

Psalm 87

1 *An ode of a psalm for the sons of Korah; for the End, for the Mahalath to respond;
understanding for Heman the Israelite. †*

2

O Lord God of my salvation, I cry day and night before You.

3

Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my supplication, O Lord.

4

For my soul is filled with sorrows,
And my soul draws near to Hades;

5

I am counted among those who go down into the pit;
I am like a helpless man, free among the dead,

6

Like slain men thrown down and sleeping in a grave,
Whom You remember no more,
But they are removed from Your hand.

7

They laid me in the lowest pit,
In dark places and in the shadow of death.

8

Your wrath rested upon me,
And You brought all Your billows over me. (Pause)

9

You removed my acquaintances far from me;
They made me an abomination among themselves;
I was betrayed, and did not go forth.

10

My eyes weakened from poverty;
O Lord, I cry to You the whole day long;
I spread out my hands to You.

11

Will You work wonders for the dead?
Or will physicians raise them up, and acknowledge You?

12

Shall anyone in the grave describe Your mercy
And Your truth in destruction?

13

Shall Your wonders be known in darkness,
And Your righteousness in a forgotten land?

14

But I cry to You, O Lord,
And in the morning my prayer shall come near to You.

15

Why, O Lord, do You reject my soul,
And turn away Your face from me?

16

I am poor and in troubles from my youth;
But having been exalted, I was humbled and brought into despair.

17

Your fierce anger passed over me,
And Your terrors greatly troubled me;

18

They compassed me like water all the day long;
They surrounded me at once.

19

You removed far from me neighbor and friend,
And my acquaintances because of my misery.

Aimilianos: Psalm 87 is a an expression of unmitigated sorrow, a cry of unspeakable grief, a howl heard in the darkness.

The deeper meaning of Psalm 87 concerns the nature of the soul's suffering in its struggles with God. Through such suffering, God is seeking for the soul like a hunter, lost as it is in the depths of some dark ocean or in the bewildering labyrinth of life. The psalm also reveals that, by struggling to find the right relation to suffering, to our own death, we shall simultaneously find God, and not simply Find Him, but acquire and indeed conquer Him completely. What will be the end result? Will God be the Lord of my salvation, or my darkness and death?

Reardon: Psalm 87 (Hebrew 88) is possibly the most difficult of the psalms. In any case, it is arguably the darkest. It even stands among the most somber compositions in all of Holy Writ, comparable to the overcast pages of Job and Ecclesiastes. It not being readily apparent, perhaps, how to reconcile such tenebrous tones with evangelical hope, some may even judge the sentiments of this psalm too dismal for it to serve as Christian prayer at all. Psalm 87 is not only darksome in its every line; almost alone among the psalms, it even ends on a dark note. Its final line says: "My friend and confrere have You kept afar from me; and my neighbors, because of my distress." Now, how can that sort of sentiment be the "last word" in a Christian prayer? Tehillim: The psalmist weeps and laments bitterly overcast the maladies and suffering Israel endures in exile, which he describes in detail...

The sons of Korach sing joyously about gloomy prophets of exile in the knowledge that the bright prophecies of the redemption will occurs as well.

An ode of a psalm for the sons of Korah; for the End, for the Mahalath to respond; understanding for Heman the Israelite.

Aimilianos: «An ode of a psalm». Here the word «ode» indicates that the text before us is a poem, which in this case has the character of a narrative. Its subject is the story of a nation, or of a particular soul, whose dramatic experiences are described in the psalm.

The word «psalm» is derived from the verb «to play on the psaltery», which was a kind of harp-like instrument, and so tells us that the singing of the psalms was accompanied by a melody played on a stringed instrument, and often by an entire musical ensemble.

«For the sons of Korah». This phrase gives us the sense that this psalm must be an important one, a kind of classic among the psalms. The psalms associated with the «sons of Korah» (Psalms 84-85, 87-88) are among the most beautiful in the entire Psalter. Notwithstanding the terrible punishment that was unleashed on the family of Korah after it had risen up against Moses and Aaron (Num 16:1-50), its descendants served God at the altar and became important figures in the history of Israel (1 Chr 9:19)

Haiman the Israelite, who is also mentioned in the title, is in fact the author of this psalm (cf. 1 Chr 2:6; TS':17).

(From the Tehillim: some say Heiman was a Levite singer, a grandson of Samuel the prophet. He is called Ezachite, "the permanent resident" among the Temple singers, since most of the singers were his children and descendants. ...Heiman composed this psalm and gave it to the sons of Korach to sing.)

«for the end», also indicates that this psalm is of special significance, since it points to the end of the period of the Old Testament, anticipating the birth of Christ, or His Second Coming. In each instance, it expresses something of great importance, namely, the manifestation of God in time.

The phrase «concerning the response of maeleth» can be said to round out and complete the two preceding phrases. It seems that the maeleth (or mahalath) was the particular instrument upon which the psalm was to be played, and which was capable of producing deep, mournful sounds. But it may also be a reference to a certain type of dirge or lament. We're not exactly sure.

Finally, the phrase «for the giving of understanding» - or ((instruction)), as it is sometimes translated - indicates that this is a «didactic» psalm. But it also signifies the gift of divine grace, which is frequently called «understanding», and which in more [precise theological terms we call «discernment». From a psalm such as this, then, one rightly expects to find depths of spiritual meaning, and this is true of virtually all the psalms containing the word «understanding» in their titles." Such depths are not easy to penetrate, for they have what Saint Paul calls both «natural» and «spiritual» meanings.(1 Cor 2:14) In order for someone to understand «spiritual» meanings, he must be ushered into the realm of the Spirit, his heart must be cultivated by the grace of God; he must be given the gift of «understanding», otherwise he will remain on the surface, limited to mere letters, understanding only the superficial meaning of the words (cf. 2 Cor 3:6).

(From the Tehillim: a psalm that enlightens and teaches wisdom.)

Theodoret: So the inspired composition prophesies the Jews' misfortunes and servitude in Babylon, and teaches at the same time also the pangs consequent on sin of the whole human race together. The inspired composition of the psalm is expressed in the form of supplication offered to

the loving God both by the former people and also by all in common, and the prayer is related to the more devout.

2 O Lord God of my salvation, I cry day and night before You.

To be sure, the psalmist is in pain. But what is significant is that his vision is not riveted on his external circumstances, but on God, Who is both the object of his longing and the center of his sorrow...

“O Lord God of my salvation.” Here the pronoun «my» ultimately refers to the word «Lord», so that the heart of the psalmist's cry is «my Lord». As such it reveals his personal bond with the Lord and not the rising tragedy, which threatens to inundate him with sorrows...

“By day I have cried out and in the night before You.” He has cried out during the day on account of his pain, and in the night on account of his desire to search more penetratingly in the hope of finding God, so that he might speak with Him and pour forth to Him all that troubles and torments him. Here the use of the verb I have cried out in the perfect tense... indicates an action that was so thoroughly and completely performed that it continues to have consequences for the present—it was, to be sure, an action performed in the past—but it continues to mark the present in the way that all important experiences do...

Reardon: But then, on closer inspection, we may observe certain subtler features softening this impression of our psalm. For all its gloom and shadow, for example, is it without significance that Psalm 87 begins by thus addressing the Almighty: “O Lord, the God of my salvation”? The intimacy and quiet hope of this address put one in mind of Psalm 21, in which the crucified Jesus, asking why God has forsaken Him, nonetheless continues to call Him “my God, my God.

Theodoret: you, O Lord, I know to be Lord of my salvation; this is the reason, to be sure, I beg night and day for my appeal to be accepted. He says this in what follows.

Augustine: Let us therefore now hear the voice of Christ singing before us in prophecy, to whom His own choir should respond either in imitation, or in thanksgiving.

3 Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my supplication, O Lord.

Aimilianos: The psalmist speaks as if God were nowhere to be seen, as if He were enclosed behind walls, which the psalmist seeks to breach by means of his voice." «I am not asking that you receive me, my God; and though You are the sole point of reference for my existence, let me not be the focus of Your concern. Accept, however, my prayer, which I place before You, within the sight of Your eyes. You live behind lofty walls, behind doors through which no man may pass, and which I myself am incapable of even opening. But grant that my prayer, like a rising breath, might reach You. Thick clouds conceal You,

but let my voice cut through them, ascending through the veil that stands between us. As for me, let me abide here on earth, to suffer countless agonies in impenetrable darkness: only let my voice rise up and resound before you». “Incline Your ear to my supplication.” It is as if the psalmist's voice is straining with all its power to draw near to God, while God Himself is beyond the range of hearing, withdrawn and remote. And so the psalmist says: «Bend down to me, incline Your whole being to me, listen to what I am saying!» But God refuses; He does not respond. For the ancient Israelites, it was impossible to imagine that God was somehow incapable of hearing, as a result of which even God's silence was understood as something that came forth from God. Affirmation and negation are equally from God. The same God who gave grace to Moses hardened the heart of Pharaoh (Ex 4:21).

Tehillim: The Psalmist asks that God Himself accept our prayer, not through an intermediary, such as an angel. And if it comes to a point where our pleas are so urgent that they are supplications—a more intense form of prayer—we ask God not to wait for our supplication to ascend to Him. Rather, we ask Him to turn His ear and hasten to listen.

Augustine: For even our Lord prayed, not in the form of God, but in the form of a servant; for in this He also suffered. He prayed both in prosperous times, that is, by "day," and in calamity, which I imagine is meant by "night." The entrance of prayer into God's presence is its acceptance: the inclination of His ear is His compassionate listening to it: for God has not such bodily members as we have. The passage is however, as usual, a repetition.

4 For my soul is filled with sorrows, And my soul draws near to Hades;

Aimilianos: If, on the one hand, God has removed Himself from the psalmist's hearing, withdrawing into the inscrutable heights of heaven, the psalmist is bound to his own course of movement, falling earthward, descending, lost in the darkness of the abyss. For my soul is filled with evils. According to Biblical tradition, the soul, which is the source of bodily life, is said to be in the blood (Lev 17:11; Dt 12:23; cf. Gen 9:5), and consequently expresses the deepest aspects of human existence.¹⁴ If, then, my soul is filled with evils, it means that my entire inner world, my entire existence, is replete with catastrophes; I am crushed, destroyed, blackened like so much scorched earth. For the ancient Israelites, the greatest catastrophe was sin, which was the root of all evil and suffering. A long and happy life was the reward of righteous deeds (cf. Pr 9:10-11), but sufferings were believed to be caused by sin. Thus the psalmist is saying that he is completely immersed in sin, submerged in the depths of all its wretchedness. And my life has drawn near to Hades.

«Hades» is a place of unrelieved darkness, into which the soul descends broken and bereft of all hope. Reading this verse is like watching a man die, taking his last breath, arriving at the very mouth of Hades, about to plunge into the abyss...

Theodoret: I beg you to repel the multitude of troubles besetting me when you perceive them; I am at the very doors of death, and in need of your help, bereft of it and enslaved to sin.

Augustine: Dare we speak of the Soul of Christ as "filled with evils," when the passion had strength as far as it had any, only over the body? ... The soul therefore may feel pain without the body: but without the soul the body cannot. Why therefore should we not say that the Soul of Christ was full of the evils of humanity, though not of human sins? Another Prophet says of Him, that He grieved for us: and the Evangelist says, "And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy:" and our Lord Himself saith unto them of Himself, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." The Prophet who composed this Psalm, foreseeing that this would happen, introduces Him saying, "My soul is full of evils, and My life draweth nigh unto hell." For the very same sense is here expressed in other words, as when He said, "My soul is sorrowful, even unto death." The words, "My soul is sorrowful," are like these, "My soul is full of evils:" and what follows, "even unto death," like, "my life draweth nigh unto hell." These feelings of human infirmity our Lord took upon Him, as He did the flesh of human infirmity, and the death of human flesh, not by the necessity of His condition, but by the free will of His mercy, that He might transfigure into Himself His own body, which is the Church (the head of which He deigned to be), that is, His members in His holy and faithful disciples: that if amid human temptations any one among them happened to be in sorrow and pain, he might not therefore think that he was separated from His favour: that the body, like the chorus following its leader, might learn from its Head, that these sorrows were not sin, but proofs of human weakness. We read of the Apostle Paul, a chief member in this body, and we hear him confessing that his soul was full of such evils, when he says, that he feels "great heaviness and continual sorrow in heart for his brethren according to the flesh, who are Israelites." And if we say that our Lord was sorrowful for them also at the approach of His Passion, in which they would incur the most atrocious guilt, I think we shall not speak amiss. Lastly, the very thing said by our Saviour on the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," is expressed in this Psalm below,

5 I am counted among those who go down into the pit; I am like a helpless man, free among the dead,

Aimilianos: I have become like a man without help, free among the dead, Let us attend carefully to this image. It's as if we're following hard on the footsteps of someone who has arrived, not only at the brink of the abyss and the very door of death, but who is lost in hell's labyrinths... «Do you not see, my God, where my feet have taken me? Were You even now to start running, You would barely arrive in time to rescue me. The dismal, sinking sounds of my footsteps fill me with horror as I draw nearer by degrees to death. The living, who have not yet come to this place, can hear my footsteps, and they know that for me there is no return. I have become like a man without help...

Then it is finished. I am dead. And You, God, remain silent, remote, concealed behind clouds». And just as this journey into death is about to fade from our sight; just as the final sounds of his footsteps fade away and are lost forever, we hear yet another cry from the depths: I have become like a man without help; free among the dead. «The living have despaired of me, given up. Those that await me below are bound fast, immovable in their bonds. They are not able to help me.

Theodoret:): I encountered irresistible problems and found no solution, but instead I was like those falling into a pit, unable to get out.... I was deprived of all providence and care. Free among the dead: though not yet enduring the end or falling under the slavery of death, I include myself among the numbers of the dead.

Tehillim: The dead are free of happenings of this world and it's toil.

Augustine: by them who knew not what they were doing, when they imagined that He died like other men, subjected to necessity, and overcome by it. The word "pit" is used for the depth of woe or of Hell. "I have been as a man that hath no help."

"Free among the dead" (ver. 5). In these words our Lord's Person is most clearly shown: for who else is free among the dead but He who though in the likeness of sinful flesh is alone among sinners without sin? ... He therefore, "free among the dead," who had it in His power to lay down His life, and again to take it; from whom no one could take it, but He laid it down of His own free will; who could revive His own flesh, as a temple destroyed by them, at His will; who, when all had forsaken Him on the eve of His Passion, remained not alone, because, as He testifies, His Father forsook Him not; was nevertheless by His enemies, for whom He prayed, who knew not what they did, ... counted "as one who hath no help; like unto them that are wounded, and lie in the grave." But he adds, "Whom thou dost not yet remember:" and in these words there is to be remarked a distinction between Christ and the rest of the dead. For though He was wounded, and when dead laid in the tomb, yet they who knew not what they were doing, or who He was, regarded Him as like others who had perished from their wounds, and who slept in the tomb, who are as yet out of remembrance of God, that is, whose hour of resurrection has not yet arrived. For thus the Scripture speaks of the dead as sleeping, because it wishes them to be regarded as destined to awake, that is, to rise again. But He, wounded and asleep in the tomb, awoke on the third day, and became "like a sparrow that sitteth alone on the housetop," that is, on the right hand of His Father in Heaven: and now "dieth no more, death shall no more have dominion over Him." Hence He differs widely from those whom God hath not yet remembered to cause their resurrection after this manner: for what was to go before in the Head, was kept for the Body in the end. God is then said to remember, when He does an act: then to forget, when He does it not: for neither can God forget, as He never changes, nor remember, as He can never

forget. "I am counted" then, by those who know not what they do, "as a man that hath no help:" while I am "free among the dead," I am held by these men "like unto them that are wounded, and lie in the grave." Yet those very men, who account thus of Me, are further said to be "cut away from Thy hand," that is, when I was made so by them, "they were cut away from Thy hand;" they who believed Me destitute of help, are deprived of the help of Thy hand: for they, as he saith in another Psalm, have digged a pit before me, and are fallen into the midst of it themselves. I prefer this interpretation to that which refers the words, "they are cut away from Thy hand," to those who sleep in the tomb, whom God hath not yet remembered: since the righteous are among the latter, of whom, even though God hath not yet called them to the resurrection, it is said, that their "souls are in the hands of God," that is, that "they dwell under the defence of the Most High; and shall abide under the shadow of the God of Heaven." But it is those who are cut away from the hand of God, who believed that Christ was cut off from His hand, and thus accounting Him among the wicked, dared to slay Him.

6 Like slain men thrown down and sleeping in a grave, Whom You remember no more, But they are removed from Your hand.

Tehillim: since the time for the resurrection of the dead has not yet come.

7 They laid me in the lowest pit, In dark places and in the shadow of death.

Aimilianos: These words give expression to a long, terrible fall; to the relentless effacement of a life, as experienced by the psalmist and observed by those around him. Like the slain that sleep in the grave. Just a moment ago, we heard the sound of his footsteps, fading away in the depths of Hades. Now he is asleep among the dead, with no hope of escape or return to the land of the living. Before him is the God of his salvation, but the psalmist confronts him without hope, without any belief in resurrection, with no mention of any other life. He is sleeping among the dead, for he has died. [Like one slayed on the battlefield]

With these words the psalmist refers to the personal activity of God, and so expresses anguish over his despair. «You, O God, have not simply forgotten me, but You have deliberately chosen to reject me, and so I have no hope. Yet I continue to speak to You. With Your hand you signaled for me to depart; You shook it at me, saying 'Go away, be gone.' You have cast me off, and sent me far away».

Do you see how deeply the psalmist experiences his distance from God? How profoundly he experiences loneliness and isolation in the absence of God? This is in fact the most profound thing that a person can experience, namely, being cut off from God and neighbors and subsequently becoming acutely conscious of this separation, this isolation.

Theodoret: These words relate to those obliged to live in Babylon, and to the whole human race: the former, in thrall to wicked people, lived a painful life and all human beings were beset with manifold calamities after the sin—death,

grief, tears, weeping and wailing, widows and orphans, penury, misfortunes and countless other problems defying explanation and bringing darkness on even the living—all these came in the wake of the breaking of the commandment. See what a terrible evil disobedience is, the cause not only of separation from God but also of involvement in such great evils.

Tehillim: The Psalmist uses the plural form for a pit deep {tachtiot), referring to our first exile, during which we were subjugated to two nations: Babylon and then Persia. After seventy years, the Babylonian/Persian exiles came to an end, and we enjoyed the Second Temple and its light. This was followed by the Greek subjugation and then our current exile, which was initiated by Rome. During the Greek subjugation, we were in dark places. But our current exile feels endless. We feel as if God has put us into the depths, with no hope in sight (Alshich).

Augustine: But what is the lowest pit, but the deepest woe, than which there is none more deep? Whence in another Psalm it is said, "Thou broughtest me out also of the pit of misery." "In a place of darkness, and in the shadow of death," while they knew not what they did, they laid Him there, thus deeming of Him; they knew not Him "whom none of the princes of this world knew." By the "shadow of death," I know not whether the death of the body is to be understood, or that of which it is written, "That they walked in darkness and in the land of the shadow of death, a light is risen on them," because by belief they were brought from out of the darkness and death of sin into light and life. Such an one those who knew not what they did thought our Lord, and in their ignorance accounted Him among those whom He came to help, that they might not be such themselves.

8 Your wrath rested upon me, And You brought all Your billows [waves] over me. (Pause)

Aimilianos: Here follows the «selah», which most probably marks the place for some sort of change in the choirs, related to the antiphonal singing, suggested by the information in the title concerning the maeleth, which we mentioned a moment ago.¹¹ It may also be a rubric calling for a musical interlude, after which the other choir responds and says: the following verse.

Theodoret: You continue in your punishment, he is saying, inflicting various assaults of misfortunes against me; he is speaking by analogy with shipwrecked people, victims of many assaults from waves and much buffeting of winds.

Augustine: What then does this mean, "Thy indignation lieth hard upon Me," except the belief of those, who knew not the Lord of Glory? who imagined that the anger of God was not merely roused, but lay hard upon Him, whom they dared to bring to death, and not only death, but that kind, which they regarded as the most execrable of all, namely, the death of the Cross: whence saith the

Apostle, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth upon a tree." On this account, wishing to praise His obedience which He carried to the extreme of humility, he says, "He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death;" and as this seemed little, he added, "even the death of the Cross;" and with the same view as far as I can see, he says in this Psalm, "And all thy suspensions," or, as some translate "waves," others "tossings," "Thou hast brought over Me." We also find in another Psalm, "All thy suspensions and waves are come in upon Me," or, as some have translated better, "have passed over Me:" for it is *dih^lthon* in Greek, not *eish^lthon*: and where both expressions are employed, "waves" and "suspensions," one cannot be used as equivalent to the other. In that passage we explained "suspensions" as threatenings, "waves" as the actual sufferings: both inflicted by God's judgment: but in that place it is said, "All have passed over Me," here, "Thou hast brought all upon Me." In the other case, that is, although some evils took place, yet, he said, all those which are here mentioned passed over; but in this case, "Thou hast brought them upon Me." Evils pass over when they do not touch a man, as things which hang over him, or when they do touch him, as waves. But when he uses the word "suspensions," he does not say they passed over, but, "Thou hast brought them upon Me," meaning that all which impended had come to pass. All things which were predicted of His Passion impended, as long as they remained in the prophecies for future fulfilment.

9 You removed my acquaintances far from me; They made me an abomination among themselves; I was betrayed, and did not go forth.

Aimilianos: I have been handed over, and I cannot get out.

«Since all the others have been lost, and nothing else remains but You, I turn round and look back; I glance about to see if by chance there might be something else. But looking around, all that I am able to perceive is that the abyss into which I have fallen continues to expand and overwhelm me. Even my acquaintances have abandoned me, but in fact it was You Who did this. You took no thought to help me, only to isolate me still further. You distanced my friends from me; they have made me an abomination to themselves.

Theodoret: The captives in Babylon, who suffered the yoke of slavery, were scattered about and deprived of the relationship and association of loved ones, drew no consolation from the experience. On the other hand, all human beings who lived a life of impiety had no share in the care coming from the angels.

Augustine: If we understand by acquaintance those whom He knew, it will be all men; for whom knew He not? But He calls those acquaintance, to whom He was Himself known, as far as they could know Him at that season: at least so far forth as they knew Him to be innocent, although they considered Him only as a man, not as likewise God. Although He might call the righteous whom He approved, acquaintance, as He calls the wicked unknown, to whom He was to

say at the end, "I know you not." In what follows, "and they have set Me for an abhorrence to themselves;" those whom He called before "acquaintance," may be meant, as even they felt horror at the mode of that death: but it is better referred to those of whom He was speaking above as His persecutors. "I was delivered up, and did not get forth." Is this because His disciples were without, while He was being tried within? Or are we to give a deeper meaning to the words, "I cannot get forth" as signifying, "I remained hidden in My secret counsels, I showed not who I was, I did not reveal Myself, was not made manifest"?

10 My eyes weakened from poverty; O Lord, I cry to You the whole day long; I spread out my hands to You.

Aimilianos: It's as if he were saying, «the only thing that existed for me, the only thing that I lived for, was God. You, O God, were my only happiness, but now my eyes fail me in the face of my wretchedness. The very thing that was my hope has become my death. What had been the source of my entire life has become a death sentence, with no hope of appeal. The One Whom I loved, it was He Who did this to me, He who killed me, leaving me here for dead. And now my eyes are failing me, and all I can see is my own misery, my wretchedness. With my own eyes I behold my executioner. But nonetheless I cried out to You, O Lord, the whole day long; I stretched out my hands to You, You remain all that I have, a distant tremulous light in my darkness».

Augustine: For what eyes are we to understand? If the eyes of the flesh in which He suffered, we do not read that His eyes became weak from want, that is, from hunger, in His Passion, as is often the case; as He was betrayed after His Supper, and crucified on the same day: if the inner eyes, how were they weakened from want, in which there was a light that could never fail? But He meant by His eyes those members in the body, of which He was Himself the head, which, as brighter and more eminent and chief above the rest, He loved. It was of this body that the Apostle was speaking, when he wrote, taking his metaphor from our own body, "If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing?" etc. What he wished understood by these words, he has expressed more clearly, by adding, "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." Wherefore as those eyes, that is, the holy Apostles, to whom not flesh and blood, but the Father which is in Heaven had revealed Him, so that Peter said, "Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God," when they saw Him betrayed, and suffering such evils, saw Him not such as they wished, as He did not come forth, did not manifest Himself in His virtue and power, but still hidden in His secrecy, endured everything as a man overcome and enfeebled, they became weak for want, as if their food, their Light, had been withdrawn from them. He continues, "And I have called upon Thee." This indeed He did most clearly, when upon the Cross. But what follows? "All the day I have stretched forth My hands unto Thee," must be examined how it must be taken. For if in this expression we understand the tree of the Cross, how can we reconcile it with the "whole day"? Can He be said to have hung upon the Cross during the whole day,

as the night is considered a part of the day? But if day, as opposed to night, was meant by this expression, even of this day, the first and no small portion had passed by at the time of His crucifixion. But if we take "day" in the same sense of time (especially as the word is used in the feminine, a gender which is restricted to that sense in Latin, although not so in Greek, as it is always used in the feminine, which I suppose to be the reason for its translation in the same gender in our own version), the knot of the question will be drawn tighter: for how can it mean for the whole space of time, if He did not even for one day stretch forth His hands on the Cross? Further, should we take the whole for a part, as Scripture sometimes uses this expression, I do not remember an instance in which the whole is taken for a part, when the word "whole" is expressly added. For in the passage of the Gospel where the Lord saith, "The Son of Man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth," it is no extraordinary licence to take the whole for the part, the expression not being for three "whole" days and three whole nights: since the one intermediate day was a whole one, the other two were parts, the last being part of the first day, the first part of the last. But if the Cross is not meant here, but the prayer, which we find in the Gospel that He poured forth in the form of a servant to God the Father, where He is said to have prayed long before His Passion, and on the eve of His Passion, and also when on the Cross, we do not read anywhere that He did so throughout the whole day. Therefore by the stretched-out hands throughout the whole day, we may understand the continuation of good works in which He never ceased from exertion.

11 Will You work wonders for the dead? Or will physicians raise them up, and acknowledge You?

Aimilianos: As we know, the ancient Israelites did not have a developed belief in an afterlife; they entertained no great hopes for life after death. If the dead existed anywhere, it was in a place of darkness.

Or shall physicians raise them up, so that they may give thanks to You? «Do you have the idea, O God, that after I'm dead, doctors will be able to bring me back to life, and then I shall glorify You and declare Your greatness? In fact, my praises will be buried with me; my songs to You covered by the tomb. Who then will know that You are wondrous? If You want Your glory to be made known, acknowledged and marveled at, You need do no more than grant me life». The psalmist, confronting the One Whose ears have been closed to him, and knowing that He is his Lord and God, can do nothing else but pour out his heart to Him in complaint... By crying out like this he endeavors to move God, to make Him mindful of His majesty in such a way that God feels compelled to rescue the him... As we know, the ancient Israelites did not have a developed belief in an afterlife; they entertained no great hopes for life after death. If the dead existed anywhere, it was in a place of darkness.

Or shall physicians raise them up, so that they may give thanks to You? «Do you have the idea, O God, that after I'm dead, doctors will be able to bring me back to life, and then I shall glorify You and declare Your greatness? In fact, my praises will be buried with me; my songs to You covered by the tomb. Who

then will know that You are wondrous? If You want Your glory to be made known, acknowledged and marveled at, You need do no more than grant me life».

Tehillim: if the oppressive exile leads to our demise, for whom will You perform wonder that you promised us.

Augustine: If we suppose this relates to those whose flesh life has left, great wonders have been wrought among the dead, inasmuch as some of them have revived: and in our Lord's descent into Hell, and His ascent as the conqueror of death, a great wonder was wrought among the dead. He refers then in these words, "Dost Thou show wonders among the dead?" to men so dead in heart, that such great works of Christ could not rouse them to the life of faith: for he does not say that wonders are not shown to them because they see them not, but because they do not profit them. For, as he says in this passage, "the whole day have I stretched forth My hands to Thee:" because He ever refers all His works to the will of His Father, constantly declaring that He came to fulfil His Father's will: so also, as an unbelieving people saw the same works, another Prophet saith, "I have spread out my hands all day unto a rebellious people, that believes not, but contradicts." Those then are dead, to whom wonders have not been shown, not because they saw them not, but since they lived not again through them. The following verse, "Shall physicians revive them, and shall they praise Thee?" means, that the dead shall not be revived by such means, that they may praise Thee. In the Hebrew there is said to be a different expression: giants being used where physicians are here: but the Septuagint translators, whose authority is such that they may deservedly be said to have interpreted by the inspiration of the Spirit of God owing to their wonderful agreement, conclude, not by mistake, but taking occasion from the resemblance in sound between the Hebrew words expressing these two senses, that the use of the word is an indication of the sense in which the word giants is meant to be taken. For if you suppose the proud meant by giants, of whom the Apostle saith, "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world?" there is no incongruity in calling them physicians, as if by their own unaided skill they promised the salvation of souls: against whom it is said, "Of the Lord is safety." But if we take the word giant in a good sense, as it is said of our Lord, "He rejoiceth as a giant to run his course;" that is Giant of giants, chief among the greatest and strongest, who in His Church excel in spiritual strength. Just as He is the Mountain of mountains; as it is written, "And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be manifested in the top of the mountains:" and the Saint of saints: there is no absurdity in styling these same great and mighty men physicians. Whence saith the Apostle, "if by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them." But even such physicians, even though they cure not by their own power (as not even of their own do those of the body), yet so far forth as by faithful ministry they assist towards salvation, can cure the living, but not raise the

dead: of whom it is said, "Dost Thou show wonders among the dead?" For the grace of God, by which men's minds in a certain manner are brought to live a fresh life, so as to be able to hear the lessons of salvation from any of its ministers whatever, is most hidden and mysterious. This grace is thus spoken of in the Gospel. "No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him;" ... in order to show, that the very faith by which the soul believes, and springs into fresh life from the death of its former affections, is given us by God. Whatever exertions, then, the best preachers of the word, and persuaders of the truth through miracles, may make with men, just like great physicians: yet if they are dead, and through Thy grace have not a second life, "Dost Thou show wonders among the dead, or shall physicians raise them? and shall they" whom they raise "praise Thee"? For this confession declares that they live: not, as it is written elsewhere, "Thanksgiving perisheth from the dead, as from one that is not."

12 Shall anyone in the grave describe Your mercy And Your truth in destruction?

Aimilianos: It's like he's telling Him: «Be careful, my God, do not deceive us, for You must be justified when You are judged (Ps 51:4). And how will You be justified? When You show that Your mercy is true, and that Your truth, and Your faithfulness, are indeed real.

Theodoret: While I am still alive, he is saying, show me your wonder working: I shall not see it when I am dead, no physician being able to give relief from death. What kind of remedy has that power, after all? ...no one will recount or confess after the departure from here.

Augustine: The word "show" is of course understood as if repeated, Shall any show Thy faithfulness in destruction? Scripture loves to connect loving-kindness and faithfulness, especially in the Psalms. "Destruction" also is a repetition of "the grave," and signifies them who are in the grave, styled above "the dead," in the verse, "Dost thou show wonders among the dead?" for the body is the grave of the dead soul; whence our Lord's words in the Gospel, "Ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but within are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."

13 Shall Your wonders be known in darkness, And Your righteousness in a forgotten land?

Aimilianos: «If You really want to help me, You won't be able to do so when I'm rotting in the ground. In the darkness, one sees only shadows. Nothing is clear there; nothing can be made out distinctly or properly acknowledged for what it is. It is only here, in the full light of day, that your wonders can be made known. In that land of oblivion, Your righteousness cannot be made manifest. Now is the time and here is the place for You to manifest your righteousness». Despite these arguments, the Lord does not appear.

Theodoret: Surely it is not possible, he is saying, for the dead gone to dust, living in death's tomb and consigned to oblivion to sense your loving-kindness and become witnesses of your marvels?

Augustine: the dark answers to the land of forgetfulness: for the unbelieving are meant by the dark, as the Apostle saith, "For ye were sometimes darkness;" and the land where all things are forgotten, is the man who has forgotten God; for the unbelieving soul can arrive at darkness so intense, "that the fool saith in his heart, There is no God."

14 But I cry to You, O Lord, And in the morning my prayer shall come near to You.

Aimilianos: «You see why I cry out? I do so of course on my own behalf, but also for the sake of Your glory. To You, O Lord, I cried. Become once again my deliverer, my comfort, especially in the morning, when I experience moments of hope. When the sun rises, I have the hope that a new life will dawn for me. This is the time of the morning sacrifice, when the peace offering is made to You (Lev 7:11; Num 28:1-8). It is then that I take my unleavened cakes, my unblemished sacrifice, my flour mingled with oil (cf. Lev 2:1-8), and I offer them to You believing that, even though You are silent, even though You hide Yourself from me, in the morning You will hear me. In the morning my prayer shall come before You».

Consider the humility, but also the grandeur, of the psalmist, who desires to be seen by God. He does not dare of course even to say that he himself will appear before God, but asks only that his prayer might attain to God. «I am unworthy to present myself before You. Therefore accept my prayer, let it come before You, let it reach You in the morning». In a sense he personifies his prayer, as if it were something that he could send forth, and which could Subsequently run and take flight, soaring aloft to the Lord, receiving divine help on his behalf. «Long before the morning sun will have reached its zenith, my prayer will have reached You. But as for me, Lord, will I ever reach You? Will I ever attain You? I shall remain in prayer all night long. All through the night I will search for you in the darkness. In the morning, that's where my prayer will be. It will have arrived. It will have reached You. That's what I will do. But what will You do, God? You appear to be in no particular hurry to do anything. You float along on some distant sea of tranquility. Even so, my prayer will reach You, it will stand before You, it will fall before Your feet. I myself, however, do not dare to do any such thing».

Theodoret: "My wailing is directed to you, Lord, and at daybreak my prayer will anticipate you." [In other words,] Desiring in life to be rid of the present evils, I wail in my pains and anticipate dawn in my praying.

Augustine: I have never ceased to stretch forth My works to glorify, Thee. Why then do the wicked rage against Me, unless because "Thou showest not wonders among the dead"? because those wonders move them not to faith,

nor can physicians restore them to life that they may praise Thee, because Thy hidden grace works not in them to draw them unto believing: because no man cometh unto Me, but whom Thou hast drawn. Shall then "Thy loving-kindness be showed in the grave"? that is, the grave of the dead soul, which lies dead beneath the body's weight: "or Thy faithfulness in destruction"? that is, in such a death as cannot believe or feel any of these things. "For how then in the darkness" of this death, that is, in the man who in forgetting Thee has lost the light of his life, "shall Thy wondrous works and Thy righteousness be known."

15 Why, O Lord, do You reject my soul, And turn away Your face from me?

Aimilianos: But as we have already seen there is no response, no confirmation, not a glimmer of hope, no experience of the nearness of God. On the contrary, the psalmist continues to feel the hand of God rejecting him, pushing him away. Why, O Lord, do You cast off my soul? Why do You reject me? A moment ago he said that God had rejected everyone, including himself. But now God has identified His prey, and so the psalmist feels even more intensely that he has fallen under divine retribution. Even so, he holds his ground; his commitment to God remains unshaken, as if the only thing that existed for him was God. «So why, then, do You cast off my soul, and turn Your face away from me?»

Augustine: But if this cause be attended to carefully, it will be found indicated above; for it is with the view that the prayers of the Saints are, as it were, repelled by the delay of so great a blessing, and by the adversity they encounter in the troubles of life, that the flame, thus fanned, may burst into a brighter blaze.

16 I am poor and in troubles from my youth; But having been exalted, I was humbled and brought into despair.

Aimilianos: «Can't you see, God, that my whole life I've been a nothing, ignored, in a state of anguish, living out my little life on a dung heap (Job 2:8) for as long as I can remember? I have not known even one day of happiness. None of Your promises has ever had any meaning for me. There were times when my heart felt light, when I had hope, when I felt comforted. However I was invariably brought low and became perplexed. Thus what few hopes I had have all come to nothing».

Theodoret: Israel's youth was the exodus from Egypt, whereas for humanity as a whole it was the life outside of paradise after the transgression of the commandment: both the one and the other continued to suffer hardship all the time in between...After their eminence the Jews were involved in slavery while human nature, after being made in the divine image and granted life in paradise, hankered after greater things and lost; what it had been given.

Augustine: For this purpose he briefly sketches in what follows the troubles of Christ's body. For it is not in the Head alone that they took place, since it is

said to Saul too, "Why persecutest thou Me?" and Paul himself, as if placed as an elect member in the same body, saith, "That I may fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh." "Why then, Lord, hast Thou cast off my soul? why hidest Thou Thy face from me?" "I am poor, and in toils from my youth up: and when lifted up, I was thrown down, and troubled" (ver. 15). "Thy wraths went over me: Thy terrors disturbed me" (ver. 16). "They came round about me all day like water: they compassed me about together" (ver. 17). "A friend Thou hast put far from me: and mine acquaintance from my misery" (ver. 18). All these evils have taken place, and are happening in the limbs of Christ's body, and God turns away His face from their prayers, by not hearing as to what they wish for, since they know not that the fulfilment of their wishes would not be good for them. The Church is "poor," as she hungers and thirsts in her wanderings for that food with which she shall be filled in her own country: she is "in toils from her youth up," as the very Body of Christ saith in another Psalm, "Many a time have they overcome me from my youth." And for this reason some of her members are lifted up even in this world, that in them may be the greater lowliness. Over that Body, which constitutes the unity of the Saints and the faithful, whose Head is Christ, go the wraths of God: yet abide not: since it is of the unbelieving only that it is written, that "the wrath of God abideth upon him." The terrors of God disturb the weakness of the faithful, because all that can happen, even though it actually happen not, it is prudent to fear; and sometimes these terrors so agitate the reflecting soul with the evils impending around, that they seem to flow around us on every side like water, and to encircle us in our fears. And as the Church while on pilgrimage is never free from these evils, happening as they do at one moment in one of her limbs, at another in another, he adds, "all day," signifying the continuation in time, to the end of this world. Often too, friends and acquaintances, their worldly interests at stake, in their terror forsake the Saints; of which saith the Apostle, "all men forsook me: may it not be laid to their charge." But to what purpose is all this, but that early in the morning, that is, after the night of unbelief, the prayers of this holy Body may in the light of faith prevent God, until the coming of that salvation, which we are at present saved by hoping for, not by having, while we await it with patience and faithfulness. Then the Lord will not repel our prayers, as there will no longer be anything to be sought for, but everything that has been rightly asked, will be obtained: nor will He turn His face away from us, since we shall see Him as He is: nor shall we be poor, because God will be our abundance, all in all: nor shall we suffer, as there will be no more weakness: nor after exaltation shall we meet with humiliation and confusion, as there will be no adversity there: nor bear even the transient wrath of God, as we shall abide in His abiding love: nor will His terrors agitate us, because His promises realized will bless us: nor will our friend and acquaintance, being terrified, be far from us, where there will be no foe to dread.

17 Your fierce anger passed over me, And Your terrors greatly troubled me;

Aimilianos: «You are the God of my salvation, but I am a stormy sea over whose surface You calmly walk» (cf. Mt 14:25). This is how we think when we become isolated. When a man suffers, he thinks that no one suffers more than he does, that no one else has the kinds of problems that he does. Soon his sense of isolation deepens and reaches its climax: He alone suffers, no one else. And thus he says: «My God, You are unjust only to me. All of Your wrath, all of Your anger, are directed solely against me. The outbursts of Your wrath have swept over me; and Your terrors have greatly troubled me. Not only are You angry with me, not only have You rejected me, but I have become like something cast off and despised, a game for the amusement of Your idle moments, a weak little child for You to frighten».

With these words, the psalmist is expressing the thoughts of every soul that suffers. More precisely, he is describing the experience of suffering undergone by the soul. And this experience consists essentially of a conflict, for this is the moment when the soul is passing, as it were, through the «Clashing Rocks» of ancient mythology, known as the Symplegades. In this dangerous passage, the soul has to make a choice, and the outcome will either break it into pieces or enable it to sail to its destination in God. And the choice comes down to this: will the soul accept or reject suffering? Will it make this suffering its own, or struggle against it, seeing it as something alien to itself? To be sure, God exists. But the psalmist is overwhelmed by his suffering, and this is the cause of the whole drama. And so he has to make a choice. If he chooses to accept his suffering, he must embrace it within the wholeness of his life; he must discover and accept the proper relation to his suffering. If he can do this, he will have transformed his suffering so that in the end his only reality will be God. But if he continues to resist his suffering, refusing to find his salvation in it, his anguish will continue unabated. The question is ultimately this: Will he offer himself as a voluntary sacrifice to the will of God, or not? Consistent with the witness of Scripture—which is so much more powerful and theologically accurate than the modern idea that God has no real relation to the world—the psalmist believes that God is acting tyrannically toward him. In the face of such a situation, what must the psalmist do? He must accept as his own will, as his own desire, the will of God for his life. If this happens, he will cease being anxious about his sufferings, for he will see that they too are the signs and tokens of God's presence.

It follows from this that the psalmist's salvation hinges on a single decision, namely, the acceptance or rejection of his suffering. To the extent that he struggles against his suffering, seeking to disown and reject it, his agony will only intensify. The avoidance of suffering serves only to increase suffering in a vicious cycle that never ends. If, on the other hand, he chooses to entrust himself to God, and so recognize in his suffering God's mercy and love; if he is able to see his suffering as the proof of God's love for him, then he will undergo another, greater experience that will shake him to the core of his being. Just when he thinks that his life is about to end, that he is about to breathe his last, he will feel, not simply an upward surge into new life, but deep within himself the presence of the long-lived seed mentioned by the Prophet

Isaiah: It was the will of the Lord to bruise him; He has put him to grief; yet when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, a long-lived seed, and the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand; he shall see the fruit of his suffering of his soul and be satisfied (Is 53:10). Spiritual health is not found in the avoidance of suffering, but in its joyful acceptance. The psalmist's dilemma lies precisely in whether or not he will accept his sufferings or reject them, which is another way of saying that the choice he needs to make is whether to accept or deny God.

**18 They compassed me like water all the day long; They surrounded me at once.
19 You removed far from me neighbor and friend, And my acquaintances because of my misery**

Theodoret: struggling under these disasters I gain no comfort from my familiars, being deprived of association with them on account of the hardship of slavery. This applied not only to the Jews of to all human beings before the appearance of the Savior; rather, at present as well the supplication is appropriate and suited to those suffering a similar fate: "Whatever was written," according to the divine Apostle, "was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Rom 15:4)

Aimilianos: In its liturgical setting (as the fourth of the «Six Psalms»), the second and third verses of Psalm 88 are repeated at the psalm's conclusion, and thus the psalm is made to dose on note of hopeful expectation....

“O Lord God of my salvation, I cry day and night before You. 3
Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my
supplication, O Lord.”

Though he has no hope and sees not even the faintest glimmer of the kingdom of heaven, God remains everything for him, and so he continually turns and returns to Him: «Either you save me for Your glory, so that You may be glorified, or I shall be lost, and You along with me». He suffers, but he sees his suffering as something that is directly related to God. «Christ suffers for You, His Father; and I suffer for You too». The life and death of the psalmist are bound up with the life and death of God: «I live for You, for Your glory; but if I die, Your memory shall be removed from the earth».

The psalmist is incapable of seeing himself in isolation from the glory of God, because his whole life and existence have meaning only in so far as they are related to God. But he must make the difficult decision to sacrifice himself voluntarily to God. If he accepts to become an instrument of God's will, he will emerge triumphant; but otherwise he will fail. His suffering is beyond his control, it was not something that he willed for himself, but all things begin ai? id end with God, and nothing takes place apart from the divine will, and so he must see himself as an instrument wielded by God. As we've said, in accepting or rejecting my suffering, I am accepting or rejecting God Himself.

A psalm such as this, which is so rich with spiritual meaning, requires understanding, that is, discernment, which is a gift from God. No amount of human effort, no amount of psychological analysis, no sociological model or philosophical theory, will enable us to understand its deeper meaning. But if God sees my desire for understanding, then He will grant me this gift. We have considered this psalm as if it were the expression of the «psalmist», but it is in fact the story of every soul. The tragedy of the psalmist, his dilemma, is something that we all confront. This is why every soul that lives within the Church is required to read (or hear) this psalm every morning, and not simply to read it or hear it, but to experience it just as the psalmist did. From a human point of view, this experience should also enable us to sympathize with others who are in pain, to make their suffering our own, to throw in our lot with the sick, the suffering, the poor, and those who have fallen into sin. This is a good response to the psalm: to make the pain of others our own and to pray for them, especially if they themselves do not pray, or if for some reason they refuse to pray. But all of this is an act of charity, which the Church encourages but also looks beyond. The suffering of the other constitutes the pain of my own soul, not because I wish or choose to share in someone else's sufferings, but because in a very real way it is my pain, and my suffering. It all depends on whether or not I see the other as some isolated individual, with no real connection to myself, with no way of bridging the distance between us, or if I see his pain as my own. It depends, in other words, on whether or not I understand that both of us are members of the body of the Church, for when one member suffers, all the members suffer (I Cor 12:26). To no longer live exclusively for myself, but for God, also means that I now live with and for my neighbor, loving him as myself (Mt 22:39). It follows, then, that the cries of the Psalter are both the cries of the soul and the cries of the Church, just like in the Song of Songs.³¹ The soul and the Church are always the Bride of Christ, and they can never be separated. In the same way that the whole Christ and the whole Church are present in each particle of the Eucharistic bread, so too is the whole Church present in every single soul, the whole body present in each member, without any being separated from the Church, for to be separated from it means to cease living. For me to really feel and understand the words of this psalm; for me to pray in the morning, as I should, when the «Six Psalms» are being read in the darkness of the church, before the sun has risen, I must have experienced the mystery of the Church. It is the suffering Church that expects the liberation of its children from corruption, and as such it is a body that suffers together with Christ (cf. Rom 8:17; Col 1:24). It is the Church that cries out, for she feels her nakedness, her exile from paradise, and her cry is a prayer for redemption. The words of this psalm will become my own when I cease being an isolated individual, when, that is, I become a member of Christ's body, when I come to experience my identity with Him.

When I become conscious of the fact that I am a member of the body of Christ, then I begin my journey on the road to perfection. But to get to this point, there is much that I have to suffer, much that I have to do. In order for

me to experience my ecclesial hypostasis, to grow in likeness to God—so that I can pray the words of this psalm in their deeper spiritual meaning—I must make my soul run to God, so that I might reach Him, and so that He, running toward me, might embrace me.

I must learn to accept suffering with joy, to find joy within my suffering, to realize that even in my moments of glory, I am nothing but dust and ashes (Gen 18:27); a pelican in the wilderness (Ps 102:6), lost in a desert land, seeking shelter in a landscape of ruins. I must realize my sinfulness, my nakedness, my alienation from God; I must realize that I am like a sparrow alone on a housetop (Ps 102:7), not because I have some psychological problem, but because I have been separated from God. I need to experience both my exile and my union with God. I need to experience my inner darkness in order to know that God is my life and my light, that He is my salvation. I need to realize that I am in hell, in prison, in solitary confinement, alone on an island dying of leprosy, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, in order to enter into the mystery of true community, both in this life and in the one to come. My soul must cry out, just as the souls of all the saints have cried out, and then my soul will be saved, suffering together with Christ. Only then will my suffering be a completion of what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ (cf. Col 1:24). If I exert myself, and commit myself to the struggles of the spiritual life, then I shall have the right to ask for the understanding of the Spirit. Either way, I'm going to suffer. But it's up to me to decide whether I'm going to be a wounded deer panting for water and never finding any (cf. Ps 42:1; Pr 7:22), or a «lamb» sacrificed «together with Christ», and «calling out to Him». In this cry, this calling out, there exists the hope that I will hear the sound of His footsteps, and that these will overtake my own and lead me to salvation. But even before I cry out, God will answer me and say: I am here (Is 58:9).

REARDON

Psalms 87 (Hebrew 88) is possibly the most difficult of the psalms. In any case, it is arguably the darkest. It even stands among the most somber compositions in all of Holy Writ, comparable to the overcast pages of Job and Ecclesiastes. It not being readily apparent, perhaps, how to reconcile such tenebrous tones with evangelical hope, some may even judge the sentiments of this psalm too dismal for it to serve as Christian prayer at all. Psalm 87 is not only darksome in its every line; almost alone among the psalms, it even ends on a dark note. Its final line says: “My friend and confere have You kept afar from me; and my neighbors, because of my distress.” Now, how can that sort of sentiment be the “last word” in a Christian prayer?

But then, on closer inspection, we may observe certain subtler features softening this impression of our psalm. For all its gloom and shadow, for example, is it without significance that Psalm 87 begins by thus addressing the Almighty: “O Lord, the God of my salvation”? The intimacy and quiet hope of this address put one in mind of Psalm 21, in which the crucified Jesus, asking why God has forsaken Him, nonetheless continues to call Him “my God, my God.”

Three further comments seem appropriate regarding this umbrageous aspect of Psalm 87. First, one must bear in mind that, like all of the Bible, it comes to us from the Holy Spirit. If death is portrayed in this psalm as a very bad thing, then the Holy Spirit wants us to regard death as a very bad thing. One occasionally meets pagans and unbelievers who avow that they are not afraid to die. Well, this psalm suggests that maybe they should be. In line after line of Psalm 87, a writer under the guidance and impulse of the Holy Spirit says, in the sharpest terms, that death is a most terrifying prospect. Moreover, in prescribing this psalm to be prayed each morning at the very beginning of the day, among the “Hexapsalmos,” Holy Church must think it important that we commence our day with this thought of death in mind. Second, bearing in mind that our fear of death is a reaction of the fleshly man, the “old Adam,” still active within us, we should be mightily consoled to think that the Holy Spirit, in this psalm, has made such generous provision for this fleshly side of ourselves. The Holy Spirit, that is to say, gives our fleshly fear its due. If we yet feel this fear of death, the Holy Spirit is careful for this fear to find expression in prayer. Here is the tender condescension of God, that He provides even that our fallen nature may voice itself to Him in supplication and the lowly fealty of our very fear. Third, Jesus took on Himself, not our pristine, unfallen nature, but our nature as tainted at the ancient tree and throughout the rest of our history. So the fear of death expressed in this psalm is certainly a fear that Jesus felt. If, in addition, as Holy Scripture indicates in so many places, death is but the outward expression of sin and our alienation from God, then a deeper understanding of sin must surely imply a more profound understanding of death. And who understood sin more than Jesus? Likewise was His perception of death vastly more ample and accurate than our own. And, as He knew more about the power of death than any of the rest of us, there is every reason to believe that He felt this fear of death more than the rest of us possibly could. Finally, it is an ironic feature of liturgical and homiletic history that one expression from this psalm has been consistently used by the Church to refer to the death of Jesus, not as a term of doom but as an emblem of the high triumph and validation inherent in His Cross. That expression is “free among the dead.” In the mystic vision of Holy Church, Jesus was indeed “free among the dead” in the sense that death had no dominion over Him. He was “free” with respect to death, inasmuch as it could not hold Him fast. Reaching to seize Jesus in the moment of His final breath, death found itself, instead, cast down and trampled by the rush of His abundant life crashing into that realm where the grave, hitherto undisputed, had so long held sway. Every antagonist fell beneath His mighty, grinding tread. And forthwith striding to the nether world, Jesus “went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient” (1 Pet. 3:19, 20). To demonstrate, moreover, that our Lord was truly free among the dead, “the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many” (Matt. 27:51–53).

