

PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied

*Go, labour on, spend and be spent;
Thy joy to do the Father's will;
It is the way the Master went;
Should not the servant tread it still?*

*Go, labour on, 'tis not for naught;
Thy earthly loss is heavenly gain;
Men heed thee, love thee, praise thee not;
The Master praises — what are men?*

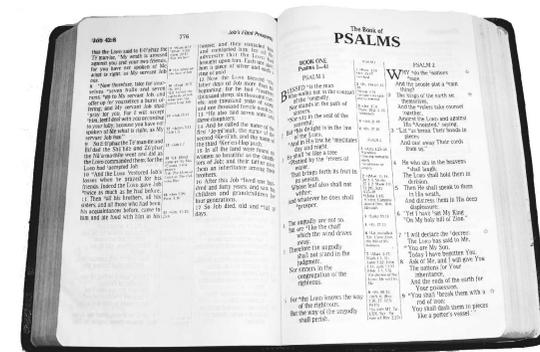
*Go, labour on, your hands are weak,
Your knees are faint, your soul cast down;
Yet falter not; the prize you seek
Is near — a kingdom and a crown.*

*Go, labour on while it is day:
The world's dark night is hastening on;
Speed, speed thy work, cast sloth away;
It is not thus that souls are won.*

*Toil on, faint not, keep watch and pray;
Be wise the erring soul to win;
Go forth into the world's highway,
Compel the wanderer to come in.*

*Toil on and in thy toil rejoice;
For toil comes rest, for exile home;
Soon shalt thou hear the Bridegroom's voice,
The midnight cry, Behold, I come!*

(Horatius Bonar)



January 2022

**Psalms 38 to 51
Acts chapters 13 to 17**

Dear Friends,

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the whole world and most of us have lost loved ones or friends. Though vaccines and treatments have been developed, the consequences are seen all around us, with the economies of many countries lying in ruins. Terrifying weapons of mass destruction have been developed on a scale never seen before. The effects of climate change are causing havoc with extremes of heat and cold, violent storms and floods. The western world is immersed in depravity and wickedness on an unprecedented scale. How are we to react to all that is happening around us? We should remember that God is sovereign and that he is in control of all these things. We should also long for the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When I was a teenager in the 1950's, there seemed to be a greater expectation of the second coming of the Lord Jesus among evangelicals. Some Christians had these words hanging in a picture frame on the walls of their homes – PERHAPS TODAY?

Jesus told his disciples that before he returns there will be false Christs and false prophets (Matthew 24:5,11,23–24), wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes, famines, and persecution of God's people such as never known before (Matthew 24:6–10). There have probably been more Christian martyrs during the past fifty years than in all the previous history of the church.

No one knows when Christ will return but we do know that everyone throughout the world will see him come (Matthew. 24:30; Revelation 1:7). *The day of the Lord will come as 'a thief in the night* (2 Peter 3:10). Jesus said, *'Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect him'* (Matthew 24:43–44). How are we to be ready? We must lead holy lives, seeking always to please the Lord. We are to remember that this world with all its sinful ways and vain pleasures will pass away (1 John 2:15–17). *Everyone who has this hope* (the second coming of Jesus) *in him purifies himself, even as he is pure* (1 John 3:2–3).

May God bless you throughout this year. Do keep this question in your mind – PERHAPS TODAY?

Alec Taylor

31 JANUARY

Acts 17:18–34

The unknown God

Some of Athens' philosophers heard Paul preaching in the market-place and were quite scornful of him and his preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. They were curious about other teachings and were open to hear *some new thing* (21). They invited Paul to address the Areopagus, the council named after the place where those legislating on religion and morals met. These people prided themselves in their learning and wisdom. They met under the shadow of the great Parthenon which was the temple to the goddess of wisdom, Athene, after whom the city was named.

Paul had seen their altar '*To the unknown god*' (23) and he proclaimed some essential truths that the Athenians needed to know about the God they did not know. He told them that:

- God made the world and everything in it (24).
- He is the Lord over all the universe (24).
- Temples cannot contain God, for he is everywhere (24,27).
- He sustains his creation (25).
- He is absolutely sovereign in all his purposes (26).
- Idolatry is a denial of God (29).
- God *commands all men everywhere to repent* (30).
- He will judge the world through the Lord Jesus whom he raised from the dead (31).

Some mocked Paul, some promised to hear him again, but others believed, including Dionysius, one of the philosophers of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris (34). **The true and living God is unknown to millions in our nation.** Some are sophisticated, cultured and articulate (like the philosophers of Athens), others boast no great education and many are poor and unemployed. They have one thing in common – they are lost, without God and without hope. We may be mocked when we witness to those around us, but there will also be encouragements. Let us persevere in prayer for the lost and look for every opportunity to make the gospel known to them. **We have the message that they need.**

His spirit was provoked within him

Paul travelled south to Athens where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him (14–15). The city was renowned for its magnificent buildings, culture, philosophy and its learning, but it was steeped in spiritual ignorance. Less than one hundred years after Paul was in Athens, a traveller named Pausanius wrote six volumes of detailed description of the land of Greece, with Athens taking up far more pages than any other city or region of Greece. Pausanius was captivated with the architecture and artistic splendour of the Greek capital. He was impressed by its temples, shrines and statues to all the gods. In fact Athens had more idols than the rest of Greece put together. They even had an altar inscribed, *‘To the unknown God’* to cover any other god of whom they were ignorant (23).

Athens made quite a different impression on Paul than it did on the majority of its visitors. *Now while Paul waited for them* (Silas and Timothy) *at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols* (16). Our English word ‘paroxysm’ is derived from the Greek word translated *‘provoked’*. A ‘paroxysm’ is a fit of deep passion or of acute pain. The apostle was set on edge, stirred up by the spiritual darkness of the city. What did he do? He went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. He also went into the market-place every day to reason with the people who were so steeped in idolatry and superstition (17).

How do you react when you visit our cities and see the vast crowds of people? Do you feel moved with compassion for them and yearn to see them saved? Are you *provoked within* yourself when you see so many given over to materialism and superstition, who have been so deceived by Satan, that they have no idea that they are on the high road to hell? How about those with whom you work or see every day? **Are you driven to your knees to pray for them? Do you speak to anyone to share the glorious good news of the gospel of Christ?**

Lo! he comes with clouds descending,
Once for favoured sinners slain;
Thousand, thousand saints attending
Swell the triumph of his train.
Hallelujah!
God appears on earth to reign.

Every eye shall now behold him
Robed in dreadful majesty;
Those who set at naught and sold him,
Pierced, and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing,
Shall the true Messiah see.

Every island, sea, and mountain,
Heaven and earth, shall flee away;
All who hate him must, confounded,
Hear the trump proclaim the day:
Come to judgment!
Come to judgment, come away!

Now Redemption, long expected,
See in solemn pomp appear!
All his saints, by man rejected,
Now shall meet him in the air.
Hallelujah!
See the day of God appear!

Yea, amen! let all adore thee,
High on thine eternal throne!
Saviour, take the power and glory;
Claim the kingdom for thine own.
O come quickly!
Hallelujah! come, Lord, come.

(John Cennick and Charles Wesley)

- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise; they are printed in italics. **If you have a different translation of the Bible, you will still be able to use these notes.**
- The number in brackets eg. (6) refers to the verse number in the passage that we are reading; (23:16) refers us to another chapter and verse in the book of the Bible from which we are reading. When we read from Matthew, this would be Matthew chapter 23, verse 16.
- Where verses from other books of the Bible are brought to our attention, the name of the book is also indicated in the brackets eg. (Psalm 19:1).
- Where I ask you to compare another verse of Scripture, I prefix the reference with cp. (eg. cp. Psalm 1:1). I prefer this to the more common abbreviation cf. which relates to the obsolete word ‘confer’.

The word ‘Lord’ in the Old Testament

The Hebrew words translated ‘*Lord*’ are:

- ‘Adon’ which is used with reference to men (Genesis 42:33; 45:8–9), and with reference to God (Joshua 3:11,13; Psalm 8:1).
- ‘Adonai’ literally ‘my Lord’ (Exodus 4:10; Psalm 68:19).
- ‘Yahweh’ (‘Jehovah’), the sacred name for God, considered by many Jews as too sacred to utter. They regularly used ‘Adonai’ in its place. ‘*Yah*’ is a contracted form of ‘Yahweh’ (Isaiah 12:2; 26:4). The word ‘*Alleluia*’ or ‘*Hallelujah*’ (Revelation 19:1–6) means ‘Praise Yah’.

Dale Ralph Davis writes with reference to Exodus 3:12,14: ‘In light of verse 12, God does not here stress his being or existence so much as his presence and “Yahweh” captures and summarizes that thought – **he is the God who will be present to be all that his people need him to be.** “Yahweh” means the God who is present to help ... “Yahweh” is a personal name, while “the LORD” is a title ... there’s a devotional warmth in a personal name that a title can’t convey’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE – PSALMS 1–12, page 8).

NB. Our Bible translators have made it possible for us to recognise when ‘Yahweh’ is used in the Old Testament. ‘Yahweh’ is printed ‘*LORD*’, whereas ‘Adon’ or ‘Adonai’ are printed ‘*Lord*’.

They received the word ... and searched the Scriptures daily

Travelling Jewish teachers were often invited to speak at local synagogues and Paul used this custom to bring the gospel to the Jews. He travelled with Silas and Timothy from Philippi to Thessalonica where he went into the synagogue *and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures* (2). He explained and demonstrated that the suffering, death and resurrection of the promised Messiah was prophesied in the Old Testament and that ‘*This Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ*’ (3). Some of the Jews and many Greeks, including some of the leading women of the city, were persuaded by Paul’s reasoning from the Scriptures.

The unbelieving Jews stirred up some of the louts from the market place and led a mob to attack the house of Jason where the apostles were lodging. They did not succeed in finding Paul, but they dragged Jason and some of his fellow-Christians before the rulers of the city accusing them of turning the world upside down and of proclaiming another king, Jesus (6–7). Today much of the professing church has compromised with the world and has little zeal for King Jesus. Is it any wonder that we make little impact upon the godless world around us?

The Thessalonians received the Word in much affliction but they became examples to other believers throughout Macedonia and Greece. They sounded forth the Word of the Lord, knowing that it works effectively in those who believe (1 Thessalonians 1:6–8; 2:13).

Paul and Silas left Thessalonica by night and went to Berea, where they and they went to the synagogue. These Jews were more open to receive the teaching of the Scriptures concerning Jesus. *They received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily* (10–11). **Do you love God’s Word enough to take time to read it and learn from it or do you skip through your reading as quickly as possible?** There were again many conversions to Christ in Berea but unbelieving Jews came from Thessalonica to stir up further trouble. Paul was obliged to depart immediately, leaving behind Silas and Timothy (12–15).

What must I do to be saved?

Paul and Silas did not reproach God for their suffering. Bleeding backs and feet bound in stocks could not keep them from praising God. At midnight they *were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them* (25). Suddenly there was a great earthquake which shook the prison so violently that the doors were thrown open and the prisoners' chains were loosed (26). The jailer knew that if any prisoners escaped in the commotion, he would forfeit his own life (cp. 12:19). Fearing the worst, he panicked and was about to kill himself when Paul called out and reassured him that no one had escaped (25–28). The terrified man asked, '*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*' (30). **This is the most important question a person can ask!**

To be saved, we must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (31). Belief in Jesus means that we trust in him with all our heart to save us through the merits of his death on the cross. It involves repenting of our sin, embracing Jesus as our Lord and gladly obeying his Word (cp. 20:21; John 10:26–27; 1 John 2:3–5).

The jailer and his family listened as Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to them. They believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and were baptised. The grateful man bathed the wounds of Paul and Silas and fed them. The momentous events of that night had resulted in his conversion and that of his household. He had good cause to rejoice (32–34).

Paul and Silas both possessed Roman citizenship which entitled them to a fair trial. The Philippian magistrates were afraid when they discovered that they had denied them their rights. They released them and pleaded with them to leave their city (35–39). Paul and Silas went to Lydia's home to encourage the new believers before departing (40). The church at Philippi became very dear to Paul (Philippians 1:3–8; 2:12; 4:1, 15–17). No suffering for the gospel is easy to endure but when we are persecuted, we must not lose heart. God uses our suffering for his own glory and for the furtherance of the gospel.

In you, O LORD, I hope; you will hear, O LORD my God

This penitential psalm repeats many of the thoughts found in Psalm 6, opening with the same words. David recognised that he was in dire trouble because of his sin (3–8). He reminds us that we are foolish when we sin (5). A true Christian can never be happy when sinning against the Lord. He will identify with the words of William Cowper:

*What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.'*

The Lord chastises us when we stray from him because he loves us (1; Hebrews 12:6). God's chastisement may take different forms. We will not feel his smile upon us and there is a loss of the sense of his presence with us (21). He may bring misery to us (4, 8–10) or cause loved ones to desert us and bring enemies against us (11–12, 19). The Lord may send physical illness and weakness (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:30–32). God does all this to make us ponder our ways so that we will repent.

It is a sad reflection of the evil days in which we live that we often sin and yet we hardly feel concerned. When we sin, we must repent. What is involved in repentance?

- Confession of sin (3,18). Confession involves naming our sins. When did you last confess your sins to God? The Word of God assures us that *if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).
- Contrition (sorrow for sin). David said, *I will be in anguish over my sin* (18). When we sin, we grieve the Holy Spirit, and we should have a godly sorrow which leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:8–9). The Lord will not turn us away if our repentance is real. We know that he is gracious and we can say, '*For in you, O LORD, I hope; you will hear, O Lord my God*' (15).

I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue

There are occasions when we are puzzled by the Lord's dealings with us and at such times we must choose our words carefully. We must watch our conversation at all times especially when in the company of the wicked (1). David resolved to discipline his tongue and said, '*I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue*' (1). If you have allowed your tongue to cause you to sin, repent of it now. The similarity in thought between verse 2 and verses 13 to 14 of Psalm 38 may indicate a link between them.

We must not suppress our feelings when passing through a period of trial or disappointment. As David was musing (meditating) he burned within himself (3). He could no longer hold his tongue and he poured out his heart to the Lord. He prayed, '*LORD, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am*' (4). He reminds himself that '*man at his best state is but vapour*' (5,11). **It is sobering to observe the swift passing of time.** How easy it is to allow ourselves to be taken up with the passing things of this world, rather than seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

*Then teach me Lord, to know mine end,
And know that I am frail;
To heaven let all my thoughts ascend,
And let not earth prevail.* (C.H. Spurgeon)

David recognised that God was chastising him for his sin (8–11). He was mute in the presence of the ungodly, but not before God. He hoped in God (7; cp. Psalm 38:15) and this encouraged him to pray for deliverance from his transgressions, and from God's chastising hand. He called on God to hear his prayer and to remove the chastisement that he might regain strength (11–13).

The word '*Selah*' (5,11) is mentioned 71 times in the Book of Psalms. It signifies a pause. The musicians paused and the worshippers also paused to meditate on the words that they were singing. Do you stop to think about the words of the psalms and hymns that you sing?

The Lord opened her heart

Paul and his companions sailed from Troas to Neapolis in Macedonia, before going to Philippi. This city enjoyed the status of being a Roman colony (12), its citizens having the same rights and privileges as those on the Italian mainland. Paul and his companions went out of the city on the Sabbath where they found a group of women who prayed by the riverside, probably because there was no synagogue. They spoke to these women, one of whom was Lydia, who was not a European. She was from Thyatira (in the province of Asia), a town famous for its purple dye and manufacture of woollen garments. She imported the purple dye and woollen garments to sell in the region of Philippi. *The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul* (14).

We must not despise the preaching and teaching of God's Word but pray that the Lord will open the hearts of those who hear. **Sinners are only saved when God opens their hearts! This should encourage us in our evangelistic work as we remember that the Lord is sovereign in bringing people to faith in Christ.** When God opened Lydia's heart, she was saved and was then baptised. You will notice that all those who came to faith in Christ in the book of Acts were baptised. If you have not been baptised, you disobey the command of Christ (cp. Matthew 28:19). God opened Lydia's heart and she opened her home to give hospitality to Paul and his fellow-missionaries (15, 40).

God was working in Philippi but so was Satan. Paul and those with him were pestered by a demon-possessed slave girl for many days. She *brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling* (16–18). These men had no compassion for this poor girl who was not only their slave but also Satan's. They were angry when she was released from the power of the demon through the ministry of Paul because their trade was ruined. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them off to the magistrates, accusing them of being troublemakers. The apostles were severely beaten and committed to prison where their feet were fastened in stocks (19–24). This may have appeared to be a great setback but we shall be seeing that the Lord overruled it for the advance of the gospel.

Come over to Macedonia and help us

Paul began his second missionary journey travelling north through Syria and then through Cilicia *strengthening the churches* (15:41). He had with him the letter from the apostles and elders at Jerusalem giving instructions for the Gentile Christians (4). Paul and Silas travelled west to Galatia and when they arrived in Lystra, Paul chose Timothy to join his missionary team. Timothy's father was a Gentile and though his mother was Jewish, he had not been circumcised. We have seen that circumcision is not required for salvation, but Paul had Timothy circumcised to avoid problems with the Jews in that region (1–3). Timothy appeared to be a reserved and timid young man (1 Corinthians 16:10; 2 Timothy 1:7), but he was well spoken of by the Christians in Lystra and Iconium (2). He was to become one of Paul's closest and most trusted friends (cp. Philippians 2:19–23; 2 Timothy 1:2).

They travelled north and then west but were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel in Asia and Bithynia. They were joined by Luke at Troas (notice how *'they'* in verse 8 becomes *'we'* in verse 10). It would appear that Luke remained at Philippi (17:1 – *'they'*) and rejoined Paul when he passed through Philippi on his third missionary journey (20:5–6).

While at the port of Troas, Paul had a vision of a man pleading with him, *'Come over to Macedonia and help us'* (8–9). The people of Macedonia enjoyed the rich heritage of Greek culture, but all the learning and wisdom of the Greek philosophers had no answer to the desperate plight of mankind. One of these philosophers once said, 'The best thing of all is not to be born, and the next best thing is to die.' What wretched despair! Man without God is without hope (Ephesians 2:12). Has man's advance in science and technology changed things? Not at all! **Men and women are still sinners. They are lost and they need to be saved. We may not be privileged to have visions like Paul, but we have the same good news.** Are you taking the gospel to sinners around you? Are you willing to say, 'Lord, send me'?

I delight to do your will, O my God

The Book of Hebrews (10:5–7) shows that verses 6 to 8 of this psalm refer to Christ. The Greek version (LXX) of the Old Testament translates, *'My ears you have opened'* (6) as *'a body you have prepared for me.'* This is the rendering used in Hebrews 10:5. God the Father prepared a body for the Lord Jesus who was born of the virgin Mary. He came to earth as a man, and as a man he was perfectly obedient to the will of God the Father. He suffered in a most horrible pit of pain and woe to save us (2). Jesus came to earth *being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.* (Philippians 2:6–8). The Lord Jesus said, *'I delight to do your will, O my God'* (8). He once said to his disciples, *'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work'* (John 4:34). The words of verse 9 are similar to those in Psalm 22:22,25 which are spoken by the Lord Jesus (Hebrews 2:12)

The believer's experience is also reflected in this psalm. We cried to the Lord from the pit and the mire of sin, and he delivered us and set our feet upon the Rock, the Lord Jesus Christ (1–2). **Is your faith being tried? Wait patiently for the Lord. He will hear you and deliver you, and he will put a new song of praise in your mouth (1–3).** *Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, and does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies* (4). We rejoice in the Lord for his wonderful works and for his thoughts which are towards us (5, 17).

Praise and obedience go hand in hand. If we love God we will delight to obey him (6–8) though we recognise that our best obedience is far from perfect. We will also proclaim the good news of righteousness, God's faithfulness, salvation and his steadfast love (9–11). A life of obedience to God is not without difficulty or opposition from the wicked. We must pray for forgiveness when we sin, and for deliverance from our enemies but it is a life of rejoicing in the Lord, as we depend upon him (11–14, 16). The living God has us in his heart and in his thoughts. He will never forget us. *I am poor and needy; yet the LORD thinks upon me* (17).

You will sustain him on his sick-bed

David probably wrote this psalm during the rebellion of his son, Absalom. He was stricken with sorrow, having been toppled from his throne by his own son. To make matters worse, his trusted friend and counsellor, Ahithophel had gone over to Absalom's side (2 Samuel 15:12,31). Verse 9 is quoted with reference to the treachery of Judas in betraying Christ (John 13:18).

Blessed is he who considers the poor (1). The word 'poor' could be translated 'needy'. David was in great need when he wrote this psalm. There were good men who supported him in his time of need (2 Samuel 17:27–29). We were in desperate spiritual need before we came to the Lord Jesus for salvation. We were lost, *having no hope and without God* (Ephesians 2:12). The Lord had mercy on us and saved us. Surely, if we know the love of Christ in our lives we will be concerned for those in need, especially for needy Christians (Galatians 6:10; James 2:14–17; 1 John 3:17–18). Notice the promises that the Lord gives to the believer who has shown compassion to others: *The LORD will deliver him ... preserve him ... keep him ... strengthen him ... sustain him* (1–3).

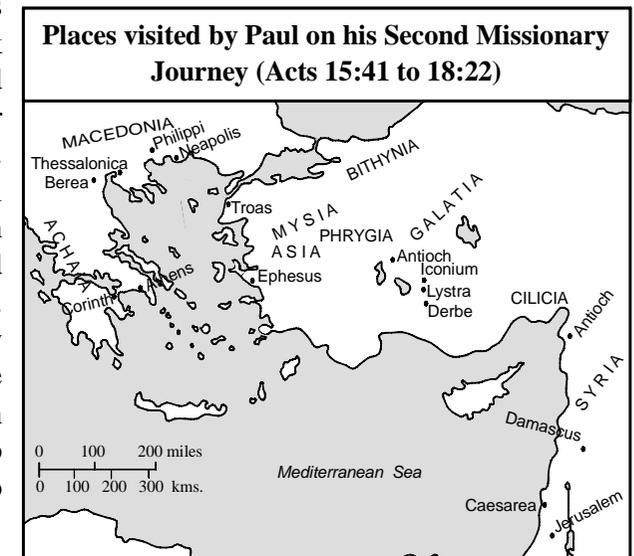
Troubles do not always come singly, and David was also sick and was slandered at this time (4–9). He was also aware of his sin and prayed for spiritual healing, 'LORD, be merciful to me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against you' (4). **The child of God is not preserved from trouble, but the Lord does preserve him in trouble.**

Verse 3 contains a wonderful promise to those who are sick or dying. *The LORD will strengthen him on his bed of illness. You will sustain him on his sick-bed.* Spurgeon tells the story of a dying saint who was visited by a close friend who asked him, 'How are you today?' The dying child of God replied, 'My head is resting very sweetly on three pillows – infinite power, infinite love, and infinite wisdom.' No wonder David closes the psalm with the words, *Blessed be the LORD God of Israel!*

They parted from one another

The Christians in the church at Antioch were encouraged when they heard the letter read. They were also blessed with the ministry of Judas and Silas (31–32). Another problem arose soon after. Even godly men have their differences or personality problems which Satan will seek to exploit. Paul and Barnabas were all set for their second missionary journey, but they parted from one another after a sharp dispute over the suitability of John Mark for missionary work. He had deserted them on their first missionary journey (13:5,13). Barnabas was John Mark's cousin (Colossians 4:10) and he wanted to take him with them again. Paul disagreed, not wanting to take with them someone who had already let them down. *Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another* (39). It is very sad when godly men cannot work with each other because of disagreements or personality problems. **Satan loves to divide us. Let us learn to recognise his craftiness so that we will be on our guard.**

The church at Antioch supported Paul, commending him and Silas *to the grace of God* for the next phase of their missionary work. Barnabas went to Cyprus taking John Mark (39–40). All did work out well for Mark in the end. Years later, Paul wrote of him with much warmth and affection (Coloss. 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11). God's grace is such that he can make failures to become useful to himself.



Some ... have troubled you ... unsettling your souls

The gospel was first preached to the Jews who had a very distinctive culture with many rules and regulations. When people from different backgrounds come into the church, it can cause problems and tension. Some Jewish Christians taught that Gentile believers must submit to the rite of circumcision in order to be saved (1). James (the half-brother of the Lord Jesus) was a leader in the Jerusalem church and he followed Peter in speaking to those assembled. He showed that the conversion of the Gentiles was a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (13–17; cp. Amos 9:11–12). He warned that these Gentile converts should not be troubled, except that they should abstain from sinful practices associated with their former way of life (19–20). They had enough battles without unnecessary burdens being placed upon them by zealots with questionable views.

The apostles prepared a letter outlining these principles and repudiating the false teaching concerning circumcision and keeping the law of Moses. They sent it with Paul and Barnabas to be read in the church at Antioch and other churches in Syria and Cilicia. (23–29). Judas and Silas, two of the leaders in the Jerusalem church returned to Antioch with Paul and his company to give added support to the contents of the letter (22,27).

Some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls ... (24). If you are a new Christian, do not be surprised when you meet with professing believers who will trouble you with their words and who will unsettle your soul. These people may twist the meaning of Scripture and want you to follow their peculiar ideas. They are doing the work of Satan to unsettle your soul. If you have been troubled by such people, talk to your pastor or to a mature Christian whom you love and respect. They will be pleased to help you.

Why are you cast down, O my soul?

In Psalms 42 and 43 the psalmist pours out his heart to God. He is in deep distress and three times he asked himself the question, ‘*Why are you cast down, O my soul?*’ (5,11; 43:5). He was distressed because he was oppressed by and taunted by his enemies, and he felt that God had forgotten him (10–11). They mocked him, asking, ‘*Where is your God?*’ (3,10). The psalmist longed for God and says, ‘*As the deer pants for the waterbrooks, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God*’ (1–2). Do you hunger and thirst for God when you are perplexed and discouraged?

When things appear to go wrong for us, the enemy of our souls and those who serve him are quick to taunt us, saying, ‘*Where is your God?*’ (3,10). Such experiences are common in the Christian life. We may remember times of great spiritual joy in the presence of God and in fellowship with his people (4), but when those times have faded as a dream, they seem to make the present suffering the more bitter.

The psalmist did what we often fail to do when we are troubled or suffering – he encouraged himself in the Lord. He spoke to himself and asked, ‘*Why are you cast down, O my soul?*’ and he told himself, ‘*Hope in God.*’ He turned to God in prayer, saying, ‘*O my God, my soul is cast down within me; therefore I will remember you ... the LORD will command his lovingkindness in the daytime*’ (6–8).

Christian, are you feeling cast down in soul? Are you spiritually depressed? Do you feel starved of spiritual refreshment? Are you longing after God as the thirsting, panting deer longs for streams of fresh water (1–2)? ‘*Hope in God*’ (5,11). **Hope in God who is rich in mercy and is faithful. Hope in God whose steadfast love for you will never cease. Hope in God who will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5–6).** Seek the Lord in prayer as did the discouraged psalmist. The Lord who is full of *lovingkindness* will give you a song (8). You will *yet praise him* (11) and rejoice in the One who is far greater than any of your enemies. He is the sovereign, eternal God!

Hope in God

The psalm opens with a plea, ‘*Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation.*’ The psalmist asked God, ‘*Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?*’ (2; cp. 42:9). The first four verses of this psalm are addressed to God and in the fifth verse the psalmist again asks himself. ‘*Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?*’ If we seek to lead a godly life, we will almost certainly suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). *An ungodly nation ... the deceitful and unjust man* (1) hate and oppress the righteous person and this may cause us to feel that God has cast us off (2). The ‘cast off’ feeling may cast us down, but we must never rely on our feelings at such times. If you are a Christian, God will never cast you off. He will vindicate you and he will deliver you (1).

The psalmist cries to God, ‘*Oh, send out your light and your truth! Let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your tabernacle*’ (3). God’s Word is the truth and the light by which we are led (Psalm 119:105; John 17:17). Notice the importance of going to the tabernacle, the dwelling-place of God. When we are cast down we must not stay away from the house of the Lord. We need more than ever to meet with God in the company of fellow-believers, to worship God together, and to hear his Word.

The psalmist describes God as his ‘*exceeding joy*’ (4). **Can you honestly say that God is your *exceeding joy*?** If you have not learned to delight yourself in the Lord, you are missing so much in the Christian life and you will rarely praise him. This short psalm closes in the same manner as Psalm 42: *Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?* He answers himself, ‘*Hope in God; for I shall yet praise him, the help of my countenance and my God.*’ (5; cp. Psalm 42:5). .

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

We believe that through ... grace ... we shall be saved

We have already seen that Satan attacks the church from the outside with persecution (eg. 8:1–3) and from within by seeking to destroy the unity of the church (eg. 6:1). The devil will do all that he can to rob us of blessing. There is another instance here of an attack from within the church. Paul and Barnabas returned to the church at Antioch in Syria to report *all that God had done with them* (14:27) but trouble was not far away. Men came from Judea insisting that Gentile Christians submit to the rite of circumcision in order to be saved (1). Paul and Barnabas debated with them and they led a delegation sent by the church, to consult with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem (2). Passing through Phoenicia and Samaria, they visited churches to describe the conversion of the Gentiles; this brought great joy (3).

News of Gentile conversions should have brought rejoicing to the Jerusalem church but some who had belonged to the Pharisees insisted that Gentile converts be circumcised (4–7). Peter pointed out to them that God had made no distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians, giving both the Holy Spirit in the same way (8–9). He went on to say, ‘*We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they*’ (11). Paul referred to his visit to Jerusalem in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 2:1–10). He describes those who insisted on circumcision as being necessary for salvation as ‘*false brethren*’ who wanted to bring the new Christians into bondage and he stood very firmly against them (Galatians 2:3–5). He saw this teaching as a serious threat to *the gospel of the grace of God* (20:24). The assembly then heard Paul’s account of how God had worked through them among the Gentiles (12).

We are saved through grace alone and not by works or religious ritual (Ephesians 2:8–9). This was the great issue at the Reformation when many Reformers laid down their lives rather than compromise this vital truth. The Roman Catholic church insists on works such as penance, and suffering in purgatory for salvation. Let us be determined to resist any compromise with such false teaching.

We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God

Paul always showed much love and prayerful interest for those who had been saved through his ministry. He had a *deep concern for all the churches* (2 Corinthians 11:28), having a self-sacrificing love for them (1 Thessalonians 2:7–12). After considerable success at Derbe, Paul and Barnabas returned to those cities where they had suffered much persecution (21). They wanted to strengthen the disciples and to encourage them to persevere in the face of suffering and trial. They exhorted them to continue in the faith, saying, *‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God’* (22). The word *‘tribulation’* in the Greek carries the idea of ‘pressure’. **The path to glory is far from smooth!** There are pressures from within such as remaining sin, and from without, such as satanic opposition and persecution. **Tribulation is never comfortable, but it is necessary.** *Tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character* (Romans 5:3–4). We are strengthened by the testing of our faith.

*Believe not those who say
The upward path is smooth,
Lest thou shouldst stumble in the way
And faint before the truth.* (Anne Brontë).

Elders are essential for the well-being of the local church (to rule, to teach, and to care for the members). Before returning to Antioch in Syria, the apostles appointed elders in the new churches (23; see 1 Timothy 3:1–7 for the qualifications of elders). Paul was not satisfied with evangelism alone. When churches were planted, he knew that they needed to have elders.

Paul and Barnabas arrived back in Syrian Antioch and reported to their ‘home’ church *all that God had done with them, and that he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles* (27). They did not take personal credit for their success but gave glory to God. It was what he *had done with them* that mattered. We must always depend on the Lord in our work for him, and magnify him when he is pleased to bless our labours.

Our fathers have told us, what deeds you did in their days

Are you troubled that wickedness and violence are increasing around us. Are you troubled that many faithful churches are struggling and weak while false religion prospers? This psalm has something to say to us in discouraging times. It can be divided into three sections:

- Confidence (1–8). *‘We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds you did in their days’* (1). The psalmist remembered the favour of God towards Israel in granting them conquest over Canaan (1–3). This encouraged him to trust in God and to glory in him (4–8) **Do you know about the mighty acts of God in Bible history and in the history of the church?** Read your Bible; read church history books and you will rejoice in God and be encouraged. Speak to others (and especially the young) about the mighty deeds that God has done. Boast in him and praise him (8). You will then find yourself encouraged in difficult times.

- Complaint (9–22). The psalmist now complains to God. *‘But you have cast us off and put us to shame’* (9). It seemed that God had forsaken his people for no apparent reason (17–22). *‘All this has come upon us; but we have not forgotten you’* (17). Such experiences leave us baffled and bewildered but we need to learn to trust God where we cannot trace his ways with us. Verse 22 is quoted by the apostle Paul who then points out that *in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us* (Romans 8:36–37).

- Challenge (23–26). The psalmist has expressed his confidence in God in a perplexing and difficult situation and he is challenged to pray. He is urgent in his prayer, saying, *‘Awake! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off for ever.’* The Lord does not sleep (Psalm 121:4) and the psalmist may seem to be irreverent as he questions God (23–24). We may feel as he did but the Lord does understand us. He will never forget us or cast us off. **When we are discouraged and downhearted let us be sure to come to God’s throne of grace in prayer** (Hebrews 4:14–16).

My heart is overflowing with a good theme

One of the titles of this psalm is 'A Song of Love' and it celebrates the marriage of a king to his queen. Spurgeon says this about the psalm, 'Some here see Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter only – they are short-sighted; others see Solomon and Christ – they are cross-eyed; well-focussed spiritual eyes see here Jesus only.' (THE TREASURY OF DAVID).

My heart is overflowing with a good theme; I recite my composition concerning the King; my tongue is the pen of a ready writer. This is a theme which thrills the heart of every Christian. It concerns the excellence of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ, in his might and majesty, in his beauty and purity, and in his victory over his enemies (2–9). Verses 6 and 7 are quoted in the New Testament with reference to Christ showing him to be the eternal God (Hebrews 1:8–9). We do not think enough about the beauty of our Saviour, perhaps because we have not seen him with our eyes. He is *fairer than the sons of men* (2), manly and strong, but gentle, gracious and humble (2–5). Grace is poured from his lips to forgive the repenting sinner, to comfort the sorrowing, to lift up the downcast (2; cp. Luke 4:22).

The bride is addressed in verses 10–12) and then her splendour and beauty are described (13–15). The church is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25–27; Revelation 21:2,9). The psalm closes with praise to the eternal King. How amazing are those words which tell us, '*The King will greatly desire your beauty*' (11). He has taken us poor, wretched sinners and he has cleansed us and clothed us with his righteousness at tremendous cost! The King humbled himself, coming to earth as a child of a poor family. He was despised and rejected, tortured so that his face was beaten beyond recognition, and then crucified in order to save us (Isaiah 52:14 to 53:12). Oh, what matchless love and glorious grace! We should love him, adore him, gladly obey him and speak about him. When we see him, we shall be lost in wonder, love and praise. *My heart is overflowing with a good theme. Is yours?*

Turn from these vain things to the living God

Some preachers rarely look at their congregation as they declare God's Word. They look at the wall, up to the ceiling or down at their Bible as they preach. If you are a preacher or Sunday School teacher, you must look at those to whom you speak. At Lystra Paul noticed among his listeners a man who was crippled from his birth. He observed this man intently ('*looking intently at him*' – ESV) and saw *that he had faith to be healed* (8–9). True faith comes through hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17) and so it was with the crippled man (9). He was wonderfully healed but the people of Lystra responded to the miracle in the wrong way. They hailed Paul and Barnabas as two of the Greek gods come down to them *in the likeness of men* (11–13). Miracles do not necessarily bring people to faith in Christ.

Greek legend has it that the gods, Zeus and Hermes (called Jupiter and Mercury by the Romans) had once visited the region of Lystra. A temple for the worship of Zeus had been erected at the entrance of the city. There was great excitement when the priest of Zeus came to meet Paul and Barnabas with garlands, and oxen to sacrifice to them. The people thought that they were having another visit from the gods. They little realised that this was a far more important event. They were hearing the messengers of the true and living God. The apostles were very distressed at the blasphemous adulation of the crowd. They ran in among the people telling them that they were only men like themselves and urged them to *turn from these vain things to the living God* who created the universe (15). **False religion, materialism and sinful pleasure-seeking are all vain and useless. When we repent, we must renounce such things and turn from them to God.** This is no loss when we gain Christ as our Saviour, Lord, Protector and Friend.

Jews from Antioch and Iconium stirred up the crowd against Paul. Those who wanted to worship him earlier now stoned him. His injuries were so serious that they thought him to be dead but he was able to get up and go into Lystra. The next day he travelled to Derbe (19–20).

Therefore they stayed there a long time

Paul and Barnabas went on to Iconium which was about seventy miles (112 kilometres) south-east of Antioch. The pattern and the effects of their ministry were similar to that in Antioch – preaching in the synagogue, many conversions among Gentiles as well as Jews, opposition from unbelieving Jews who *stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren* (1–2).

Notice the comment in verse 1 concerning the preaching of Paul and Barnabas in the synagogue, *they ... so spoke that a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed*. Notice that little word ‘so’ (the English Standard Version translates this verse, they ‘*spoke in such a way*’). There was persuasion in their preaching as they challenged their hearers to think about their message (cp. 26:27–28). Biblical Christianity is not a mindless exercise. It is persuasion based on facts.

Preachers must be persuaders!

How did the apostles react to opposition and slander (2)? They did not give up, or ‘get up and go’: *Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord* (3). God blessed their preaching of *the word of his grace*, confirming it with signs and wonders. Hatred and persecution did not deter the apostles – *they stayed there a long time*. Paul and Barnabas only left Iconium when a violent attempt was made by their enemies to stone them. They moved on south to Lystra and Derbe where they continued to preach the gospel (5–7).

We must not sink into despair when we encounter difficulties, opposition, discouragement or setbacks in our work for the Lord, but stay on unless God clearly directs us away from that sphere of service. *Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart* (Galatians 6:9). We must expect disappointments as well as blessings but *those who sow in tears shall reap in joy* (Psalm 126:5). Let us persevere; faithful service in God’s work is never in vain!

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble

This wonderful psalm is divided into three stanzas, each ending with the word ‘*Selah*’ (which means ‘pause’ to give singers a break for breath and to give us time to meditate on the words). *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, Therefore we will; not fear* (1–3). This is our confidence in an uncertain, godless, turbulent world. The almighty, eternal, sovereign, infinitely wise God is our refuge and strength. These verses are very relevant to us in these troubled times.

The *river* (4) may refer to God or to his covenant with all its wonderful promises. The church is *the city of God* (cp. Revelation 21:2,9–10) and she is made glad in the Lord who is in her midst, bringing great stability and confidence. *The LORD of hosts is with us* (5–7, 11) in every difficult situation and he will destroy every weapon that is taken up against us (8–9; cp. Isaiah 54:17). Verse 10 has a message for God’s people and for their enemies. We must learn to *be still* in perplexing and difficult times, waiting patiently upon the Lord. If we do not know the Lord, we should stop and be still, considering his greatness and his claims upon us. The message to God’s enemies is that it is foolish to rebel against him. *‘Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth’* (10).

Let the words of this great psalm sink into your heart and be impressed upon your mind. They will be a constant source of encouragement throughout your life. If you are passing through a time of testing and trouble, turn now to your great God and trust in him. You will prove him to be *a very present help* in your trouble!

*In heavenly love abiding,
No change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding,
For nothing changes here:
The storm may roar without me,
My heart may low be laid;
But God is round about me,
And can I be dismayed?*

(Anna L. Waring)

Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King

The joyful theme of the exalted God is carried over from Psalm 46:10 into this psalm. *He is greatly exalted* (9). We have here a song of great joy in the sovereign, triumphant God, who is worthy of our worship. *Sing praises to God, sing praises! sing praises to our King, sing praises!* (6).

Why should we sing praises to God?

- *The LORD Most High is awesome* (2). His greatness and splendour inspire reverent fear. A sense of reverence has been lost from the worship of many evangelical churches. How sad and insulting to God!
- *He is a great King over all the earth* (2). How often do you think about the greatness and majesty of our awesome God? He is sovereign over all the nations (2,7–8).
- He will cause us to triumph and even if we have no inheritance on earth, he has a glorious inheritance in heaven for us (3–4; cp. 1 Peter 1:3–4).

God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with a sound of the trumpet (5). Some commentators believe that this verse refers to Christ's ascension. When the Lord Jesus comes again, it will also be with a shout and the sound of a trumpet (1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

We must *sing praises with understanding* (7). If you could see the expressionless faces in many church congregations as they sing their hymns, you would perhaps be surprised. Is it because of a lack of interest or understanding? Are their minds many miles away as mouths repeat words without much thought? If we do not think about the words of the hymns that we sing in our worship we are not truly worshipping God. **Let us sing praises with understanding; it will make all the difference to our worship.**

As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed

Paul's sermon made a great impact on many Jews and proselytes (Gentiles who had embraced the Jewish faith). They followed the apostles from the synagogue who *persuaded them to continue in the grace of God* (42–43). What does this mean? These people had been taught that to be accepted by God, they must adhere strictly to the requirements of Judaism such as circumcision, observing various holy days and ceremonial rites (cp. Colossians 2:16–17). These things could not bring peace with God, however. The grace of God declares that we are not saved through our own works but through the Lord Jesus Christ who died on the cross to save sinners. Paul and Barnabas impressed these great truths upon their hearers. They must never again depend on religious rites for their salvation.

The following Sabbath, *almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God* (44). Many Gentiles were saved in Antioch and the gospel spread throughout the surrounding area (48–49). We have already seen that Satan is not slow to stir up opposition to the preaching of the gospel, and that it often comes from religious people. The greatest enemies of Paul's ministry were generally religious Jews (45–47). They stirred up the civic leaders of Antioch to persecute the apostles who were then expelled from the region. Paul and Barnabas *shook off the dust from their feet against them* (50–51; cp. Luke 9:5). If we are faithful to God's Word, and proclaim the gospel of God's free and sovereign grace to sinners, we must not be surprised to encounter opposition from religious people who reject much of the Bible.

What is our confidence in evangelism? – That all of God's elect will surely believe. In Antioch, *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed* (48). All those whom God has chosen before he made the world will surely be saved! (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2). We do not depend upon ourselves but upon the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit as the Word of God is preached. When God is pleased to give blessing, we *are filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit* even in the face of persecution (52).

By him everyone who believes is justified

Paul told his hearers that John the Baptist had prepared the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus but that the rulers in Jerusalem had rejected him. His death and resurrection had been foretold by the prophets. God had raised him from the dead and he was seen by many witnesses on many occasions (27–31). The apostle continued to quote Old Testament prophecies relating to Jesus (33–35), showing that Psalm 16, verse 10 could not refer to David whose body decayed in the grave, but David speaks Jesus whom God raised up. Paul went on to explain that through the death of Jesus there is forgiveness of sins and justification: *‘By him everyone who believes is justified’* (36–39).

Our sin renders us guilty in the sight of God who is righteous and must punish us for our sins. How can he freely pardon us and remain just? The doctrine of justification shows how God has dealt with this problem (Romans 3:24–26). We cannot be justified by the law of Moses (39) or through our own works. Paul, writing later to the Galatian churches (which included the church at Antioch in Pisidia), emphasised this truth (Galatians 2:16). **What is justification?** – ‘Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.’ (WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM). ‘To justify’ is a legal term which means ‘to declare righteous’. Our sin is imputed to Christ (put to his account) and his righteousness is imputed to us (put to our account) – see Romans 4:3–5, 22–25; 2 Corinthians 5:19–21.

The more we understand this great doctrine, the more we will appreciate the wonder and greatness of our salvation, and the more we will love and magnify the Lord Jesus. ‘Justification by faith is the jubilee trumpet of the gospel because it proclaims the gospel to the poor and destitute whose only door of hope is to roll themselves in total helplessness upon the grace and power and righteousness of the Redeemer of the lost’ (Professor John Murray. ‘COLLECTED WRITINGS’, VOLUME 2, page 217. Published by Banner of Truth Trust).

We have thought, O God, on your lovingkindness

In this psalm God is again joyfully praised on account of his greatness (1), his lovingkindness (9), his righteousness (10) and his everlasting care and protection (14). The angry mob at Ephesus shouted out the name of their goddess crying out, *‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians!’* (Acts 19:28). Muslims today shout, ‘Allah is great,’ but there is only one great God – the triune God, Jehovah, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in his holy mountain* (1). Read through the words of the hymn ‘How great thou art’ and praise God with gratitude and joy.

Jerusalem (*Mount Zion*) was a wonderful city when this psalm was written, *beautiful in elevation ... the city of the great King* (2,8). The temple, the palaces and the strong bulwarks of the city made an impressive sight (12–13). The city was great, however, not because of her buildings, but because God was in her midst (3). We have already seen that the church is now *the city of the living God* or *Jerusalem above* (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22). We may feel weak, but in God we are strong. *The gates of Hades shall not prevail* against Christ’s church (Matthew 16:18).

The psalmist had heard of the great works of God in the past, but he records that they too have seen God work mightily *‘in the city of our God’* (8). We need to know of God’s work in Bible times and in the history of the church because it will encourage us and stir us up to pray for the work of the Lord.

Are you feeling downcast? The great antidote is found in verse 9. *We have thought, O God, on your lovingkindness* (‘steadfast love’). **Think of all of the Lord’s mercies to you – his love in giving his only begotten Son to die for you, for the Holy Spirit to help us, for the Bible to teach you, for eternal life and a glorious future and for answers to prayer, and many more blessings.** Rejoice that he *will never leave you nor forsake you* (Hebrews 13:5–6). *For this is God, our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to death* (14).

But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave

The psalmist calls on all the people of the world to listen to him, both rich and poor, because he had an important message for them (1–4). His message for the rich is that they are foolish to trust in their wealth which cannot save their souls. *For the redemption of their souls is costly* (6–9). We know that though redemption is freely bestowed, it was purchased not with silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18–19).

Riches may bring honour but when death comes the wealth is left to others and honour does not remain. The wise man cannot escape death any more than the fool (10). The body rots in the grave just as the corpses of animals (12,20). Some translations (eg. ESV) show verse 14 to liken death to a shepherd, herding the ungodly into the grave. Let us be encouraged with the words of verse 5. *Why should I fear in the days of evil* when I am surrounded by sin? We can face the future, confident that God is with us in evil times as well as good times.

We live in a world where there is much envy and discontent. Christians should never be envious of the ungodly with their wealth. Why is it foolish to envy those who are wealthy? Death ends all their pleasures and judgment awaits them (6–10), but we can affirm, *But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave for he shall receive me* (15). We will hear the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, ‘*Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*’ (Matthew 25:34). **We may be poor here on earth, but we have a precious Saviour and a priceless inheritance.**

*How vast the treasure we possess!
How rich thy bounty, King of grace!
This world is ours, and worlds to come;
Earth is our lodge, and heaven our home.*

*I would not change my blest estate
For all the world calls good or great;
And while my faith can keep her hold
I envy not the sinner's gold.*

(Isaac Watts)

According to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour

Paul and Barnabas sailed from Paphos in Cyprus to go to Pamphylia (see map, page 19). When they arrived in Perga (which is in what is now Turkey), John Mark, for whom they apparently had high hopes, left them and returned to Jerusalem (13). We are not given the reason for John Mark's decision but it is obvious from later events that Paul considered him to be very wrong in what he had done (15:38–39). Mark was eventually reconciled to Paul, serving with him as a missionary (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11); Philemon 24).

Paul and his companions travelled north from Perga to Antioch in Pisidia (14; not to be confused with Antioch in Syria). They went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day where the rulers invited Paul to preach. He challenged those who feared God to listen to what he had to say (15–16). If we fear God, we will listen to God's Word and obey it,

The sermons to the Jews recorded in the Book of Acts are rooted in the Old Testament (eg. 2:16–36; 3:13–26; 7:1–53). Notice how Paul declared the sovereignty of God:

- In his choice of Israel to be his people (17).
- In his deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt (17).
- In his destruction of the Canaanite nations and distribution of their land to the people of Israel (19).
- In giving them judges and then King Saul (20–21).
- In removing Saul and raising up David as king (22).
- In fulfilling his promise to raise up a Saviour. ‘*From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Saviour — Jesus.*’ The promise of the Messiah from the family of David was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus (23; cp. verse 32).

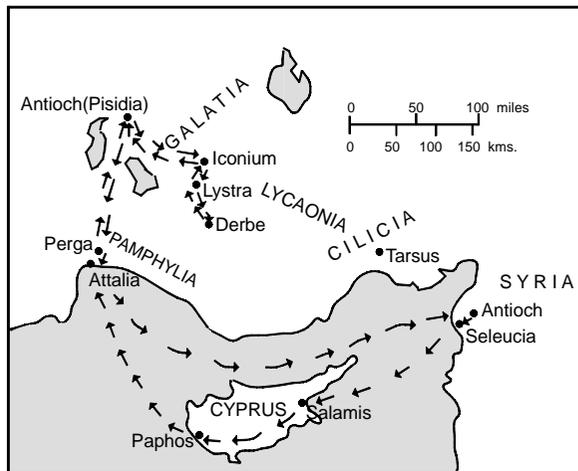
We need to know the Old Testament if we are to understand the New (cp. Luke 24:27,32,44–46). ‘We must see that the relationship of the Old to the New is not that of law to grace – for there is grace in the Old as well as in the New, and law in the New as well as in the Old – but rather that of promise to fulfilment.’ (Rev. James Philip).

Being astonished at the teaching of the Lord

Barnabas and Saul took John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10) as their assistant and began their missionary work in Cyprus (4–5). They landed at Salamis in eastern Cyprus and preached in the Jewish synagogues. They then travelled through the island to Paphos.

The only conversion recorded in Cyprus was that of Sergius Paulus the Roman proconsul, who *called for Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God* (7). Elymas, a Jewish false prophet and sorcerer, sought to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Where men are seeking to know God and his Word, Satan will seek to turn them away from the faith, using false teachers (8). Elymas was struck with blindness at the command of Saul (from now on called ‘Paul’) and the proconsul *believed, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord* (9–12). The miracle had convinced him of a superior power to that possessed by Elymas but notice that he was also amazed by what he heard. **Does this same teaching fill you with a sense of amazement, worship and grateful thanksgiving to God?**

The work in Cyprus was not spectacular apart from this one incident, but we see the pattern for the ongoing missionary work of Paul. There was opposition and hostility to the preaching of the gospel. We must never forget that we are engaged in spiritual warfare (2 Corinthians 10:3–5; Ephesians 6:1–12) but it is reassuring to know God is with us and that he is far more powerful than the enemies of the gospel.

*Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you*

In this psalm the mighty God, the great Judge, summons all the people of the world to listen to him (1–6). Among those gathered before God are his *saints*, who are bound to him by covenant (5). Christians are frequently called *saints* (‘holy ones’) in the New Testament (eg. Acts 9:32; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1).

God’s word to those who profess his name is that sacrifices and burnt offerings are not enough for him. He doesn’t need them (7–13). The Lord wants a people who will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and of praise, and who pay their vows to him (14). We often fall short in giving thanks and praise to God who has called us to proclaim his praises (Hebrews 13:15–16; 1 Peter 2:9).

There is here a wonderful promise for the child of God in troubled times. *‘Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me’* (15). If we would claim the promises of God, we must also remember to obey his commands such as found in verse 14. Have you made vows to God in the past, but have forgotten to keep those solemn promises? **You will never enjoy God’s blessing on your life if you are a promise-breaker.**

The Lord rebukes the wicked who recite his statutes and speak as though they honour his covenant. They have an outward show of religion but they hate instruction and despise the words of God (16–17). God is not deceived by their words and he sees their wicked deeds (18–20). It is foolish of them to reduce God to their puny way of thinking and to imagine that he will not judge them (21–22). Those who say, ‘That’s not my idea of God ...’ when they hear what the Bible teaches about God, should take verse 21 to heart.

How do we glorify God? We do so by offering praise to him and by honouring him in our conduct. *Whoever offers praise glorifies me; and to him who orders his conduct aright I will show the salvation of God* (23).

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit

The title of this psalm indicates that David wrote it after he had been confronted by the prophet Nathan following his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1–15). He was under great conviction for his sin and he truly repented. What is the evidence of true repentance?

- A plea for mercy based on the fact of the *loving-kindness* ('steadfast love') of God and according to the multitude of his *tender mercies* (1). Think of that! God's mercy is so great that there is a multitude of tender mercies to deal with a multitude of sins.
- A desire for forgiveness and for a thorough cleansing from sin (2, 7, 9–10).
- A frank confession of sin with no excuses (3).
- A sense of the enormity of sin. It is not only against those we have wronged, but also against God (4).
- A recognition that we sin because it is our nature to sin. We were '*brought forth in iniquity*' (5).

We should be deeply troubled when we sin. Sin will destroy our testimony and it will silence our lips. When God restores the joy of his salvation our mouths are opened to teach transgressors the ways of God and to praise him (12–15). Have you lost the joy of your salvation (12)? Is it because of sin? Oh, confess that sin to God and repent of it.

The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7,9) but there are sacrifices that God wants from you. *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart — these, O God, you will not despise* (17). There is a false gospel which is influencing many evangelicals today – the gospel of self-esteem. The answer to the needs of sinners is not self-esteem but a broken heart for sin. **When our sin breaks our heart, we will not lightly sin again.** We were thinking yesterday about the sacrifice of praise (Psalm 50:14,23) but there is also the sacrifice of a contrite heart. Such sacrifices God will not despise, but will accept according to the multitude of his *tender mercies*.

They sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit

The church at Antioch was established by Christians who had been driven from Jerusalem by persecution (11:19–26); it became the base for the missionary activity of the early church. The characteristics of a healthy fellowship were found among them. Their leaders were blessed in their evangelistic work (11:20–24) and diligent in their teaching (11:26). The people were also generous in their giving (11:27–30). Barnabas and Saul were among the prophets and teachers at Antioch.

The word '*ministered*' (2) is not the more usual New Testament word meaning 'to serve'; it is translated from the Greek verb from which our English word 'liturgical' is derived and it is also translated '*worship*' in the English Standard Version. We must always remember that our worship and service is first and foremost for God and not for our own enjoyment. I do not advocate dullness in worship but many believe that worship is dead if it does not entertain them. How mistaken they are!

The prophets and teachers at Antioch gave themselves to God in worship and fasting. As they worshipped and fasted, the Holy Spirit directed them to set aside as missionaries two of their number, Barnabas and Saul. Fasting is a neglected discipline in the church today and we are the poorer for it! The church at Antioch was led by godly men who fasted and prayed (3; cp. 14:23). They earnestly sought the Lord and they were brought into line with the mind of the Holy Spirit. — *They sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit ...* (3–4).

There are some important principles for missionary work in these verses. Though Barnabas and Saul were called to their missionary work by God, it was their local church that recognised that call! They were also active in the leadership of the Antioch church. Unproven novices or those who are not already involved in serving the Lord in their local church should not be sent out as missionaries. If we disregard these biblical principles, we are asking for trouble!