

A voyage of discovery

The ups and downs
of the Christian life

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Foreword

Some time ago I met an acquaintance whom I had not seen for several weeks. It was immediately obvious that he had lost weight and was looking in very much better shape. When I commented on this he replied enthusiastically, ‘Yes, I have been on a diet designed by the Mayo Clinic.’ As the conversation continued, it emerged that the diet covered a two-week period and provided a disciplined foundation for him to be in better health for the future. That, of course, is (or ought to be) the point of a diet: to provide a basic restructuring of habits which, if continued, will improve health, well-being and our overall performance. In this instance, apparently, it had been very successful — as one would expect from a diet carefully researched and field-tested by an internationally-renowned hospital.

Here, Derek Thomas provides us with the spiritual equivalent of the Mayo Clinic Diet. In these pages you will find a carefully researched two-week programme designed to help you reshape and re-discipline a daily time of Bible study, meditation and prayer.

We tend to trust such programmes as the Mayo Clinic Diet, because we know they have been designed by reliable

clinicians and have been well tested. The same is true here. Derek Thomas is a reliable, widely respected, long-experienced student of Scripture and the spiritual life, a pastor of Christ's sheep, a scholar, a theologian and a teacher of theological students. So here is a clinician of the soul who can be trusted to give reliable guidance and solid biblical wisdom.

But, more than that, the basic programme which Dr Thomas here prescribes for us — the Songs of Ascent, Psalms 120 – 134 — has had the most rigorous field testing. He has tested it himself. In addition, it has been given the most rigorous use by countless numbers of believers spreading over three millennia.

Above all, this programme was field-tested by the 'founder ... of our faith' (Heb. 12:2), Jesus himself. From the time he was twelve years old he must have sung them, either *en route* to Jerusalem, or during the days he was there, asking questions in the temple, amazing the Jewish scholars with his knowledge of the Lord and his Word. The way in which Dr Luke records that event seems to me to reflect the wonderful words of Psalm 27:4 and 8 (NIV):

One thing I ask of the LORD,
 this is what I seek:
 that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
 all the days of my life,
 to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
 and to seek him in his temple...
 My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'
 Your face, LORD, I will seek.

Here, then, is an invitation to spend two weeks in a spiritual exercise which has brought countless blessings to God's people in every age — and one which our Lord Jesus himself field-tested and found to be wholly reliable. Like the Mayo

Clinic Diet, it requires commitment; it involves discipline; there may even be some pain. But of this you can be sure, if I may paraphrase the apostle Paul a little: while the appetite, discipline and training of the Mayo Clinic Diet is of some value, this spiritual training will help to reshape your whole life and bring rich and lasting benefits.

Sinclair B. Ferguson
Glasgow
July 2001

Introduction

Spirituality has become popular of late, and not just in Christian circles. From *Star Trek* to prime-time soaps, spirituality is no longer a turn-off. In this post-modern age, no one is threatened by anyone else's personal religion.

Is the modern appreciation for spirituality something to be welcomed? Is it a sign that our age is, after all, deeply religious and turning back to God? Religious it is, as every age has been (whether it has realized it or not). But it is often an expression of man's idolatry as much as anything else. Abraham Kuyper, in the *Stone Lectures* delivered at Princeton in 1898, was right when he suggested that the fundamental contrast has always been, still is, and will be to the end: Christianity or paganism, idols or the living God.

Spirituality, like everything else, needs to be evaluated in the light of the Scriptures, what God has written. Spirituality that is not in accord with the Bible is merely an expression which reveals that the human heart is lost and needs to find wholeness in biblical salvation. To cite the oft-quoted words of Augustine: 'Thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee.'¹

This book is designed to portray biblical spirituality as believers in the God of the Bible express it. It takes a collection of fifteen psalms, conveniently lumped together in the Hebrew canon. The collection of Psalms 120 - 134 all bear the same title: A Song of Ascents. Several theories have been put forward to explain this. Some have noticed that there are poetic features within these psalms which function almost like 'steps', rising from one thought to another. Another view notes that the word 'ascent' is related to the Hebrew verb 'to go up', which is used in Ezra 2:1, for example, of the exiles *going up* to Jerusalem. This has led to the idea that these psalms were sung by the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon to their homeland. Three of these psalms are ascribed to David (122, 124, 133), one to Solomon (127), but the rest bear no ascriptions of an author and may date from much later times in the history of the Old Testament.

A more general view is that these were sung, not by exiles, but by the Jewish diaspora as they made their way to Jerusalem in order to attend the various obligatory festivals, such as Passover (March/April), Pentecost (May/June), or the Day of Atonement (September/October). Hundreds, possibly thousands, would travel together to Jerusalem for these occasions, the procession growing as they journeyed through various towns and villages before arriving in the city itself. It is interesting to think that as they made this journey, they sang these psalms, providing food for meditation as they went. Before the Psalter was compiled in the way we have it now, this collection of psalms might have existed as a special 'hymn book' designed for a 'special occasion'.

Another view suggests that these psalms may have been sung in turn on the fifteen steps which led from one court of the temple to another (the word 'ascent' is used of 'steps' or 'stairs' in Exod. 20:26 and 1 Kings 10:19; compare Neh. 3:15;

12:37). It is suggested that the 'ascent' is to be understood in a spiritual way; these psalms are meant to convey a fifteen-step programme of meditative, spiritual progress from one degree to another. Some movement is readily discernible in them, and they can function very easily as guides to growth and maturity in the faith. The 'spiritual person' (1 Cor. 2:15), as Paul refers to him, needs to be fed spiritually. These psalms do just that.

Christian tradition offers many examples of similar attempts to recharge batteries when energy output threatens to come to an end. From such writings as Augustine's *Confessions*, Anselm of Canterbury's *Monologion*, Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, or the principal writings of the Carthusian prior, Guigo II, *Scalaclaustralium*,² works abound offering spiritual rejuvenation through an intense reflection on Christian doctrine and/or experience. In our own time, James I. Packer's *Knowing God*, though not written with this purpose in mind, has, nevertheless, been used in precisely this way to considerable advantage.

Loyola is an interesting example. He is, possibly, one of the most important of the spiritual writers of the sixteenth century. Born c.1491 in Spain, he served briefly in the army of the Duke of Nájera, only to suffer a leg wound which forced him into a prolonged period of convalescence in the castle at Loyola. There he read Ludolf of Saxony's *Life of Christ* which projects the reader, imaginatively, into the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The book caused Loyola to desire a reformation in his own life. His course of reform involved a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. During this journey, Loyola wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* in which he suggests a course of four weeks in which the reader studies and meditates on such doctrines as sin, the life of Christ, the death of Christ, and the resurrection.

If there is one consideration more humbling than another to a spiritually-minded believer, it is, that, after all God has done for him — after all the rich displays of his grace, the patience and tenderness of his instructions, the repeated discipline of his covenant, the tokens of love received, and the lessons of experience learned, there should still exist in the heart a principle, the tendency of which is to secret, perpetual, and alarming departure from God.

Octavius Winslow

*Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*³

Books such as Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* often contain elements which are objectionable. Similar works designed to engage backslidden Christians into 'the deeper life' contain doctrine that is insufficiently orthodox and clear; sometimes the meditations are mystical in the sense of being esoteric and experience-seeking at the expense of truth. That such works have been written throughout church history, witness to the fact that a structured course of self-evaluation and spiritual reflection has proved beneficial in restoring closer communion with God.

Consider, for example, Christian hymns. Many Christians have found that meditating on well-known hymns has a peculiar and distinct advantage for the spiritual life. Many hymns (and psalms, too!) deal particularly with what Richard Baxter called 'the diseases and distempers of the soul'. They are especially useful in addressing the causes of spiritual declension.

The Psalms of Ascent function in much the same way. Whether the various theories about their compilation have any truth, they do appear to possess a particular quality about them which urges the reader forward and upward, from the doldrums of Meshech (Ps. 120:5) to the beauty and heights of worship in Jerusalem (Ps. 122:2) and to the enjoyment of

the presence of God (Ps. 134). Along the way, we find them contemplating the dangers as they ascend towards the hills of Zion (Ps. 121). Later, upon beholding the beauty of Jerusalem, the writer of Psalm 125 bursts into a song of assurance:

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be moved, but abides for ever
(Ps. 125:1).

The next psalm in the series finds him recalling the power demonstrated in the release they had known from captivity:

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!
Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!
(Ps. 126:4-5).

Just as there is geographical progress discernible, so there are valuable lessons to learn — lessons about suffering and its place within the pilgrimage that leads to the eternal city:

‘The ploughers ploughed upon my back;
they made long their furrows’
(Ps. 129:3).

The suffering goes even deeper:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!
O Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!
(Ps. 130:1-2).

Learning this lesson comes closest to what Paul meant when he wrote that ‘we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings’ (2 Cor. 1:5). Participating in these sufferings (1 Peter 4:13) is at the heart of our pilgrimage to heaven. Calvin wrote by way of commentary on a similar passage in 1 Peter, ‘The church of Christ has been from the beginning so constituted, that the cross has been the way to victory, and death a passage to life.’⁴ The secret to be learned is to ‘wait for the LORD’ (Ps. 130:5).

One of my aims in writing this book is to provide Christians with a distinctively Reformed guide to spirituality, a book that distinguishes spirituality from mysticism on the one hand, and ambiguous and eclectic theologies on the other. The church not only needs a renewal of spirituality, but of Reformed and biblical spirituality. But what is this? Can we identify Reformed spirituality as something distinct from spirituality in general? Yes, we can! For one thing, those features that identify and distinguish the Reformed faith generally are equally valid as identifiers in the realm of piety and devotion. What are they? They are many, but five in particular shape the essential character of biblical spirituality.

Firstly, spirituality must be thoroughly theocentric. If God — that is to say, God as he reveals himself in the Bible — isn’t at the heart of our spirituality, then we have something that is a hybrid. What this means in effect is this: we must think of ourselves as naturally corrupt, without interest in those things which are true, and given to that which perverts and obscures the true God. Man’s mind is a perpetual factory of idols, Calvin surmised, and he was right.⁵ We are by nature totally depraved, so aligned to sinful ways that only a sovereign rebirth ‘from above’ — to cite Jesus’ words to Nicodemus (John 3:31) — can set us moving in a different direction. What we need is to be made ‘a new creation’ (2 Cor. 5:17), raised from spiritual death to spiritual life and resurrection, in union with Jesus

Christ (Rom. 6:4-11; Eph. 2:1-10). This frees us from our past so that what we are now 'in Christ' is radically different from what we were before 'in Adam'. This sovereign work of God in conversion forms the first and essential plank in what we may call a Reformed view of spirituality.

To be theocentric necessitates being Trinitarian. God is three persons and God is one Lord. Keeping this 'threeness in one' before us will keep us at the centre of God's revelation of himself. The Trinity is not some device conjured up by the church at Constantinople in order to baffle the minds of everyone thereafter! It is, in fact, the careful pronouncement of the church's findings as it examines the multilayered witness of Scripture to the being of God. To cite Hilary of Poitiers of the fourth century: 'God alone is fit witness of himself', and in this case, his witness is of three persons in one God. We will need the testimony of Scripture to all three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in order to achieve a well-grounded spirituality. At the same time any deviation into polytheism will damn us.

Secondly, spirituality must be Bible based and Bible driven. *Sola Scriptura*, one of the watchwords of the Reformation, will insist that in spirituality, as in everything else, the Bible must define and control. God makes his will known to us *through his Word read, explained and understood*. Paul could say of the God-breathed Scriptures, that they are 'profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:16-17). One such 'good work' is the cultivation of spiritual life and vitality, and here the Scriptures must inform, motivate, encourage and shape. That will mean, at the most basic level, that Christians who desire spiritual renewal must, to cite Cranmer, 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' what the Bible has to say.

The ‘Quiet Time’ can easily degenerate into something individualistic and subjective, ignoring other dimensions of corporate life and responsibility. Reading the Psalms of Ascent, with their pervasive sense of community life, will go a long way in correcting this. But, as is so often the case, the fact that an aberration exists does not mean the thing is wrong in itself. We do need to spend time alone with God and his Word. A spirituality that fails to put the Bible (i.e. Bible reading and Bible study) at the very centre fails to appreciate *how* God speaks to us. Growth in grace can never be achieved without a serious grappling with the Scriptures and experiencing the pain of their correcting and modifying effect upon the totality of our lives.

Thirdly, spirituality must be biblically realistic — realistic, that is, about what can and cannot be achieved in this world as far as our conformity to Christ and his image is concerned; what we generally refer to as sanctification. Realistic? Yes, because unreality abounds in this area. Recognition that we live in a battlefield, surrounded within and without by implacable enemies bent on our destruction, is vital to our worldview as Christians.

The latter part of Romans 7 is vital here. We are to see ourselves as engaged in a war where total victory cannot be achieved until we get to glory. Truthfulness forces us to acknowledge that, as well as making progress, we often lose ground, too: the struggle against the world outside, the flesh within, and against the devil who manipulates both of these to curtail our progress. Thoughts of having ‘arrived’ will be seen as just plain zany. Important, too, will be a realism of what, or *who*, we are — that Romans 7 follows Romans 6! That means understanding that we are dead to sin and alive in Christ; that we have been buried and raised to new life in Christ.

Just as progress will be hampered, progress will also be encouraged by recalling that we are ‘in Christ’ in the sense that we have been raised from the dead, spiritually, into union with the risen and ascended Lord Jesus himself. This truth will give us a platform on which to make advances that nothing else will. It is the realization that we ought to make progress in sanctification because now we *can* do so. We are not ‘in Adam’, hampered by spiritual inability; we are ‘in Christ’ empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is the inexorable logic of Romans 8:10-14, where Paul reasons that, (a) we are in Christ (or, that Christ is in us); (b) we are indwelt by the same Spirit that indwelt Christ; and (c) that we have an obligation to mortify sin and put on the graces that mirror Jesus-likeness. This will keep us from an antinomian, lazy view of sanctification on the one hand, and a psychologically paralysing view of unattainable righteousness on the other.

Fourthly, spirituality must be twin-focused — that is, both on this world and the world which is to come. It should be twin-focused because of the danger of a pietism that misses or denies the importance of life lived in *this* world, and because of an equally important danger of missing the focus of all of living here — as preparation for the world to come. Reformed spirituality will be concerned to prepare souls to live useful and productive lives in this world, appreciating all that God gives in common with everyone else living on earth.

Appreciating the creative and sustaining hand of God in all things, ‘Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father’ (James 1:17), will ensure that we don’t miss our vocation to be ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in *this* world (Matt. 5:13-14). Equally, remembering that in this world ‘we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come’ (Heb. 13:14), is the key note focus of New Testament Christianity.

This is not, as is so often irritatingly labelled, pietistic — as though ‘to live’, as Thomas Ken put it, ‘each day as though thy last’ was somehow misguided. This is, rather, how it ought to be. We are to live, as one puritan Chancellor told his terrified student, as those ‘ready to die’. A spirituality that does not prepare us for heaven isn’t worth anything.

Fifthly, spirituality must involve effort on our part as well as empowering on God’s part. The relationship between sovereignty and responsibility within Reformed expressions of Christianity have sometimes been troublesome; one or other has been emphasized at the expense of, or in denial of, the other. Making too little of the necessity of effort on our side leads to passivity. Views of sanctification and growth in grace that are achieved by osmosis rather than endeavour are the result. There are views of meditation currently in vogue which come close to this view.

Reformed spirituality will not hesitate to apply Calvin’s third use of the law: that we are to be motivated and impelled to seek after God with all our hearts, minds and strength, because God says so. We are culpable if we do not. Equally, we are in need of the empowering of the Holy Spirit to do so. And here, spirituality will take into consideration the various possible conditions of the soul in relationship with God. Some are healthy and others are backslidden — to cite a favourite expression of Jeremiah’s (Jer. 2:19; 3:22; 4:7; 5:6; 15:6, NIV). In each (and everything in between on the spectrum of spiritual diagnosis), the Holy Spirit must come and enable us to do those things which foster and deepen our relationship with God. ‘... if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live’ (Rom. 8:13). It is we who must mortify sin and not God; but, at the same time, it is ‘by the Spirit’. Calling upon God to help us in no way lessens our responsibility; but, it does keep us from a legalism that boasts self-achievement on

the one hand, and a fractured mind that is frustrated by the impossible on the other.

These Psalms of Ascent continue to provide spiritual instruction to weary travellers. Their lessons have a timeless quality about them. Twenty years ago, Eugene Peterson wrote a volume on these psalms which he entitled, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.⁶ I have tried in this volume to approach the psalms from a different point of view, though the overall intent of both is the same: to promote a biblical view of discipleship. As we examine these psalms one by one, their cumulative force is life-changing and reforming. They point us away from introspection and self-centredness to the God of Zion whose glory ought to consume our vision.

Keeping your eye on the ball is an essential lesson in playing golf. Failure here brings tragic and embarrassing results. Equally, keeping our eye on the Lord and his glory is the lesson of these psalms (see Heb. 12:2). Taking a psalm a day, they provide us with just over two weeks in which to get in shape.

Two weeks! From the darkness of 'Kedar' in the opening psalm (120:5; *Kedar* means 'black'), we are led to an altogether different night of temple worship in the final psalm (134:1).

Two weeks! This is a goal worth pursuing.

Each day, we will spend time in one of these psalms. Read the psalm, pray over it, make notes from what you think God might be teaching you. As you read the chapter for that day, keep a journal. Donald Whitney has written:

A journal is one of the best places for charting your progress in the Spiritual Disciplines and for holding yourself accountable to your goals...⁷

At the end of each chapter I have included some questions to ‘stir the juices’, as it were. There are no strict rules, except the need for honesty. Writing down how we respond to God’s teaching can stir the affections in a way that nothing else can.

So, there is the outline of my challenge to you.

Will *you* pursue it with me?

Psalm 120

A Song of Ascents

- ¹ *In my distress I called to the LORD,
and he answered me.*
- ² *Deliver me, O LORD,
from lying lips,
from a deceitful tongue.*
- ³ *What shall be given to you,
and what more shall be done to you,
you deceitful tongue?*
- ⁴ *A warrior's sharp arrows,
with glowing coals of the broom tree!*
- ⁵ *Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech,
that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!*
- ⁶ *Too long have I had my dwelling
among those who hate peace.*
- ⁷ *I am for peace,
but when I speak, they are for war!*

Day 1

A godly man in an ungodly world

- *Begin by reading Psalm 120.*
- *Pray about what you have read.*
- *Make notes on what you think God is teaching you.*
- *Read the chapter.*
- *Answer the questions in the section 'For your journal'.*

Psalm 120

Home is where the heart is. So the saying goes.

There is a Welsh word '*hiraeth*', which is almost impossible to translate. It means an intense homesickness that can render the sufferer ill. There can exist a longing for familiar sights, sounds and smells of what memory calls 'home' that is intense. Something of that 'longing for home' is apparent in this opening psalm of ascent.

Jerusalem was the psalmist's 'home'. It is not that he *lived* there; it is rather that he longed *to be* there. It is quite likely that he had made pilgrimages to this city as a young boy. It was here that he met with his fellow Jews at the occasion of

the great feasts of Israel. More importantly, God himself had made his 'home' here by coming to dwell in the temple. But for some reason, the psalmist finds himself as far away from Jerusalem as it was possible to get.

He talks about being in two places: 'Meshech', which is thought to have been somewhere in the north, near the Black Sea (in what we would regard as the Baltic Republics); and to the south, 'among the tents of Kedar' in the Arabian desert (v. 5). Whatever his precise geographical location, emotionally and spiritually, he resides among the heathen: he feels far away from God and from the comforting reassurance of Christian fellowship. Unlike the sense of joy that opens Psalm 122, here the psalmist is melancholic: saddened by days of deprivation and opposition, he pines for better days to come. A spiritual melancholy has enveloped him. He is singing 'the blues'.

Every now and then, most believers will find themselves suffering from spiritual depression. When things don't go according to *our* plan, we tend to get down. Something of this *dis*-ease is reflected in the opening verse of this psalm: here is a man who is in a state of 'distress' (v. 1; see 'woe', v. 5). 'The Holy Spirit has exhorted the faithful', wrote John Calvin in a comment on Psalm 47:1-2, 'to continue clapping their hands for joy, until the advent of the promised Redeemer.'¹ But there are times when we feel unable to comply with this sentiment. The Psalms are nothing if not honest. And this psalm relates with alarming frankness just how the psalmist felt. In so doing, it accurately reflects the condition of many Christians who find themselves in similar circumstances from time to time.

It probably goes without saying that Psalm 120 is not a 'favourite' psalm for most Christians. On the surface, it is far too pessimistic and gloomy; it goes against the grain of what we modern Christians are led to expect from our faith. Conditions of deprivation and distress are not central

to modern expressions of Christianity. We are taught that singing 'I'm h-a-p-p-y' is essential to our faith. Christians who betray seriousness, or worse, melancholy, are living spiritually impoverished lives. What they need, we are informed, is a fresh baptism of the Spirit, an awakening to what Christianity is all about: unmixed pleasures and prosperity.

Those who propagate such views sometimes cite Scripture to support what they say. Does not the Bible teach that we can expect to receive 'a hundredfold now in this time' such things as 'houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands' (Mark 10:30)? Certainly there are Christians who have taken such verses quite literally, spreading a gospel of health and wealth as the rightful expectation of every believer, and with it an expectation that Christians should experience an unrelenting sense of joy, somewhat narrowly defined as something frothy and exterior.

The supporters of this view of the Christian life forget that Jesus adds a caveat: 'with persecutions' (Mark 10:30)! No part of our Christian experience in this world will be free from suffering in some form or another. Every Christian must expect to receive things he does not want, and to be denied things that he craves. 'Losses and crosses', to borrow a phrase from the Puritans, is part of our lot, no matter how far advanced in holiness we may be. It was a lesson the apostle Paul learned following his first missionary journey: 'through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). And when Christians find themselves up against the wall, facing the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', it is understandable that they express a sense of sadness and near despair. One of the lessons that Jesus teaches us in his earthly life is that in the Garden of Gethsemane he came as close to despair as it is possible to get *without sinning*. Such intense seriousness was fitting for the occasion, and in displaying it,

our Lord sanctions such feelings in the lives of his children. It is both dangerous and wrong to deny them.

The Bible is nothing if not completely candid about the condition of some of its most well-known believers. There are times when the best of God's people are downcast, when all they can say is 'Woe is me!' There are occasions when the light of God's countenance seems to be withdrawn and the Christian believer has to walk about in the dark (Isa. 40:27; 49:14). The first of the Ascent Psalms seeks to identify with this spiritual malaise and to minister to those who suffer from it. It is, perhaps, encouraging in and of itself, that the Bible recognizes the condition so transparently. If it teaches nothing else, it tells us that those who feel like this are not alone. Even some of God's giants have known times of anguish and despair. The psalmist feels far away from the Lord and the whole thing is getting him down.

Isolation from God is something which this psalm shares in common with two others, Psalms 42 and 43. It is the sense of isolation from God that caused the psalmist to be downcast there too: 'These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival' (Ps. 42:4). He had been one of the Levitical singers in the choir at the temple, accustomed to leading the congregation of Israel through the temple gates in joyous celebration of their great religious festivals. But now, physically separated from Jerusalem for some reason, he can no longer participate in those jubilant occasions. He is homesick for what had been the high point of his experience.

The psalmist is not alone in these feelings.

Elijah knew spiritual depression. When he faced the prophets of Baal and the ferocity of Ahab and Jezebel, he

found himself demonstrating the power of the God of Israel by a pyrotechnic display of fire. The water-drenched sacrifice ignited as soon as Elijah called upon God to show his power (1 Kings 18:21-39). And yet, within a few hours we find him sitting beneath a juniper tree, utterly dejected and wishing his life away (1 Kings 19:1-19).

Jonah, in very different circumstances, runs away from God's revealed will. Instead of going to Nineveh to preach a message of forgiveness and reconciliation, he found himself taking a course of action which would lead him in the very opposite direction. When, after God had caught up with him, Jonah repents and does as he is told, we find him sitting underneath a vine and feeling utterly sorry for himself. He says, 'It is better for me to die than to live' (Jonah 4:8).

The two disciples on the Emmaus Road, Cleopas and his companion (was it his wife, perhaps?), are a case in point (Luke 24:13-27). These two are walking the seven-mile journey to Emmaus having witnessed the death and burial of Jesus Christ. They were disappointed, depressed, and close to despair. All their hopes had been dashed to pieces in the events of the previous two or three days. They were going home, and every step of the journey seemed to be painful and wearisome. They even looked *sad* (v. 17).

Life is like that; it is about unfulfilled expectations, sudden providences with devastating, unexplained consequences. You plan ahead only to have those plans shattered by unforeseen events. 'In the world you will have tribulation,' Jesus warned (John 16:33). There is a war in which the Christian finds himself pitted against hostile forces determined to bring him down. The casualties of this conflict are the 'walking worried'. *And the psalmist seems to be one of them!*

What are the causes of this spiritual melancholy? Psalm 120 mentions two in particular.

1. *The opposition of the world.* No Christian is sheltered from the world's ill will. Just because Christians live the way they do, shunning the world's gratification of personal power, profit and pleasure, they can expect the world to hate them. What the psalmist mentions here, 'lying lips' and 'a deceitful tongue' (v. 2), is but the world's response when stung by the believer's refusal of its lifestyle. By building an ark, Noah 'condemned the world' (Heb. 11:7). We may, like the psalmist, desire peace; but the world has declared 'war' (v. 7).

Christians are the Lord's soldier-pilgrims and there is no advance made in the kingdom of God without opposition. The English puritan, John Gere, wrote in a tract, *The Character of an Old English Puritane or Non-conformist* (1646), 'His whole life he accounted a warfare, wherein Christ was his captain, his arms, prayers and tears. The cross his banner and his word [motto]: *Vincit qui patitur* [he who suffers, conquers].'²² It is opposition of this kind that produced in the Puritans such sharpness of wisdom and refinement of discipleship. In God's overall plan, opposition and difficulty are meant for our 'good' (Rom. 8:28).

This is what Jesus tells us to expect. Unbelievers, Jesus warns, will know nothing of the world's opposition: 'If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you' (John 15:18-19). Whether the opposition is cool and calculating, or fervent and ferocious, the effect is the same.

Christians who refuse to falsify data, steal from the company, or condone the sexual liaisons of a modern working environment can expect to be ridiculed, even despised. Promotions may be bypassed in favour of someone who willingly complies with the world's expectations. I think of

a businessman who, when asked to display his product at a prestigious exhibition in London, complied but refused to open his stand on the Lord's Day — the busiest day of all. Though there was admiration from some, bemusement by others, there was equally a sense of outrage, for the act had appeared to condemn the unprincipled standards of the world. This is part of what we can expect, and Peter warns us not to be surprised when trials of this sort come upon us suddenly (1 Peter 4:12).

God can look sourly, and chide bitterly, and strike heavily, even where and when he loves dearly. The hand of God was very much against Job, and yet his love, his heart, was very much set upon Job... The hand of God was sore against David and Jonah, when his heart was much set upon them. He that shall conclude that the heart of God is against those that his hand is against will condemn the generation of the just, whom God unjustly would not have condemned.

Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices*³

It is interesting that the psalmist is the subject of malicious talk. So was John Bunyan. Making his way to a service on horseback in the pouring rain, he noticed a young girl whom he recognized as heading to the same service. In giving her a ride on the horse certain people gossiped, accusing the preacher of impropriety. The tale followed him for many years and was the cause of much distress.

Sadly, tale-bearers are to be found in the church also. It is one reason why James warns us that the tongue is 'a fire, a world of unrighteousness ... set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell' (James 3:6).

Hostility is, of course, what Jesus experienced: an uncomprehending family, an unsympathetic government, and even friends who betrayed him. Lies and deceit were the cause of his crucifixion. And it is this fact alone — that in experiencing the hostility of the world we are at the same time following in the footsteps of our Master — which strengthens and motivates us to persevere.

2. *The allurement of the world.* Complaining as he does that he has lived among the heathen for too long (vv. 5-6), the psalmist seems to raise a quite different problem. The world is more than just hostile and antagonistic to the believer. There is a quite different and far more subtle danger: that of yielding to the world's allurement. One of Satan's ploys is to undermine the believer's holiness by compromising his lifestyle. Believers are to pursue holiness, an internal and external conformity to be like Christ. The constant pressure of the world is such that it prevents this process of change from taking place, and it may be that the psalmist was aware of the world's stamp upon his current lifestyle. The sanctifying effect of rubbing shoulders with other believers had been withdrawn.

It is the eternal purpose of the triune God to conform his people to the image of Christ. No one saw it clearer than Peter, who having failed Christ dismally on several occasions, insisted that believers are chosen 'according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood' (1 Peter 1:2). By way of incentives he adds that God himself is holy and that we are to be like him (v. 15), that Christ died in order to purchase holiness for us (vv. 18-19), and that we must all meet God as our Judge and give an account of ourselves (v. 17). Living a worldly life frustrates the

counsels of the triune God whose aim is to purify us and make us like his Son.

Perhaps the psalmist is conscious that the distinctive qualities of holiness are missing from his life. In taking stock of his current spiritual condition he notices the elements of compromise. It is a time of leanness. He thinks about the joy of worshipping God in Jerusalem and *he misses it!*

It has to be said at once that this is a good sign. People who don't miss spiritual things when they are forcibly kept away for one reason or another are in bad shape. If we can be absent from worship for no good reason and not miss it, we are in a dangerous condition, a hair's breadth away from catastrophe. Why was the psalmist far away from Jerusalem? He may have had a perfectly good reason, but perhaps he had moved there quite deliberately because of some worldly advantage. Perhaps he had entertained the idea that he was strong enough to survive without regular visits to the place of worship. Perhaps, like some Hebrew Christians in the New Testament, assembling together with other believers was something he had begun to regard as unnecessary (Heb. 10:25). Such notions are, of course, quite wrong.

The way of recovery

When we find ourselves in similar circumstances to that of the psalmist, how can we cope? What can we do to remedy the situation? The answer seems to lie in recognizing five important truths.

Firstly, it is important to recognize that *an enemy exists*. It is always fatal to underestimate the power of an enemy bent on our destruction. The psalmist was not about to make that mistake. His enemy was a liar, one who had declared war.

It would be foolish to ignore his threats. It is a lesson that Christians fail to learn to their cost. It is so easy to downplay the threat that the world, or indwelling sin, or the devil himself poses. To pretend that the forces of darkness are inconsequential can prove to be the means of our destruction. In dealing with indwelling sin, for example, Paul assumes that we have recognized our need to deal with sin and that we have the means to do so when he exhorts his readers, 'For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live' (Rom. 8:13).

Secondly, it is equally important to recognize *our inadequacy to overcome our enemy*. Just as Paul encourages mortification *by the power of the indwelling Spirit* in Romans 8:13, so the psalmist finds himself unable to cope. He is in 'distress' (v. 1). The Christian life is never easy, and saints down through the ages have confessed their weakness in the face of the enemy. The New Testament warns the one who thinks he is strong, 'take heed lest he fall' (1 Cor. 10:12). Jesus said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick' (Matt. 9:12).

This leads to a third truth: a recognition that *the source of all our hope lies in the power of God*. It is in the name of the 'LORD' (v. 1) that the psalmist finds renewed strength and motivation in his melancholy. This is the very name that had enlivened Moses' faith when asked to return to Egypt knowing that a price lay on his head (Exod. 3:15). There is a hymn which includes the lines:

The arm of flesh will fail you,
You dare not trust your own.⁴

George Duffield Jr
1818-1888

That is why the psalmist begins with a plea to God to come and help him: 'In my distress I called to the LORD' (v. 1). It is because he has realized his weakness that he cries to the Lord to save and deliver him.

At one point in the psalm he confronts his enemy and warns him of the consequences of his malice. His words of enmity may well have hurt the psalmist, but they are as nothing in comparison with the judgement that this enemy will receive from God. As weapons, the psalmist's enemy has used words, likened to 'sharp arrows' and 'glowing coals' (v. 4; the roots of the 'broom tree' apparently burn well and make good charcoal). These metaphors pick up allusions elsewhere in the Old Testament: 'A man who bears false witness against his neighbour is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow' (Prov. 25:18); 'A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire' (Prov. 16:27). In the judgement, the justice of God will see to it that like is met with like: arrows will be met with arrows and fire with fire. Something similar is found in an earlier psalm:

But God shoots his arrow at them;
they are wounded suddenly.
They are brought to ruin, with their own tongues
turned against them;
all who see them will wag their heads
(Ps. 64:7-8).

This is what the psalmist does, then, when he finds himself in trouble: he confronts his enemy and tells him what God is going to do! It was David's tactic when confronting Goliath. He said to him, 'You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have

defied' (1 Sam. 17:45). It was also the strength that Gideon gained against the Midianites: 'A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!' (Judg. 7:20). It is for this very reason that the apostle Paul encourages Christians to be strong 'in the Lord and in the strength of his might' (Eph. 6:10). It is the only way to confront the enemy: armed with the power of God!

It is at once a confidence in God's sovereignty and power to which the psalmist has recourse. What does the knowledge of God's sovereignty imply? It implies many things, including the reassurance that his purposes cannot fail (Isa. 46:9-10; Dan. 4:34-35). If God is not sovereign he cannot be God! It was this very truth that helped Job in his trials: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted' (Job 42:2). Even the cruel actions of the psalmist's enemies were part of God's overall plan and purpose — something that the Bible witnesses to in Job's trials (Job 2:3), as well as in the greatest of all crimes: the death of Christ himself (Acts 2:23). The explanation is given by Joseph, who had himself suffered at the hands of his own brothers' evil intent, 'you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive' (Gen. 50:20).

'From my childhood up,' wrote Jonathan Edwards, 'my mind had been full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty... It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me. But I remember the time very well, when I seemed to be convinced, and fully satisfied, as to this sovereignty of God... I have often since had not only a conviction but a delightful conviction. The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God.'¹⁵

Knowing God as the King of our lives is the way out of spiritual melancholy.

Truth number four is that *prayer is the key that unlocks the gate to renewed fellowship with God*. It appears as though the psalmist had known God's help on many an occasion in the past. The opening verse is a testimony to the benefit of answered prayer: 'In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. Deliver me, O LORD...' (vv. 1-2). His expectation of God's help *now* is based on the experience of knowing his help on previous occasions. The way out of his despondency and gloom is to have recourse to prayer. Fellowship with God in prayer is the means by which his strength is renewed.

We are to pray at all times (1 Thess. 5:17). That means that we are to pray at every significant moment, making the most of every opportunity. This is especially good advice when we find ourselves in trouble of any kind. Just as police need constantly to keep in touch with headquarters so that their whereabouts might be known, and that they in turn may pass on information, so the Christian needs to keep in constant touch with the Lord. When Nehemiah sent up an 'arrow-like' prayer when he was asked to explain his demeanour to King Artaxerxes, his instant recourse to prayer *at that moment* was the result of a habit of disciplined prayer (Neh. 2:1-4; compare 1:4). It is the same here. The psalmist knows from previous occasions that 'prayer works'.

When all things seem against us, to drive us to despair
We know one gate is open, one ear will hear our prayer.⁶

Prayer is a renewal of fellowship with God. By vocalizing the condition of our souls before the Lord we are reminded that he came into this world in the person of Jesus Christ. By prayer we are reminded of our Sin-bearer and Substitute who

is able to ‘sympathize with our weaknesses’ (Heb. 4:15). ‘For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted’ (Heb. 2:18).

Being serious about his enemy, his need, and God’s sovereign power to which he has recourse through prayer, the psalmist finds the beginnings of his release from spiritual depression. The journey which he now takes, a journey that we will follow in these psalms, is one which will lead to the very greatest of spiritual blessings. There is a way out of spiritual depression and it begins by honestly facing up to our present condition. If you find yourself in similar circumstances to the psalmist then begin by acknowledging it. Do more than that! Go and tell God all about it! *Tell him everything!*

Maybe before we can do that, we need to ask ourselves whether we miss the presence of God in our lives as much as the psalmist did. Perhaps we need to pray first, ‘Lord make me thirsty for yourself.’ If a bout of spiritual depression will bring you to pray a prayer like that, you will have cause to turn around and thank God for it!

There is one final truth — the prayer isn’t answered! More accurately, it *is* answered, but not in the way we might have expected. Recognizing this — that God makes us wait for his blessings — is part of the remedy to despair. The pilgrim remains in a dark place at the end of the psalm, but armed now with fresh resolve. Darkness had brought out some steeliness in soul. In saying, ‘not *yet*’, God has strengthened him for the harsher battles of life.

For your journal...

1. Why are some psalms more appealing to you than others? As you think about this, consider whether an imbalance has crept into your life because you have failed to appreciate the breadth of spirituality expressed in the book of Psalms.
2. Do you know what it means to be discouraged? Are there particular issues that constantly get you down? What are they?
3. If the motto *Vincit qui patitur* (he who suffers, conquers) is true, how should this affect the way you view your life as a Christian?
4. Have you been absent from corporate worship recently? Are there good reasons for this absence? Is this a sign of backsliding?