

# DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

February 20, 2022 | Seeking Justice—Finding Praise

## PREPARATION

### GETTING READY

What situations could arise in the coming months and years that would challenge your faith?

Read Psalm 9.

Pray this study will encourage you to depend on God when you encounter trials in your faith.

## THIS WEEK

### KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

When we are suffering because of the actions of others, we can count on God's justice.

### THEOLOGY APPLIED

We can praise God even while enduring trials of every kind because of our faith in God's justice (James 1:2).

### MEDITATE

*"Sing praises to the Lord, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell among the peoples his deeds! For He who avenges blood is mindful of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted" (Psalm 9:11–12).*

## GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to relate to the psalmist's outlook in times of trouble.

Q: *How do you encourage yourself to persevere when your faith is tested?*

Q: *Why is it important to remember God's faithfulness to you in the past?*

"Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." This perhaps overly pessimistic line is frequently put forward as a reason we should be students of history. Failure to be a student of the past has led to some of the most pivotal moments in human history. Consider, for instance, the parallels often noted between the invasion of Russia by Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler in 1941. Napoleon's invasion began on June 23; Hitler's began on June 22. Both believed they would occupy Moscow before winter. Both underestimated the amount of territory their invasions would cover. Both underestimated the number of battalions needed to succeed as well as the level of resistance they would face. Both campaigns were stalled in December. The failure and tremendous casualties of both campaigns led to more significant defeats in Western Europe. Had Hitler learned from and avoided the mistakes of Napoleon, the course of WWII might have looked very different. War historians have also noted broader parallels between the British (19th century), Russian (20th century), and NATO (21st century) invasions of Afghanistan.

The book of Psalms has a more optimistic outlook of learning from the past. The psalmists frequently invite the reader to look to the past for examples of God's faithfulness. Celebrating the past faithfulness of the Lord will renew the readers' strength to endure in the present. If God was faithful in the past, He will be faithful again in the present. We only need to be reminded of His past faithfulness. In Psalm 9, the psalmist faced hostility from his enemies. In the midst of his struggle, he remembered instances of God's past faithfulness and anticipated the ways in which God would prove Himself faithful again.

Q: *What specific events from your past can you draw on for strength when your faith is challenged?*

Q: *How can you use the experiences of other Christians to strengthen your faith in preparation for times when your faith is challenged?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – As you read Psalm 9, you will recognize that the psalmist was confident God would preserve him because of His faithfulness in the past. The psalmist had specific instances from his own experience

in mind. You have already been encouraged to keep a spiritual journal to refer to in times of trial. The psalmist was likely also aware of God's faithfulness to heroes from Israel's past. He would have at least been familiar with the patriarchs, Moses, and Joshua. We can share his appreciation for the faithful heroes found in Scripture (Hebrews 11). We can add to these the stories of faithful Christians who lived in the centuries between biblical times and us. One of the best ways to strengthen your faith is to read biographies of Christians from the past. Many Christians missionaries over the past several centuries, such as William Carey or Adoniram Judson, endured incredible sorrow for the sake of spreading the gospel to areas where it was unknown. Their biographies can be a tremendous source of encouragement when our faith is being challenged. Other examples include George Muller, who started orphanages that cared for thousands of children despite his own personal poverty, or Gresham Machen, who helped preserve biblical Christianity when liberal Protestant theology threatened to overshadow its fundamental beliefs. There are many stories of faithful Christians of the past who can encourage us in the present if we will only explore their lives.

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The structure of Psalm 9 is difficult to ascertain. The psalmist seems to meander from one point to the next before returning to a previous point. The psalm does not have tightly developed stanzas or other structuring features. Nevertheless, the main themes of Psalm 9 can be loosely organized into three movements in the first half which are then repeated in the second half.

1. PRAISE GOD FOR HIS WONDERFUL DEEDS, PAST AND PRESENT.
2. GOD WILL JUDGE THE WICKED WHO OPPOSE HIM.
3. HOPE IN GOD'S JUSTICE.

## GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each of the three thematic movements in Psalm 9.

## 1. PRAISE GOD FOR HIS WONDERFUL DEEDS, PAST AND PRESENT.

### ■ PSALM 9:1-2, 11-14

**Q:** *How many different ways does the psalmist describe his praise of God in verses 1-2?*

**Q:** *What wonderful deeds could the psalmist have had in mind?*

As will be more and more evident as Psalm 9 progresses, the psalmist was suffering from the torment of his enemies. He was seeking God's deliverance and began to reflect on the mighty ways God had worked on behalf of His people in the past. Although the psalmist did not identify specific events, the exodus from Egypt was paramount in Israel's history. The people of God were enslaved, abused, and exploited by the Egyptians (Exodus 1:8–14). They turned to God for help, and He resolved to deliver them from slavery (Exodus 2:23–25) and secure the inheritance He had promised their forefathers (Exodus 3:15–17). This event served as a paradigm for how God would come to Israel's rescue in the future. The conquering of the promised land as recorded in Joshua is another example of how God had worked miraculously in Israel's past.

Such reflection on God's past deliverance led to immediate and exhaustive praise on the part of the psalmist. The initial two verses seem so disjointed from the rest of the psalm that it almost appears as if the author forgot the occasion driving him to compose it once he began thinking of God's past deliverance. He expressed his thanksgiving in as many ways possible.

**Q:** *What keeps us from showing the kind of thanksgiving evident in verses 1-2?*

**Q:** *Why is thanksgiving an appropriate response to God's work in the world?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – For many of us, the idea of praising God for His wonderful deeds seems foreign and trite. The secular worldview has infected our thinking more than we understand or would dare admit. For many of us, even though we believe in God and His active presence in the world, our default assumption is that the world is continuing along its way with little purpose or direction aside from what we give it. For some of us, maybe this tendency is driven by a desire to not over-spiritualize what we take to be everyday occurrences. Such a mindset would have been foreign to the mind of the psalmist. He was inviting us to view the world from a much different angle. He saw God at the center of every event he encountered, and thus, he could offer God praise for every good thing. Thanksgiving was real for the psalmist because God's activity in his world was real to him.

Q: *Why did the psalmist call for corporate praise even in the midst of his time of need?*

Q: *What gave the psalmist confidence that God would act on his behalf?*

The psalmist was confident God would intervene in his present time of distress because He sits enthroned in Zion. “Zion” can refer to the city of Jerusalem, to the city of God, or to the mountain on which Israel’s temple stood. The attribution of Psalm 9 to David in the superscription can be problematic because Israel’s temple was built after David’s death by his son Solomon. There is ample evidence to suggest David could anticipate the construction of the temple at this location. While David was prohibited from building the temple himself (1 Kings 5:3; 1 Chronicles 22:6–10), he selected the location and also made preparations for its construction (1 Chronicles 22). The temple symbolized God’s presence in Israel and His rule over creation. It is the manifestation of His heavenly rule encroaching on earth.

The psalmist called for communal praise because he was anticipating that God would act in his current time of need. Although he did not give the specific circumstances regarding his time of need, he created a remarkable contrast between the place of his plight and the place of his praise. He felt as if he were in the gates of death. “The gates of death” is a poetic euphemism. Euphemisms are milder words or expressions used to replace harsh realities. Think of how we use the phrase “pass away” to refer to death. We might use the expression “on death’s doorstep” to describe what the psalmist was feeling. He was basically saying to God, “I’m dying here!” Even though he was concerned for his life, he remained confident that God would intercede on his behalf. Although he voiced his plea from the gates of death, he anticipated the moment he would voice his praise from the gates of the “daughter of Zion,” a way of referring to Jerusalem.

Q: *In what ways are we trained to look elsewhere for deliverance during times of need?*

Q: *How does the church function as a means by which God provides deliverance?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – It is crucial for us to realize that the psalmist looked to Zion when he found himself in a time of need. David could have looked to his military to defend himself against his enemy. He could have looked

to his storehouses during an enemy siege. While he certainly relied on these things, he recognized that his security ultimately rested in God, and that's where he pointed his audience. Although Israel's kings were supposed to be just rulers, David recognized that his listeners needed to turn to God even before they sought intervention from the king. We must maintain this sequence of priorities in our times of need. Our ultimate deliverer is God. This is true of our need for salvation, and it is just as true of every other need that arises throughout the course of our lives. Christians are not forbidden to receive government aid in times of need or crisis. We should certainly seek assistance from trained medical professionals during times of sickness or emergency, but we must always remember that God is our ultimate deliverer. Apart from Him, the efforts of all others will be in vain.

## 2. GOD WILL JUDGE THE WICKED WHO OPPOSE HIM.

### ■ PSALM 9:3–6, 15–18

**Q:** *What does the phrase “my just cause” indicate about the psalmist’s predicament?*

**Q:** *Why does the psalmist want the memory of the wicked blotted out forever?*

The psalmist described his need using a courtroom scene in verses 3–4. Given that the enemies are identified with the nations, this courtroom functions as an extended metaphor rather than an actual event. In the metaphor he created, the psalmist has undertaken some kind of action he believed was just (v. 4), but his enemies were using it as an excuse to condemn him and seek his destruction. When they brought the psalmist before God, who functions as the judge (v. 3), God vindicated him (v. 4) and turned their accusation back on them (v. 3). The enemies thought they had the upper hand, but their schemes were undermined by God’s commitment to righteousness.

In verse 6, the psalmist asked God to destroy even the memory of the wicked. The concept of forgiveness may illustrate what the psalmist has in mind. If you have ever been offended or hurt by someone, you know that even if you forgive the person, you still remember what they did. Their actions are seared into your memory. The psalmist wanted to be completely free of the burden of his enemy, so he yearned for God to take away even the memory of their accusation.

**Q:** *How did the psalmist's experience differ from Jesus's experience at His trial?*

**Q:** *Why is it important for us to put the evil deeds of the wicked out of our minds forever?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – For Christians, the psalmist's courtroom scene must evoke memories of Jesus. Like the psalmist, Jesus lived a just life on earth but was taken to court and tried by His enemies. Unlike with the psalmist, God did not intervene on Jesus's behalf. The only man who could be described as truly righteous died on behalf of unrighteous sinners like us. Because of our sin, we should all have been justly condemned. Instead, the deliverance Jesus deserved did not come. He suffered God's wrath as though He were guilty so we would not have to. The righteousness that belongs to Jesus has been applied to us so that God may intervene on our behalf and declare us "not guilty."

**Q:** *What causes the reversal of fortunes between the wicked (v. 6) and the poor/ needy (v. 18)?*

**Q:** *How is the fate of the poor and needy (v. 18) contrasted with that of the wicked in verse 6?*

As in the court scene the psalmist described in verses 3–4, the plot of the wicked was turned against them and resulted in their own destruction. They fell into their own pit and were caught in their own net (vv. 15–16). When God intervened in judgment, the wicked were caught in a comedy of errors of their own making. God did not unfairly side against them. His determination to uphold righteousness means their own unrighteous deeds led to their undoing.

The judgment of the wicked coincides with the deliverance of the poor and needy. The decision to contrast the wicked with poor and needy adds another dynamic to the plot of the wicked. Their evil deeds included the exploitation of others who were powerless to stop them. At God's intervention, however, the outlook of the poor and needy completely changed. Where the wicked will be quickly forgotten (v. 6), God's deliverance means He has remembered the poor and needy.

Q: *How do you see the world working toward its own destruction?*

Q: *How have some of your own plans undermined your happiness?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Perhaps the most amusing aspect of Psalm 9 is how it describes the wicked falling into their own traps. This brings up memories of the Road Runner cartoons I enjoyed as a kid. No matter how brilliant the coyote’s scheme was, it always backfired and worked to his own detriment. This is also the most tragic element of Psalm 9 because of how frequently we see this scenario play out in real life. Most people recognize that major issues confront our society, but we seem obsessed with investing in one bad idea after another to resolve them. Once an idea proves unfruitful, it is vilified, and a worse idea takes its place. The situation is even worse on the personal level. The father worries about providing for his family, but then works so many jobs or such long hours that he becomes estranged from his household. The mother wants so badly for her children to succeed that she pushes them until they resent her. The teenager (or executive) wants so badly to be accepted that he compromises his beliefs and integrity.

The common denominator in all these scenarios is the failure to accept sin as our worst enemy and the gospel as our only solution. We should never expect our society to turn around apart from widespread acceptance of the gospel. We should never expect to find order and purpose in our lives if we fail to place reconciliation with God through the blood of Jesus Christ at the center of everything we do. Until we embrace the gospel as the solution to our greatest need, we will always find ourselves in the same trap as the wicked in Psalm 9. Our best laid plans can undermine the joy we are seeking.

Q: *What is the purpose of the words “higgaion” and “selah” (vv. 16, 20)?*

Q: *Why is it important for Bible translations to retain these words?*

As you read through the Psalms, you will notice a variety of foreign words retained in the English translation. The superscriptions are filled with words that are unfamiliar to us, such as *maskil* (Psalm 32) or *shiggaion* (Psalm 7). Some words occur within the psalms themselves, as is the case in Psalm 9 with *higgaion* and *selah*. These words stand out to us on our first encounter, but it is fairly easy to see that they are musical terms of some sort. These



words offer an important reminder to us that the Psalms are poetic in nature, and many were used in public worship. Due to their technical nature, the meaning of these terms was not often preserved. Although it is difficult to say for certain, *Selah* is probably a signal to change musical instruments or for the musical accompaniment to begin again. The word *higgaion* seems to stem from the same root as the word often translated as “murmur” or “meditate.” Most scholars surmise it means to slow down.

Q: *Do you find it challenging to read the psalms?*

Q: *How do our normal reading tendencies fight against us when reading poetry?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – While many Christians find the Psalms to be an unending source of encouragement for their faith, many others struggle with the poetic and non-narrative format. They find it challenging to apply poetic expression to their lives. I have counted myself in this latter category for much of my life. For those of us who are uninspired by the psalms, one of the main reasons is that our reading habits work against us appreciating the intricacies of the psalms. We are trained to read quickly through texts in order to be as productive as possible. Even better, to skim through material to pick out the main point. The Psalms can never be appreciated when read in this manner. The pervasive use of metaphor and the non-narrative framework mean we can never “get in a groove” when reading the Psalms. We need to follow the instructions of the psalmist where he included a note to *haggaion*. We need to slow down to appreciate the style of writing used in the Psalms. As one who has struggled to appreciate the Psalms in the past, I can verify there is much spiritual edification to be gained from them if you will slow down and appreciate them for what they are. You cannot speedread the Psalms.

### 3. HOPE IN GOD’S JUSTICE.

#### ■ PSALM 9:7–10, 19–20

Q: *How does God’s reign compare to the reign of wicked nations?*

Q: *Why was the psalmist able to put such trust in God?*

The psalmist's only hope was in God's righteous judgment. This hope for God to intervene is grounded in the psalmist's belief that God remains on His throne even when it does not look like it. God's kingship is vital to the Christian faith. We recognize the rule of modern nations over their territory, but we also recognize that their claim to authority is contingent upon God's rule over the whole earth. Where wicked nations will eventually be blotted from memory (v. 5), God sits upon His throne forever (v. 7). His reign means He is able to establish righteousness.

The psalmist called the Lord a stronghold for the oppressed in times of trouble. This is one of the most prevalent themes in the Psalter (Psalm 46:7, 11; 59:16-17; 62:2, 7). Another frequent image used in the Psalms to allude to God's protection is finding shelter under His wings (Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). The oppressed (v. 9) and the afflicted (v. 12) can depend on His protection. These words are the Old Testament equivalent of the "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3).

**Q:** *How can we rely on God's protection today?*

**Q:** *Why might God's judgment, if it is temporary, be a good thing for the nations?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Many people, even Christians, struggle to understand God's judgment of the unrighteousness. Our culture often views God as a benevolent grandfather-type who would never disapprove of or punish anything His children want to do. Such a perception of God demands a very selective reading of Scripture. Psalm 9 certainly would not be included on the docket. What many people fail to recognize about God's judgment is that it can lead people to repentance and faith on earth. Christians believe God will decisively judge between the wicked and the righteous at the end of this age, and that time of judgment will not include an opportunity to repent afterward. But until then, God's judgment offers a clear picture for our world of who truly reigns over the cosmos. When faced with God's judgment, people have a clear choice. They can harden their hearts and continue in their rebellion against His authority, or they can heed the warning His judgment provides and repent of their sin. For now, regardless of what the wicked choose, His judgment offers an opportunity for repentance. Christians can rejoice in God's deliverance, but we cannot relish the judgment of the wicked while an opportunity remains for them to repent. We need to pray for them to repent (Matthew 5:44).

## NEXT STEPS

Psalm 9 encourages readers to look to the past to gain confidence in God's willingness to act in current times of need. This lesson started by recommending you read biographies of significant figures from Christianity's past. You should study their lives to find examples of God's faithfulness you can use to encourage yourself in times of need. It is likely, however, that you can also find encouragement a little closer to home. Take some time to talk with members of your church, especially older members, to hear their stories of God's faithfulness. It is great to read biographies of heroes of the faith from generations past, and you should. But if you take the time, you will also find examples of God's faithfulness in your own church. Listening to their stories has added bonuses. Christian biographies can sometimes make us believe these figures were some sort of super Christian, but speaking to the people in your church will help you realize that God is concerned with average Christians just as much as the ones others have written books about. Furthermore, when we receive the wisdom of those in our church, we can continue to go to them in the future for encouragement. This week, have an intentional conversation with someone from whose stories will encourage you to preserve in your faith.

## PRAY

*+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.*

*Father, help me to look to your past faithfulness to find strength for my current need.*

*God, help me during my time of affliction. I know I can trust in your enduring grace. You are on your throne. Your rule stretches from heaven to earth.*

*Jesus, may the nations recognize their need for you in the midst of judgment before it is too late.*

*God, help me to read your Word with patience in order to seek understanding.*

