

PREACHING CHRIST
CONFIDENCE IN LIFE AND DEATH
PSALM 16

INTRODUCTION

Let us begin by looking at the title of Psalm 16.

Title מִכְתָּם לְדָוִד *miḵtām ləḏāwīd* Michtam of David

The attribution of authorship to David is supported by the apostles, Peter and Paul (Acts 2:25; 13:35-37).

The meaning of מִכְתָּם is uncertain and, therefore, disputed. Let us look at the various options.

Discussion: “Michtam”

The various suggestions as to the meaning of מִכְתָּם are:

1. A golden psalm (a derivative of כֶּתָן “gold”), indicating either its preciousness or that it should be written in letters of gold.
2. A silent prayer.
3. An atonement psalm (from the Akkadian *katāmu*, “to cover”).
4. The name of a collection of Psalms.
5. A musical term whose meaning has been lost to us.
6. An inscription. The word may be derived from a Hebrew root כָּתַב “to inscribe,” closely related to the verb כָּתַב “to write”. A related form of this word is found in Jer.2:22, “thine iniquity is marked (נִכְתָּב “inscribed”) before me.” The title also precedes the other “Michtams,” Psalms 56-60, all of which begin with prayer in times of trouble and conclude with confident songs of praise. The records of these significant turning points in David’s life would certainly have warranted permanent inscription. The LXX also suggests this understanding of the title with its use of στηλογραφία, “an inscription on a pillar.”

Conclusion: “Michtam” means “inscription.”

Although we shall consider this Psalm under two headings, we shall focus largely on the second. The two divisions are:

1. A prayer for present security (16:1-8).
2. A promise of eternal security (16:9-11).

Under each heading we will firstly look at the “**anticipation**,” the prophetic Old Testament words. Secondly, we shall investigate the “**accomplishment**,” the fulfilment of the Old Testament words in the New Testament. And, thirdly, we shall consider the “**application**,” how the message and lessons of the prophecy and its fulfilment can be applied to the Christian life today.

I. A PRAYER FOR PRESENT SECURITY (16:1-8)

ANTICIPATION

v.1a שְׁמֹרֵנִי אֱלֹ šəmṛēnî ʿēl Preserve me, O God

Although no specific event or occasion is mentioned, the content of this Psalm, in common with the other Michtams, suggests a time of danger and opposition for David. It would suit the time when he was being pursued in the wilderness by Saul.

The imminence of the danger is reflected in the urgency and brevity of the first words in David's prayer, "**Preserve me, O God**" (v.1). His prayer for protection, however, is couched in the context of great confidence in God as seen in the very next words.

v.1b כִּי־חֲסִיתִי בָךְ kî-ḥāsītî bāk For in thee do I put my trust

The joining of these two feelings of both deep danger, "**Preserve me,**" and strong confidence, "**For in thee do I put my trust,**" raise the question as to whether the Psalmist is oscillating between the two, or is he experiencing both at the same time?

From v.2-8 the Psalmist expresses his great enjoyment of and satisfaction in God.

v.2 אַתָּה טוֹבֹתִי בְל־עֵינֶיךָ ʿāttā^h ṭōbātî bal-ʿāle^ʿkā My goodness *extendeth* not to thee

This expression has occasioned considerable debate.

Discussion: "My goodness extendeth not to thee" (v.2)

1. "My goodness is not for thy [God's] benefit" (v.2), but is, in contrast, for the benefit of the saints (v.3). David realises that any goodness he has cannot profit or add to God, but can benefit God's people on earth.

2. "My goodness [or, "happiness"] is not besides [or, "beyond"] thee." In other words, "I have no other source of happiness but God." If this is the correct meaning, then the translation of the next verse would differ from the KJV which translates לְקַדְוֹשִׁים **"but to the saints."** Notice the italicized "**but**" which highlights a word supplied by the translators to smooth the English reading. If omitted, then the meaning of v.2-3 may be "My happiness is not beyond God – and his people." This fits the context of v.4 in which the Psalmist turns away from all false gods and their worship.

However, The use of the Hebrew 'full stop' : at the end of v.2 would make the required continuous flow of v.2 into v.3 unlikely.

Conclusion: "My goodness is not for God's benefit; but for the saints..."

The Lord was David's allotted portion (v.5), the best inheritance anyone could receive (v.6). At a time when he wandered as a fugitive in the wilderness without a place or a thing he could call his own, he realised more and more that the Lord was all he needed to satisfy his heart and mind. That the Lord was near and manifesting Himself to David gave him cause for praise and confidence, even when events were threatening to shake and move his faith (v.7-8).

ACCOMPLISHMENT

As we shall see below, both Peter and Paul assert that the latter part of this Psalm (v.9-10) was fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:24-32; 13:35-37). Can we use that as a basis for also seeing the early part of the Psalm (v.1-8) as fulfilled in Christ's life?

We may be encouraged to see the earlier parts of the Psalm as anticipating Christ's life by the way that Peter attributed a Messianic fulfilment to v.8: "For David speaketh concerning him [Christ], I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved" (Acts 2:25).

There are two important principles of interpretation to note here. **Firstly**, the inspired apostle claimed that David spoke "concerning him" [Christ]. That means that when David wrote this Psalm, he was not ignorantly nor coincidentally predicting the Messiah. He was consciously and providentially seeing the promised Messiah and writing a song of praise about Him.

Principle of Interpretation

When Old Testament Prophets predicted the Messiah, they were not doing so coincidentally nor ignorantly, but were usually consciously predicting the Messiah through Divine providence and under Divine inspiration.

Secondly, Peter asserted that in Psalm 16:8 David was not speaking of his own experience so much as predicting the Messiah's experience. David's life was full of spiritual ups and downs. He did not keep the Lord always before him and was regularly "moved." Only the Messiah kept the Lord always before him and so was never moved. Don Carson concurs with this interpretation:

Even when David wrote this psalm he was going beyond his own personal experience: he did not, for example, always set the Lord before him, nor was he always unshaken. Both he and his contemporaries would recognize the psalm as an unrealized ideal. Rightly, therefore, the NT finds here a foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus Christ in whom its ideals and hopes were fulfilled (Acts 2:24-32) and through whom the identical hope awaits us (Rom. 8:11).¹

Principle of Interpretation

If the prophet described something which was beyond his own experience, the prophet was describing an ideal which he trusted would one day be realised in and by the Messiah.

This Psalm, therefore, gives us an insight not only into the Messiah's resurrection but into his life and experience beforehand. Through the prophet we eavesdrop on the Messiah's prayers while living in the 'wilderness' of this world with all its attendant dangers and threats. His goodness could not add to His Father, neither was it for himself, but was for the benefit of the saints (v.2-3). The Father was His precious possession and territory – the "place" where he lived (v.5-6). They communed and fellowshiped together day and night (v.7). The Father – His will, command, covenant, promises, faithfulness – was so present with him that he could truthfully assert, "I shall not be moved" (v.8).

He that had nowhere to lay his head, how happy is He! What a calm contentment sits upon his pensive brow! Earth and hell are unable to destroy his blessed lot. He has (v.7) found communion with his Father when others sleep – in the retired valleys and hills of Galilee, on the Mt of Olives, in the wilderness.²

APPLICATION

1. Let us worship Jesus the Christ who realised this Psalm perfectly.

...This psalm exhibits One who is happy, truly happy, notwithstanding a world full of broken cisterns around him, and the sighs borne to his ear on every breeze.³

¹ D A Carson, *New Bible Commentary* (Leicester: IVP 1970), Electronic Edition.

² A Bonar, *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 1978), 52-53.

³ Ibid, 51.

2. Let us delight in and do good to God's people, the "excellent of the earth."
3. Let us follow Christ in valuing our spiritual inheritance more than anything else in this world,
4. Let us develop and maintain both a sense of present danger and of present confidence in God.

II. A PROMISE OF ETERNAL SECURITY (16:9-11)

ANTICIPATION

v.9a לָכֵן שָׂמַח לִבִּי *lākēn śāmah libbī* Therefore my heart is glad,
 וַיִּגַּל כְּבוֹדִי *wayyāgel kabōdī* and my glory rejoiceth:

David's inward gladness of heart was the result of the answered prayer for preservation, and caused כְּבוֹדִי "his glory" to rejoice. Peter translates "glory" as "tongue" (Acts 2:26), as the tongue is the major instrument for praising and publicly glorifying God. The tongue is also the "glory" of humanity, with the faculty of speech separating us from the animals.

v.9b אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי יִשְׁכֹּן לְבַטָּח *ʾap-bəśārī yiškōn lābēṭaḥ* My flesh also shall rest in hope

"Flesh" refers to the body and "rest" describes the state of the body in the grave. Death, therefore, is predicted here. However, the body is buried with "hope" that the grave will be only a temporary resting place.

v.10a כִּי לֹא־תַעֲזֹב נַפְשִׁי *kī lōʾ-taʿāzōb nap̄šī* **lišʾōl** For thou wilt not leave my soul
 לְשָׂאוֹל in hell

As נַפֶּשׁ "soul" can refer to the human spirit, or the body (Nu.9:6,10; 19:11,1-3), or the whole person (Gen.12:5; Ps.3:2), the meaning here will be determined by how we understand the other critical word in this construction, שָׂאוֹל.

Discussion: "Hell"

The KJV translates שָׂאוֹל *śəʾōl* as "grave" 31 times, "hell" 30 times, "pit" 3 times. So, in some way or other it refers to the place of the dead.

The word only occurs once outside the Old Testament, in the Jewish Elephantine papyri, where it means "grave."

Commentators' conclusions on the meaning of this word are largely determined by their view of how much the Old Testament saints understood of life after death, with some denying any such belief, and others suggesting widespread and considerable understanding. The three main views of what שָׂאוֹל represents are:

1. שָׂאוֹל describes the grave, the place where all bodies go after death. It makes no comment on the destination or experience of the soul.

- a. Godly Jacob goes to שָׂאוֹל. (Gen.37:5), as do ungodly Korah and Dathan (Num.16:30).
- b. As almost all the references are in poetic literature, it may be that שָׂאוֹל is a poetic synonym for קֶבֶר *qeber* which is used seventy-one times for "grave."

- c. Two Old Testament passages containing שְׂאוֹל are quoted in the New (Ps.16:10; Hos.13:14), and in both cases they are referring to bodily resurrection (Acts 2:27; 1 Cor.15:55).
- d. In Ezekiel 31 and 32, Hebrew words for “grave” (קֶבֶר *qeber* 32:22, 23, 25, 26), “pit” (בּוֹר *bôr* 31:14, 16; 32:18; 23, 24, 25, 29), and the “earth below” (אֶרֶץ תַּחְתִּית *’ereṣ taḥtîṯ* 31:14, 16, 18; 32:18, 24) are used interchangeably with שְׂאוֹל *šə’ôl* (31:15, 16, 17; 32:21, 27).
- e. שְׂאוֹל is said to be like a bed in darkness characterized by dust, the worm, and decay (Job 17:13-16). The grave is also clearly meant in Job.21:26.

This interpretation usually regards the Psalmist as looking backwards with thankfulness to a time when God delivered him from death and so did not leave him in the grave.

2. שְׂאוֹל has a double meaning, but here it means “hell.” Originally שְׂאוֹל just meant “the grave,” but later became a specialized term for “hell” (Ps.9:1; Prov.7:27). This is the general translation pattern of the KJV, although there are exceptions (Num 16:30, 33 and Deut 32:22). In support of this, there are three passages which describe שְׂאוֹל as a great depth in contrast to heaven (Ps 139:8; Job 11:8; Amos 9:2), which suggests a meaning of “hell.” However, this could also be a physical description of the grave (down below) in contrast with the sky (high above).

If שְׂאוֹל means “hell” then here the Psalmist is looking forward with thankfulness to God for a future deliverance of his soul from hell, the place or experience of the damned. This is the view favoured by most commentators who support a Messianic understanding of the Psalm.

3. שְׂאוֹל describes the spirit underworld, a dark and dismal place where all souls go to after death. This is consistent with Mesopotamian literature but it is inconsistent with the New Testament (Lk.23:43).

Conclusion: The Psalmist expresses the confidence that his soul will not be left in the place of the damned, meaning either that his soul will not go there or if it does it will not be left there forever.

v.10b לֹא־תִתֵּן חַסִּידְךָ לְרֵאוֹת שְׂחָת׃ *lō’-tittēn ḥāsîdḱā lir’ôṭ šāḥaṭ* Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

Commentators who support “grave” as the meaning of שְׂאוֹל in the first part of the verse, argue that this last part, “**neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption,**” is simply a parallel statement, expressing the same thought in different words.

If this interpretation of sheol is correct, its usage does not give us a picture of the state of the dead in gloom, darkness, chaos, or silence, unremembered, unable to praise God, knowing nothing. Such a view verges on unscriptural soul sleep. Rather, this view gives us a picture of a typical Palestinian tomb, dark, dusty, with mingled bones and where “this poor lisping stammering tongue lies silent in the grave.” All the souls of men do not go to one place. But all people go to the grave.⁴

⁴ Harris, Archer, & Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Moody Press: Chicago, 1980), Electronic Edition.

However, it is more likely that two sides of the one experience are being described – the first describing the soul after death (not left in hell), and the second the body (not permitted to experience corruption).

While all believers are spared hell, all believers who die in the normal way corrupt in the normal way. That someone special, other and higher than David, is being spoken of here is confirmed both by the corruption of David's body (Acts 2:29; 13:36), and by the use of the beautiful and highly Messianic title חֲסִידָךְ "thine Holy One" to describe this person.

Discussion: "Thine Holy One"

חֲסִידָךְ *hāsîd* is far more than a parallel for נַפְשִׁי *nepēs* "soul" in the previous clause. It is a special Messianic title. It occurs 32 times (including 25 times in the Psalms) and always in poetic passages. It is derived from חֶסֶד *hesed* "loving-kindness" or "loving-favour" and may be either active (one who shows חֶסֶד to God) or passive (one who receives חֶסֶד from God, or one in whom חֶסֶד resides). The passive understanding is supported by similarities to the noun and adjectival pattern of אֲסִיר *āsîr* "one who is bound, a prisoner," or קָצִיר *qāšîr* "what is gathered, the harvest".

Let us look at how the Messianic content of this word is filled up.

"...the LORD hath set apart him that is חֲסִידָךְ for Himself"(Ps.4:3), and so will hear when he calls upon Him in the midst of trouble.

"...with a חֲסִידָךְ thou wilt show thyself חֲסִידָךְ" (Ps.18:25). In the context of this Psalm the evidence of being God's חֲסִידָךְ will be seen in deliverance from all enemies.

"Thou spakest in vision to thy חֲסִידָךְ, and saidst, I have laid help upon one that is mighty; I have exalted one chosen out of the people. I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him..." (Ps.89:19-20). Classic Messianic terms, such as "my servant" and "anointed" are joined with חֲסִידָךְ to show that the LORD's king, servant, anointed one, and חֲסִידָךְ are one and the same in the person, office, and mission of David. Hannah also connected the "horn of his anointed" (1 Sam.2:10) with the חֲסִידָךְ .

"...thy חֲסִידָךְ whom thou didst prove at Massah, and with whom thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah" (Dt.33:8; cf Ex.17:2, 7). Here, the Lord who was the one tested is identified as חֲסִידָךְ .

H H Rowley argued for the active meaning of חֲסִידָךְ on the basis that the word is used of God in Ps. 145:17 and Jer.3:12. He says that "it is quite impossible to suppose that when God says [in Jer.3:12] 'I am *hāsîdh*' he means that he has been treated with *hesedh* because the whole burden of the verse is that he has not."⁵

However, this is no different from the meaning of חֲסִידָךְ in Dt.33:8 for the חֲסִידָךְ is not only the one to whom loving-kindness comes because of a particular office or mission, but also the one in whom this loving-kindness resides.

⁵ H H Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (London SCM, 1956), p130 n.1.

Because Yahweh was Himself ḥāsîd, Israel was invited to return to Him (Jer.3:12)...In other words, Yahweh is first declared to be just and ḥāsîd before He begins to manifest such characteristics to others.⁶

Of the 32 times חֲסִידִים ḥāsîd appears, in 17 cases it is “favoured ones” (pl.). This has also been used to argue against the Messianic view. However, the oscillation between singular and plural, the one and the many, is common for other parallel Messianic terms such as “seed,” “anointed one,” “servant,” and “firstborn.”

Conclusion: חֲסִידִים is the receiver of God’s special favour and kindness, which in the context includes God’s promises of preservation from hell and corruption.

Principle of Interpretation

Messianic terms develop and mature in meaning as Scripture is revealed and, therefore, to understand the full significance of certain words their previous Scriptural usage must be studied.

The חֲסִידִים does not see שְׁחָתָה šāḥat “corruption.” Most older versions translate this as “corruption” and most modern versions translate it as “pit.”

Discussion: “Corruption”

1. שְׁחָתָה šāḥat is a derivation from שָׁחַ שūaḥ “to sink down” and refers to an underworld deep below the earth. The word is used in connection with “dig” (Ps.7:15), and also to describe a pit-trap (Isa.51:14). It is used a number of times in close connection with death or the grave (eg. Job 17:14). It is possible that this word developed from pit to grave, to the corruption that comes from the grave. The translation “pit” suits those who wish to minimize the amount of knowledge Old Testament believers had of life after death. They then understand these words as confidence that God would prevent the Psalmist’s death and subsequent burial rather than deliver him out of it.

2. The word is a derivation from שָׁחַ “to go to ruin.” In Job 17:14 it refers to decay in death and is parallel to “the worm.” In Isaiah 38:17 שְׁחָתָה בְּלִי šāḥat bēlî is the place of total decay. The apostle’s quotation (Acts 2:27) supports the meaning of “corruption.”

“To see corruption” is also supported by the opposite phrase following “Thou wilt shew me the path of life”. To “see life” was to remain alive. This meant eternal life. Dahood has shown from Ugaritic sources that ḥayyîm was used as a synonym for immortality.⁷

Conclusion: The Psalmist is anticipating that the חֲסִידִים will experience a separation of body and soul, but that a miraculous intervention will prevent the normal bodily corruption

Principle of Interpretation

The New Testament writers give conclusive translations of Old Testament language.

⁶ W C Kaiser, Jr. *The Use of the Old Testament in the New*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 35.

⁷ M Dahood, *Psalms*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1965), 1:91.

v.11a

תּוֹדִיעֵנִי אֶרְחַ חַיִּים

tôdî'ēnî ʾōrah ḥayyîm

Thou wilt shew me the path
of life

חַיִּים “lives” is plural indicating variety and abundance of life. The Psalmist anticipates that for the חַיִּים the path to the grave does not lead to death in all its dimensions, but to life in all its abundance in the joyful and pleasure filled presence of God.

ACCOMPLISHMENT

Though we believe that in this Psalm David was consciously predicting the Messiah, there are many commentators who deny this and simply see here a confidence that God would prevent the Psalmist from dying as a result of sickness or some other threat. For example, P C Craigie writes:

...the psalm, with respect to its initial meaning, is neither messianic nor eschatological in nature. Yet it is apparent that in the earliest Christian community, the psalm was given a messianic interpretation with respect to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:25–28), and Paul, in the synagogue at Antioch (Acts 13:35), reflect this interpretation of the psalm in their preaching...[This] is an example of the double meanings which may be inherent in the text of Scripture, a dimension of their inspiration...The new meaning imparted to the text suggests not only progress, but contrast. The psalmist was faced with imminent death; he rose in confidence above that danger to know the fullness of life in God's presence. But in the new interpretation, Jesus not only faces imminent death—he goes on to die; whereas from the psalmist's theological perspective, death would end it all, in the experience of Jesus, death became a door. The psalmist rose up in confidence against the danger of death: Jesus rose up in confidence from the actual stronghold of death. While God did not abandon the psalmist to Sheol, he delivered Jesus from Sheol.⁸

Driver adds:

The Psalm contains...a great declaration of the faith and hope of an Old Testament saint... but when we study it in itself, and consider it carefully in its original import, we see that verse 10 will not support the argument which the apostles built upon it, and that the Psalm cannot be appealed to, in the way in which they appealed to it, as a proof of the resurrection of Christ.⁹

However, in his sermon at Pentecost, Peter declares categorically that this part of the Psalm does not describe David but the Messiah. “[David] spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption” (Acts 2:31).

Peter is most insistent that his understanding of Psalm 16 is not a novel interpretation: It was David's own view. Thus any belief that the psalm had been accommodated to contemporary fancies or subjected to a reinterpretation fails to grapple with the apostle's own claim: Psalm 16, not Peter (or Paul) made those claims for Christ and his resurrection.¹⁰

Paul later confirms this exegesis (Acts 13:35-37).

Principle of Interpretation

When NT writers attribute an understanding to OT writers, their attribution is authoritative.

“Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoiceth” (v.9).

⁸ P C Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Incorporated, 1998), Electronic Edition.

⁹ S R Driver, “The Method of Studying the Psalter: Psalm 16,” *Expositor*, Seventh Series, 10 (1910): 37.

¹⁰ W C Kaiser, Jr. *The Use of the Old Testament in the New*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 39

Though a “man of sorrows” yet the Messiah was also a man of joy whose joy was verbalised in praise and worship.

“My flesh shall rest in hope” (v.9).

The Messiah’s joy was not in anticipation of the sufferings he would endure but for the hope that was set before him of what these sufferings would purchase and achieve. In the light of this hope, he faced death with confidence.

“For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell” (v.10).

If שְׂאוֹל means “hell” and “soul” means the human spirit, then the prophecy teaches that Christ experienced hell for a time. Some have taken this to mean that Christ descended to hell. However, it is best to see it as describing Christ’s experience of God’s wrath against His people’s sins which he vicariously suffered while he yet lived. The prophet, therefore, is predicting that Christ will not suffer this forever, that for him the experience of hell will be temporary.

If שְׂאוֹל means “grave” and “soul” means the human spirit, then the prophet is predicting that Christ’s soul will not go to the grave. As we know, the moment he died, his soul went to “paradise.”

If שְׂאוֹל means “grave” and “soul” refers to the whole person, then the prophet is predicting the resurrection of the Messiah’s body.

“Neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption” (v10).

Just as it is sin which causes death and decay, it is holiness which preserves the soul from corruption and decomposition. The holiness of Christ was a counterforce to the powers of death and the grave. He would arise uninjured.

The great promise to Christ is, that though he took a corruptible body upon him, yet he should not see corruption, that is, partake of corruption: corruption should have no communion with, much less power over him (Joseph Caryl).

“Thou wilt show me the path of life” (v11).

The Messiah’s reward for his sufferings is here set forth. Not just restoration to life but a higher life than ever experienced before. He will be led through death on the path to life.

“In thy presence is fullness of joy” (v11).

Unmixed and unbroken joy will be his reward. His human nature is filled with joy unspeakable and full of glory. An overflowing delight rather than an overwhelming sorrow.

His soul is fed and nourished with a perpetual vision of God, in whose face he beholds no more frowns, no more designs of treating him as a servant but such smiles that shall give a perpetual succession of joy to him, and fill his soul with fresh and pure flames. Pleasures they are, pleasantness in comparison whereof the greatest joys in this life are anguish and horrors. His soul hath joys without mixture, pleasures without number, a fulness without want, a constancy without interruption, and a perpetuity without end (Stephen Charnock).

“At thy right hand are pleasures for evermore” (v11).

To the right hand of the father was Christ exalted (Ps.110:1; Acts 2:33; Heb.1:13). Christ’s pleasure is the fruit of his exaltation.

APPLICATION

1. Let us worship Christ who was the first to walk this pathway of resurrection from death to life. As such he is the first-fruits of them who sleep and the first begotten from the dead.
2. Let us face death with similar confidence. We can put off the body with a joyful hope of resurrection. Though it corrupt for a time yet soon it shall put off corruption and put on incorruption. "My flesh shall rest in hope" and "therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth."
3. Let us look forward to heaven, full of eternal pleasures in God's presence.