be right lest he be dismissed from his post as governor (and this did happen to him later). **Are you determined to please God in all your decisions, whatever the personal cost?**

Behold your King!

The words of our reading today should fill us with a sense of awe and of wonder. Pilate said to the Jews, ‘*Behold your King!*’ (14). The lonely, bleeding, disfigured man standing before Pilate was more than ‘*the King of the Jews*’; he is the King of Kings (Rev. 19:13–16)!

*Give me a sight, O Saviour,
Of thy wondrous love to me,
Of the love that brought thee down to earth,
To die on Calvary.*

*O, make me understand it,
Help me to take it in,
What it meant to thee, the Holy One,
To bear away my sin.*

(Katherine A.N. Kelly)

‘*Behold your King!*’ – His crown woven from long thorns which ripped his scalp and his brow.

‘*Behold your King!*’ – His face pummelled beyond recognition (cp. Isaiah 52:14).

‘*Behold your King!*’ – His back torn apart by scourging.

‘*Behold your King!*’ – Mocked, humiliated, nailed to the cross, dying in terrible agony.

‘*Behold your King!*’ – Dying for his subjects.

What a glorious King; what matchless love!

We should meditate much on the suffering of our Saviour. We will then hate the very thought of sinning and we will welcome his reign over us. Let us worship him and praise him for his great love.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all!*

(Isaac Watts)

It is finished!

John was the only disciple of the twelve to be an eye-witness of the crucifixion (26, 35). He emphasises that the events at Calvary were a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (24, 28, 36–37). The Lord Jesus was in terrible pain and anguish but he tenderly commended his mother into the care of John (at this time his brothers were not believers, 7:5). The loyal disciple took Mary to his own home, probably the house or rooms rented for the Passover; his real home was in Galilee.

The rich man tormented in the flames of Hades begged for water (Luke 16:24). For him it was too late! The Lord Jesus was also thirsty as he hung on the cross and said, *'I thirst!'* (28). He suffered to save us from hell and to give us *living water* (4:10,14; 7:37–39). The soldiers put a sponge, which was soaked in sour vinegar, to his mouth. He then said, *'It is finished!'* (30); his work was finished and he gave up his spirit, our redemption being accomplished.

The Jews were anxious to have the bodies removed from the scene before the Sabbath came at nightfall. The soldiers broke the legs of the thieves to bring their lives to an end (those crucified were obliged to use their legs to push the body up and down to allow movement of the chest for breathing). Jesus was already dead and none of his bones were broken. God had forbidden the Jews to break the bones of the Passover sacrifice (Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12). Jesus is our Passover Lamb (1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7). **Our Saviour willingly suffered and died to save us. Let us praise him with grateful hearts!**

*'Tis finished! the Messiah dies,
Cut off for sins, but not his own;
Accomplished is the sacrifice,
The great redeeming work is done.
'Tis finished! all the debt is paid;
Justice divine is satisfied;
The grand and full atonement made;
God for a guilty world hath died.*

(Charles Wesley)

A disciple of Jesus, but secretly

Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man (Matthew 27:57) and a prominent member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin (Mark 15:43). He was a secret believer but now he took courage and went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus (38). Pilate would have recognised Joseph as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin and he sent for the centurion to confirm that Jesus was dead before granting Joseph's request (Mark 15:43–45). Hendriksen points out that according to Roman law, those condemned to death lost the right to be buried (COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF LUKE, page 1043). God's hand was in all this for under normal circumstances Pilate would not have granted Joseph's request. Joseph's action meant that Jesus had an honourable burial and that Scripture was fulfilled (Isaiah 53:9; Acts 13:35–37).

Joseph was aided by Nicodemus. They may have had servants to help them as they extracted the nails that bound the corpse of Jesus to the cross and lifted him down. They acted speedily, and would have washed the body and then bound it with strips of linen and embalmed it with spices (38–42). It would seem that Joseph and Nicodemus had begun their preparations when Jesus was condemned to death. Joseph laid Jesus in his own family tomb, in a garden at Calvary (41–42).

It was a perilous time for Joseph to own his allegiance to Christ. His colleagues on the Sanhedrin hated Jesus and he knew that their hatred would now be directed against him (they wanted to kill Lazarus after Jesus had raised him from the dead, 12:10). He knew that he would be cast out of the council and the synagogue once his secret was out (cp. John 12:42). We hear no more of him after the Gospels; both he and Nicodemus would have been content to serve the Lord without seeking prominence in the infant church.

In some parts of the world Christians are persecuted and martyred for their faith in Christ. In other places, we are in no physical danger if we openly confess the Lord. **Are you ashamed to own your Lord and to defend his cause? Are you afraid of the scorn of the unbeliever?**

Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden

The tomb where the Lord Jesus was buried had to be very close to Calvary in order for the burial to be completed before the onset of the Jewish sabbath after sunset. Joseph himself owned this new tomb (Matthew 27:60) which had never been used or known decay or decomposition. Here was a very suitable resting place the body of the Lord Jesus (41; cp. Luke 23:53). Over 700 years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied, *'They made his grave with the wicked (the two robbers) but with the rich (Joseph) at his death'* (Isaiah 53:9).

The entrance to the tomb was low; John and Mary stooped down to look inside (20:5,11). Joseph (presumably with the help of others), rolled a large stone to cover the entrance which was later sealed at the request of the Jewish leaders (Matthew 27:60).

The women who had followed Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome (Mark 16:1) went into the tomb to see how the body of Jesus was laid (Luke 23:55). When they entered the tomb after the resurrection they would see the grave clothes lying in place but no body (Luke 24:3).

Gardens figure prominently in the destiny of man. God placed Adam in a garden and it was there that he fell into sin and brought ruin to the human race (Genesis 2:8; 3:1–24). It was in a garden (18:1,26) that the Son of God agonised in prayer and willingly submitted to the will of God the Father; there he affirmed that he would take the dreadful cup of suffering to save us (Matthew 26:36–46). *Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden* (41). The Lord Jesus was buried in a garden but rose victoriously from that garden tomb. **Adam lost so much in a garden, but our blessed Saviour triumphed in a garden to save us. Hallelujah!**

*In him the tribes of Adam boast
More blessings than their father lost.*

(Isaac Watts)

He saw and believed

Mary Magdalene and two female companions set out for the tomb of Jesus while it was still dark, but by the time of their arrival at the tomb the sun had risen (1; cp. Mark 16:1–2). They hoped to anoint the body of Jesus with spices, but recognised that they would have a problem in getting the stone that sealed the tomb rolled away (Mark 16:1–3). John's account of the resurrection begins by focusing our attention on Mary Magdalene. Mary was one of the women who provided for Jesus and his disciples (Luke 8:2–3). The notion that she had previously been an immoral woman is without any foundation. Mary had good reason to love the Lord Jesus. Her life had been ruined by demon-possession until he had delivered her.

Mary was alarmed to find the stone rolled away and she thought that the enemies of Jesus had stolen his body and ran to tell Peter and John. (John describes himself as '*the disciple whom Jesus loved*' in his Gospel, 2; cp. 21:7, 20). John outran Peter as they hurried to the tomb. He stooped to look inside and saw the linen grave clothes. Peter arrived to crawl into the tomb and he too saw the linen cloths and the face cloth folded and lying separately (2–7). If the body of Jesus had been stolen, the thieves would not have taken the trouble to remove the linen cloths or to fold the face cloth so carefully. They would not have wanted to delay their departure from the tomb.

John also entered the tomb after Peter. We read that *he saw and believed* (8). What did he believe? He believed that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. He realised that the body of his Master had not been stolen as Mary Magdalene had supposed. He had not previously understood the Scripture prophesying that Jesus would rise from the dead (9; cp. Psalm 16:10), but now things were becoming clearer to him. **The physical resurrection of Christ is true.** It is an essential part of the good news that we take to sinners, that Jesus died on the cross to save sinners, that he was buried and that he rose from the grave on the third day according to the Scriptures (cp. 1 Corinthians 15:1–4).

Why are you weeping?

Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb and through her tears she saw two angels. She did not realise that they were angels. They asked her, ‘*Woman, why are you weeping?*’ Mary did not yet know that Jesus had risen and believed that someone had removed his body (11–13). She then turned round and saw Jesus, but did not recognise him. He repeated the angel’s question, ‘*Woman, why are you weeping?*’ and then asked her, ‘*Whom are you seeking?*’ She thought that he was the gardener and that he would be able to tell her where the body of Jesus could be found (14–15).

Jesus called her by name, ‘*Mary*’ (cp. 10:3) and that was enough to transform her grief to joy. She realised that her precious Lord and Saviour was speaking to her. She joyfully clung to him, but he told her that she had to let him go because he had to ascend to the Father. He entrusted her to go and tell the good news to his brethren (the disciples). He said to her, ‘*I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God*’ (16–18).

Christian, are you passing through a dark period in your life? The Lord Jesus knows you by name (10:3) and you are precious to him. Nothing whatever can separate you from his love (Romans 8:35–39). *Weeping endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning* (Psalm 30:5). **Look to the Lord, trust in him, and thank him that weeping is not for ever. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).**

*We expect a bright tomorrow;
All will be well;
Faith can sing, through days of sorrow,
All, all is well:
On our Father’s love relying,
Jesus every need supplying,
Or in living or in dying,
All must be well.*

(Mary Peters)

As the Father has sent me, I also send you

The disciples gathered together during the evening of the first day of the week. They were assembled behind locked doors, still fearing what the Jews might do to them. At the same time they must have been excited as they discussed the momentous events of that day. Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene and the other women (11–18; Mark 16:9; Matthew 28:9–10), and to Simon Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5). Cleopas and his companion had just arrived to report that the risen Christ had also appeared to them (Luke 24:13–35). Suddenly Jesus appeared among them, saying, ‘*Peace be with you*’ and he showed them his hands and his side. They were glad when they saw him (19–21).

Jesus then said, ‘*Peace to you! As the Father has sent me, I also send you*’ (21; cp. 17:18). They were to go forth to preach the good news. We too know this good news and we must not keep it to ourselves. He has given us the Holy Spirit and he enables us to witness for Christ (Acts 1:8). Verse 22 looked forward to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (cp. Luke 24:48–49). **We are not apostles, but we too have the awesome responsibility to take the good news of the gospel to a needy world — ‘*I also send you.*’**

What is the meaning of verse 23? Bishop J. C. Ryle comments, ‘He also conferred on them the power of declaring with peculiar authority whose sins were forgiven and whose sins were not forgiven. That this is precisely what the apostles did is a simple matter of fact ... When Peter proclaimed to the Jews, “Repent ye, and be converted,” and when Paul declared at Antioch of Iconium, “To you is the word of this salvation sent,” ... they were doing what this passage commissioned the apostles to do. They were opening the door of salvation and inviting with authority all sinners to enter in by it and be saved (Acts 3:19; 13:26–28).’ [DAILY READINGS FROM J.C. RYLE, COMPILED BY ROBERT SHEEHAN, VOLUME 2, Day 342].

My Lord and my God

Thomas was a pessimist (cp. 11:16) and he was not with the disciples when the Lord Jesus first appeared to them. Perhaps he was so full of despair that he preferred to grieve alone. Never stay away from God's people or God's house because you feel low. Many a child of God has gone to the house of the Lord in a depressed state of mind, but has met with the Lord there, and has gone on his way rejoicing (cp. Psalm 73:2,12–17,21–28).

Thomas would dearly have loved to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, but he wanted to be sure that the others had not imagined that the Master had appeared to them. He wanted to see and feel the nailprints in his hands and the spear-wound in his side (25). **We must be careful to distinguish between the doubts of those who rebel against God, and the doubts suffered by the Christian.** There are those who oppose God with mocking and scoffing. Such rebels come under his judgement (2 Peter 3:3–7). We are sometimes tormented by doubt when Satan hurls his fiery darts at us (Ephesians 6:16); he plants doubts about God – his existence, his love and care for us; doubts about assurance of our own salvation. Such doubts bring darkness and despair, but we can emerge from these dark struggles with greater faith and devotion to the Lord.

The Lord Jesus knew all about Thomas, his doubts and struggles. He knew what he had said to his fellow disciples. He appeared to the disciples a week later and Thomas was with them. Jesus called on him to look on his pierced hands and to place his finger there; to put his hand in his pierced side (27). He encouraged him, '*Do not be unbelieving but believing.*' Thomas exclaimed, '*My Lord and my God!*' (28). Jesus said to him, '*Thomas, because you have seen me, you believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*' (29). **We have not yet seen the Lord Jesus; we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7), but he blesses us as we trust in him.**

That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God

The Gospel of John opens with a wonderful statement about the Lord Jesus Christ who is described as *‘the Word’* – *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (1:1). Thomas said to the risen Lord Jesus, *‘My Lord and my God!’* (28). Many people say that they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ but they do not know that he is God. They may acknowledge him as a prophet or a great teacher, as a good man, but all this falls short of what the Bible teaches us about him.

Jesus is not only a teacher or a prophet – he is *‘the Son of the living God!’* (Matthew 16:13–16; John 9:17,35–38). The Jews recognised that by using the title *‘Son of God’* Jesus was claiming to be equal with God, being the very essence of God (5:18; 10:30–33,36; cp. Matthew 26:63–65). When the apostle Paul became a Christian, he preached to the Jews that Jesus *‘is the Son of God’* (Acts 9:20).

John wrote his Gospel, recording the resurrection of Christ and his miracles, *‘that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name’* (31). If you remain mistaken about the identity of Jesus, you cannot have eternal life; you will die in your sins (John 8:24).

Mark Johnston writes, ‘Now John makes it clear that this life becomes ours, not in some mystical or mysterious manner, but in the ‘name’ of Jesus; that is, entirely by his merits and on his account. It comes by virtue of all that Jesus is and all that he has accomplished. In a world in which, for many, ‘life is what you make it’, the promise of the gospel is of a life that consists of what Christ can make it. Given the brokenness and emptiness of life, here is the greatest reason to believe in the Christ of the gospel.’ (LET’S STUDY JOHN, page 262). **Do you really believe that Jesus is the Son of God? Do you have new life in him (30–31)? Do you joyfully worship him as your Lord and as your God?**

Going fishing

The angel told the women at the tomb to go and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen and that they would see him in Galilee (Matthew 28:5–7; Mark 16:7). We now find Peter and six other disciples fishing on the Sea of Tiberias (Galilee). Peter said to them, '*I am going fishing*' and they went with him, but a night's fishing failed to produce a catch (1–3).

They did not recognise Jesus when he stood on the shore early that morning. We are not told why this was so; it could be that they were supernaturally kept from recognising him (cp. Luke 24:16); it may have been because of an early morning mist that blurred their view of the shore. Hearing that they had not caught any fish, he told them to cast the net on the right side of the boat. The catch was so great that they could not draw the net into the boat.

John said to Peter, '*It is the Lord!*' Peter plunged into the water to reach Jesus ahead of the boat (4–7). The others followed, dragging the net full of fish behind the boat. Jesus had a charcoal fire prepared with fish cooking and also bread for breakfast. He told them to bring some of the fish which they had caught and they ate breakfast together (8–13). This was the third time that the Lord Jesus had appeared to the disciples as a group. The first and second occasions are recorded in John 20:19–23 and 20:24–29. They could be in no doubt whatever that the Lord Jesus had risen from the dead and this was a vital part of their message (Acts 10:41; 1 Corinthians 15:1–8,14).

Going fishing with Peter, the disciples failed to catch anything until the risen Lord worked through them. We are in the business of fishing for men to win them to Christ (cp. Mark 1:16–20) but there is no easy way to success in the work of the gospel. Let us persevere in sowing the seed of God's Word, realising that God alone gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6–7). **He is able to give us a huge catch and a great spiritual harvest if we will but trust in him and obey him.**

Do you love me?

After they had eaten breakfast, Jesus spoke to Simon Peter who had denied him three times. The Lord challenged him three times, ‘*Do you love me?*’ (15–17). On the first two occasions Jesus used the verb ‘agapao’, the greatest of the Greek words for ‘love’, meaning ‘to have whole-hearted, self-sacrificing devotion’. Peter, in response, used the Greek verb ‘phileo’ which means ‘to have affection’.

‘Peter, do you love me with all your heart and soul?’ Peter replied, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I am fond of you.’ The third time, Jesus asked, ‘Peter, are you fond (‘phileo’) of me?’ and Peter was grieved as his Master gently probed his heart. Sentimental affection or fondness of the Lord Jesus falls far short of his demands. He wants us to follow him with total devotion and obedience even if it means laying down our lives for him (18–19, 22). Why should we love the Lord Jesus? We should love him because he is perfect in all his ways. He loves us and willingly laid down his life on the cross to save us. He has had mercy on us and he cares for us. He is preparing a place in heaven for us. **We often sing of our love for Jesus and of our willingness to do whatever he asks of us but actions speak louder than words. Do we really love him?**

Peter had been a failure but the Lord Jesus was demonstrating to him and to the other disciples that he had forgiven Peter and that he was trusting him to serve him and to care for his people. Our Master is patient and kind. He does not write us off when we fail but lovingly restores us and makes us fit for his service. Let us be encouraged!

*In full and glad surrender,
I give myself to thee,
Thine utterly and only
And evermore to be.*

*O Son of God, who lov'st me,
I will be thine alone;
And all I have and am, Lord,
Shall henceforth be thine own!*

(F.R. Havergal)

But Lord, what about this man?

The Lord Jesus predicted that Peter would die by crucifixion. His words signified *by what death he would glorify God* (18–19). Death is a great and dreadful enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26) but we can glorify God in death by being ready to die and witnessing to our confidence and trust in God. It is a humbling and wonderful thing to be with a dying Christian who even in great weakness speaks of his love for the Lord Jesus (cp. Acts 7:55–60; Philipians 1:19–23).

After the Lord Jesus had spoken to Peter, the apostle turned and said to him, *‘But Lord, what about this man?’* (21). Peter was curious about the future of John, but this was none of his business. The Lord Jesus reassured Peter that John’s future was in his hands and repeated the words said earlier, *‘You follow me’* (22). It is right that we should be concerned for our fellow believers but we must not neglect our own souls. We must follow him.

There are many Christians who show little love and zeal for the Lord. Their lukewarmness and apathy discourages us and we may think to ourselves, *‘What about this man, or woman?’* The Lord will deal with them and judge them. **Let us be determined to follow the Lord in glad obedience to his will.**

There are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written (25). We must not take verse 25 literally. J.C. Ryle comments, *‘To suppose that the evangelist meant the world could not hold the material volumes which would be written is evidently unreasonable and absurd. The only sensible interpretation is a spiritual and figurative one.’* (DAILY READINGS FROM J.C. RYLE, COMPILED BY ROBERT SHEEHAN, VOLUME 2, Day 365). We have a wonderful Saviour. He is worthy of our love and service.

Sing praises to his name, for it is pleasant

This psalm is a great psalm of praise beginning and ending with the exhortation, ‘*Praise the LORD!*’ We can never be too lavish in our praise of God and we should always have praises to him in our hearts and on our lips (Hebrews 13:15). When we offer praise to God, we glorify him (Psalm 50:23). Psalm 135 has close similarity with some other psalms:

- Verses 1 and 2 with Psalm 134:1–2.
- Verses 5,15–18 with Psalm 115:3–8.
- Verses 8 to 12 with Psalm 136:10–22.

When Scripture speaks of the name of God (1,2,13) it speaks of his character: ‘*Sing praises to his name, for it is pleasant*’ (3). This verse may mean that the act of praise is pleasant (cp. Psalm 147:1), but the verse can also be taken to mean that the character (the name) of God is pleasant. It can be rendered, ‘*Sing praises to his name, for it is lovely.*’ In what way is the character of God lovely and deserving of our praise? We should praise God for his goodness (3), for his electing love (4), for his greatness (5), for his sovereign power (6–7), for his judgments (8–12), for his unchanging character (13) and for his compassion towards his people (14).

We should thank God that we know better than to worship or to trust in useless idols (15–18). These are made by men and they have mouths that are unable to speak, eyes that cannot see, and mouths that are without breath (cp. Psalm 115:4–8)! How foolish it is to trust in idols and ‘lucky charms’! Those who trust in these lifeless and useless objects are as dumb as the objects themselves (18).

One commentator (quoted by Spurgeon) describes the statement, ‘*For I know that the LORD is great*’ (5) as ‘delicious dogmatism’. **Do you know the greatness of the Lord in your own experience? The more that you know of this ‘delicious dogmatism’, the more you will bless the LORD (19–21).**

His mercy endures forever

The refrain: *'For his mercy endures for ever'* is found in every verse of this psalm. The same words were probably sung by the people in response to words sung by the Levites (cp. 2 Chronicles 7:3; Ezra 3:11). We sometimes hear people suggest that the God of the Old Testament is severe and full of judgment and that it is only in the New Testament that we see his love revealed. Such a notion displays much ignorance of the Bible. The Hebrew word 'chesed' which is here translated 'mercy' is found throughout the Old Testament; it is also translated 'kindness' (Psalm 31:21) and 'lovingkindness' (Psalm 138:2)

The psalm begins with a three-fold call to *give thanks to the LORD* and ends with a further call to thanksgiving. Why should we *give thanks to the LORD*?

- Because of who he is (1–3). He alone is God. He is superior to other gods, he is the Lord of Lords!
- Because of what he is: *'For he is good'* (1).
- Because he alone is able to do wonders (4) This should give us confidence in prayer.
- Because of his work in creation (5–9). There is no place in the Bible for the theory of evolution which is an expression of man's rebellion against his Maker.
- Because of what he did in delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt (10–15). He has delivered us from slavery to sin and to Satan.
- For his providential care of Israel as they journeyed from Egypt to the promised land (16–22). He cares for us too (Romans 8:31–39; Philippians 4:19; 1 Peter 5:7).
- For his grace to help in time of need (23–24; cp. Hebrews 4:16).
- For his goodness to all people (25).

Think of the ways in which the Lord has been merciful to you and praise him with thanksgiving. – Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! For his mercy endures for ever.

Sing us one of the songs of Zion

This poignant psalm is a lament of the captives in Babylon who wept as they remembered Zion. These were the faithful among the exiles who longed to be back in Jerusalem and to worship God in the temple which now lay in ruins. Their despair was made worse by the taunts of the heathen Babylonians who said, '*Sing us one of the songs of Zion*' (3). They felt that they could not *sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land* (4). Daniel and his three friends showed how the Lord's song could be sung in Babylon. Through their faithful and courageous witness, the proud king of Babylon came to realise that God is sovereign over all the nations of the earth (Daniel 3:28–29; 4:34–37).

The psalmist goes on to call judgment upon himself if ever he forgets Jerusalem (5–6). He then calls down the curse of God on Edom and Babylon, nations which had brought so much suffering to the Jews (7–9). He was filled with righteous indignation and knew that God would punish Babylon (cp. Isaiah 13:16–18). Some are very critical of such sentiments which are found in this and in some other psalms. Spurgeon answers, 'Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned, their wives ravished, and their children slain; they might not, perhaps, be quite so velvet-mouthed if they had suffered after this fashion' (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

Do you delight in singing the songs of Zion? Do you delight in worshipping God each Lord's Day? Do you worship God in your home with psalms and spiritual songs? If you have no song to the Lord, is it because you have wandered away from him to a 'far country'? Oh, return to the Lord with cries of repentance! He will heal your backsliding. He will freely forgive you and restore to you the joy of your salvation. You will then sing again '*the songs of Zion*'.

The LORD will perfect that which concerns me

Some do not believe that David wrote this psalm because of the mention of the temple which was built after his death (2). There is no reason to doubt Davidic authorship, however. The Hebrew word, ‘hekal’ translated temple is used elsewhere of the tabernacle (1 Samuel 1:9; 3:3). **Many people give little thought to God and worship gods of materialism or pleasure. We know better, and our lives and lips should declare the praises of the living God: *I will praise you with my whole heart*** (1). Are you enthusiastic in your praise? Are you eager to worship God? The word ‘gods’ (1) may refer to idols or to the great people of the world.

How are we to understand the words, ‘*you have magnified your word above all your name*’ (2)? The ESV translates it, ‘*You have exalted above all things your name and your word.*’ Others understand it to mean, ‘You have magnified your name above all things in your word’. This means that in fulfilling his Word, faithfully keeping all his promises, God’s holy character (name) is magnified more than it is anywhere else (eg. through his work of creation, Psalm 19:1). The hearing of God’s Word will lead kings to praise him (4–5; cp. Daniel 4:18, 33–37).

We should be wholehearted in our praise because:

- God is exalted and powerful but looks graciously on the humble (4–6; cp. Isaiah 57:15).
- He preserves us in trouble (7).
- God will fulfil all his wise purposes for us so that we can confidently affirm, ‘*The LORD will perfect that which concerns me*’ (8). We cannot lose our salvation; God will complete the good work that he has begun in us (Philippians 1:6).

Are you struggling in your Christian life? Look to the Lord who cannot fail! You will then be able to praise him because his mercy endures for ever and he will fulfil his purposes for you.

How precious also are your thoughts to me, O God!

This sublime psalm fills us with awe as it reminds us of the surpassing greatness of God who is personal, omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time) and holy. David was aware that God knew him intimately, observing all his actions, all his ways, all his thoughts and all his words. God surrounded him (1–5). This filled him with such wonder that he exclaimed, ‘*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it*’ (6). God knows us better than any human could ever know us. Though he sees into our sinful hearts, he still loves us! How wonderful this is! We cannot know God in the same manner that he knows us because his knowledge is beyond our comprehension and beyond our imagination!

We cannot hide from God because he is everywhere and this is a great comfort to the believer (7–12). David goes on to consider himself as the handiwork of God. The human body with its brain, organs, etc. is a wonderful piece of God’s creative work (13–15). This leads the godly person to say to the Lord, ‘*I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are your works, and that my soul knows very well*’ (14). David hated and loathed the wicked for their rebellion against God and their violence (19–22; cp. 1 Corinthians 16:22). Spurgeon comments, ‘he was a good hater, for he only hated those who hated good ... To love all men with benevolence is our duty; but to love any wicked man with complacency would be a crime’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

We have seen that God has a thorough knowledge of each one of us (1–6). He knew us before we existed (16). No wonder David wrote, ‘*How precious also are your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them!*’ (17). Does meditation on the greatness and the mercy of God fill you with adoration and praise?

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (23–24).

I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted

David may have written this psalm when he was being pursued by King Saul (1 Samuel chapters 20 to 23). Evil and violent men were plotting against him, slandering him and seeking to ensnare him (1,5). We may not suffer in the same way as David but we will encounter the hatred of ungodly people if we are faithful to the Lord (John 15:18–19; 2 Timothy 3:12).

What must we do when under pressure?

- We should pray for ourselves (1,4,6) and tell the Lord about the problem. Some people feel that it is pointless to pray at such times since God knows about all that is happening to us. This is wrong-headed and foolish reasoning! David had no hesitation in calling on the Lord. Jesus urges us to do the same (eg. Luke 11:1–4;18:1).
- We should encourage ourselves by remembering how God has met with us and delivered us in the past (7).
- We should not be afraid to pray against the wicked, that the Lord will frustrate their wicked plans and judge them (8–11).
- We should encourage ourselves in the faithfulness and justice of God. David affirmed, *‘I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted’* (12). Our faith is strengthened through prayer. We know that God will bring us through every trial and to glory where we will live in his presence (13).

Are you passing through an anxious or difficult time? Come now to the Lord in prayer and encourage yourself in him. He will not fail you!

*Prayer makes the darkened cloud withdraw;
Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw;
Gives exercise to faith and love,
Brings every blessing from above.*

*Restraining prayer we cease to fight;
Prayer makes the Christian’s armour bright:
And Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.*

(William Cowper)

Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness

There is a sense of urgency in David's prayer in this psalm. He cried out to the Lord, '*Make haste to me,*' and he asked that his prayer might be acceptable to God as if it were offered in the tabernacle (1–2). How do you pray? Are you so moved in your heart that you '*cry out*' to the Lord? David felt pressure from attacks of the wicked and prayed against their deeds. He expected the people to hear his sweet words once their wicked leaders were overthrown (5b–6). David's eyes were on the Lord when the bones of the righteous were scattered. He looked to God for help and took refuge in him (7–8). He prayed that the wicked would be trapped in their own nets and traps which they had laid to ensnare him (9–10).

David recognised that the tongue is very difficult to control, especially when we are under pressure (James 3:1–10). He prayed, '*Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips*' (3). Do you ever ask the Lord to set a guard over your mouth? Verse 4 echoes the Lord's prayer, '*And do not lead us into temptation*' (Matthew 6:13).

David also felt pressure not only from the deeds of the wicked but also their enticing delicacies (4–6). Satan and his agents often present sin as a desirable thing and the unwary are soon ensnared. We need God's help to resist temptation and the enticing power of sin. We do not have to fight our battles with temptation on our own. God is faithful and he is at hand to help us (1 Corinthians 10:13).

When the ungodly strike us it is usually to harm us but the same is not true of the righteous: '*Let the righteous strike me; it shall be a kindness.*' The rebuke of a godly person is like refreshing oil upon the head and it is for our own good (5). A true friend will not flatter us, but he wounds us to heal us and to bless us (Proverbs 27:6; 28:23). **Can you take the loving rebuke of a friend and count it as a kindness?**