

Selah

by Wayne Goff

The word “*selah*” is found 74 times in the Book of Psalms and 3 times in the Book of Habakkuk. It is a Hebrew word whose meaning is quite uncertain. The translators of the Bible were quite puzzled by it, so rather than translate it, they simply passed it on to us by way of transliteration.

Similarly, there are events in life which we do not at all understand at the time. It may be that later on in life or in heaven we will understand better. Joseph did not comprehend the providence of God working in his life as he was sold by his brothers into Egypt. His young faith did not waver, and in time he came to understand. He pointedly stated to his brothers that the events of his life were “*meant ... for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive*” (Genesis 50:20).

Abraham did not understand how God could ask him to sacrifice Isaac, the very son through whom God’s promises would come. But his faith sustained him, and he did not waver in unbelief. He glorified God in his life by doing that which he could not understand, plainly because God commanded it. He came to appreciate God’s plans and purposes *only after* the test.

So it is with us today. Our physical maladies better suit us to sympathize with others in their sufferings (2 Cor. 1:4), though we may not enjoy them at the time. Our lives may contain the very marks of providence, though we cannot see the overall effect any more clearly at this time than Joseph or Abraham did early on. But whatever comes our way in life, we must develop through the events an unwavering faith in God which gives glory to Him by doing His will without fail, whether or not we understand the why of it.

A Rest Note?

Is the “*selah*” a rest note? Many hold this as the explanation of the word. Psalm 7:5 might give credence to such a view, since a rest seems appropriate there.

Also in our lives there must be the proper time for rest. God instituted the Sabbath under the Old Law as a day of rest (Ex. 16:23), and Jesus later would proclaim that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27). We need a time for rest each day of our lives, and a day of rest, such as the Lord’s Day should afford, that we might meditate on the more important things of life. Discord fills our lives when there is no room for rest.

A Note Of Exclamation?

Is the “*selah*” a note of exclamation? Archibald G. Brown held to this view, and several Hebrew experts affirmed that he was right. He said the meaning could be rendered “Think of that!” Read, for example, Psalm 3 and when you come to “*selah*” insert the phrase “Think of that!” in its place, and you will fall in love with this helpful interpretation and explanation.

And indeed, there are many wonderful blessings from God in our lives which ought to make us stop and say, “Think of that!” Life, breath, food, clothing, loved ones, this country, the Bible, God’s sacrifice in Christ, Christ’s love, salvation, the church, etc. — “Think of that!”

A Musical Sign?

Is the “*selah*” a musical sign indicating the song should rise to a higher note? This works well when adapted in the reading of Psalm 4. The Psalmist begins on a doleful note, and everything seems to be on a minor key, until we reach the “*selah*.” Suddenly everything is different, and the movement reaches a higher level.

Christians would do well to remember to raise their lives to the higher level to which God calls them. Alexander Maclaren once said to a group of young men, “Young men, do not make it your ambition to get **on**, but to get **up**.” Indeed, the Christian life is the higher life — higher standing with God, higher hopes, higher expectations, higher morals and higher friendships.

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