

You are the God who does wonders

The psalmist paused at the end of verse 9 (*'Selah'* means *'pause'*), before going on to meditate on the works of the Lord. He may have had in mind the song of Moses when he confessed, *'Your way, O God, is in the sanctuary; who is so great as our God? You are the God who does wonders'* (13–14; cp. Exodus 15:11). He recalled God's great victory in redeeming Israel from oppression in Egypt and of their passage through the Red Sea (15–19).

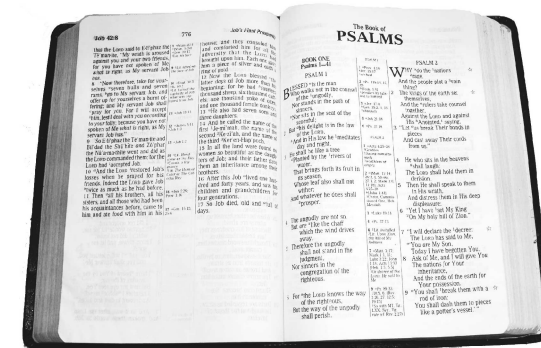
There are two ways of looking at the past. We can long for 'the good old days' and sink into despair (as in verses 3 to 6), or we can be encouraged knowing that the God who worked so wonderfully for his people in time past can do the same for us. *'You are the God who does wonders'* (14; present tense; he still performs miracles). **The way we view the past influences the way we cope with the present.** The Puritan, William Gurnall, writes, 'Faith hath a good memory, and can tell the Christian many stories of ancient mercies; and when his present meal falls short, it can entertain the soul with a cold dish, and not complain that God keeps a bad house. Therefore, Christian, when thou art in the depths of affliction, and Satan tempts thee to asperse God, as if he were forgetful of thee, stop his mouth with this: "No, Satan, God hath not forgot to do for me, but I have forgot what he hath done for me, or else I could not question his fatherly care at present over me." Go, Christian, play over thy own lessons, praise God for past mercies, and it will not be long before thou hast a new song put into thy mouth for a present mercy' (quoted in THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

*His love in time past
Forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last
In trouble to sink;
Each sweet Ebenezer
I have in review
Confirms his good pleasure
To help me quite through.*

(John Newton)

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



March 2015

Bible readings from Deuteronomy chapters 31 to 34
Jude and Psalms 67 to 77

Be strong and of good courage

Moses was now one hundred and twenty years old and he knew that his earthly end was near. God had told him long before that he would not be allowed to cross the Jordan into Canaan. Though Israel would be without their aged leader, they had the promise of God that he would cross over Jordan before them, giving them victory over the Canaanite nations (1–5).

Moses urged Joshua and the people, ‘*Be strong and of good courage*’ (6–7, 23). They had no need to fear their enemies because the Lord was present with them and he would never leave them nor forsake them. Joshua and the Israelites had problems, trials, obstacles and battles ahead of them, but they had a great God with them.

Where does our strength lie? Certainly not in ourselves – we are painfully aware of our weaknesses. It lies in the same God whose presence is with us wherever we may go. The Christian life is not easy and we sometimes ponder the future with apprehension. Our faith may well be severely tried, but we know that God will never leave us nor forsake us so that we may boldly say, ‘*The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*’ (Hebrews 13:5–6). **Anxious Christian, ‘be strong and of good courage.’**

Moses handed over the book of the law to the priests and elders (9). The priests were to read the book of the law to the people, including the children, in the year of release (every seventh year) at the Feast of Tabernacles (10). The purpose for the reading of the law was that the people might learn to fear God and to obey his word (12–13). We hear very little talk about the fear of God today, but it is essential for holy living (cp. Hebrews 12:28–29). *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge* (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). I remind you of Charles Bridges’ description of ‘*the fear of the LORD*’. It is ‘that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law’ (COMMENTARY ON PROVERBS published by The Banner of Truth Trust, pages 3 & 4).

In the day of my trouble, I sought the Lord

Are you passing through a very difficult period in your Christian experience? Then this psalm is for you. The psalmist mentions that he is in trouble three times (2–4). He was so low in spirit that his *soul refused to be comforted*. He was so distressed that he endured sleepless nights when he could not close his eyelids (2,4). He lay awake musing on the past years, to better times when he had a song in the night (4–6). He asked God questions knowing in each case that the answer was ‘No!’ (7–9):

- ‘*Will the Lord cast off for ever?*’ — ‘No!’
- ‘*Will he be favourable no more?*’ — ‘No!’
- ‘*Has his mercy ceased for ever?*’ — ‘No!’
- ‘*Has his promise failed for evermore?*’ — ‘No!’
- ‘*Has God forgotten to be gracious?*’ — ‘No!’
- ‘*Has he in anger shut up his tender mercies?*’ — ‘No!’

We often complain to others when we are in trouble, but we do not pray. How foolish of us. The psalms teach us that we must always turn to the Lord in trouble, wait on him and trust in him, committing ourselves to his wise, sovereign, powerful care. He declares, ‘*In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord*’ (2). Matthew Henry comments, ‘Days of trouble must be days of prayer; in the days of inward trouble, especially when God seems to have withdrawn from us, we must seek him, and seek till we find him. In the day of his trouble he did not seek for the diversions of business or recreation, to shake off his trouble that way, but he sought God, and his favour and grace. Those that are under trouble of mind, must not think to drink it away, or laugh it away, but pray it away.’

*O what peace we often forfeit!
O what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

(Joseph M. Scriven)

Surely, the wrath of man shall praise you

C.H. Spurgeon writes concerning this psalm, 'Faith in the 75th Psalm sung of victories to come, and here it sings of triumphs achieved' (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). God is invincible in his greatness and the enemies of his people are no match for his power. *His name is great ... He is more glorious and excellent than the mountains of prey* (1,4). The invading armies who sought to overcome his people were so strong that they are described as '*mountains*' but they are no match for the God we love and worship (6–9,12)!

The Lord is '*The Unknown God*' to most of the world (Acts 17:23), but the child of God knows him and loves him. *In Judah God is known ... and his dwelling place in Zion* (1–2). God is present among his people. His dwelling-place is no longer earthly Zion (Jerusalem), but the church of Christ (Galatians 4:25–26; Ephesians 2:21–22). We often fail to grasp this wonderful privilege that is ours; the awesome (12), almighty God dwells among us. He is a God *to be feared* (7) but the fear of God is absent from many of our churches. A lack of reverence is alien to biblical worship.

Wicked men may persecute God's people but the Lord turns the worst that they may do against us for his glory and for our good. *Surely the wrath of man shall praise you* (10). Pharaoh did many things to crush the Israelites, but God overturned everything for his own glory (Exodus 9:16–17). No weapon formed against God's people shall prosper (Isaiah 54:17). God uses wicked men and even the devil to accomplish his purposes. Think of the crucifixion when the Lord Jesus was humiliated, tortured and murdered by wicked men. Calvary was not defeat but glorious victory. It is through Christ's death that the works of the devil are destroyed and we are saved. Let us be encouraged by this whenever our Christian witness is opposed.

Have you made vows to the Lord to forsake your sin, to serve him and to put him first in your life? **Are you paying those vows (11)?**

Write down this song ... and teach it

The Lord summoned Moses and Joshua to the tabernacle where he appeared before them to commission Joshua as Israel's new leader (14–15). Joshua had no illusions about the difficulties facing him. As Moses' assistant, he had witnessed the many acts of rebellion by the people. The Lord told Moses that after his death, they would turn away to worship idols and bring his judgment upon themselves (14–18). God gave Moses a song and said to him, '*Write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel*' (19). The Lord knows the inclination of men and women to rebel against him (21). The song which is recorded in chapter 32, reminded the people of God's goodness to them and warned them against backsliding from him (19–22, 30; 32:1–43).

After Moses wrote the song, Joshua was commissioned and the Lord encouraged him, '*Be strong and of good courage ... and I will be with you*' (23). We know that Joshua was a courageous leader who faithfully led Israel all his days but the people did fall into a backslidden state following his death.

God provided two witnesses for himself against the children of Israel, the song (19–22) and the Book of the Law (26–29). The latter was to be put beside the ark of the covenant as a witness against them when they fell into sin (26). Hundreds of years later, the book of Deuteronomy was discovered in the temple and was read to King Josiah (2 Kings 22). The king had seen with his own eyes the consequences of backsliding from God as described in Deuteronomy. He read the words of the book to the people and they made a covenant with God to serve him alone. Idolatry and occult practices were banished from the land (2 Kings 23:1–25). The recovery of the word of God made all the difference to Israel. **The healthy church is the church where God's word is loved, taught and obeyed. The healthy Christian is the person who not only hears and reads God's word but who also obeys it.**

Ascribe greatness to our God

The song of Moses (31:30) not only contained warnings to the people against forsaking God, but is also full of praises to him. It rehearses his unchanging faithfulness and contrasts it with the repeated failures of Israel.

Whenever we think of God, we should remember his greatness. The song of Moses urges us, ‘*Ascribe (give) greatness to our God*’ (3).

- We see the greatness of God in his strength. He is called ‘*the Rock*’ (4,15,18,30,31). He is almighty in his strength and power.
- We see the greatness of God in his work (4). *His work is perfect,* without blemish or mistake, *for all his ways are justice.*
- We see the greatness of God in his ways (4). *All his ways are justice.* He is righteous in all his dealings with us.
- We see the greatness of God in his truth (4). All the promises (and warnings) found in the Bible are true. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2).
- We see the greatness of God in his sovereignty. *The Most High* controls all the nations of the earth (8). There is no other God; he is in complete control (39).
- We see the greatness of God in his love for his people (9–10). He found Israel (‘*Jacob*’), encircled them with his loving protection, instructed them and kept them as *the apple of his eye.*
- We see the greatness of God in his compassion (36). Though the people of God were wayward, he had pity upon them.
- We see the greatness of God in his goodness (13–14). He had richly blessed and prospered his people.

‘*Ascribe greatness to our God.*’ **Do not have small views of God. Remember his greatness at all times – whenever you worship him, whenever you come to him with your needs, whenever you speak about him to others.** ‘*O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth!*’ (Psalm 8:1).

When I choose the proper time

This psalm begins with a song of gratitude and praise to God for his wondrous works (1) and then God himself speaks (2–3); a warning to boastful, wicked men follows (4–8). The psalm closes with praise to God in anticipation of his judgment on the wicked and his blessing on the righteous (9–10).

‘*We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks! For your wondrous works declare that your name is near*’ (1). C.H. Spurgeon comments, ‘We sing not of a hidden God, who sleeps and leaves the church to her fate, but of one who ever in our darkest days is most near, a very present help in trouble’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). Verse 2 is an encouragement to all who are passing through difficult times. God has his appointed time for deliverance and judgment: ‘*When I choose the proper time* (‘*set time*’ AV margin) *I will judge uprightly.*’ We must always remember that God is absolutely sovereign over his universe. We are often impatient to see him work, but he has his ‘proper time’ which is always the right time! God’s sovereignty over the affairs of men is also taught in verses 6 and 7. It is a comfort to know that God puts down rulers and raises up others.

The cup of red wine which the wicked will drink speaks of judgment (8; cp. Revelation 14:10). How can the Christian be confident that he will escape judgment for his sin? Because we have trusted in Christ who took the terrible cup of God’s judgment to save us (Luke 22:42; John 18:11). He suffered and died on the cross to be punished for our sin. *He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities* (Isaiah 53:5). We are reminded of this when we drink the cup at the communion service. It is for us a cup of blessing which also speaks of the new covenant in the blood of Christ (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians. 10:16). **Let us sing praises to God (9).**

Arise, O God, plead your own cause

The words of this psalm were first uttered in very bleak times, probably after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 586 BC. There is a graphic description of the enemy destroying the sanctuary and the meeting places of God in the land and of the setting up of pagan banners (3–8). The psalmist does the best thing possible at such a time; he seeks the face of God.

He asks ‘Why?’ (1,11). ‘Why have you cast us off for ever? ... why do you withdraw your hand, even your right hand (or your power)?’ There were no longer any signs from heaven nor prophetic voice to encourage and comfort the people. He asks, ‘How long’ will the enemy be allowed to reproach and to blaspheme the name of God (9–10)? **When we are cast down, we may feel that God has forsaken us, but this is not so.** He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). The psalmist encourages himself by thinking about the sovereign power and goodness of God. He recalls that God intervened at a time when Israel was in dire peril. The Lord displayed his great power when he delivered his people from the pursuing Egyptian army and parted the Red Sea. That mighty army with its chariots is likened to sea-serpents and Leviathan (an awesome sea-monster which is now extinct). God provided his people with food in the wilderness and he is the King who rules creation (12–17).

We live in times when the church is generally weak and God’s name is blasphemed (I refer to Britain and the western world). Derelict church buildings which once rang with the praises of God have not been destroyed by armies but lie forsaken through apathy. God’s name is reproached and this should drive us to our knees to pray like the psalmist (18). God has bound us to himself and committed himself to us in the new covenant. We should pray that God will *have respect to the covenant* and revive us in our need (20–21). Let us remember that the church belongs to God. It is his work, it is his cause. Let us pray, ‘Arise, O God, plead your own cause’ (22) and persevere in proclaiming the gospel to our needy generation.

I will hide my face from them

How can anyone who has tasted the good things of God and has seen wonderful proofs of his greatness, turn away from him? The people of Israel did just that and this song was taught to warn them against forsaking God. He was their Father and Maker and they owed everything to him (6). ‘Jeshurun’ (15) means ‘the righteous one’ or ‘the beloved one’ and it is here used as a name for Israel. *But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked ... then he forsook God who made him, and scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation.* The Israelites acted treacherously against God who had been unfailing in his faithfulness to them (15–21). How could such a thing happen?

Backsliding is generally a very gradual process that creeps upon us. We become *unmindful* of God and forget him (18). As God prospers us, we may ‘grow fat’ on material things and become preoccupied with them. The devil will see to it that we face strong temptations to crowd God out of our lives by many ‘worthy’ activities or causes. We become too busy for private prayer and Bible study, then too busy to be at the prayer meeting, and then eventually too busy to worship the Lord on his Day. Our lives become filled with other things and we turn to other gods which are no gods.

The Lord said, ‘I will hide my face from them’ (20). When God hides his face from us he appears distant, remote and unreal. We no longer enjoy any sense of his presence or peace in our hearts. The tragedy is that so many who have tasted the good things of God have grown cold in heart and they are not even concerned that God is hiding his face from them. **Have you been drifting away from God? Do you realise that he has hidden his face from you?** Oh, come to Christ with confession and repentance. He will restore your soul and the joy of your salvation.

Prayer: ‘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’ (Psalm 139:23–24).

Their rock is not like our Rock

Israel was warned that to forsake God would bring them disaster and destruction (23–25). That destruction would have been total but for the fact that their enemies would then imagine that their conquest of Israel was down to their own military might, not recognising the hand of God in judgment (26–27). The saying that ‘Ignorance is bliss’ is not true. Israel’s spiritual blindness caused them to ignore the consequences of their sin. They would not *consider their latter end* (28–29), that the Lord their Rock would give them over to their enemies, so that even weak armies would prevail over them (*‘How could one chase a thousand, etc?’* – 30). There is here a contrast between the Lord and the useless idols of the heathen. *Their rock is not like our Rock* (31).

The Israelites were always to remember that the God whom they served is glorious in his power, holiness, justice and compassion (36). John Currid remarks, ‘The point of the reminiscence is to remind the people of the covenant that throughout the ages they will receive wondrous and rich blessings from Yahweh ... Verse 29 gets to the heart of the true blessings that come only to those who are numbered among God’s people. First, they are a people ‘saved by Yahweh’. Secondly, they are under his protection, or his ‘protection shield’. and finally, they are triumphant over the enemies of God through his power. Such blessings only come to true believers (COMMENTARY ON DEUTERONOMY, page 532).

Israel was very foolish to turn to dumb idols which were powerless to help them (37–38). Our Rock is the only true God who kills and makes alive and who lives for ever (39–40). The Lord who brought hostile nations against Israel as instruments of punishment will avenge his people. The closing words of the song are quoted in Romans 15:10 with reference to the conversion of the Gentiles.

Are you trusting in almighty God, the Rock? Men and women will fail you, and gods of pleasure and materialism will never satisfy you. Trust in Christ, the Rock of our salvation.

But it is good for me to draw near to God

The psalmist was very troubled about the apparent unfairness of God in his dealings with men and women. He observed the wicked prospering while he, a godly man, was suffering. He just could not understand how God could allow such a thing to happen. He states, *When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me* (16).

He goes on to describe how he emerged from his doubts concerning the goodness and fairness of God. He was painfully perplexed until he *went into the sanctuary of God* (16–17). The psalmist then understood the end of the wicked. They are set on a slippery slope leading to destruction, desolation and the terrors of hell (17–20). How foolish to be envious of proud, prosperous, wicked people whose pleasures will soon pass away and whose possessions will be snatched from them (3,27). Such people are to be pitied rather than envied. He was also reminded of his privileges. He had God’s presence and wisdom to guide him (23–24), God’s strength in weakness (26) and glory and heaven at the end (24). How wonderful! Is it any wonder that the psalmist expresses his love for the Lord (25)?

When we are feeling low, the great temptation is to stay away from the house of the Lord just as certain Hebrew Christians did in New Testament times (Hebrews 10:25). We may also give up praying, thinking that it is a futile exercise. We need at such times, more than ever to come into God’s presence in private prayer and to attend the house of God. Meeting with God to worship him and to hear the preaching of his word puts everything into perspective just as it did with the psalmist. You will prove the truth of the words, *But it is good for me to draw near to God* (28).

If you love the Lord, you will treasure those times when you are able to draw near to him. When you trust in God, you will testify of all his wondrous works (28). You will then no longer complain, but rather exclaim, *Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart* (1).

Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart

This psalm is the testimony of a man who was tormented by doubts (1–14) and it describes how he obtained victory over them (15–28). He affirms the goodness of God as he looks back on his experience: *‘Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart’* (1). Not everyone in Israel is described here but those who are pure in heart. We are reminded in Romans 9:6, *For they are not all Israel who are of Israel.* The church is now *‘the Israel of God’* (Galatians 6:16).

The psalmist’s problem came from observing the prosperity of the wicked who mocked God (3–12) while the godly man was plagued and chastened (13–14) and God allowed it to happen. What was the point of seeking to lead a life of obedience to God when his reward was suffering? At the same time, the ungodly had a life of prosperity, ease and comfort. Where was the goodness of God? He was in such despair that his faith was on the verge of collapse (2–3,13). C.H. Spurgeon comments, ‘There were crowns for the reprobates and crosses for the elect. Strange that saints should sigh and sinners should sing. Rest was given to the disturbers, and yet peace was denied to the peace-makers. The downcast seer was in a muse and a maze. The affairs of mankind appeared to him to be in a fearful tangle; how could it be permitted by a just ruler that things should be so turned upside down, and the whole course of justice is dislocated?’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

There are times when God appears to be unfair in his dealings with us. At such times, the devil will whisper dark doubts into our minds and suggest that God is unconcerned for us. In Psalm 37, which deals with the same problem, the Lord urges us, *‘Do not fret because of evil-doers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity’* (Psalm 37:1,8). Are you beset by doubts and difficulties? Do not think that you are alone in having such experiences. **Most Christians pass through such testing times. Commit your way to the Lord and trust in him (Psalm 37:3–5).** He will bring you through and you will then affirm, *‘Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart.’*

Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you

Moses and Joshua repeated the words of the song in the hearing of the people (44) He urged them, *‘Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today’* (46). They were to set their hearts on the threats as well as the promises of God’s word. They were to be *careful to observe* all of God’s word by seeking to obey all that the Lord had commanded (44–47). These are vital principles which are necessary to everyone who would follow the Lord and remain faithful to him (see comments on verse 18, 5 March).

God’s word brings life and light and we must have more than a passing interest in it (47). We must set our hearts on the word of God and be careful to obey it if we are to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God. **If we do not love the Bible, if we are bored with its teaching, there is something wrong with our Christian life.**

On the same day that Moses repeated the song to Israel, the Lord told him to go to Mount Nebo in the land of Moab, where he would die after viewing the promised land. You will remember that God would not allow Moses to enter Canaan because he had spoken rashly (48–52; cp. Psalm 106:32–33). Just one slip of the tongue caused Moses a lifetime of regret. Our words can be a blessing to others but with the same tongue we may say hurtful things which displease God (cp. James 3:8–10). Let us learn to think before we speak.

Prayer: *Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth;
Keep watch over the door of my lips.* (Psalm 141:3).

Yes, he loves the people

This chapter records the blessing of Moses upon the tribes of Israel before his death (1). It is profitable to compare it with the blessing of dying Jacob on his sons from whom these tribes were descended (Genesis 49). We do not know why the tribe of Simeon is omitted from Moses' blessing, except that this tribe was given an inheritance within the territory of Judah (Joshua 19:1–9).

Moses begins with a description of the awesome majesty of God revealed when the law was given at Sinai (1–5; cp. Habakkuk 3:3). The giving of the law is likened to the dawning of the sunrise in the east (2). The *'ten thousands of saints'* most likely refers to angels (2; cp. Acts 7:53). The Lord is glorious in all his being, but he is concerned for his people: *Yes, he loves the people* (3). The blessings described in this chapter are generally concerned with the prosperity, strength and protection provided by God. These blessings are tokens of his love. Christian, never forget that God loves you!

After blessing Reuben (6) Moses asked God to hear Judah's prayer, to bring him into his inheritance and to strengthen him in his work and in his battles (7). He then goes on to bless his own tribe of Levi (8–11). The *'Thummim'* and the *'Urim'* (8) were set in the breastplate of the high priest and were used to obtain guidance from God (cp. Exodus 28:30). The incidents at Massah and Meribah are described in Exodus 17:1–7 and Numbers 20:1–13. The faithfulness of the tribe of Levi when they sided with Moses and God against the idolaters in Israel is recalled in verse 9 (cp. Exodus 32:26–29). They were responsible for upholding God's law and teaching it to the people (9–10).

Benjamin, *'the beloved of the LORD shall dwell in safety by him'* (12). ***Yes, he loves the people' and he will keep us safe and he will be with us in every difficult, dangerous or perplexing circumstance.***

Blessed be the LORD God ... who only does wondrous things

Spurgeon suggests that David, near to his end, prayed for Solomon his son who committed these words to writing: 'It is, we conjecture, the Prayer of David, but the Psalm of Solomon.' (See title and also verse 20). The psalm begins with a prayer for God to give his *judgments* ('justice') to the king and his righteousness to the king's son (1). Our attention is directed to a greater King, however. Verses 2 to 17 foretell the coming of David's greater Son, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaac Watts based his hymn, 'Jesus shall reign where'er the sun doth his successive journeys run' on this passage of Scripture. Let us think about the reign of Christ:

- He will bring justice to God's people and save them from oppression (2–4; 12–14).
- The righteous will flourish and enjoy peace under his rule (5–7).
- He will reign over the whole world; rulers will bring tribute to him *and all nations shall serve him* (8–11).
- Prayer will be made for him and people will praise him (15).
- He will remove the curse from the earth so that an abundant harvest will be gathered from mountain-tops (16; cp. Genesis 3:17–19).
- His reign will continue for ever and people of all nations will be blessed in him and will call him blessed (17). This is a fulfilment of the promise given by God to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3).

The psalm ends on a great note of praise to God. *Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things! And blessed be his glorious name for ever! And let the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen* (18–19).

The Lord Jesus will come again in great power and majesty and he will destroy all his enemies. He will then rule for ever over a world from which the curse has been removed, when there will be everlasting peace and joy (cp. Revelation 21:3–4; 22:3). **The thought of this filled the psalmist with praise. Does it thrill you? Are you looking forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus?**

I will hope continually, and I will praise you yet more and more

This psalm is a prayer of an elderly believer (9,18). Old age has many perils and difficulties. Failing strength, failing eyesight and failing memory can lead to frustration, bitterness and despair. The Christian should be different though naturally he is concerned about these things. Let us see how this elderly saint coped with trials in his old age (2,4,10–13):

- His confidence. He put his trust in God (1). This good habit had been formed while he was young (5). What we are now will greatly influence what we will be then. If your Christian life is shallow now while you are strong and healthy, you are not preparing yourself for your later years. He depended upon God for strength (3,16). He hoped in God and this was no vain hope (5). He prayed, *'But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more'* (14). He was confident that God who had done great things for him in the past would bring him through his present trials (19–21). You may wonder why he prays as he does in verse 9, *'Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails.'* Why does he call on God not to forsake him (18) when we know that the Lord will never forsake the child of God? There are times when the most godly person fluctuates between fear and faith, and this was such a time for the psalmist.
- His Praise. He constantly praised God (6,8,14,22–23). This is the great antidote to complaining. A praising heart makes all the difference!
- His Confession. We are more likely to confess the Lord to unbelievers if we have a heart that is filled with praise to God. He told others about God's greatness and goodness (15–18,24). The precious lessons learned in our early years prepare us well for the future (17).

This encouraging psalm shows that we can triumph in all the trials of increasing age and physical weakness, and that God can use us in our closing years on earth (22–24). **Happy the man or woman who learns these lessons!**

The eternal God is your refuge

The longest of all Moses' blessings was pronounced upon the tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh, 13–17). Joseph was *separate from his brothers* meaning that he was pre-eminent among them (16). *The horns of a wild ox* speak of strength (17). Notice all *the precious things* promised to the tribes of Joseph. In Christ, we also have *'exceedingly great and precious promises'* (2 Peter 1:4). Think about some of the wonderful promises that we have as Christians and open your heart in praise to God.

Zebulun was promised success in trading (*in your going out*) and Issachar in farming in his own tribal territory (*in your tents*). Naphtali was given the rich and fertile land to the west and south of the Sea of Galilee (23). The territory of Asher was famous for its olives, hence the reference, *and let him dip his foot in oil* (24). We have in verse 25 a beautiful promise that has encouraged believers throughout the ages. *As your days, so shall your strength be*. God will strengthen and support us in every trial and in all the troubles that may assail us. He will never fail us. Hallelujah!

The chapter closes with praise to God and has more precious promises. *'God ... who rides the heavens to help you'* (26). Nothing can stand in his way nor thwart his plans. The promise in verse 27 is wonderful and has been the comfort of many a hard-pressed believer. *The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. Earthly kingdoms come and go, governments fall, but God reigns eternally. We know that he will support us in every difficult situation and we know that his almighty arms will never grow weak or weary.*

The people were assured of victory as they prepared to cross over the Jordan, *'He will thrust out the enemy from before you'* (27). Moses was leaving a people who were happy because they were *a people saved by the LORD* (29). Lasting joy is the portion of all who trust in Christ and obey him. Are you a rejoicing Christian?

Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face

Mount Pisgah in Nebo is some 2600 feet (790 metres) high, and from the top of the mountain, Moses would have been able to see the promised land as far as *'the Western Sea'* (the Mediterranean, 1–4). He was physically strong and alert right to the day of his death. Moses died in Moab and God buried him in a valley there. The people mourned for him for thirty days and Joshua became leader of Israel (7–9).

Moses had remained faithful to God throughout the most testing times and his greatness is acknowledged in verse 10. What was Moses' spiritual secret?

- He is described as *the servant of the LORD* (5). His life was one of careful obedience to God's word. He was a great example to a wayward and disobedient people. *All that the LORD had commanded him, so he did* (Exodus 40:16).
- We read of *Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face* (10). He enjoyed a personal walk with God. He knew God and God knew him in a special way. There is no easy route to spiritual greatness. **If we would be strong in the Lord, we must spend time in personal communion with God.** We cannot afford to sit back and congratulate ourselves that we belong to the Lord. We must seek with all our heart to know Christ better but realise that fellowship with him is not without suffering (Philippians 3:10).

Moses was the greatest prophet in Old Testament history (10; cp. Hosea 12:13). The Lord blessed his leadership with mighty signs and wonders in Egypt and on the journey to the promised land. He points us, however to a far greater prophet, the Lord Jesus Christ (18:15) who humbled himself and was perfectly obedient to the will of God the Father (Philippians 2:5–9). He died and rose to save sinners and to lead us to a land of far greater promise than Canaan, even to the glory of heaven. Let us rejoice in him and praise him.

Let all those who seek you rejoice and be glad in you

This psalm of David is almost identical to Psalm 40:13–17. It is a desperate cry for help from a situation of great danger (2). The psalmist cries out, *'Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O LORD!'* (1,5 – it is like asking God to hurry up). We must learn to wait for God to answer our prayers in his time, but there is nothing wrong in requesting a speedy answer to prayer in urgent circumstances. Malicious enemies may taunt us with words such as, *'Aha, aha!'* (3). The Lord Jesus knew such taunts as he was dying on the cross (Mark 15:29–32) and he feels for us in such trials (cp. Hebrews 4:15–16).

David had prayed concerning his enemies, *'Let them be ashamed and confounded ... Let them be turned back and confused ... Let them be turned back'* (2–3). In verse 4 he prays for those who seek and love the Lord, *'Let all those who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; and let those who love your salvation say continually, "Let God be magnified!"'*

- To seek the Lord means turning away from all that is sinful in our lives. It is frivolous to call on God to forgive us if we have no intention of forsaking our sin (cp. Isaiah 55:6–7). The child of God also seeks him in bringing his worship and praise to God, in praying for himself and others, as David does in this psalm.
- To love the salvation of God is to delight in him and in the glorious salvation that we enjoy in him. It is to love God's people and the work of making known the gospel.

The godly person seeks God and loves his salvation. Do you? He is prepared to magnify God even during his trials and that is why he can be glad and rejoice in the Lord. You may not feel like praising God because of present trials or difficulties, but you must call upon him for he is your help and deliverer (5). He will not fail you and you will soon be saying, *'Let God be magnified!'*

Reproach has broken my heart

We are repeating yesterday's reading, but this time we consider the passage as prophecy relating to the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ. David not only speaks of his own sufferings in this psalm, but he also prophesies of the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. C.H. Spurgeon comments 'His footprints all through this sorrowful song have been pointed out by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament' (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). There are verses here, however, which cannot possibly refer to Christ (eg. the confession of sin, 5).

This psalm is quoted in a number of New Testament books. When the Lord Jesus drove the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals from the temple, the disciples were reminded of the words of verse 9 (John 2:17). The Holy Son of God was hated without a cause (4; cp. John 15:25) and reproached (9b; cp. Romans 15:3). He was given vinegar mingled with gall (a bitter fluid) to drink as he was hanging on the cross (21; cp. Matthew 27:34). The Lord Jesus is described as '*a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*' (Isaiah 53:3). The words, *Reproach has broken my heart* (20) describe the depth of the suffering that he endured to save us from our sin. There was no pity or comfort for him as he hung in agony on the cross (20; cp. Mark 15:29–32). He was cursed to redeem us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13). **What amazing love! Should we not love him with all our heart and tremble at the very thought of displeasing him?**

*Give me a sight, O Saviour
Of thy wondrous love for 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).

JUDE

Jude identifies himself as the brother of James (1). In the early church, the only James (except the brother of John) known to everyone was the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19). It seems therefore that Jude (or Judas) was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 13:55). These half-brothers of Jesus did not believe in him until after the resurrection (John 7:3–5; Acts 1:14). The warnings in Jude against false teachers (3–4) are very similar to those in 2 Peter chapter 2.

John's first two letters also warn us again and again to be on our guard against false teaching. These warnings are more relevant than ever! Some television evangelists and teachers are peddling all kinds of strange views and many thousands are being deceived. Some claim that the Holy Spirit is working through them to perform miracles and that he is speaking through them. Their claims are like their doctrine – highly questionable!

Outline of Jude

1. Opening greeting – verses 1–2
2. The purpose of the Letter – verses 3–4
3. Three examples of God's judgment on the wicked verses 5–7
4. False teachers denounced – verses 8–19
5. Exhortation to true Christians – verses 20–23
6. Doxology – verses 24–25

Called ... sanctified ... preserved

Jude's greeting gives a description of what it means to be a Christian. He wrote *to those who are called, sanctified by God the Father and preserved in Jesus Christ* (1). Let us think about these words:

- *Called:* God has called us *out of darkness into his marvellous light* (1 Peter 2:9). We have been called out of spiritual ignorance and alienation from God (Ephesians 4:17–18), out of bondage to Satan and sin (Ephesians 2:2–3; Colossians 1:13). We are called to be holy (1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:15).
- *Sanctified:* The early Christians were known as '*saints*' (3), that is those who are *sanctified* ('set apart') by God through the Holy Spirit (2 Thessalonians 2:13). We have been set apart to serve the Lord. Notice how Jude describes himself as '*a servant*' (Greek = 'slave') of *Jesus Christ* (1). What a great privilege it is to be in the service of God. The Lord has also set us apart to enjoy his special love and care.
- *Preserved:* Every true believer is kept in the Lord Jesus however difficult the times in which they live. The same Greek word is also translated *reserved* (6,13). The angels who sinned and false teachers are kept for judgment and hell but the child of God is kept for glory and everlasting joy (24). He is one of Christ's sheep and he has eternal life. He can never perish nor be snatched from the hand of Christ or God the Father (John 10:27–30).

How does Jude pray for believers whose faith is under attack? He prays that God's choice blessings of *mercy, peace and love be multiplied* to them (2). **Christian, is your faith being sorely tried? Do not lose heart. Look to your Saviour who loves you and who is rich in mercy.** He will never fail you, and as you seek to please him, he will give you his peace *which surpasses all understanding* (Philippians 4:7).

Hear me, O LORD, for your lovingkindness is good

This psalm contains a number of prophecies relating to the suffering of the Lord Jesus. We shall be considering these prophecies tomorrow. David was in deep distress when he penned these words. He was like a man stuck in the muddy bed of a river and unable to escape as he sunk deeper in the mire. The waters were up to his neck and he was beyond human help as no one heard his cries which grew weaker and weaker (1–3).

What was the cause of David's trouble? He had powerful enemies who were seeking to destroy him. They had no reason to hate him and to make matters worse, he found no support from his own brothers (4–8). We may be beyond the help of humans but we are never beyond the reach of God who hears even the weakest cries of his people.

David was sinking in the mire, but he acknowledged his own sinfulness (5). He called on One who was able to rescue him in his trouble and is faithful to all the promises that he makes to us in the truth of his salvation (13–15). Spurgeon comments, 'He turned to Jehovah in prayer as being the most natural thing for the godly to do in their distress. To whom should a child turn but to his father. Prayer is never out of season, it stands us in good stead in every evil day' (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

David was confident that the Lord would hear him and deliver him. God knew all about his trial and saw all that his enemies were doing against him (19). He prayed with the goodness and mercy of God in his thoughts, '*Hear me, O LORD, for your lovingkindness is good; turn to me according to the multitude of your tender mercies*' (16). We may pass through long, dark trials when we sink in deep mire, when there seems to be no escape, but it is of great comfort to know that the Lord Jesus Christ has passed that way before and that he will never forsake us, but will bring us safely through (cp. Isaiah 43:1–2). **Christian! If you are troubled in your heart, come now to your precious Lord. Cast all your care upon him, for he cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).**

Strengthen, O God, what you have done for us

The victory of Christ brings us great blessings and he *daily loads us with benefits* (19). Notice that ‘*with benefits*’ is in italics in the AV and NKJV which indicates that those words are not in the Hebrew manuscript. The translation in the ESV is probably better – ‘*who daily bears us up.*’ We may feel that we must bear our burdens alone, but that is not so. There is One on whom we can cast our cares.

The procession following the ark has reached Mount Zion and God’s victory over his enemies is proclaimed (20–23). The procession goes into the sanctuary with great joy and singing (24–27). THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY (1958) describes verses 28 to 31 as ‘The hymn of Israel’ and verses 32 to 35 as ‘The hymn of all the earth.’

- In the first hymn (28–31), there is a prayer that God will continue to strengthen what he has done for his people and to rebuke Egypt, which is described as *the beasts of the reeds*. God is then called on to scatter any enemies who delight in war. We also need to pray, ‘*Strengthen, O God, what you have done for us*’ (28). We want to see the work of the Lord strengthened with for the building up of good churches and in the spread of the gospel.
- In the ‘hymn of all the earth’ (32–35), the people of all nations (*you kingdoms of the earth*) are called on to sing praises to the Lord. God is awesome and we must worship him and serve him with reverence (35; cp. Hebrews 12:28–29).

How do you think of God? Do you think about his greatness and his strength? We may feel weak (and we are weak), but our God is strong (28,34–35). He *gives strength and power to his people* (35). Let us praise him.

Contend earnestly for the faith

Jude had intended to write about our *common salvation* but the Holy Spirit directed him to exhort us *to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* (3). We must be vigilant and fight against error. Warren W. Wiersbe rightly observes that ‘the Christian life is a battleground, not a playground’.

Error never announces its coming to a church. False teachers creep in unnoticed and craftily spread their poison (4). They may appear to love truth and seem to be faithful to God’s word, but we must judge their teaching by the word of God. Beware of those who claim to have ‘new insights’ and who bring new doctrines. They may appear to be godly, but they are not (4; cp. 2 Timothy 3:5–7)! Some will use grace as an excuse for licentious behaviour by suggesting that if we are saved by grace, we are free to do as we please. Continuing in sin does not magnify the grace of God (Romans 6:1–7).

Jude not only urges pastors and other church leaders but **every** Christian *to contend earnestly for the faith*. Our word ‘agonise’ is derived from the Greek word translated *contend*. It carries the idea of an athlete exerting himself to win his race. *The faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* is not negotiable. Our faith does not change with the times and we are not permitted to interpret Scripture in a way that denies its plain and obvious meaning. Some false teachers claim to be ‘born again’ and thus gain acceptance by unsuspecting Christians. **Confusion is all around us and you must contend earnestly for the faith. Are you able to do this?** If you feel insufficiently equipped for the battle, take time to give yourself to the study of God’s word, and obey its teaching.

The way of Cain ... the error of Balaam

The Bible teaches that it is possible to be identified with God's people, to taste the good word of God and yet fall away (Hebrews 6:5–6). People who once appeared to be Christians, but who then renounce Christianity are known as 'apostates'. The apostasy of some is not always apparent and they continue to be identified with the church and they spread false teaching.

Jude reminds us that those who rebel against God will surely be punished:

- Some of those whom God delivered from Egypt were destroyed because of unbelief (Numbers chapter 14; 1 Corinthians 10:1–12).
- The fallen angels are reserved for judgment (6; cp. 2 Peter 2:4).
- The people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them who gave themselves over to sexual immorality and homosexual practices were severely punished (7; Genesis 13:13; 18:20; 19:1–13).

Verse 8 sums up the sins of these people; those of Sodom and Gomorrah defiled the flesh, the fallen angels rejected God's authority and the Israelites spoke evil of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16). God's word is quite clear: *Speak evil of no one* (Titus 3:2). If you are too ready to criticise your pastor and others whom God has placed over you, beware.

Scripture gives us no other details of the dispute between the archangel Michael and the devil over the body of Moses (9). If Michael dared not accuse Satan, how much more should we take care in the way we speak about others. When false teachers despise godly leaders they rush in where angels fear to tread. Jude again turns to the Old Testament to reinforce his warnings. *The way of Cain* is to reject God's way of salvation through the shedding of blood. *The error of Balaam* is to gain influence through encouraging immorality (Numbers 25:1–3; 31:16). *The rebellion of Korah* is to reject the authority of God's appointed leaders (11). **Beware of false teachers and their ways. They are leading many on a slippery slope to hell.**

You have ascended on high, you have led captivity captive

We have here a great and uplifting song of triumph which may have been penned when the ark of the covenant was transferred from the house of Obed-Edom to the new tabernacle prepared by David on Mount Zion (cp. 2 Samuel 6:2–18). The words of verse 1 were used when the ark was moved (Numbers 10:35). As the ark was carried ahead of the procession, there was great joy and singing (24–27).

God is enthroned in heaven, *his holy habitation*, but he is concerned for those who are vulnerable and exploited in this world. He is a father of the orphan and a defender of widows (5, 10). The song recalls how God led his people out of Egypt and provided for them in the wilderness (7–10). Verses 15 and 16 show that Mount Zion was favoured more than the higher mountain of Bashan (Mount Hermon) because the Lord chose Zion (Jerusalem) as his dwelling place.

You have ascended on high, you have led captivity captive'(18). This verse is taken by Paul to refer to Christ's triumphant ascension to heaven after his victory on the cross (Ephesians 4:8–10). Here is another proof that Christ is God, for these verses clearly refer to God. The Lord Jesus has a multitude of captives in his triumphant procession. Some understand these captives to be the enemies that have tormented and imprisoned men and women since Adam fell into sin – Satan and his demons, sin and death (cp. Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14). When Jesus comes again, they will receive their final banishment (1 Corinthians 15:54–57; Revelation 20:10). Others see these captives as believers, snatched from Satan's dark kingdom to sit in heavenly places with Christ.

You received gifts among men, even among the rebellious (18). The Lord graciously has dealings with rebels and dwells among those he brings to himself. Christian, you once rebelled against God, but you have been brought to Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. You now gladly own and obey the Lord Jesus. **Bring to him your heartfelt thanks and praises for all his goodness to you.**

God be merciful to us

We all need to know the mercy and the blessing of God in our lives and the psalmist prays, ‘*God be merciful to us and bless us, and cause his face to shine upon us*’ (1; cp. Numbers 6:24–26). Spurgeon writes, ‘This verse may be regarded as the prayer of Israel, and spiritually of the Christian church’ (THE TREASURY OF DAVID). We must not think that having experienced God’s mercy in granting us salvation, we never again need to ask for mercy. Many of the apostolic greetings call for mercy (1 Timothy 1:2; 2 John 3; Jude 2). When we call on God for mercy, we are acknowledging that God owes us nothing, that we are supplicants before his throne and that we must never take his goodness for granted.

The prayer in this psalm for God’s blessing upon his people was motivated by a desire for the Lord to make his way known on the earth and his salvation among all nations (2). There is a longing that the peoples of all nations will praise God and rejoice in the Lord (3–5). This should also be the longing of every Christian. Most Jews did not have such a missionary vision (think of Jonah’s unwillingness to go to Nineveh), nor do they actively seek converts to their religion today. Some of the early Jewish Christians also had problems in accepting that Gentiles (non-Jews) could be brought into the kingdom of God (cp. Acts 11:18; 15:7–8, 16–18). We need the blessing of God upon our lives if we are to be a blessing to those who do not know him. If we are to shine as lights in this dark world, we need God’s face to shine on us.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you (5). Is your life filled with praise to God? Do you long to see God’s holy name hallowed and praised in all the earth? Having called upon the Lord to bless us, the psalmist closes with the confidence that God *shall bless us, and all the ends of the earth shall fear him* (7). God is glorified when sinners are saved. **Do you desire God’s blessing on your life? Is it because you want to be a blessing to those around you and to see sinners saved and singing the praises of God (3–5)?**

The Lord comes with ten thousands of his saints

Jude paints five pictures of apostates in verses 12 and 13. They are:

- *Spots* in the fellowship gatherings (love-feasts) of the church (cp. 2 Peter 2:13). The word *spots* can be translated ‘hidden rocks’. Many have had their faith shipwrecked through false teaching which lay hidden under snippets of truth and thus went undetected. Jude indicates that the apostate teachers who had gained influence in the church served themselves rather than the Lord and his people.
- *Clouds without water* which promise rain but fail to produce it. False teachers may appear to give good spiritual help but they are unable to live up to their promises. They promise freedom, but they bring bondage to those who follow them (cp. 2 Peter 2:19).
- *Late autumn trees* showing themselves to be *twice dead*, rootless and fruitless.
- *Raging waves of the sea* whose restless waters cast up mire and dirt (cp. Isaiah 57:20). They should be thoroughly ashamed of the spiritual flotsam and jetsam which they produce (cp. Philippians 3:19).
- *Wandering stars* on an aimless course. Travellers are able to determine their bearings by fixed stars, but would be led astray if they followed wandering stars. Just as meteors burn out in the blackness of the night, eternal darkness is reserved for these people (cp. verse 6; 2 Peter 2:17).

Enoch, seventh from Adam, prophesied of the doom of the apostates when *the Lord comes with ten thousands of his saints* (14). When Jesus comes again, he will punish all who have rebelled against him (15). **Are you rebellious, refusing to obey God’s word, or do you gladly submit to the Lord?**

Building yourselves up on your most holy faith

Jude now describes the methods used by apostates and false teachers to gain a following. Some undermine godly men by murmuring and complaining against them. They talk big, using great swelling words and flattery (16). Others mock the righteous and are *sensual persons* (the opposite of ‘spiritual’) who cause divisions among God’s people (19). A spiritual person will always seek to *keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (17–18; cp, Ephesians 4:3).

What must we do to guard ourselves from deception? How can we equip ourselves *to earnestly contend for the faith*? Jude tells us:

- We must *remember the words* of the apostles (17). We have these words in the New Testament.
- By building ourselves up on our *most holy faith* (20). This is done through the prayerful and thoughtful reading of the Bible and by placing ourselves under a sound ministry of God’s word. We must be keen to learn and to obey the teaching of the Bible.
- By *praying in the Holy Spirit* (20). This has nothing to do with working ourselves up into an ecstatic state or with speaking in tongues. It is to look to the Holy Spirit to lead us in our praying (cp. Romans 8:26) and to pray according to that leading.
- We must keep ourselves *in the love of God* which comes from obedience to the commandments of the Lord Jesus (21; cp. John 14:15,23; 15:10).
- By *looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life* (21). The Greek word translated *looking* means to wait with expectation. We are to look with expectation for the return of the Lord Jesus (cp. Titus 2:13). The second coming of Jesus will bring eternal darkness to the ungodly but eternal glory in heaven for the Christian.

Remembering – building – praying – keeping – looking. How do these things feature in your life?

Faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy

What should our attitude be to those who have been influenced by false teachers? We ought to do everything possible to rescue them from the snare of Satan. ‘We must distinguish between the weak and the wilful’ (Matthew Henry). *On some have compassion, making a distinction* (22). Our approach will be different with those who are unstable waverers to those who are hardened in their error. We must have pity on the waverers, seeking to win them back to the Lord. Others have become thoroughly involved with apostates and defiled by sin. They are in the fire! We must seek to snatch them from the flames, at the same time showing caution (*‘fear’*), lest we be tainted by their false teaching and ungodly ways (23).

Jude ends his letter with a very reassuring benediction and doxology. We are in a fierce battle when we *contend earnestly for the faith* but we know that the Lord Jesus is able to keep us from stumbling into error and sin. When Jesus comes again, he will present us *faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy* (24). This exceeding joy will last for ever because we will be with our Saviour in glory and we will be perfect at last, never to sin again. What a glorious hope! What a precious faith! This is worth contending for with tireless energy. We can be confident that the Lord will preserve us to the end because he is infinite and eternal in his wisdom, glory, majesty, dominion and power (25). He cannot fail in his great purposes

Now ... to God our Saviour, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.