

Psalm 143.^{1-2, 4, 6-9}

¹Hear my prayer, O LORD,
give ear to my supplications: in thy faithfulness
answer me, and in thy righteousness.

²And enter not into judgment with thy servant:
for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

⁴Therefore is my spirit overwhelmed within me;
my heart within me is desolate.

⁶I stretch forth my hands unto thee:
my soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land.

⁷Hear me speedily, O LORD:
my spirit faileth:
hide not thy face from me,
lest I be like unto them that go down into the pit.

⁸Cause me to hear thy lovingkindness in the morning;
for in thee do I trust:
cause me to know the way wherein I should walk;
for I lift up my soul unto thee...

⁹I flee unto thee to hide me.

I personally find any thoughts or feelings that the Psalms are not pertinent, even vital to be utterly mystifying. But, my experiences with students and congregations suggest that passages such as found in this reading leaves many LDS readers feeling confused and ambivalent about the Psalms. The confusion and ambivalence about this reading is at least two-fold. First, the idea that “no man living” “shall be justified” in the eyes of God challenges their view of man’s divine heritage and potential—a view more in line with enlightenment philosophy than scripture. Second, they conclude, as they do elsewhere in the Psalms, that because David is the author and because David is guilty of a far worse sin (murder) than they, the Psalms, including this one, have little to offer them. David deserves to suffer the pains of hell—“the pit” in this reading—while they, apparently, do not.

Such misunderstandings are most unfortunate and wrong on numerous fronts. We cannot address them all. But can share a thought or two. Leaving aside David’s final eternal state, which is a matter of complete conjecture, we can mention the fact that many, considering the possibility that they might not achieve the highest degree of glory—a consideration which, itself, causes chills to run up and down many a spine—never consider hell as a realistic alternative for or threat to their eternal being. With this dubious conclusion in mind, I have always been intrigued by Lehi’s and then Nephi’s thoughts about hell in relation to themselves.

First, we should understand what they meant by “hell.” Nephi speaks of “death and *hell*, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit.”¹ So, in Nephi’s mind, “hell” entails more than physical death. It entails “the death of the spirit.” Moreover, Nephi speaks of “that awful monster the devil, and death, and *hell*, and that lake of fire and brimstone, which is endless torment.”² Thus, “hell”

¹ 2 Nephi 9.¹⁰

² 2 Nephi 9.¹⁹

entails “endless torment” and lakes of “fire and brimstone”—metaphorical or not. Given, then, the nature of the place and the “righteous” nature of Lehi and Nephi, we might expect that they would have no fear of the place or feel any need for redemption from hell. But we would be wrong. In praising God for his saving influence in his life, Lehi exclaims,

“But behold, *the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell*; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love.”

It seems clear that Lehi would not need to be “redeemed” from something that posed no actual threat. Thus, it seems that Lehi did see hell as a possible threat to his eternal well-being and was extraordinarily grateful for the Lord’s labors in “redeeming” him from that terror and torment. In his much beloved “psalm,” Nephi pleads,

“*May the gates of hell be shut continually before me*, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite!”

Apparently, Nephi continued to worry that the “gates of hell” still stood wide open, awaiting his arrival and hoping to monstrously engulf and consume his eternal soul. The point is, “hell” is not open for business to murderers such as David only. Even individuals, “good and obedient” individuals such as Nephi and Lehi have felt its awful draw. Without becoming obsessed by the very real threat, we too can and perhaps should feel its awful draw. The danger is as real for us as it was for David or Lehi or Nephi. As we follow the Psalmist’s example and find a hiding place in God, our appreciation of God grows ever stronger. Lent is a good time to “let the solemnities of eternity rest upon [our] minds.”³ This admonition comes immediately after this warning,

“And the wicked shall go away into unquenchable fire, and their end no man knoweth on earth, nor ever shall know, until they come before me in judgement.”⁴

Lent is a good time for us to confess and repent so that as we “let the solemnities of eternity rest upon [our] minds” as David and Lehi and Nephi did, our expectations might be far more pleasant.

“And I soon go to the place of my rest, which is with my Redeemer; for I know that in him I shall rest. And I rejoice in the day when my mortal shall put on immortality, and shall stand before him; then shall I see his face with pleasure, and he will say unto me: ‘Come unto me, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father.’ Amen.”⁵

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 30, 2025)

³ DC 43.³⁴

⁴ DC 43.³³

⁵ Enos 1.²⁷