

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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“Selah”: a meaningful pause

(Jerry Fite)

The Psalms of the Old Testament were written to be sung in worship unto God. God is exalted by such recorded Psalmists as David, but also sons of Korah, including Heman, then Asaph, and Ethan. Many of these Psalms were for the Chief Musician who was in charge of worship in the temple. These Psalms were arranged to be sung with mechanical instruments of music. At determined places in the various Psalms the word “*Selah*” occurs 71 times.

The etymology of the word is uncertain, and the definition is undetermined. However, by examining where the word “*Selah*” occurs in the various Psalms, we can have a good understanding regarding the word. “*Selah*” is inserted to cause one to pause and meditate on what has just been said in the Psalm, and anticipate what is to follow. It is also used as a musical notation, giving opportunity for the mechanical instruments to bridge the thoughts with maybe a crescendo of sound to emphasize an important concept.

For example, David writes, “*Jehovah hath made Himself known, He hath executed judgment: the wicked is snared in the working of his own hands...[Higgaion, Selah]*” (Psalm 9:16) Here is a pause in the Psalm to bridge the fact that God has made himself known in judgment, (v.16), to verse 17: the wicked’s destiny, “*sheol*”.

Along with the meaningful pause, “*Selah*”, is the word, “*Higgaion*”. In Psalm 92:3, the word denotes the “*solemn sound on the harp*”, or the “*resounding sound on the lyre*”. As one meditates on the wicked ensnared by their own devices as God making His judgment known, the solemn sound on the harp enhances the solemn mood: to the grave they go.

The first occurrence of “*Selah*” in the Psalms reveals its purpose of pausing to reflect on what has just been said, and connecting a new facet of related truth. David writes, “*Many there are that say of my soul, ‘There is no help for him in God’...Selah*” (Psalm 3:2). We stop with David

in the midst of his increasing number of vocal adversaries. What is he to do? After the pause we are introduced to David’s shield, Jehovah. What does David do? “*I cry unto Jehovah with my voice, and He answereth me out of His holy hill...Selah*” (Psalm 3:4). After pausing knowing God answers, David can now rest, even sleep, with confidence (Psalm 3:5). David sums up his personal experience by encouraging all to pause and reflect on the fact that “*Salvation belongeth unto Jehovah; Thy blessing be upon thy people...Selah*” (Psalm 3:8).

“*Selah*” is also used to pause and reflect on a refrain in the Psalm. For example, the vanity of man is emphasized twice in Psalm 39 with the use of “*Selah*”. “*...Surely every man at his best estate is altogether vanity...Selah*” (Psalm 39:5). Then we read at the close of the Psalm: “*...Surely every man is vanity...Selah*” (Psalm 39:11).

With “*Selah*”, pause to reflect on what has just been said. Notice a new facet of established truth to follow.