

# Singing *the* Lord’s Song in a Strange Land



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Ps. 79:5–13, Ps. 88:3–12, Ps. 69:1–3, Ps. 22:1, Psalm 77, Ps. 73:1–20, 1 Pet. 1:17.*

**Memory Text:** “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land?” (*Psalm 137:4*).

**W**e do not need to get deep into the book of Psalms in order to discover that the Psalms are uttered in an imperfect world, one of sin, evil, suffering, and death. The stable creation run by the Sovereign Lord and His righteous laws is constantly threatened by evil. As sin corrupts the world more and more, the earth has increasingly become “a strange land” to God’s people. This reality creates a problem to the psalmist: How does one live a life of faith in a strange land?

As we already have seen, the psalmists acknowledge God’s sovereign rule and power, as well as His righteous judgments. They know that God is the everlasting and never-failing refuge and help in times of trouble. For this reason, the psalmists are at times perplexed (who isn’t?) by the apparent absence of God and the flourishing of evil in the face of the good and Sovereign Lord. The paradoxical nature of the Psalms as prayers is demonstrated in the psalmists’ responses to God’s seeming silence. In other words, the psalmists respond to God’s perceived absence, as well as to God’s presence.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 3.

## The Days of Evil

**Read** Psalm 74:18–22 and Psalm 79:5–13. What is at stake here?

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The psalmist seeks to grasp the great controversy between God and the powers of evil, and he points to God's unfathomable forbearance, as well as to His infinite wisdom and power.

The problem of evil in the Psalms is primarily theological; it inevitably concerns questions about God. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is seen principally as a divine scandal because it provided an opportunity for the heathen to blaspheme God. God's inheritance (the people of Israel) is the sign of His divine election and covenant (*Deut. 4:32–38; Deut. 32:8, 9*) that will never fail. The concept of God's inheritance also contains an end-time dimension, as one day all nations will become God's inheritance and will serve Him. The notion that the nations invaded God's inheritance threatens these divine promises.

No question, the psalmist acknowledges that the sins of the people corrupted the people's covenantal relationship with God and brought upon the people all the consequences (*Ps. 79:8, 9*). The people's survival depends solely upon God's gracious intervention and the restoration of the covenantal bond through the atonement of sin. The Lord is "God of our salvation," which conveys God's faithfulness to His covenantal promises (*Ps. 79:9*).

However, more important than the restoration of Israel's fortunes is the defense of God's character in the world (*Ps. 79:9*). If the evil actions of the nations go unpunished, it will appear that God has lost His power (*Ps. 74:18–23, Ps. 83:16–18, Ps. 106:47*). Only when God saves His people will His name be justified and uplifted.

As today, the same principle existed back then. Our sins, our backsliding, our evils, can bring disrepute not only on ourselves but, worse, on the God whose name we profess. Our wrong actions can have detrimental spiritual effects on our witness and mission, as well. How many people have been turned off to our faith by the actions of those professing the name of Christ?

**"The honor of God, the honor of Christ, is involved in the perfection of the character of His people."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 671. How do you understand this important truth and what it should mean in your own Christian life?**

## At Death's Door

**Read** Psalm 41:1–4; Psalm 88:3–12; and Psalm 102:3–5, 11, 23, 24. What experiences do these texts describe? In what can you relate to what is said here?

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These prayers for salvation from illness and death demonstrate that God's children are not exempt from the sufferings of this world. The Psalms reveal the psalmist's terrible afflictions. He is without strength, withering like grass, unable to eat, set apart with the dead, lying like the slain in the grave, repulsive to his friends, suffering and in despair. His bones cling to his skin.

Many psalms assume the Lord has permitted the trouble because of Israel's disobedience. The psalmist recognizes that sin can bring sickness; therefore, he refers to the forgiveness that comes before healing (*Ps. 41:3, 4*). However, some psalms, such as Psalm 88 and Psalm 102, acknowledge that the innocent suffering of God's people is a fact of life, no matter how hard to understand.

In Psalm 88, God is charged with bringing the psalmist to the verge of death (*Ps. 88:6–8*). Notice, however, that even when the most daring complaints are uttered, the lament is clearly an act of faith, for if the Lord in His sovereignty allowed trouble, He could restore the well-being of His child.

At the grave's threshold, the psalmist remembers God's wonders, loving-kindness, faithfulness, and righteousness (*Ps. 88:10–12*). Despite his sense of being stricken by God, the psalmist clings to God. Although he suffers, he does not deny God's love and knows that God is his only salvation. These appeals show that the psalmist knows not only suffering but also has an intimate knowledge of God's grace and that the two do not necessarily exclude each other.

In short, both God's permitting of suffering and His deliverance are demonstrations of His ultimate sovereignty. Knowing that God is in control inspires hope. When we read Psalm 88 in the light of Christ's suffering, we are awed by the depths of His love, in which He was willing to pass through death's door for the sake of humanity.

**Think about Jesus on the cross and what He suffered because of sin. How should that reality, that God in Christ suffered even worse than any of us, help us keep faith even amid times of suffering and trial?**

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## Where Is God?

**Read** Psalm 42:1–3, Psalm 63:1, Psalm 69:1–3, and Psalm 102:1–7. What causes great pain to the psalmist?

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Not only does personal and communal sufferings trouble the psalmist but also, if not more, God’s seeming lack of attention to His servants’ hardships. God’s absence is felt like intense thirst in a dry land (*Ps. 42:1–3, Ps. 63:1*) and mortal anguish (*Ps. 102:2–4*). The psalmist feels removed from God and compares himself to lonely birds. “I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop” (*Ps. 102:6, 7, NKJV*).

The mention of wilderness highlights the sense of isolation from God. A bird “alone on a housetop” is outside of its nest, its resting place. The psalmist cries to God “out of the depths,” as if being engulfed by mighty waters and sinking into a “deep mire” (*Ps. 69:1–3, Ps. 130:1*). These images depict an oppressive situation from which there is no escape, except by divine intervention.

**Read** Psalm 10:12, Psalm 22:1, Psalm 27:9, and Psalm 39:12. How does the psalmist respond to God’s apparent absence?

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It is remarkable that the psalmists resolve not to keep silent in the face of God’s silence. The psalmists unswervingly believe in prayer because prayer is directed to the living and gracious God. God is still there, even when He is apparently absent. He is still the same God who heard them in the past, and so, they are confident that He hears them now.

The occasions of God’s silence cause the psalmists to examine themselves and to seek God, but with confession and humble petitions. They know that God will not remain silent forever. The Psalms demonstrate that communication with God must go on, regardless of life’s circumstances.

**What can we learn from the psalmists’ responses to God’s apparent absence? How do you respond to times when God does seem silent? What sustains your faith?**

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## Has His Promise Failed Forevermore?

**Read** Psalm 77. What experience is the author going through?

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Psalm 77 begins with a plea to God for help that is filled with lament and painful remembering of the past (*Ps. 77:1–6*). The psalmist’s whole being is mournfully turned to God. He refuses to be comforted by any relief except the one coming from God.

However, remembering God appears to intensify his anguish. “When I remember God, I moan” (*Ps. 77:3, ESV*). Hebrew *hamah*, “moan,” often depicts the roar of raging waters (*Ps. 46:3*). Similarly, the psalmist’s whole being is in a state of intense unrest.

How can remembering God produce such strong feelings of distress? A series of troubling questions betray the cause of his anguish (*Ps. 77:7–9*): *Has God changed? Can God possibly betray His covenant?*

The stark contrast between God’s saving acts in the past and God’s apparent absence in the present causes the psalmist to feel abandoned by God. If God has changed, then the psalmist has no hope, a conclusion that he struggles to reject.

Meanwhile, the psalmist cannot sleep because the Lord keeps him awake (*Ps. 77:4*). This recalls other biblical characters whose insomnia was providentially used by God to advance His purposes (*Gen. 41:1–8, Esther 6:1, Dan. 2:1–3*). The long sleepless night causes the psalmist to consider the Lord’s past acts of deliverance but with new resolve (*Ps. 77:5, 10*).

The assurance that the psalmist receives from God does not consist of explanations about his personal situation but rather a confirmation of God’s faithfulness and trustworthiness (like Job). The psalmist is encouraged to wait on the Lord in faith, knowing that He is the same God who performed miracles in Israel’s past (*Ps. 77:11–18*). The psalmist also realizes that “Your footsteps were not known” (*Ps. 77:19, NKJV*), recognizing God’s guidance, even in situations in which His presence is not obvious to human eyes. The psalmist acknowledges that God is simultaneously revealed and hidden, and so, he offers praise to the Lord’s mysterious and sovereign ways.

**Think about past times when the Lord worked in your life. How can that truth help you deal with whatever you are facing now?**

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## Lest the Righteous Be Tempted

**Read** Psalm 37:1, 8; Psalm 49:5–7; Psalm 94:3–7; and Psalm 125:3. What struggle does the psalmist face?

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These psalms lament the current prosperity of the wicked and the challenge that this fact poses to the righteous. The wicked not only prosper but at times also openly despise God and oppress others. The perplexing issue is that while “the scepter of wickedness” (*Ps. 125:3, NKJV*) dominates the world, the “scepter of righteousness” (*Ps. 45:6, NKJV*) seems to be failing. Why not, then, give up and embrace evil as others do?

**Read** Psalm 73:1–20, 27. What brings the psalmist through the crisis? What is the end of those who trust in futile things? *See also 1 Pet. 1:17.*

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While the psalmist in Psalm 73 remained focused on the current iniquity in the world, he was unable to see the big picture from God’s point of view. The problem that the prosperity of evil posed to his faith was overwhelming; he believed, also, that his argument about the uselessness of faith was based on reality.

However, Psalm 73 shows that “these things mock those who ignore the first verse of this psalm, which is the summary of the whole psalm: ‘How good the God of Israel is to those who are upright in heart!’ ”—Johannes Bugenhagen, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), p. 11.

The psalmist is led to the sanctuary, the place of God’s sovereign rule, and was reminded there that “today” is only one piece of the mosaic, and he should consider the “end,” when the wicked will face God’s judgment. The fact that the psalmist understood this truth in the sanctuary and confessed his previous folly shows that reality can be grasped only by spiritual insight and not by human logic.

**How does the promise of God’s judgment upon the world, and upon all its evil, give you comfort when so much evil now goes unpunished?**

**Further Thought:** Read Psalm 56; Ellen G. White, “Rejoicing in the Lord,” pp. 115–126, in *Steps to Christ*.

Like the psalmists, God’s people of all times wonder every so often how to sing the Lord’s songs in “a strange land.” Our faith in the sovereign rule of the Lord is challenged, at times severely, and we may ponder whether God is in control or truly as powerful and good as the Scriptures say.

Biblical faith often implies uncertainty and suspense as much as confidence and assertion. Sometimes uncertainty and suspense, especially in the face of evil and God’s seeming absence, can be almost unbearable. Yet, uncertainty must never be about God or His loving and righteous character and trustworthiness. The psalmists may be uncertain about the future, but they often appeal to God’s unfailing love and faithfulness (*Ps. 36:5–10; Ps. 89:2, 8*).

Likewise, we are to follow the same example. “Summon all your powers to look up, not down at your difficulties; then you will never faint by the way. You will soon see Jesus behind the cloud, reaching out His hand to help you; and all you have to do is to give Him your hand in simple faith and let Him lead you. As you become trustful you will, through faith in Jesus, become hopeful.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 578, 579.

The times when God “hides His face” do not undermine the efficacy of prayer. On the contrary, these occasions cause the psalmists to examine themselves, recall God’s past saving acts, and seek God with confession and humble petitions (*Ps. 77:10–12, Ps. 89:46–52*). “Faith grows strong by coming in conflict with doubts and opposing influences. The experience gained in these trials is of more value than the most costly jewels.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 555.

## Discussion Questions:

- 1 What tensions did the psalmists experience in the face of evil? What similar tensions have you faced, and how have you dealt with them? How do you maintain your faith during these times?
- 2 Where should we look for answers when our faith in God is tested by trials or by people whose own sufferings cause them to question the goodness and power of God?
- 3 How do you answer the common question about evil in a world created and sustained by an all-powerful God of love? How does the great controversy motif help answer, at least somewhat, this challenge?

# Giving Up on God: Part 1

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Five-year-old Sekule was frightened by Grandmother's warnings about hell. "You must be good," Grandmother said. "If you aren't good, you'll end up in hell."

"What do you mean 'end up in hell'?" the boy asked.

"You will end up in eternal flames if you lie or steal," she said. "You will feel the flames for all eternity."

Grandmother's words ignited great fear in the young boy's heart. He was confused. On the one hand, she said God is love. On the other, she said that if Sekule lied, he would end up in hell. Sekule was afraid because he couldn't help but lie sometimes.

The boy didn't know what to do. He couldn't turn to his parents. They were not Christian in then-communist Montenegro. Grandmother was the only Christian whom he knew in his village.

One day, when no one was looking, he hid behind a bush and scolded God. "I don't know why people say You are love," he said. "You aren't love but a monster. Why did You create me to end up in flames? Am I supposed to be faithful and not lie and do bad things? I can't believe in You, and I won't believe in You. You are a monster."

Sekule was finished with God. He was only 5 and had no interest in God.

Nine years later, at the age of 14, Sekule was sent away to a boarding high school in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among the 700 boys at the school, he was the only one from Montenegro. Sensing that he faced an uphill battle as an outsider, he resorted to fighting to gain acceptance with his classmates. He fought nearly every day. If someone even touched one of his ears—and they were a temptation to touch because they stuck out like teacup handles—he attacked viciously. One fight left him with a knife scar on a hand. Sekule also was a bully. When a younger boy received a food package from home, Sekule dangled him outside a dorm window by the ankles until he handed over the package.

After three years of fighting, a desire grew in Sekule to know truth. He wondered whether Grandmother had told him the truth about God. But what was truth? Sarajevo had several main religions: Islam, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Judaism. Sekule wondered, *If God is One, why are there so many religions?* He decided to become familiar with all religions to find the truth.

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SEKULE SEKULIĆ is an affluent entrepreneur and faithful Seventh-day Adventist in Montenegro. Read more of his story next week. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Montenegro and around the world.