

*A One-Year Journey of Prayer and Praise*



**52 WEEKS**  
**THROUGH THE**  
**PSALMS**

**J A M E S M E R R I T T**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF **52 WEEKS THROUGH THE BIBLE**

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**HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS**

EUGENE, OREGON

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## **52 WEEKS THROUGH THE PSALMS**

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## The Music of Heaven

It was the most nervous and scared I have ever been in my ministerial life. I was about to walk into a packed worship center of close to a thousand people, many of whom wanted my scalp. I was thirty-two years old, pastoring a church larger than I ever imagined pastoring, and my first six months were the good, the bad, and the ugly. The good was the church had exploded in growth unlike it had ever seen in its one hundred plus years of existence. The church had never baptized so many people in a six-month period nor seen as many people join the church. Money was flowing like a river in a flood zone.

The bad was many people were unhappy because (a) they didn't like all the new growth; (b) the staff was undermining me behind my back because they didn't share my conservative evangelical theology nor my emphasis on evangelism; and (c) many resented my strong preaching and decisive leadership.

The ugly was there was a movement to have me fired, and a petition with some three hundred signatures to effect just that was reportedly circulating in the community and was to be presented that night. My strongest supporters were as worried as I was and told me they didn't know how the meeting would go.

I had developed a blood pressure problem over the stress and my sleep account was completely empty and overdrawn. I was spiritually drained, emotionally exhausted, and physically depleted. I was convinced that I was going to be fired that night not for doing wrong but doing right.<sup>1</sup> As I placed my hand on the door to enter the arena (it didn't feel like a worship center to me), I was sweating profusely, my heart was pounding, I felt sure my blood pressure was up, and I was almost hyperventilating. Just as I was

about to open the door, everything changed for me because of one part of a lyric of a song that was written over three thousand years ago. It was written by a king named David and the lyric was this: “This I know...God is for me” (Psalm 56:9 ESV).

That verse came to me because the Thursday prior to that Sunday night I spent an entire day “listening” to every single one of those 150 songs in the book of Psalms, choosing the lyrics that meant the most to me in one of the most difficult times of my life. Those songs changed my life that day, and to this day the sound of these spiritual songs are music to my ear.

There is something about music that appeals to everyone. Not everyone likes sports. Not everyone likes politics. Not everyone likes movies.<sup>2</sup> But I have never met anyone who doesn’t like music. Whether it be rock or jazz, southern gospel or high church, pop or hip-hop, country or classical, heavy metal or disco, you would be hard pressed to find someone who doesn’t like some sort of music.

God evidently likes music too. The longest of all the sixty-six books in the Bible, authored by God, is dedicated to the hymns of the Hebrews, known as the Psalms. In fact, music is referred to in 1150 verses throughout Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

Both Judaism and Christianity are unique in that they are singing faiths. The Psalms have been described as “Israel’s Hymnbook,” and the word *psalm* actually means “song.” These songs originally were sung to the accompaniment of an ancient stringed instrument known as a psaltery, hence the word *psalm*.<sup>4</sup> From the birth of Christianity, psalms were one of the main forms, if not *the* main form, of musical expression in the early church.<sup>5</sup> Paul said using psalms to communicate truth is an outflow of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-19).

Paul’s observation also clues us in to the fact that psalms are more than songs to be sung or music to be played but truth to be heard and learned. One of the ways the earliest Christians communicated doctrinal truth within the church was through hymns.<sup>6</sup>

This practice has continued throughout the history of the church: “the hymns of the early church throughout history were intended primarily for that purpose—to teach and reinforce sound doctrine in a memorable form... if you’ll go back and look at the hymnbooks [churches used to use] you will see how each song often communicated a complete doctrinal statement,

usually a complete retelling of the gospel in capsule. These songs weren't to dance to. They were to learn from. This was the understood meaning of hymns for centuries and was particularly true at the dawn of the church."<sup>7</sup>

Which brings us full circle to the Psalms. Even in his death, we know just how important the Psalms were to Jesus. All four Gospel writers tell us that on the cross Jesus quoted from the Psalms.<sup>8</sup> The Psalms have been historically a foundation for both Jewish and Christian prayer. Not only is this book the most popular in the Bible<sup>9</sup> but it is the oldest songbook still in use in the world.

All of which gives the impetus to this book. This music from the heart of God is indeed the music of heaven. Without question, these songs will make it into eternity and be sung forever and ever. But unlike other music, the lyrics alone captivate the heart, the soul, and the mind.

It was Martin Luther who said, "I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the Psalms played a role in his sentiment for there is great theological truth found in this music that will warm the heart, challenge the mind, and strengthen the spirit.

In 1703 Andrew Fletcher said, "Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws."<sup>11</sup> I pray that you will understand the truth and reasoning behind Fletcher's statement after spending a year with these songs. For the truth in these lyrics can transform a heart in a way that all the laws ever written never can. "Listen" to them and learn from them for the next fifty-two weeks, and you will be comforted, encouraged, strengthened, and blessed by songs that came from the hands of men but were composed from the heart of God.

## PART ONE

### Up Close and Personal

*God is a God we can approach and have an intimate relationship with.*

# 1

## Happiness in High-Def

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 1
- Matthew 25:14-21
- Psalm 37:1-6
- Proverbs 8:32-36
- Nehemiah 8:1-12

### **Are You Happy?**

If you have ever seen anything in high-definition, you know how clear and sharp the picture is. The details are luminous and the colors pop. Sometimes I wish life could always be so veracious and vibrant. What might the whole of life look like in high-def?

In his autobiography *Just as I Am*, Billy Graham tells a story from a visit to the Caribbean. One of the wealthiest men in the world asked Billy and his wife, Ruth, to come to his lavish home for lunch. The man was seventy-five years old and throughout the entire meal he hardly spoke. Something was troubling him and he seemed close to tears.

He finally looked up at the Grahams and said, “I have to confess something. I am the most miserable man in the world. I don’t understand it. I can go anywhere I want in my yacht, private plane, or helicopters. I have

everything I want to make me happy, and yet I am miserable as hell.” Dr. Graham talked and prayed with him trying to point him to Christ, who alone could give him real happiness.

That afternoon the pastor of the local Baptist church came to call on Ruth and Billy in their cottage. He was an English widower who was also seventy-five and he spent most of his free time taking care of his two invalid sisters. Dr. Graham could not get over this man’s enthusiasm for life, his love for Christ, and his love for other people.

This pastor, who did not have a fraction of what the other man had, said something that Dr. Graham never forgot: “I don’t have two pounds to my name, but I am the happiest man on this island.” When the man left, Dr. Graham looked at Ruth and said, “Who do you think is the richer man?”

I believe there is a way to live and to die truly happy and then find out after death that real eternal, permanent happiness has only just begun!

Are you happy? Are you happy with your life? Are you happy with your singleness? Are you happy with your marriage? Are you happy with your job? Are you happy with your finances? Are you happy with your friendships? Are you happy with who you are, where you are, and what you are accomplishing with your life? If the answer isn’t crystal clear to you, then let’s let the psalmist tune up our vision.

## **“I Am Never Happy”**

In 1835, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, “Music is the universal language of mankind—poetry their universal pastime and delight.” The ancient Hebrews had the same understanding well before Longfellow. In fact, the longest book of the Bible, the book of Psalms, is a collection of one hundred and fifty songs. Originally, psalms were not read or taught; they were sung. And the very first song in this musical collection is about happiness.

Shockingly, happiness is *not* tied to prosperity, profits, or people. It has nothing to do with means, money, or mistresses. The rich and famous can still be unhappy. You would think that someone rich and famous like Howard Stern would be a happy man. However, back in 2007 he had a personal trainer and was in the best physical shape of his life. He was in therapy and was getting his mind together. He was living with a young,

beautiful model. He was earning one hundred million dollars a year to do what he loved doing, which was radio. But in an interview at the time, he said, “I am never happy. I haven’t been happy a day in my life.”<sup>1</sup> While I wish Howard Stern could be reading this chapter, I’m so glad that you are!

When Psalm 1:1 talks about the man who is “blessed,” the Hebrew word literally means “to be happy.” Perhaps the Hebrews’ title for this song was, “How to Be Happy.”

Contrary to what some people think, God is not some cosmic killjoy who loves it when we are miserable. God wants you to be happy, but he wants you to be happy his way. He wants you to be happy internally, externally, *and* eternally. The psalmist shows us that the key to a happy life is living a God-centered life.

## **Happiness Is Found in Favoring the Right People**

The psalmist begins with what sounds like a negative, but it is undoubtedly a positive. I love the way The Message translates verse 1: “How well God must like you—you don’t hang out at Sin Saloon, you don’t slink along Dead-End Road, you don’t go to Smart-Mouth College” (Psalm 1:1 MSG).

This is a descriptive way of talking about the three different kinds of people who make up what we would call *the wrong crowd*:

- the ungodly
- the unholy
- the unbelieving

The ungodly have no room for God in their life. The unholy live as if there is no God. And the unbelieving mock God and the whole concept of sin. In short, these are people who will lead you further away from God, truth, and even happiness.

If you want to be happy, you cannot act on the advice and the counsel of people who push away, ignore, or mock God. Getting spiritual counsel from unspiritual people would be like getting advice on brain surgery from an automobile mechanic.



There is a progression in verse 1 that we are wise to pay attention to. First, you *walk* among the wrong crowd, then you *stand* around the wrong crowd, and then you join in or *sit* with the wrong crowd. This is the way it always works. First you start listening to what they say, and then you start hanging out with them, and then you start living like them.

We don't need to be listening to the ungodly and the anti-godly. We do need to be talking to them and to be a friend of sinners as Jesus was. Yet, we can't give in to their influence and become like them. The simple strategy is to favor the right people in your foremost relationships.

## **Happiness Is Following the Right Principles**

The psalmist goes on to say the mark of a truly happy person is someone who wants to study the word of God so he can discover the will of God and do what God wants him to do. When God says, "Do this," he is simply saying, "Help yourself to happiness."

The more you learn how God wants you to live and the more you live what you learn, the happier you will be. When I first started playing golf, it was far more frustrating than exhilarating. There was a lot more hurt than happiness. Then, I started taking lessons and reading about golf. I began to learn what to do and what not to do. Suddenly, I could get out of a sand trap. I could hit the ball farther. I began to lower my score. Guess what I discovered? The better you are at practicing golf, the more you enjoy it.

It is not enough just to read your Bible and put it down with forgetfulness, or to read it to check it off your to-do list. Go further. Think through what you read. Apply it to how you live. Find the enjoyment in the practice of his word.

To improve my golf game, I did a lot of reading. And then I began to practice what I'd read. Everything I read told me that most bad shots can be attributed to one of three things: a poor grip, poor posture, or improper alignment. So, I have a little golfing system that I call GPA: grip, posture, and alignment. When I practice this, my game improves.

God's word helps you to get a grip on life. It will inform you of those things that are good and bad, right and wrong. It will also posture you for success, putting you in the best position to be happy. Then, when you are

aligned with God's principles, facing the direction he wants you to go, he will see to it that you are happy and full of joy.

## **Happiness Is Fulfilling God's Purpose**

When you live such a God-centered life that you are favoring the right people and following the right principles, you will be like "a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers" (Psalm 1:3 NASB).

Why do you think the psalmist compares happy people to trees? First, when you take root in God's word, you will be unshakable in what you believe. You will be unwavering in how you behave. You won't get into the ditch of sin on either side of your life. You will stay right in the middle of God's highway of happiness.

The people who have truly moved this world have been people the world could not move. People like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were like a good tree, which took root in believing the right thing. I shudder to think where America would now be in our racial relations if it were not for Dr. King. The reason he could move this nation is because this nation could not move him. He took root in what was right—the belief that all men are created equal and should be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

Second, if you bear the fruit of living God's word, you will not wither away in the wind. In one sense, every life bears fruit, but some is ripe and some is worthless. That is why we go on to read, "The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away" (Psalm 1:4 NASB). When the grain was thrashed in the breeze, the worthless parts would fly off in the wind. The wheat, the fruit, is what settled down for use.

The truly happy person is a person who is living a rooted life, a life of purpose, a life that makes an impact on others. Real happiness is found in favoring the right people, following the right principles, and fulfilling God's purpose.

Do you want to be miserable? Live a you-centered life. Do you want to be happy? Live a God-centered life. This is how you live a high-def life.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, give me a desire for your life-giving word, place me among your invigorating people, and name a vivid purpose for my days.*

**Question for This Week:** How can you improve your grip, posture, and alignment to the happy life God has for you?

## 2

### A Song for Today

#### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 3
- Psalm 119:153-160
- Daniel 11:32
- Psalm 34:4-7
- 2 Samuel 22:47-49

#### **You Have a Fan Who Will Never Fail You**

I am a huge baseball fan and my favorite team has always been the New York Yankees. Great players have come through the Yankees and one of the greatest was Lou Gehrig. At the height of his career, Lou Gehrig contracted a fatal disease and had to retire from baseball. On July 4, 1939, he stood before sixty thousand fans and gave one of the greatest speeches in the history of sports. Listen to it:

Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans. Look at these grand men. Which

of you wouldn't consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day? Sure, I'm lucky...When everybody down to the groundskeepers and those boys in the white coats remember you with trophies—that's something! When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles with her own daughter—that's something. When you have a father and a mother who work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body—it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown more courage than you dreamed existed—that's the finest I know. So I close in saying that I might have been given a bad break, but I've got an awful lot to live for!<sup>2</sup>

Less than two years later, Lou Gehrig died. Even when he faced a disease that would eventually kill him, he understood the great blessings of life and drew strength from his fans.

Have you ever lived through a season when bad news was good news because the next news was always worse news? King David experiences dark days like this. Not only does his son Absalom rebel against him, but Absalom deceives the whole kingdom and takes it away from his own father (2 Samuel 15–18). Now he is pursuing David, trying to kill him. The walls of David's life are crumbling all around him, but God is a fan who endures with him through hardship. Just when the armies of Absalom are closing in on David, when his own people call him a coward and it appears that all is lost, the Lord gives David Psalm 3.

## **You Have Foes Who Will Fight You**

The Psalms are songs for the soul. They speak to the heart. They come out of authentic scenes and express intense emotions. Psalm 3 speaks to the way many of us live—whether we realize it or not—in a daily fight with our enemies.

We are light living in darkness and darkness hates light. So don't expect the world to like you. A Christian does not have to go looking for trouble; if you are a child of God, trouble will come looking for you! Listen to Psalm

3:1, “O LORD, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me” (NASB). What is true for David is also true for me.

I have three enemies that work 24/7 to get me away from God. I know every day when I get up they are just waiting for me: an enemy around me, an enemy within me, and an enemy beneath me.

The world is my external foe. It says, “I am just a product of chance and my life has no meaning.” The Bible fights against this foe by declaring, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”—and me too!

The flesh is my internal foe. My flesh will say, “Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow I may die.” But the Bible says, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The devil is my eternal foe. The devil will whisper in my ear, “You can get away with it!” But the Bible says, “be sure that your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23).

David’s enemies don’t just mock him, they also mock God. In Psalm 3:2 they say, “There is no deliverance for him in God” (NASB). They laugh at David’s faith and make fun of David’s Father. They do not see David living a victorious life and so they do not see God either.

Even when the people of this world can’t see God, they can see our faith. Be assured, they will measure the size of our God by the size of our faith. Through the way we live our lives every day, we must show the world, by our great faith, that we serve a great God. No matter the foe, there is no god like our God.

## **You Have a Father Who Befriends You**

Have you ever been so focused on what you’re afraid of that you lost sight of God’s love? When we focus on our foes and fears, we forget our Father. Focusing on our foes and fears will only fill our days with doubt, discouragement, depression, and defeat.

David does this too, but when problems and troubles come into his life, rather than use them as microscopes to focus on himself, he uses them as telescopes to focus on God. He says, “But You, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the One who lifts my head” (Psalm 3:3 NASB). David understands, in the middle of trouble and trials, that God is a shield *around*

him, a glory *for* him, and supporter *under* him. But more important than being around, for, and under David, God is *with* him.

If you are facing difficulties and mountains you don't think you can climb, God is right there with you. In the book of Daniel, when three godly men were thrown into the fiery furnace, the Son of God was standing right there with them. When the disciples were in that boat being tossed about on that stormy sea, Jesus came walking to them. When Paul was sitting in that Roman dungeon waiting to die, Jesus was living in him.

In verse 3, David refers to God as the "lifter of his head." David is discouraged and defeated. His spirits are sagging and his head is hanging. But he knows he needs to lift his head. Even Jesus told his disciples that when the great tribulation was upon them, they were to "straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28 NASB).

You might be tempted to say, "Who could blame David under the circumstances?" Well, that was the point. David was not under circumstances; he was over them. He was over his foes and over his fears and he was focused on his Father.

## **You Have a Freedom that Is Forever**

The first time the word *psalm* occurs is here in the superscript to Psalm 3. In Hebrew, a psalm is a poem to be sung to musical accompaniment, so this is the first recorded song that David writes. What would you choose to write a song about? David chooses to write about freedom.

When David finds God, David finds peace, for he says, "I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the LORD sustains me" (Psalm 3:5 NASB). Even though David is no longer surrounded by the luxury of his palace, the love of his people, or the loyalty of his soldiers, he still says, "I had the best night's sleep I've had in years." He finally discovers that true security and true serenity are found only in God.

Do you sleep well at night because you've got savings in the bank? Your good job is secure? Your health has never been better? The reality is that a hacker can steal your savings, a market crash can deplete your investments, the economy can cut back your job, and disease can ruin your

health. But nobody can take Jesus Christ away from you. How soundly do you sleep because you have Jesus?

If the headlines declared today that God was dead, a lot of people would still sleep like a baby. But if those people were fired from their job today, they would lose their mind. If you are putting your trust, happiness, peace of mind, security, faith, and hope in anything or anybody other than Jesus Christ, you are headed for disappointment, doubt, and defeat. A lot of songs are written about these downers, but when we trust that God will never leave us or forsake us, we can sing a song of freedom.

## **You Have a Future that Is Firm**

David realizes that with God there was no way he could lose, and thus he grows stronger in three ways.

First, his courage comes back. What David says in verse 6 is kind of weird: “I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about” (NASB). Anyone with common sense would be afraid of ten thousand people all wanting his scalp. But David said, “Bring them on!” How can David say that? Because David understands that God plus one is a majority in any situation.

Not only does David’s courage come back, but David’s confidence comes back. He says in verse 8, “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (NASB). The word he uses for salvation here is the same word used for deliverance in verse 2. It means “victory.” David finally figures it out. In any situation, victory belongs to the Lord. Now if victory belongs to the Lord and if, as a child of God, I belong to the Lord, that means victory belongs to me!

Finally, David’s contentment returned to him. He says, “Your blessing be upon Your people!” (Psalm 3:8 NASB). David finally understands that even in the middle of his deepest, darkest trials, God’s blessing is always upon him. No matter how dark the thunderclouds are hanging over your life, they will contain showers of blessing.

The next time you are in one of those difficult times, one of those Lou Gehrig moments, just remember you have a song for today where you can know that even when the foes are surrounding you, you have a Father who is always for you and a future that is bright and certain.



**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, give me the courage, confidence, and contentment to trust you through my darkest times.*

**Question for This Week:** In whatever you're facing, what would it take to focus on God instead of on your fears and foes?

## 3

### The Role of a Lifetime

#### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 8
- Psalm 40:4-5
- 1 Peter 4:7-11
- 1 Peter 2:9-10
- John 15:9-17

#### **The Most Unique Role**

My wife was a big fan of Patrick Swayze. Patrick Swayze was an actor in movies like *The Outsiders*, *Road House*, and *Dirty Dancing*. But the role of his life was in a movie called *Ghost*, the highest grossing film of 1990. I could always tell when Patrick Swayze was on TV because Teresa got this glazed-over look in her eyes. One day, I happened to walk into the living room, took one look at her, and knew immediately who was on television. I said, “Why are you so enamored with him? If you took away his money and his good looks and his body, what would you have?” She looked at me and said, “I’d have you!”

That is obviously special, because I am the only me there is. You be yourself, because you are the unique self that God made you. Until you understand that you are a creation of God put on this planet to play a special

God-given role, you will wander through life aimlessly never finding real meaning.

When God created you and put you on this planet, that automatically made you special. Every person has a God-given unique role to play that gives life purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. God designed every one of us to play the role of a lifetime—to be so different that we make a difference in the lives of others.

In one of the songs David wrote, Psalm 8, we find three truths that will enable you to give that role not just an Oscar-winning performance, but a performance that will win you the approval of the God who made you.

## **God Made You a Unique Person**

We commonly define ourselves by what we have, what we do, and what we are passionate about. But none of these is a good basis for our identity. If we experience change in our stuff, our jobs, or our passions, then we experience a loss of our identity.

But is it worth it to live according to who God made us to be instead of who others think we are? There is an exciting answer in Psalm 8:4: “What are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?” (NLT). Think about that. David said we have God’s attention. The infinite Creator thinks of us!

Then David goes on to say that not only does God think about me, but God cares about me. I not only have his attention, but I also have his affection. That ought to tell you how valuable you really are. Think about this: God loves you not because you are valuable. You are valuable because God loves you.

David then says, “Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:5 NLT). What an astoundingly incredible statement! God sees us as the crown jewels of all creation. We are unique and distinct from everything else in existence.

We have all heard of DNA. The discovery of DNA confirmed for the first time that every person on this planet has a unique genetic fingerprint. Alex Jeffries, the British geneticist who separated DNA into genetic markers, said, “You would have to look for one part in a million, million, million, million, million before you would find one pair with the same

genetic fingerprint...It can be categorically said that a genetic fingerprint is individually specific and that any pattern, excepting identical twins, does not belong to any one on the face of this planet who ever has been or ever will be.”<sup>3</sup>

That is why you don't have to and should never, ever compare yourself with anyone else. Not even Patrick Swayze.

## **God Gave You a Unique Passion**

What is one thing you are deeply passionate about? Can you name five other people who share your exact passion? Not only are you unique on the outside, you are unique on the inside. God has given each one of us a desire to be something. Psalm 8:6 says, “You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority” (NLT). Every one of us has a God-given passion to do something. We have been given both a passion and a gift to have sovereignty over certain areas of life. That passion is what gives life meaning and makes us productive.

It's one thing to have a passion for something, but it's another thing to live it out. Sadly, most people are not living out their passion. According to a recent survey, only 45 percent of American workers say they are satisfied or extremely satisfied with their jobs and only 20 percent feel passionate about their jobs.

The truth is you have unique gifts that no one else has and you are given these gifts to fulfill a unique calling that no one else can fulfill. When you wake up every morning, even though you cannot control the day, you can control how passionate you'll be as you enter it. You can use your gifts to do what God has called you to do with the enthusiasm that God deserves.

Pastor Rick Warren hit the nail on the head when he said, “What matters is not the *duration* of your life, but the *donation* of it. Not *how long* you lived, but *how* you lived.”<sup>4</sup> You need to take the unique passion that God has given you, wrapped up in that unique personality that is you and you alone, and let that passion drive you every day to be what God wants you to be and do what God wants you to do. That is your role of a lifetime.

## **God Designed You for a Unique Purpose**

A survey taken recently in *USA Today* asked, “If you had the opportunity to get a direct and clear response from God, what one question would you ask Him?” By an almost 2-to-1 margin, the number one question people would ask God is “Why am I here on earth?”<sup>5</sup>

Everything God has made he has made for a purpose—including you. Proverbs 16:4 says, “The LORD has made everything for his own purposes” (NLT). That tells me two things: God made you and me for a purpose, and God wants to reveal that purpose to us so that we can fulfill it.

I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of people go through life searching for purpose and meaning but never truly find it. My all-time favorite comic strip is *Peanuts*. Charles Schultz had a way of capturing real life in his cartoons. I remember one where Lucy was delivering one of those classic dogmatic lectures and Charlie Brown was listening.

She says, “Charlie Brown, life is a lot like a deck chair. Some place it so they can see where they are going. Others place it to see where they have been. Some put it to see where they are.” The last caption shows Charlie with a big sigh saying, “I can’t even get my chair unfolded.” So many people are just like Charlie Brown when it comes to finding their purpose and meaning in life—they just can’t seem to get their chair unfolded.

A few years ago, Teresa and I attended a dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria honoring the delegates to the United Nations, and the keynote speaker was Billy Graham. I remember Dr. Graham telling this true story about Albert Einstein.

He said that years ago the great scientist was on a train bound for New York City. As the ticket-taker came through the car, Einstein reached into his pocket to retrieve his ticket, but he couldn’t find it. He frantically searched his coat pockets, turned his pants pockets inside out, but he still couldn’t produce the ticket. The ticket-taker said, “Mr. Einstein, don’t worry. We know who you are.” About twenty minutes later, the ticket-taker came back through the car and found Einstein on the floor on all fours searching everywhere for that lost ticket.

The ticket-taker again tried to assure Einstein, saying, “Mr. Einstein, please don’t worry about the lost ticket. We trust you. We believe you purchased it and that’s good enough for us.” Einstein looked up at the railroad employee and said, “Young man, this is not a matter of trust, it is matter of direction. I need to find this ticket because I forgot where I am

going.” Your life’s greatest achievement is finding God’s direction and taking it.

## **The Most Unique Opportunity**

I’ve got great news for every reader who is a follower of Jesus Christ. You not only have a unique purpose, but you can know what that purpose is. God’s purpose is that you use your unique passions to serve the ultimate purpose of bringing glory and honor to the God who made you.

God wants your life to be so different that you make a difference in the lives of others. In 1983, John Sculley quit his post at PepsiCo to become the CEO of Apple Computer. He took a big risk leaving his prestigious position with a well-established company to join ranks with an unproven little outfit that offered no guarantees and only the excitement of one man’s transforming vision. When someone asked him why he was making this risky move, he said it was because of the question Apple cofounder Steve Jobs asked him: “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?”

Do you want to live your life as usual or do you want to live a changed life that can change the lives of others? When you enter a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, you learn to value your unique personhood, live your unique passion, and discover your unique purpose. This is truly a role of a lifetime. Don’t pass it up!

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, your design is amazing and wonderful. I praise you for your exclusive attention and affection over me.*

**Question for This Week:** What makes you unique? How are you going to steward your uniqueness for the good of God’s world?

## 4

# What Are You Going to Do with God?

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 14
- Ephesians 4:17-24
- Psalm 10:12-15
- Jeremiah 29:10-14
- James 1:2-8

### The Greatest Questions

Is life an appointment or just an accident? Is there a God? If there is a God, has he revealed himself to us in some knowable way? From the beginning of time, humanity has asked questions about life, death, purpose, meaning, good and evil, and God himself. Maybe you've asked your own questions, perhaps one of these:

- Why should I take a serious interest in spiritual matters?
- Why should I bother to keep the tenets of my religious upbringing?
- What do I need God for? My life is going fine.
- If God is so loving, kind, and caring, why is my life going so badly?

- Why do people feel a need for the spiritual or supernatural when science explains everything?
- How can we even know whether God exists?

If we don't answer the question of God, then every other question is meaningless. We have never seen God, so why all the fuss? Well, most of the people in the Bible hadn't seen God either, yet they nurtured a faith supported by rich principled practices. In Psalm 14, David tackles this whole idea of belief in God. He begins with those who don't believe in God, and from there, we learn that there are three things people are going to do with God.

## **You Can Deny the Reality of God**

I know that most of you reading this believe in some concept of God, but 4 percent of Americans identify as atheist. There are really two types of atheists: the intellectual atheist who believes there is no God, and the practical atheist who behaves as if there is no God. There are far more practical atheists, both in the church and outside the church, than anybody realizes.

The most foolish person in the world is not the person who says he doesn't believe in God. The most foolish person in the world is the person who says he *does* believe in God but then doesn't live like it. You may not think you fall into the category of practical atheism, but let me give you some examples:

- the person who says he believes in God but never prays to him or serves him
- the person who says she believes the Bible is God's word but never reads it or obeys it
- the person who says that hell and heaven are real but doesn't care whether others go there
- the person who says she believes Sunday is the Lord's day and then spends all her Sundays at the lake or the golf course



If you say you believe in God and yet never adjust your life to that belief, then what good is the faith you claim to have? If God isn't real to you, then you deny his reality.

God has something quick and sharp to say to all atheists: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1 NASB). Even brilliant PhDs with genius IQs can be fools. They see a car and they believe in a manufacturer. They see a portrait and believe in an artist. They see a book and believe in an author. But they see creation and refuse to believe in a creator. The reason God calls this person foolish is because deep down he knows there must be a God and yet he chooses to believe and act as if there isn't one.

Famous atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair once made this statement: "I am an atheist, not because I searched behind every star and looked under every rock to prove there is no God. I am an atheist because I want to live my life as if there were no God."

You can choose to do that with God if you like. You can deny the reality of God. God will understand, but he will still label you a fool. Let's see what God says about fools.

## **You Can Detest Any Response to God**

God says about the fool. "They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:3 NASB). Notice something here: God deals with atheism on a moral level, not an intellectual level. It's not a head problem; it is a heart problem. The atheist is not a person who cannot believe; it is a person who will not believe. God is a threat to those who want to be their own god.

Think about it. If there is no God, then there is no judgment. If there is no judgment, then there is no eternal punishment, and you can live freely without consequences. The reason an atheist cannot find God is the same reason a thief can't find a policeman. They don't want to find God because they know if they do, it will change the way they live.

I want to give atheists credit. They do live by a strong faith. Don't ever let scientists and pseudointellectuals ridicule you because as a Christian you live by faith when the truth of the matter is they do too! William Rowe, a professor at Purdue University, once admitted to his class, "Even as the

evangelical Christian accepts God by faith, I reject the idea of God by faith. I cannot reject God by reason alone for there is too much evidence of his existence. It is by faith that I am an atheist.”

Nobody in this world is looking for God. “The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God” (Psalm 14:2 NASB). Fortunately, God is seeking us, and we all do give him a response: either we detest or we delight.

Detesting isn’t an innocent act. To detest means to hate, and when you grow to despise God, you’ll also hate his people because you don’t want to be reminded of the possibility of God. “Do all the workers of wickedness not know, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord?” (Psalm 14:4 NASB). David saw what we see. People will not only attack God; they will attack the people of God. Not surprisingly, it sometimes seems as if God’s people have a bull’s-eye on their backs when their only crime is delighting in a relationship with God.

## **You Can Delight in a Relationship with God**

There is another option. David goes on to tell us, “For God is with the righteous generation” (Psalm 14:5 NASB). The “righteous” are those who not only believe in God, but they seek God, want to know God, and want to live for God. God is seen primarily not by the eyes in their head but by the eyes in their heart.

Does this describe you? This is what relationship looks like. He is *with* you. You cannot have a relationship with God until you know God personally, which means you believe he exists and you engage in a relationship with him. You can have a real relationship with God only by faith, and that bothers a lot of people, but it shouldn’t.

You can know God. You can talk to God. You can walk with God. You can experience God. You can spend eternity with God. God will not force himself on you. You can (if you choose) deny the reality of God. You can (if you choose) detest any response to God. But you can (if you choose) delight in a relationship with God.

## **A Great Skeptic’s Admission**

W.O. Saunders was, in his words, an atheist/agnostic who labored between not believing in God at all and never getting beyond doubt. He was a newspaper editor and people loved to read his editorials. He once wrote these words that I believe express what many people may be experiencing today:

I would like to introduce you to one of the most lonesome and unhappiest individuals on earth. I am talking about the man who does not believe in God. I can introduce you to such a man, because I myself am one and in introducing myself you shall have an introduction to the agnostic or skeptic in your own neighborhood for he is everywhere you live.

You will be surprised to learn that the atheist or agnostic envies your faith in God, your subtle belief in a heaven after life, and your blessed assurance that you will meet with your loved ones in an afterlife where there is neither sadness nor pain. He would give anything to be able to embrace that faith and be comforted by it. For him, there is only the grave and persistence of matter...

The atheist/agnostic may face life with a smile and a heroic attitude. He may put on a brave front, but he is not happy. He stands in awe and reverence before the vastness and majesty of the universe knowing not where he came from nor why. He is appalled at the stupendousness of space and the infinitude of time. Humiliated by the infinite smallness of himself cognizant of his own frailty, weakness and brevity. Certainly, he sometimes yearns for a staff on which to lean.

He too carries a cross. For him, this earth is but a tricky raft, adrift in the unfathomable waters of eternity with no horizon in sight. His heart aches for every precious life upon the raft—drifting, drifting, drifting. Where—no one knows.<sup>6</sup>

If you're stuck in doubt like Mr. Saunders, let me affirm that there is a God. He is a God who loves us so much he sent Jesus Christ to die on a

cross for our sins. This gives us a new life and allows us to delight in a relationship with him on this earth and for all eternity.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Holy Father, increase my faith and help my life to display the faithful truth that you exist and that you reveal yourself to me in a loving relationship.*

**Question for This Week:** What do you need to change about the way you live so that you can reflect a life that's devoted to a holy, personal God?

## Here, There, and Everywhere

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 19
- Job 26:7-10
- Psalm 119:105-112
- Isaiah 26:7-11
- 1 Peter 3:18

### **When We Can't See a Thing**

Have you ever been looking for something and discovered that it's right in front of you? Reading glasses, keys, or a cellphone top the list of "lost" items. They aren't really missing, they just aren't noticed. There is a train of thought among the New Atheists, scientists, and many philosophers who say that God is missing because God is not there. They deny that there is any evidence for God's existence. Many even say that we have created the idea of God just to try to understand the difficulties we face.

Atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell was once asked, "If you meet God after you die, what will you say to him to justify your unbelief?" Russell said, "I will tell him he did not give me enough evidence." But the universe we live in overflows with evidence for a powerful, intentional God. For instance:

- The moon is approximately 240,000 miles from earth. The sun is about 93 million miles from earth. Scientists know that if either of those astronomical bodies were 100 miles closer to or farther from the earth, life on our planet would not be possible.<sup>7</sup>
- Every day, the pull of the moon lifts the oceans of the earth in what we call tides. Millions upon millions of tons of water is quietly lifted anywhere from ten to forty-three feet. The exact distance of the moon creates the tides that provoke the waves that aerate the oceans that fill with oxygen that supports the plankton, which is the very foundation of the food chain of our world.

These things are true whether we recognize them or not, and they are true not just in some places but everywhere. God has spoken loudly enough and shown himself clearly enough for everyone to hear and see him. Psalm 19 tells us we don't have to look far to find God. We can see God in the skies, the Scripture, the soul, and the Savior. He is, without a doubt, here, there, and everywhere.

## **We See God's Glory in the Skies**

The world's largest and most technically advanced digital billboard spans a full city block in Times Square. Every day approximately 460,000 people visit Times Square. Nearly 500,000 cars pass through each week. A billboard with more than 25,000 square feet of digital canvas can make more than 2 million impressions every week for advertisers. With wide vertical viewing angles, it assures that everyone can see the display whether in the darkness of night or in broad daylight.<sup>8</sup>

This is an amazing piece of technology, but there is a billboard that puts that one to shame: creation. As much as the jumbo screen in Times Square is the display of the work of someone's hands, so are the heavens. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1). When we look up to the heavens, whether day or night, God broadcasts his benevolent message, "I'm here!"

I agree with Abraham Lincoln who said, "I can understand how someone might look down at the earth and say there is no God, but how can you look up into the heavens and say there is no God?" We see God's glory

in the sky. When you look up, you are seeing not just physical, natural beauty; you are seeing spiritual, supernatural glory.

The immensity and complexity of the skies immediately clue us in to the existence of God: The “skies” in Psalm 19:1 are literally “the expanse of the heavens.” The expanse is so immense that even traveling at the speed of light it would take four and a half years just to get near the nearest star. Our galaxy contains 100 billion suns. Our universe contains more than 100 billion galaxies. We accept that somebody had to build that billboard in New York City, and yet some people think the billboard of the galaxies just showed up!

Do you know just how specialized our universe is? Our planet exhibits at least twenty-five different characteristics so precisely fixed that life could not exist if they were different in the slightest. In fact, for life to exist anywhere in the universe, this solar system and other galaxies must maintain thirty-eight characteristics within very narrowly defined ranges.<sup>9</sup> The skies furiously “pour forth” evidence for the power and reality of God (Psalm 19:2). In short, if you cannot see God in the skies, it is not God’s problem. It is yours. It’s a giant billboard we should never miss.

## **We See God’s Guidance in the Scriptures**

Beginning with verse 7, the psalm shifts from the world of God to the word of God. We look up into the skies and see the power of God, but when we look into Scripture we see the person of God. These verses tell us that God’s word refreshes the soul, makes wise the simple, and gives joy to the heart and light to the eyes. Through David’s song we learn that God’s word is perfect, trustworthy, right, and radiant. We can trust it because it is firm and righteous.

What a marvelous gift! When we are in the middle of darkness, we will give anything to be led to light and truth. Verses 10-11 explain that the virtues of God’s word show us the value of God’s word. “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb. By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.” Gold and honey represented the most valuable objects and the finest food.

Sometimes I am convinced we know the price of everything and the value of nothing. The most expensive perfume ever sold was made by DKNY and came in an apple-shaped bottle made of gold, sapphires, diamonds, tourmaline, and rubies. Yet, I say to you that one sentence of God's timeless word is worth more than that bottle of perfume.

You can know there is a God and you can know some things about the power and presence of God by studying the stars, but you can know the person of God only by studying Scripture. Surely, the word of God doesn't just inform; it transforms.

## **We See God's Goodness in the Soul**

Another way God speaks to every human being is in the soul. Sin is to the soul what kryptonite is to Superman, and David wants nothing of it. In verses 12 and 13, David invites God to speak to his soul by revealing his errors and faults and freeing him from the burden of sin.

We are born knowing that certain things are wrong: murder, stealing, and lying for starters. This is because God has put within each of us a conscience—a bit of a moral alarm clock or sin detector. When it comes to our sin, God detects and then protects.

Only God can detect our sin. We all have hidden faults and, at times, all of us are worse than we think we are. Don't ever say, "If I know my heart..." because you can't ever fully know it. In fact, you won't know you are wrong with God unless God reveals it to you. A courtroom can convict you of a crime, but only God can convict you of sin. And where he does this is in the soul.

Only God can protect us from sin. David says in verse 13, "Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression." Let me give you this mathematical equation:

Sin = an undetected weakness + an unexpected temptation + an unprotected life

To keep us from sin, we need a God who can not only detect our sin, but correct our sin, forgive our sin, and protect us from the effects of our sin. Life is at its best when we are living purely and blamelessly. That sounds



impossible! That's exactly why we need to see God here, there, and everywhere, including within our very souls.

## **We See God's Grace in the Savior**

This psalm ends, "May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14). We can actually come into the presence of the God of the universe and be pleasing to him. How? Because of our Rock and our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

In the cross we can see the redemption of the human race. In Jesus, we see the God of eternal grace. In the Savior, we discover all of God we can know and have all of God we need. We see the greatness of God in the skies, the guidance of God in the Scriptures, the goodness of God in the soul, but we see the glory of God in the Savior.

Jim Irwin was one of the astronauts who went to the moon. After he got back he said,

When I looked out and saw the earth, about as big as a little marble, I thought, "How big am I? I am just a speck of dust—if that big—compared to the universe. Yet, this little speck has the capacity to know God! To know the One who holds the universe, to know his love, and have his direction."

For the first time, I saw—felt God's love for the earth...I realized then that God loved that little blue marble, that little blue planet. He loved all the billions of people on it, and he loved me! I realized at that moment that my relationship with Jesus Christ was the most precious thing I had.<sup>10</sup>

Irwin was right. Whether you are on earth looking up at the moon or on the moon looking back on earth, God is everywhere. A heathen once showed Saint Augustine his idol and said, "Augustine, here is my god. Where is yours?" Augustine replied, "I cannot show you my God, not because there is no God to show, but because you have no eyes to see him." What will it take for you to see him here, there, and everywhere?

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, open my eyes so that I can see the wonders of your creation, the wisdom of your word, the wickedness in my soul, and the wonderful love of my Savior.*

**Question for This Week:** Is there a place where you believe God does not reveal himself? Ask him to dwell even in that place.

## 6

### Back to the Future

#### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 22
- Romans 5:1-5
- Hebrews 9:23-28
- Ephesians 1:3-6
- Ephesians 1:7-10

#### **Before the Cross We See the Prophecy of God**

Of all the songs that David wrote, Psalm 22 is the most poignant, piercing, powerful, and prophetic. Jesus himself quoted from the psalm as he was dying on the cross. It was written one thousand years before Jesus was born and eight hundred years before crucifixion was even invented. Yet, here, generations before Christ, David takes us back to the future and puts us at the foot of the cross where his descendent, Jesus, would one day be crucified.

Ironically, this is a song written by a sovereign king about a suffering king. When you read this psalm you feel as if you are actually standing in the shadow of the cross. It feels like an eyewitness account: there is angst in the cry of Jesus, disgust in the hurled insults, and pain in the bones of our Lord pulled all out of joint. In this psalm we can read thirty-three distinct

prophecies that were all fulfilled on the cross outside Jerusalem. In the Gospels, we see the cross through the eyes of man, but here we see the cross through the eyes of God. What the disciples saw with their eyes David saw with his heart.

Psalm 22 is written in two parts. The first stanza takes us to the depths of the Valley of Despair, but the second stanza takes us to the peaks of the Mountain of Delight. The first stanza deals with the victim; the second deals with the victor. However, like David before Jesus, those of us who come after Jesus can never understand Jesus apart from his suffering on the cross. Mahatma Gandhi once wrote, “His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it my heart cannot accept.”<sup>11</sup> I wish Gandhi could have heard this song when it was originally written.

## **At the Cross We See the Passion of God**

Do you ever feel as if you know when something is going to happen? Parents are usually very intuitive about this. If you see your young child tipping backward on a chair, you can predict with good certainty that they will soon slip and be hurt. These wise predictions typically come from our own experience.

However, this is not likely what King David was writing about. Scholars can't connect this psalm to a known incident in David's life, so he isn't drawing from personal experience to write this. Peter gives us an explanation though. In Acts 2:31, though Peter was speaking about another prophetic psalm of David, he declares that David was a prophet who “seeing what was to come” spoke of the Messiah.

The first eight verses demonstrate David's vivid foresight of the passion or suffering of Christ even so far as to include some of the very words of Jesus himself: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises” (Psalm 22:1-3).

If you ever wonder whether God truly has passion for the world, just think about what his Son, Jesus, endured on the cross. His physical torment may have been the least of what he suffered. The first two verses say it all:

Jesus endured personal separation from his heavenly Father that had never been known in eternity past or would ever be known again in eternity future.

When the soldiers spat on Jesus, he said nothing. When they beat him, he uttered not a word. When they crucified him, his lips were closed. But when he was forsaken by God, he could no longer hold in his anguish and pain. The word “groaning” or “cries” refers to the roar of a lion or the noise of thunder. God blew out the sun and pulled the curtain of night over the earth, and at midday it became midnight. As Jesus turned his face toward the world, God turned his back on Jesus.

More than the separation was the silence. God would listen to the cries of Moses the murderer, David the adulterer, Jacob the swindler, and Jonah the slanderer, but he would not even hear the cries of his own son. God turned his back on his son so he would never have to turn his back on us. What incredible passion!

## **By the Cross We Feel the Presence of God**

In the moments following the birth of a baby, the common practice is to offer that newborn skin-to-skin contact with his or her mother. In the adjustment to life outside the womb, this gives long-lasting bonding benefits to each of them. Early skin-to-skin contact increases physiologic stability, promotes psycho-emotional well-being, and supports infant brain development.<sup>12</sup>

The nearness of a mother is a powerful thing in the life of a newborn. The spiritual equivalent to this skin-to-skin contact is the very presence of God. David writes, “From birth I was cast on you; from my mother’s womb you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help” (Psalm 22:10-11).

David knew that the presence of God that was with him when he was born was the same presence that would be with him daily. “But you, LORD, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me” (Psalm 22:19). God allows us to suffer in part so that we will cast ourselves upon him. In our suffering, he wants to be our strength. In our pain, he wants to be our protector. In our danger, he wants to be our deliverer.

Even though Jesus was separated from God when he hung on the cross, he knew God was present in loving the world at that moment through him. The God who brings us out of the womb will go with us all through life to the tomb. Because he did leave and forsake Jesus, God will never leave you nor forsake you. Remember, when trouble is here, God is near.

Later on, another songwriter would pen the lyrics: “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). God is never nearer to you than when you feel him the farthest. The cross is where we can feel the presence of God.

## **In the Cross We Declare the Praise of God**

In the second half of Psalm 22, we enter with David into praise. “I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one” (Psalm 22:22-24). It is the horror of the cross that gives us the hallelujah of our faith.

Indeed, God accepted Jesus’ death as payment for the sins of the human race, and he proved the check was good by raising Jesus from the dead. What the devil meant for evil, God meant for good. Where the soldiers and the Pharisees wanted to bring death, God and the Holy Spirit wanted to bring life.

It is amazing how the nations of the world cannot get away from displaying and elevating the cross. The flags of many countries, such as Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland, contain the cross of Jesus. It’s as if God himself has played a joke on the world by ensuring that the cross is prominently displayed.

In the cross, we should constantly declare the praise of God—a God who loved us so much that he could use the worst form of human execution to offer salvation to all humans.

## **Through the Cross We Know the Purpose of God**

“All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations” (Psalm 22:27-28). Because of the

cross, everyone—poor and rich, races of all colors, all nations, and all generations—will bow their knee and proclaim that the crucified Jesus is the conquering Jesus.

The purpose of God in the cross was to exalt Jesus above everyone and everything. “All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!” (Psalm 22:29-31).

What an exciting conclusion. The music of this song moves from a minor key to a major key, from the cross to the crown, from a tree to a throne. We leave the grief of crucifixion and move to the glory of coronation. The Jesus who was rejected on the cross has been resurrected to wear a crown. The cross is where Satan and sin met their Waterloo. The cross, intended by some to be the final defeat of Jesus, was a springboard to the ultimate victory of Jesus.

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, there was a powerful picture of people toppling a statue of the founder of the KGB, Felix Dzerzhinsky, outside the former KGB headquarters. If you go there today, the pedestal of that statue remains, but on top of it stands the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

We may put a lot of people on pedestals—from politicians, to pundits, to pollsters, to personalities—but ultimately it is the cross of Jesus that is on the pedestal of this universe. It is in the shadow of that cross, in the good times and bad, whether successful or suffering, happy or hurting, where we will find a God who is always there.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord God, help me to see my own Valley of Despair and Mountain of Delight through the shadow of the wonderful cross.*

**Question for This Week:** Consider God’s deep passion or suffering for you. Write your own song or poem that ends with praise.

## 7

### He's Everything I Need

#### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 23:1
- Isaiah 40:9-11
- Ezekiel 34:20-24
- Psalm 100
- 1 Corinthians 8:1-3

#### **The Great Shepherd**

Americans worry about a lot of things. In a study done by Chapman University in 2015, the top five things we worry about are corruption of government officials (58.0 percent), cyberterrorism (44.8 percent), corporate tracking of personal information (44.6 percent), terrorist attacks (44.4 percent), and government tracking of personal information (41.4 percent).<sup>14</sup>

Worry is something we are all intimately familiar with even though three thousand years ago, David wrote one sentence that should put worry to bed.

Of the 150 songs in this music collection called the Psalms, the twenty-third song is the most popular and the best known. It is only 118 words in



English, but they are the most familiar 118 words in the hundreds of thousands of words that make up the Bible.

When times are tough, the going is rough, the news is bad, your world has collapsed, and the sky is black, there is a natural yearning for and turning to this psalm. Reading this psalm brings healing for the hurting, hope for the hopeless, help for the helpless, encouragement for the discouraged, and strength for the weak.

Verse 1 is not only the first verse in this psalm, it is the foundational verse, and everything else David says follows from the truth in this first verse. From this verse, we can trust four truths that encourage us to spend our time worshipping rather than worrying. In just a few words, we learn everything we need about the Great Shepherd.

## **The Shepherd Is Perfectly Reliable with the Sheep**

Empires and countries throughout the centuries have adopted various animals to symbolize their national spirit. The United States adopted the eagle. Russia adopted the bear. Great Britain adopted the lion. Each one of those animals symbolizes strength and power and independence. And yet, God chose to represent his people as sheep—dependent, timid, followers—who need a shepherd.

While we might be tempted to take offense at being compared to sheep, it's more intriguing to me that the almighty God is compared to a shepherd. Being a shepherd was an unsavory occupation. Shepherds in Palestine were considered unscrupulous, untrustworthy, and were in the lowest class of people. Yet being a shepherd was and still is a tremendous responsibility as sheep depend on the shepherd for everything—for food, water, shelter, and safety.

The analogy of God as shepherd to his people is found throughout the Bible. Sheep are mentioned over five hundred times—more than any other animal—and the whole of Psalm 23 is based on this imagery. Verse 1 simply begins, “The LORD is my shepherd.”

Notice carefully that this shepherd is “the LORD.” Whenever LORD is printed in large and small capital letters, it refers to the Hebrew name *Yahweh*. That name is used over four thousand times in the Bible and it is the most respected name for God in all of Scripture. This name was so

sacred to the Hebrew people that whenever they were reading their Bible publicly, they wouldn't speak the name. Only the high priest could say this name aloud and only in the holy of holies once a year on the day of atonement.

Yahweh is a combination of three tenses of the Hebrew verb "to be." The verb *yehi* means "he will be," the verb *hove* means "he is," and the verb *hahyah* means "he was." So Yahweh literally means "I am, I always have been, and I always will be."

His very name shows us that God is a twenty-four-hour-a-day God, which is perfect because being a shepherd is a twenty-four-hour-a-day job. This God, the sovereign God of this universe, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, is our shepherd, and he is responsible, responsive, and related to his sheep.

## **The Shepherd Is Permanently Responsible for the Sheep**

The welfare of the sheep is the work of the shepherd. He guides the sheep to shelter, he guards the sheep from danger, and he gives sheep their food. In other words, he meets all their needs. Without a responsible shepherd, sheep can overeat, run into brambles, and be attacked from every side. They cannot survive without a responsible shepherd.

God has voluntarily made himself responsible to meet your needs. He has everything, he is everywhere, he can do anything, and therefore he can meet any need you have. He is no ordinary shepherd as we see in this verse. *Lord* speaks of deity, but *shepherd* speaks of humanity. The one David wrote about is both a sovereign and a shepherd, both divine and human, both God and man. Does that remind you of anyone? This shepherd is none other than the God-man, Jesus Christ.

That's why in John 10:11 he is called "the good shepherd." In Hebrews 13:20 he's called "the great shepherd." In 1 Peter 5:4 he is called "the Chief Shepherd." Therefore, when Jesus becomes your savior, Yahweh becomes your shepherd. When Yahweh becomes your shepherd, he becomes responsible to meet all your needs.

## **The Shepherd Is Powerfully Responsive to the Sheep**

David goes on in Psalm 23:1 to say, “I shall not want” (ESV). Now the Hebrew word translated “want” literally means “lack.” Psalm 37:25 says, “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread” (ESV). This isn’t to say that God provides for our every greed, but he does meet our every need. If you knew that all your needs were going to be met for the rest of your life, why would you worry?

Stephen Ambrose wrote a magnificent book, *Undaunted Courage*, about the Lewis and Clark expedition that opened up the American West. Thomas Jefferson realized that when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark reached the Pacific Ocean, they would be without money, clothes, or provisions. So Jefferson did something unprecedented—he provided a letter of credit for Lewis, authorizing him to draw on any agency of the U.S. government anywhere in the world for anything he needed. Here’s what he wrote to him:

I also ask of the Consuls, agents, merchants and citizens of any nation to furnish you with those supplies which your necessities may call for...And to give more entire satisfaction and confidence to those who may be disposed to aid you, I Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States of America, have written this letter of general credit for you with my own hand and signed it with my name.<sup>15</sup>

This will go down in history as the most unlimited letter of credit ever issued by an American president, but it is nothing compared to what God does for his people. He has given us over seven thousand promises in his word, each one of them a blank check promising that whenever we come up against a real need in our life, he will meet that need.

Now I know many of you are saying, “Well, I had a need in my life and God didn’t meet it.” But if God didn’t meet it, then it wasn’t a need. If you have a real need, God will meet that need. The shepherd is powerfully responsive to the sheep.

## **The Shepherd Is Personally Related to the Sheep**

One little word in this verse holds some amazing power. It's the word *my*. That little word is the golden key that unlocks the door to God's treasure chest of blessing. You may know that God is a shepherd. You may believe God is the shepherd. You may even be able to recite Psalm 23, but can you say, "I know the shepherd and he is mine?"

An amazing thing happens in your relationship to God when you come to know him as your own shepherd. When you say, "my shepherd," he says, "my sheep." Saying "my shepherd" is the supreme act of faith. But when he says "my sheep," that's the supreme act of grace. There is only one way to know that the Lord is your shepherd and that is to make sure that the shepherd is your Lord.

To make the Lord your shepherd, first acknowledge him as your shepherd. The Bible says in Isaiah 53:6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way" (ESV). We all truly need a shepherd. Second, accept him as your shepherd. That is, accept him for who he is, both as king and as Lord, as sovereign and as shepherd. Then, acclaim him and follow him totally and completely; as the sheep follow the shepherd, so you must follow him.

Not all sheep look the same to a shepherd. A good shepherd can locate one sheep out of a flock of twenty-five hundred in less than five minutes by the way that sheep holds his head, bleats, or walks. The condition of the grass where the sheep slept or the droppings left behind leave telltale, identifying signs of every sheep. The shepherd has a personal relationship, a personal knowing, with every one of his sheep.

This shepherd wants to have a personal relationship with you to give you everything you need and be everything you need. If you're hungry, he is the bread of life. If you're thirsty, he is the living water. If you're in the dark, he is the light of the world. If you're lost, he is the way. If you need it, he has it. If he doesn't have it, you don't need it.

My friend, if you can say, "The LORD is my shepherd," you have no need to worry and no need to fear, for he is everything you need.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Precious Lord, I praise you for being present and personal. I thank you for your care, trust you for my needs, and seek to obey every loving command.*

**Question for This Week:** In what area of your life are you not trusting the great shepherd to meet your needs? What would it take to give this area over to him?

## A Bridge Over Troubled Waters

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 23:2
- Ecclesiastes 3:10-14
- Joshua 1:7-9
- Ezekiel 34:11-16
- Philippians 4:4-7

### Resist the Rest Robbers

Our lives are full of tasks, troubles, conflicts, and choices. Rather than change our lifestyles, we have simply grown accustomed to stress, and it's affecting us spiritually, physically, and relationally. According to a 2014 Barna survey, among those who say their Bible reading decreased in the last year, the number one reason was busyness: 40 percent report being too busy with life's responsibilities (job, family), an increase of seven points from the previous year.<sup>16</sup>

Stress is clearly affecting our ability to rest. We are working longer and sleeping less than at any other time in our history. One source tells us, "The average American gets 2.5 fewer hours of sleep per night than they did a century ago."<sup>17</sup> And according to the Centers for Disease Control, only 65 percent of Americans sleep for seven hours or more a night.<sup>18</sup>

It doesn't take much to connect that stress is robbing us of our rest, and the lack of rest is increasing our stress. As we find ourselves caught in this vicious cycle of fatigue, we can be grateful that the shepherd of Psalm 23 offers us a solution. "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters" (Psalm 23:2 *ESV*). There is a bridge over our troubled waters.

## **Rest in the Presence of the Lord**

Have you ever been on forced bed rest? Or gotten sick at the worst possible time? It's so difficult to make yourself lie down when there's so much you need to do. But when we feel like there's so much to do, the first thing the shepherd does is make us lie down.

Sheep begin to graze and feed about four o'clock in the morning. But by ten in the morning the sheep are hot, tired, and thirsty. Sheep can't drink while they're hot nor when their stomach is filled with undigested grass. So the shepherd has to make them lie down and rest. But they don't like to lie down. Just like little children, sheep resist rest. But the shepherd knows that's what the sheep need.

Normally, when there is a lot that needs to be done, we wake up, get ready for work, and then work until we get tired. Only then do we rest. But in this psalm, the shepherd leads the sheep to rest *first*. Resting before we work might look as simple as taking time to be with the shepherd or as simple as enjoying his fellowship.

"Take time to smell the roses" is not just an old saying—it really is biblical. A shepherd knows that even sheep must take a break, and so should you. The first step to handling stress is to realize that you must rest in the presence of the Lord.

## **Reflect on the Power of the Lord**

This shepherd is truly a sheep whisperer. He is not forcefully making the sheep lie down. He is not a drill sergeant who sends the fear of God into them unless they obey. Rather, he is creating the conditions in which true rest can occur.

Before sheep can consider resting, they must have their greatest anxieties solved: they cannot be afraid, hungry, in conflict with other sheep,

or bothered by insects. When the shepherd has resolved these problems and worries, the sheep can easily be led into rest. What a powerful shepherd we follow. God has his eye on the details of our lives and rids us of worry, worms, starvation, and strife. When he rights our conditions, he rests our positions.

Sheep do not graze when they lie down. Once they are made to rest, they chew on what they've already eaten. While they are lying there and digesting their meal, it is a critical time for these sheep because it has been proven that their wool grows fastest and their bodies grow strongest during this quiet time.

Reflection or meditation is so important because you will grow faster and get stronger in the time you spend in the presence of the shepherd more than in any other time during your day. That's why God sometimes "makes us lie down."

Has God done this with you? Has he allowed sickness, fatigue, or circumstances to force you to lie down and spend time with him? Did you recognize his loving power in your life? When we reflect on the power of our loving Lord, our rest is truly rewarding.

## **Rely on the Provision of the Lord**

The shepherd not only makes the sheep lie down, but notice he makes them "lie down in green pastures," or literally, "pastures of tender grass."

Sheep eat green and tender grass, which is provided for them by God. Some grass is inferior to others. Some grass will make the sheep sick or give them indigestion. But a good shepherd leads his sheep only to the best grass. God has done the same thing for us in giving us his word.

Did you know that sheep will lie down only when they are fully satisfied? Sheep will lie down only when their stomach is full, where they don't get too hot, or they can be out of the rain. Sheep will lie down only where there is safety without fear. All these things are provided for them by the shepherd. They rely on the shepherd's provision to have all that they need.

The Bible says about us in Ephesians 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (ESV). Did you know in the Lord



Jesus we've already got every spiritual blessing we need? We spend too much time asking God to give us new blessings when we ought to thank him for the old blessings, which are all the blessings we will ever need.

But you should be satisfied in your heart and in your soul knowing that just as the shepherd provides for the sheep, God will also provide for you. He will meet all your needs. What a great stress reliever.

## **Be Refreshed with the Peace of the Lord**

Palestine is not a wet climate and does not have a lot of lush meadows. It is a rocky, dry, hot, barren land. Therefore, every good shepherd must lead his sheep to places of rest, because without his guidance they won't rest, they won't find good grass, and they won't find clean water. They will drink from polluted holes and dirty streams and pick up parasites and germs.

"He leads me beside still waters" (Psalm 23:2 ESV). In Hebrew, this literally says, "the waters of quietness." Sheep will not drink from a turbulent stream. They will drink only from still waters because they are afraid of drowning. The only way they will drink is when the water is quiet and still.

Just before Jesus fed the five thousand people—a story we find in every one of the Gospels—he looked out at the crowd of people as "a sheep with no shepherd." Jesus saw the people as sheep, wandering lost, eating poisonous grass, and drinking from polluted water. They were never satisfied, healthy, or fully alive. People today drink the water of drugs, sex, money, fame, and alcohol. Yet they are never satisfied either.

When sheep lie down in green grass beside a still stream, they are at the height of peacefulness. They're growing and strengthening for the journey. They're full. They're protected. When we enter God's green pastures and feed on his word, and we get beside the still waters and drink from his Spirit, we too are refreshed with his peace.

Life is like a song. In any song, there are moments of music, but there are also moments of silence. Each song is simply sound followed by silence, notes followed by rests. In the same way, as we live a life full of both performance and pauses, work and rest, God makes us lie down in the green grass of his word and leads us to the quiet waters of his Spirit. While

others are drowning in a sea of difficulty, you will be standing on that bridge over troubled waters.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty God, how wonderful that you know my truest needs and create the conditions in which I can find your satisfying rest. Lead me there today so that I might reflect on your powerful love and be refreshed.*

**Question for This Week:** Why do you think you are resistant to resting? What are the conditions that are keeping you from rest and how can you give those over to the Lord to correct for you?

## His Way Is the Right Way

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 23:3
- Psalm 42:11
- Psalm 51:10-12
- Acts 17:24-28
- Isaiah 53:4-6

### **Danger: Wrong Way**

Before you picked up this book you made a host of decisions. Some of the first were whether reading was the best use of your time right now or where you were going to sit. Then you had to decide whether to get your reading glasses (Where did I leave them?), a highlighter (What color?), your Bible (My paper one or just use my phone app?), or a drink (Water or tea? What flavor? Cream?).

Making decisions can really wear us out. When we get to this point, researchers say, we reach something called decision fatigue.<sup>19</sup> This is why at the end of the day it's hard to decide what to have for dinner. In the evening, rather than dive into a project, it's far more appealing to turn on the television or download a movie just so we don't have to make any more choices before bedtime.

We rejoice over our good decisions but we never forget the bad ones. And because life is just one decision after another, we have a fifty-fifty chance that we're going to make some of each. King David made some of each as well. And he knew that when he made bad ones he needed to be restored. He then needed to be guided along a new path so he could continue to make decisions that led to life.

In the third verse of Psalm 23 we get a lot of guidance in just a few words. David shares with us some wonderful truths: God will love us enough to correct us when we make the wrong decisions and he will then lead us to make the right ones.

## **God Lingers in Our Ruin**

This psalm is a beautiful picture of a shepherd's relationship to his sheep. A shepherd must be persistent and patient, watchful and wise. It's not a matter of *if* his sheep get into trouble but *when* his sheep get into trouble. The shepherd cannot stop attending to his sheep no matter how exhausting it might be. And when we fall, our shepherd is also there with us, without fail.

"He restores my soul" (Psalm 23:3 ESV). The Hebrew literally says, "He brings me back." What does he bring me back from? Ruin. There are some dangers that sheep face that only the shepherd can handle. One of the dangers is that a sheep will become a cast sheep.

In Psalm 42:11 the psalmist cries out, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" (ESV). To be "cast down" is an old English shepherd's term for a sheep that is turned over on its back and cannot get up by itself. Lying on its back, its feet straight up in the air, the sheep will struggle frantically and hopelessly. Due to the sheep's physical makeup, this is a position it cannot get out of alone. The sheep becomes very frightened and begins to kick and flail, to bleat and cry. It is easy prey and open to the attack of buzzards, vultures, dogs, coyotes, and cougars. Sheep often die in this position if there is no shepherd tending to it.

But we have an attentive shepherd. He is with us when we fall into ruin. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. He knows we will get into trouble and he stays with us anyway. He loves us enough to linger. The longer we struggle, the more danger we find ourselves in. As a sheep lies struggling

on its back, gasses begin to collect in the stomach. As those gasses expand, it hardens the stomach and it cuts off the air passage, and if it is hot, sheep can suffocate in a matter of hours.

If the weather is cool or cloudy, a sheep can survive in that agonizing position for several days, struggling to get its breath. There is not one thing it can do about its predicament; it needs a shepherd who can restore its soul.

## **God Lifts Us to Restoration**

When a shepherd restores a cast down sheep, he may not do it immediately. It takes time to restore that sheep. First, he massages the sheep's legs to encourage circulation. He will then roll the sheep on its side to relieve the pressure of gasses in the stomach. All the while, he allays the sheep's fear by talking in a reassuring tone.

Then he gently puts his hand under the sheep's belly in case it cannot stand on its own. He will hold that sheep there until the blood begins to flow in the legs again and it begins to get some stability. Finally, the sheep is able to stand on its own and rejoin the flock.

This is a tremendous picture of what God is willing to do for all of us. If you've ever had your soul cast down—if you've ever backed yourself into a corner and you're struggling to get out—God has promised he will come and restore your soul. He will restore your confidence, your peace, your strength, and your joy.

You may be cast down right now by guilt. You need to hear that the good shepherd has a word for you. It is 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (ESV).

You may be cast down right now by grief. Will you listen to the good shepherd say in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (ESV)? Whether you are broken by guilt or burdened with grief, God will restore you. There is only one remedy for guilt or for grief, and that is the grace of the good shepherd.

## **God Locates our Route**

Getting lost is another danger for a sheep. Oftentimes sheep will begin to nibble on grain and grass, and they just follow their nose, walking and

eating. It doesn't take a lot of nibbles until a sheep will wander off trying to satisfy his hunger. The only thing on that sheep's mind is the next blade of grass. It's oblivious to the route it is taking away from safety. Before you know it, that sheep is lost, and it doesn't have a homing instinct to find its way back.

A cow will come back to the barn, a horse will return to the stable, a dog will return to his house, but sheep can't find their way back to the flock.

A sheep is not strong like a lion; it is not swift like an antelope; it is not smart like a dog. The number one characteristic of a sheep is it is dependent. So it becomes a matter of urgency to restore that sheep to the flock. Without a keen sense of smell, it could eat poisonous weeds, drink polluted water, or come up against a natural enemy.

It is the shepherd's job not only to restore cast sheep to their feet, but to restore lost sheep to the flock. Before a shepherd could sleep at night, he would count the sheep, even calling them by name, and if one was missing, he secured the flock and went to find that one lost sheep. Our own shepherd will not let us wander outside of his protective range. If you belong to the shepherd, he will locate your route and bring you back to him.

## **God Leads Us to Righteousness**

In his 1939 Christmas Eve address to the British Commonwealth, King George VI made his closing remarks. WWII had begun just months before, and he himself was dying of cancer. Quoting from a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, these were the last words he said to his people: "I said to the man at the gate of the year, 'Get me a light that I may walk safely into the unknown.' He said to me, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand in the hand of God, and it shall be to you better than the light and safer than the known.'"

Sheep have extremely poor vision and can see only about ten yards away. Unless they put their "hand" in the hand of the shepherd, their eyesight is a reason they wander. In the spiritual sense, every one of us has bad eyesight. Even with the best eyesight in the world we cannot see the future. So how can we face the unknown? Corrie ten Boom, a Christian

Holocaust survivor, said, “Never be afraid to trust a future you don’t know to a God you do know.”

David’s next words tell us about that future. He says, “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3 ESV). This literally means, God leads me in “the right path.” The wrong path is the path of danger, despair, and disillusionment. When sheep don’t follow the shepherd, this is where they find themselves.

But if a good shepherd is leading, the sheep will not take the path to wild animals and cliffs but to green grass and still waters. A shepherd never guides his sheep to destruction. He guides them only into the places that are right and nourishing for them. The path that God will guide you on is a path of no darkness, a path of no danger, a path of no disappointment.

How can we follow the good shepherd on the path to righteousness? First, ask God to give you wisdom to make wise decisions and to correct unwise decisions. Then ask God to guide your walk. It’s better to ask God to direct your paths than it is to correct your mistakes. Finally, ask God to guard your ways. He doesn’t do this just for our well-being but “for his name’s sake.”

God wants his name to be glorified. We ought to make sure that we’re in the path of righteousness so that we might bring glory and honor to him.

When we’re in the midst of making decisions, we can be assured that God will linger with us, lift us, locate us, and lead us all for the purpose of glorifying himself among his creation. His way is the only right way.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Loving God, may I choose the path of righteousness by following your voice and keeping you in sight. Thank you for coming after me when I fall.*

**Question for This Week:** What hole have you rolled into that you simply can’t get out of on your own? Cry out to your shepherd for his skilled, loving help.

# 10

## No Fear

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 23:4
- Hebrews 2:14-18
- Isaiah 43:1-7
- Psalm 5:8-11
- Romans 8:31-39

### **A Fate Worse Than Death**

Fear is one of the most debilitating emotions known to the human race. It is fascinating to see what people fear most. A California university does a fear survey every year and here are the three greatest fears people have in America. Fear number one: public speaking. Fear number two: heights. Fear number three: bugs, snakes, and other animals.<sup>20</sup>

Fear penetrates the heart, poisons the spirit, and paralyzes the soul. It can affect you emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and even physically. But fear is not altogether a bad thing. We'd be in bad shape if we didn't fear hot stoves, oncoming traffic, or flood warnings. I think we fear death because it's the unknown. We get to experience death only once, and we don't know what it's like until we go through it.



Yet it's amazing that some people don't fear death and hell. On her eighty-first birthday, Katharine Hepburn said, "I look forward to oblivion. I'm what is known as gradually disintegrating. I don't fear the next world, or anything. I don't fear hell and I don't look forward to heaven."<sup>21</sup>

We can approach death in one of two ways: we can deny it or defeat it. We all have to face it, but some of us don't have to fear it. Notice I said "some." Without God you should fear death and eternal separation from God, but with God you should have no fear. In this text before us, the good shepherd tells the sheep how to face death without fear.

## **Don't Be Afraid of Death's Power**

In my travels to Israel, I often lead tours through a valley that lies between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. It is a narrow canyon that is so steep the sun hits the bottom only at high noon. There are times when our group cannot travel through at all because the stream at the bottom, fed by overflowing rivers from the surrounding hillsides during the rainy season, creates a narrow valley that is sometimes only about twelve inches wide. It is dark and it can be very dangerous to try to travel through it. This valley is actually called the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

David compared that valley to death. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" (Psalm 23:4 ESV). He expresses no doubt that he is going to walk through that valley. The Hebrew word translated "though" could be better translated "when." That is, David said, "When I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Death is not a question of whether, but a question of when.

A shepherd would appreciate what David was saying. Each year, as the snow began to melt on the mountaintops, it would provide fresh water and fresh grass in the highlands. Annually, the shepherd would lead the sheep from the lowlands—now barren and parched by the sun—and take them up to where it was cooler and better. This temporary journey might take hours, days, or weeks, but the best route, and often the only route, to higher ground is through the valley.

The name of the valley in this verse is not the valley of death; it is the valley of the shadow of death. Do you know what a shadow is? It is an image without substance. Did you know that if you are a child of God you

don't face death, you only face death's shadow? That's why David said when it comes to death, I have no fear.

## **Do Be Aware of God's Presence**

There is a tremendous change in David's perspective in Psalm 23:4. In the first three verses David speaks about the shepherd in the third person. But beginning in verse 4, he changes to the second person. Now he is talking to the shepherd: "for you are with me." David knew sheep never go through valleys alone; the shepherd's always there. With God as his shepherd, David didn't fear going through his circumstances alone either.

We are going to walk through the "valley of the shadow of death." Behind a shadow there must be a light. Some people are afraid of their own shadows. If you've got that problem, here is what you do: turn your back on the shadow and look to the light. When you do, guess what happens? When you look to the light beyond you, the shadow falls behind.

Hebrews 13:5-6 says, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (ESV).

Sheep are safer in the valley with the shepherd than on the mountaintop without him. No Christian dies alone, and the shepherd never takes his flock where he has not already been before. Jesus, our great shepherd, has already encountered death so that we don't have to, and even when we face it, he is with us. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the only thing that can ever touch us is the shadow.

## **Definitely Be Assured of the Lord's Protection**

This verse ends by giving another reason David had no fear: "your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4 ESV). In the Middle East a shepherd carried only two tools—a rod and a staff. The rod became an extension of the shepherd's right arm as he guarded his sheep. He would drive pieces of metal into the knob, and he could use that rod as a club to kill bears and snakes and to drive off wolves. Whenever the sheep saw the rod in the shepherd's hand, they knew he was guarding them.

The shepherd also had a staff bent on one end to form a hook. That hook would be just perfect for reaching around the chest of a lamb or around the neck of a larger sheep. The staff was used to guide sheep as they walked along a dangerous path. The shepherd could gently press the staff to a sheep's side or he could reach out with the crook and pull him back into the fold. If a sheep slipped over a steep ravine or stumbled into a rocky creek bed, the shepherd could lift it up and restore it to the flock.

The rod guarded the sheep, the staff guided them. One protected the sheep; the other directed the sheep. Nothing was more comforting to the sheep than the sight of the rod and the staff. The shepherd would make sure his sheep got safely through the valley and all the way to the top of the mountain.

## **Life and Death**

Do you know the most often repeated command from the lips of Jesus? It isn't "Be good," "Be holy," or "Don't sin." It's "Do not be afraid."

One of the greatest preachers who ever lived was John Chrysostom. He preached during the fourth century, and he was such a great preacher he was called "the golden mouth." Chrysostom was brought before one of the pagan rulers and commanded to forsake his Christian faith, but he refused. As a result, he was then brought before the Roman emperor.

The emperor threatened him with banishment if he remained a Christian. Chrysostom said, "You cannot banish me for this world is my Father's house." The emperor said, "Then I will slay you." Chrysostom said, "You cannot slay me for my life is hid with Christ in God." The emperor said, "Then I will take away your treasures." Chrysostom said, "You cannot take away my treasure because my treasure is in heaven, and so is my heart."

The emperor said, "Then I will drive you away from every human being and you won't have one friend left." Chrysostom said, "You can't do that either for I have a friend in heaven who sticks closer than a brother from which nothing can ever separate us." Chrysostom then stood up, looked the emperor in the eye, and said, "You need to understand, in my heart there is no fear, for there is nothing you can do to hurt me."

If the Lord is your shepherd and you are his sheep, whether in life or death, what do you have to fear? If you walk with God through life, God will walk with you through death. Therefore, in neither life nor death should you ever have any fear.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Loving God, you are masterful at guiding my path and mightier than death itself. Increase my faith so that I might trust you in my darkest moments and days.*

**Question for This Week:** What fears need to come out of the shadows so that God can walk through them with you?

# 11

## Me, Myself, and God

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 23:5
- Matthew 6:5-8
- Matthew 19:16-22
- Isaiah 55:6-7
- Ephesians 3:20-21

### **The Hour of Need**

In our study of Psalm 23, we've encountered only two characters so far—the shepherd and the sheep. But now a third party appears: enemies. Do you ever feel surrounded by enemies, as if the world is against you and you can't count on anybody? Do you ever feel totally alone and needy? Emptiness reverberates through our culture. Because he was overwhelmed by emptiness, hopelessness, and loneliness, six-time tennis champion Boris Becker came close to taking his own life. Here's what he said:

I had won Wimbledon twice before, once as the youngest player. I was rich. I had all the material possessions I needed: money, cars, women, everything...I know that this is a cliché. It's the old song of the movie and pop stars who commit

suicide. They have everything and yet they are so unhappy...I had no inner peace. I was a puppet on a string.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps David could relate to what Boris Becker was feeling. As he writes this part of the psalm, it's as if he's saying, "It's just me, myself, and God." At this point in his life, he saw only enemies, not friends. Perhaps he thought there was no one who cared. I don't know what caused David to write this part of the song, but I do know that the Lord shared with him four wonderful truths that can give all of God's sheep great joy concerning their shepherd.

## **God Gives Us What We Don't Know We Need**

The scene changes in Psalm 23:5 from a field to a feast, from a trail to a table: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (ESV). We often think of this as a big banquet table in a king's palace, but this isn't what a table was to a sheep.

Shepherds often looked for mesas, a field of green grass where the sheep could feed in peace. This was called "good tableland," and the shepherd would prepare it for his sheep. He would clear poisonous plants and harmful stalks. He would drive off wolves and wild dogs and keep the snakes at bay. He prepared the table in spite of all the natural enemies that threatened the sheep.

In many parts of the Middle East, there were tiny adders, poisonous snakes that lived right under the ground. They could often pop out of their holes and nip the sheep on their noses. The bite from those snakes, though not instantaneously fatal, could cause an inflammation that could eventually kill the sheep.

But the shepherd would inspect that field for snake holes and pour a circle of oil around each one. When the vipers, sensing the presence of sheep, attempted to surface, their smooth bodies could not pass over that slippery oil, and the sheep were protected.

The shepherd ensured that the sheep were without fear before they ever had a chance to sense it. He provided for them what they didn't even know they needed so they could eat, lie down, and digest their food in peace. It

was his job to “prepare a table” for the sheep, to anticipate their needs and to remain tuned in to needs that might arise.

## **God Himself Is All That We Need**

One of the greatest lessons I’ve ever learned about the Christian life is this: peace is not the absence of problems; peace is the presence of Jesus.

Steve Brown, a Bible teacher who was raised in North Carolina near a Cherokee reservation, tells the story of one of their cultural traditions:

As a Cherokee youth moved into manhood, the tribe had a custom of taking this young man into the middle of the woods on a dark night and leaving him there all by himself. He had no weapons, no way to defend himself, and when the father would leave him there he would simply say to him, “No matter what happens, remember you have nothing to fear.”

Needless to say, that young man heard every owl hoot, every branch rustled by the breeze, every falling pinecone, and every animal scurrying about the woods. He had no trouble imagining that every shadow was a black bear looking for a meal. The young person could easily spend the entire night in unbelievable terror counting the minutes until the sun came up.

Do you know what would always happen when the sun came up? In the dawning light, that young Cherokee would make out his surroundings, and one of the first things he would see was his father who had never left him. His own father stood watch nearby all night with weapons ready to protect him.

One of the reasons why you and I should be able to sit down at a table and eat to our heart’s content in peace is that our shepherd is always near. He not only *gives* us all that we need, he *is* all that we need.

## **God Gives Us Just What We Need**

Try to guess what the biggest danger to a sheep might be. Wolves? Bears? Snakes? Getting lost? Eating the wrong grass? Drinking bad water?

Those are all dangers, indeed, but the worst danger to a sheep is what is known as a nose fly. To prevent this nuisance from invading the sheep, the shepherd would use oil: “you anoint my head with oil” (Psalm 23:5 ESV).

This fly lays eggs in the nose of a sheep, and the hatching, hungry larva will drive that sheep crazy. The helpless sheep will run and bleat and even bang its head against a rock, but nothing relieves it of the larva. Without relief, the sheep will quit eating, lose weight, and stop growing.

The shepherd offers relief when he anoints the head of that sheep with a mixture of olive oil and sulfur to protect from the nose fly. The oil kills the larva and the eggs and also repels other flies from bothering that sheep. It was also used as a salve for open wounds. Oil was a marvelous repellent and cure. The sheep didn’t need a weapon to protect them, they just needed a shepherd.

Notice the personal singular here—David doesn’t say that God anoints “our heads,” but rather he anoints “my head.” Each day, the shepherd examines every sheep, one-by-one, to make sure there are no flies, no sores, and no problems. He loves the individual sheep in the flock and gives each one exactly what is needed to heal its wounds and to soothe its pain.

Through the oil of his Holy Spirit, God does the same for us. When we are wounded, hurting, irritated, or grieving, God takes the oil of his Holy Spirit and pours it anew over our heads and hearts to soothe us. As great as God is, and as powerful as God is, he cares for each one of us. You never get overlooked in the crowd and you never get lost in the flock. God is always there for you at just the time you need him.

## **God Gives Us More Than We Need**

In the deserts of the Middle East, it was customary for a visitor to arrive at someone’s home and be offered a cup of water or wine. After the guest drank the cup, the host would refill it. As long as the guest kept drinking and the host kept refilling, the guest was welcome to stay. If the cup turned empty, it meant that it was time for the guest to leave. If the host wanted a guest to stay a long time, however, he would fill that cup to overflowing.

In the Bible, an overflowing cup is a symbol of total satisfaction. David writes “my cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5 ESV) in order to express that he has everything he needs.



When his flock needed water and there were no streams, a shepherd would lead his flock to a well. Some wells were very deep, and by lowering and raising a bucket, he would fill large stone cups beside the well with water. Sheep do not like to get wet, so the shepherd made sure that the cups were filled to overflowing. They were satisfied when they could drink with ease.

The blessings of God upon his children are just as generous. Think for just a moment how much your cup truly overflows with God's compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. God doesn't simply pardon us or answer our prayers, he does exceedingly more. When Jesus turned water into wine, he produced 120 gallons, enough for ten weddings. When he fed five thousand people, he had twelve baskets left over. Our cup overflows with abundance because that is the nature of our God. God fills our cup with his blessings to overflowing because he wants us to fellowship with him forever.

Pastor Jack Hinton had the opportunity to lead worship music during a service in a leper colony on the island of Tobago. There was time for one more song so he asked for a request. A woman who had been facing away from the pulpit turned toward him and raised a hand that had no fingers. Her nose was entirely gone. Both ears were missing. Most of her lips had rotted away. The rest of her body was filled with terrible cankerous sores from that leprosy.

Hardly able to look at her, Pastor Hinton asked, "And what would you like for us to sing?" She asked if they could sing the hymn "Count Your Blessings." Hinton said he was so overcome with emotion he had to leave the service. One of his church members followed him out the door and said, "Brother Jack, I guess you'll never be able to sing that song again." The pastor said, "Yes, I will, but I'll never sing it the same way again."

There are going to be times when it's just me, myself, and God. There are going to be times when you feel all alone and think nobody understands or even cares. But if you will look closely and carefully at your cup, you will see how it overflows. Rejoice because you're with the only one who gives you what you don't know you need, gives you all that you need, more than you need, and exactly what you need when you need it.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, I rejoice in your faithful abundance toward me. Help me to remember and expect your lovingkindness in my moments of*

*need.*

**Question for This Week:** For what do you need the oil of the Spirit to heal? Will you trust the shepherd to do more than you could ask or imagine?

# 12

## Final Destination

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 23:6
- Matthew 5:43-48
- Isaiah 60:10-12
- Isaiah 51:9-11
- Colossians 3:1-4

### **Signs of the Future**

I fly quite a bit, and if I check luggage, I am sometimes asked, “What is your final destination?” It really shakes them up when I say, “Heaven.” Sometimes they will respond, “I can’t check your bag there.” Usually I will say, “That’s okay, it wouldn’t make it anyway.”

The truth is, we all have a final destination—you notice the last word in Psalm 23 is “forever.” We all have an eternal destination; we are all going to be somewhere forever. We live for about eighty to ninety years on earth, but this is nothing compared to the enduring experience of eternity. It’s really incomprehensible, but let’s try.

A million years is a thousand thousand. A billion years is a thousand million. A trillion years is a thousand billion. A quadrillion years is a thousand trillion. A quintillion years is a thousand quadrillion. You might

be thinking, “James, you’re being ridiculous. That’s incomprehensible.” Exactly, and so is eternity. Even after a quintillion years has gone by, eternity will have just gotten started.

God wants your final destination to be heaven. When you come out of the valley of the shadow of death, I want you to be, like David, in the house of the Lord. Life is a journey that is preparing you for your final destination. As we close this study of the twenty-third psalm, four wonderfully encouraging truths ought to give all of us who know the Lord victory over worry, depression, and anxiety as we face the future with him.

## **God’s Goodness Is Walking after Me**

Psalm 23:6 says, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (ESV). God’s goodness comes behind us all the time. That doesn’t mean that everything that happens to you will be good, but it does mean that God will use everything that happens to you for your good. Goodness will follow you.

This is a psalm about how a shepherd leads his sheep, and the shepherd in this psalm is the Savior in the Gospels. The shepherd that David is talking about is the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus is no ordinary shepherd. Acts 10:38 tells us that Jesus “went about doing good.” For thirty-three years, he went about doing good for his sheep, just as he continues to do now. Let’s think about what his goodness means to our lives.

According to the Bible, goodness is a perfect gift that comes from God (James 1:17) and nothing except good ever comes from God. Psalm 52:1 says, “The goodness of God endures continually” (NKJV). Furthermore, God is good to everybody. The psalmist said, “The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” (Psalm 145:9 ESV). You can’t go anywhere in this world where you cannot find evidence of the goodness of God. Psalm 33:5 says, “The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD” (NKJV). God’s goodness is abiding, restorative, and divine.

The problem is that we so often take God’s goodness for granted that we don’t realize just how good God is and how we benefit from his goodness every day. But if we would learn to look for it, and to even share it, we could understand what the New Testament means when it says, “And we

know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

## **God’s Grace Is Working in Me**

Not only does goodness follow us, but so does mercy. Mercy is connected to and is even the result of grace, and it follows us right alongside goodness. The Hebrew word translated “follow” literally means “to pursue.” God’s goodness and God’s mercy pursue us, run after us, and stay right on our heels all the days of our lives.

If you’ve ever seen a photo of shepherds and sheep, then you’ve likely seen sheepdogs in the frame as well. Shepherds do not drive sheep, they lead sheep. But following behind the sheep are dogs such as Australian shepherds and border collies. Their job is to follow the sheep, and if one goes astray, gets hurt, or starts falling behind, the dogs bark to alert the shepherd to take care of that sheep. David is saying that goodness and mercy are like divine sheepdogs always following behind us and hemming us in.

Think about how a parent follows a little child around picking up after him. That is what God does for us; he’s constantly picking up after our messes. We make mistakes, we blow it, we get things out of order, and there is God behind us all the time putting it back together, working it out, taking care of our messes. That is simply the mercy of God.

Thank God he doesn’t turn his goodness and mercy on and off. He’s not good one day and bad the next. He’s not merciful one day and unmerciful the next. All the days of my life I will have God’s goodness and God’s mercy. This doesn’t go unnoticed. It has an effect on me, it works in me, bringing me salvation, strength, and sensitivity to God’s Spirit. We need both goodness and mercy—goodness for our steps and mercy for our stumbles. God’s goodness supplies me, helps me, and provides while God’s mercy soothes me, heals, and pardons.

I love that word “surely.” Not maybe, not possibly, but surely I can look back on my life and thank God that his goodness and mercy followed me. If you are a child of God and the Lord is your shepherd and you are his sheep, you don’t face the future with a question mark, you face it with an exclamation point. God’s goodness and God’s mercy will follow you. Not

just some of the days but all of the days. You may not see it, you may not feel it, you may be hard pressed to find it, but it's always there.

## **God's Gladness Is Waking Inside of Me**

Have you ever had a dream or a desire that you thought might never come true, but you hoped that it would? Perhaps you're waiting for a prodigal child to return home or for a medical treatment to have a good effect. Maybe you've waited longer than you wished you had to for a spouse. David knows what it's like to have to wait a lifetime for something you've only ever dreamed of.

In Psalm 27:4, David tells us his own big wish: "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (ESV). David had one major goal in his life—he wanted to finally arrive in heaven. Just thinking about it made him glad. Everything would be complete. All the loose ends tied up. Enemies would be no more and worries would be done away with.

We can tell that David was pumped because after all the wonderful things he talks about in Psalm 23, he doesn't just say, "And then I will die," or "I will cease to exist," or "I will dissolve into nothingness." He says, "I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever." After all of these wonderful things, it only gets better from here.

Imagine you're a shepherd who is always on the move. You might live in a tent or sleep in the open air. As soon as sheep devoured all the grass in one spot, they had to move on. A shepherd never got to settle down in one place for very long. But David said, "One day I'm going to make my final move. I'm going to reach my final destination. It is going to be in the house of the Lord and it's going to be great."

## **God's Glory Is Waiting for Me**

As we've studied this psalm, it feels like God saved the best for last. He tells us in the very beginning of this psalm that we will never lack anything. When we're hungry, he'll lead us to green pastures. When we're thirsty, he'll lead us to still waters. When we're down, he will pick us up, and he'll always lead us in the right way. Even when we walk through the valley of

the shadow of death, he will protect us with his rod and his staff. Even when we are surrounded by our enemies, we will eat in a calmness and assurance at his table, knowing he is right beside us.

He tells us our earthly life is going to be full of goodness and mercy, and it is wonderful to know him, to love him, to worship him, to serve him, to praise him on earth. But David closes this psalm by telling us that if the Lord is your shepherd, the best is yet to be. You haven't seen anything until you reach your final destination.

Now this destination is not just a place, it is a person. You notice that the psalm begins with "the LORD" and it ends with "the LORD." Jesus said in John 14:2 (NASB), "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you." If you are his sheep and the Lord is your shepherd, you are guaranteed and reserved a first-class suite in his house. And praise God, there is no checkout at noon.

I don't know all the facts about the future. I don't know how, when, or where I am going to die. But though I do not know the facts about my future, I do know the finality of my future—"I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Goodness and mercy will see to it.

If you know the Lord Jesus—if you are his sheep and he is your shepherd—just remember that your final destination is with this one who has provided and cared for you all along your earthly journey. Certainly, the best is yet to come.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty Lord, you are so good to pick me up when I stumble and move me back on track. May I follow you completely, love you wholeheartedly, and dwell with you eternally.*

**Question for This Week:** When has God's goodness helped you and when has God's mercy healed you? How will knowing these are always with you change the way you follow him now?

# 13

## Farewell to Fear

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 27
- Psalm 71:5-8
- Jeremiah 17:5-8
- Isaiah 43:1-7
- Hebrews 3:1-6

### **Fearing the Worst**

March 3, 1943. At exactly 8:17 p.m. bomb-raid sirens filled London with their ear-splitting sounds. Buses and cars screeched to a halt, and passengers poured out like rats from a sinking ship. Gunfire erupted and rockets were launched from anti-aircraft artillery forces.

Throngs of people in the street began to scream. Some threw themselves facedown on the pavement awaiting certain death; others covered their heads and cried, “They’re starting to drop them!” Thousands of eyes scanned the black canvas of the night looking for the dreaded Luftwaffe, though none were to be seen or heard.

Many ran toward the Bethnal Green Underground Station, joining more than five hundred others who had already taken shelter there. That number would swell to two thousand in ten minutes, and that is when the real



danger began. It started when a horde of safety seekers jammed the stairwell entrance. A woman carrying her baby tripped on one of the steps leading down from the street, and others fell on top of her.

Some tried to push their way through, thinking someone was deliberately blocking the entrance. The stampede lasted less than fifteen minutes, but it took until midnight to disengage the tangled bodies. In all, 173 men, women, and children died...yet not one bomb ever fell. Fear killed them all.<sup>23</sup>

Fear kills. It kills ambition. It kills dreams. It kills initiative. It kills creativity. It kills risk taking. It kills the courage to do the right thing, say the right word, take the right path. No one is immune to it—not popes, priests, potentates, professors, and (I can personally testify) not even pastors.

David wrote a song about fear when “Wanted Dead or Alive but Preferably Dead” posters with his face on them appeared on every other tree for a hundred square miles. King Saul had put out a contract on him, and like ants at a picnic, bounty hunters were scouring every square inch of every cave and forest looking to cash him in. There are only two antidotes to fear—courage and confidence—and the lyrics of this song give God followers reasons to have both.

## **Be Confident in the Protection of God**

As I write this, a terrorist in London drove his car into a crowd walking on Westminster Bridge, killing at least four people and injuring forty more, crashed his car into a gate outside Parliament, and stabbed a policeman to death before being shot and killed. It is the deadliest terrorist attack in London in twelve years<sup>24</sup> and a stark reminder that hardly anyone is safe anywhere anymore—or are they? Darkness, depravity, and danger lurk on every street corner and in every nation. But God is the sun for darkness, salvation for depravity, and a stronghold for danger.

Psalm 27:1 is the only place in the Old Testament where God is actually called *light*. “The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” One thing we all fear as children is the dark. Even as adults we fear the stormy darkness of international terrorism, global recession, and national unrest. In

the dark storms of life, God's light will guide us safely to the shore of his love and care.

The word used here for "salvation" is elsewhere translated "deliverance." God delivers us from our own depravity and either from or through the depravity of others. Daily he delivers us from the power of sin in our lives and through the practice of sin in the lives of others.

God is our stronghold—a word meaning "fortress." He is "Fort God" for us when we are under attack, a tent to protect us from the heat of persecution and opposition, and a rock to keep us above the floods of pressures and strife that constantly surround all who stand for God. "For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock" (Psalm 27:5).

## **Be Confident in the Providence of God**

David talks about both a desire in verse 4 and a destination in verse 13. Both are inextricably linked. "One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4).

David isn't asking to move into the temple, but he's asking the temple—the dwelling place of God—to move into him. In those days, Levites lived in the temple and performed the sacred works of worship. This same continual attention to and presence with their magnificent God was something David wanted in his life. David had a desire to spend all of his days in the house of God so that he could gaze on the beauty of the God of the house. He longed to be with God forever, a promise God makes to all his children.

David then declares the absolute certainty that he will indeed see the goodness of God in the land of the living. "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living" (Psalm 27:13). How does he know his preferred destination would become his permanent destination? The only reason is the providence of God.

In the providence of God there is an absolute assurance that all who love him *here* will love him *there*. As David wrote earlier, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23:6 ESV). Many people start out on a journey but don't get to their destination either because of death or disease

or disaster. But we can be confident that our journey will end gazing on God's glory and God's goodness in the land of the living where we never die.

## **Be Confident in the Presence of God**

David writes in verses 7 and 8, "Here my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, LORD, I will seek." There is a difference between being aware of someone's presence and actually *being in* their presence. David seeks not just to be heard by God but also to be seen by God, to have, if you will, a face-to-face encounter.

Many people in the Old Testament could claim that they were with God: Adam (Genesis 2:21-22), Abraham (Genesis 12:7), Isaac (Genesis 26:24), Moses (Exodus 33:17-23), and Samuel (1 Samuel 3:21) for starters. These encounters with God were far from fearful. They were personal, and they showed each individual the intimacy that God desires to have with his creation. Psalm 34:4 says, "I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears."

David isn't just inviting himself over to God; God made the first move. This invitation comes from God himself.<sup>25</sup> We never have to barge into God's presence, make an appointment long in advance, or see one of his associates. J.I. Packer says, "The Christian's life in all its aspects—intellectual and ethical, devotional and relational, upsurging in worship and outgoing in witness—is supernatural; only the Spirit can initiate and sustain it."<sup>26</sup> We can be confident in the presence of God because God is constantly inviting our presence with him.

In the most fear-inducing, terrifying circumstances, we can seek his face, and when we *seek* his face we *see* his face. We never face darkness, danger, disease, or disaster alone. Sometimes God holds our hand and walks with us in our fear. Sometimes God puts us on his shoulder and carries us above the fear. Sometimes God wraps his arms around us and shelters us from our fear. But regardless, we can be confident and take courage in the presence of God.

## **Be Confident in the Promise of God**

One of our greatest fears is the fear of rejection. It is the fear of not being chosen at all or being chosen at first and later kicked to the curb. Experiencing exclusion creates more than just an emotional response; when we are rejected by others, we feel it in a very physiological way.

Dean Ornish, clinical professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, did a study on what happens when we are socially excluded. His participants played a ball-tossing video game and were told that unseen players were tossing the ball back to them with their own controllers. When the unseen players (which were really just the video game program) stopped tossing the ball back, the participants felt rejected. When the ball wasn't shared with them, it activated the anterior cingulate and insula parts of their brain, the parts that register pain. "Subjects' brains responded the same way as if they experienced physical pain. Rejection doesn't just hurt like a broken heart; your brain feels it like a broken leg."<sup>27</sup>

David had been rejected by the king and by many of his own people. He asserts that even if his own parents slam the door and turn their back on him, God will receive him. "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (Psalm 27:10). This might not mean that his mom and dad have treated him like this but that David recognizes that beyond the breaking point of even the deepest and most committed promises of human love, God's acceptance is even more steadfast. His promises never fail; his commitment is continuous.

Even at our worst, God will never disown us, change the locks on the door, write us out of his will, or refuse to take our calls. He has promised never to leave us or forsake us. Whenever fear raises its head, we can be confident because with God beside us, behind us, and before us, we can say farewell to fear.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, when I am filled with worry and dread, send your spirit to calm my soul and to show me the path to confidence in you.*

**Question for This Week:** What makes you feel afraid? What provision of God can you have more confidence in? How can you express this?

# 14

## Planting Your Feet

### Scriptures for this Week

- Psalm 32
- Isaiah 43:16-21
- Ephesians 4:29-32
- Philippians 3:12-14
- 1 John 1:8-10

### Root Out Your Past

Who would you label the greatest songwriter of all time? *Rolling Stone* magazine recently made a list and guess who they said was number one? Bob Dylan. I would have no problem putting Bob Dylan as number two, but I believe someone else should be in the number one position. I believe the greatest, most prolific songwriter of all time was a king by the name of David.

Modern worship leaders are still putting the Psalms to music today. How many songs written by those on *Rolling Stone's* list do you think will still be sung regularly thousands of years from now? David wrote at least seventy-five songs that we know of for sure. He wrote love songs and sad songs. He wrote songs that would pick you up and songs that would put you

down, but every song that he wrote had a way of penetrating right to your heart.

Sometimes David wrote songs for tomorrow. Sometimes he wrote songs for today. But today we are going to listen to a song that he wrote for yesterday. The psalm we are going to explore in this chapter is a song about his past, and, in some way, it's about the past we all have in common.

If we're honest, every one of us can see things in our past we wish were not there. We have regrets and decisions we wish we could remake. We've all said things, gone places, and hurt people for the wrong reasons. Those regrets can cause a powerful form of grief called guilt. The things we regret the most are the things that are our fault. If we root out our past, we might find ourselves singing this song right along with David.

## **Revisit Your Remorse**

David wrote Psalm 32 as a way to talk about a terrible sin that he had committed. The ghost of guilt haunted him 24/7 until he finally made things right with God and with the ones he sinned against. In effect, Psalm 32 is an X-ray of a forgiven heart.

I am sure you know the story, but by way of review, David committed adultery with another man's wife, impregnated her, and then had her husband murdered to hide what he had done. That fault caused a relational, emotional, and personal earthquake that left behind unbelievable damage. It cost a man and a baby their lives, destroyed a marriage, shamed a king, and broke God's heart. David was in the wrong and he experienced deep remorse.

The first step we must take in order to make things right when we are in the wrong is to confess our sin. David had done that. The second thing we must do is repent of our sin and by God's grace turn away from it. David had done that. But here in this psalm, he seems to be struggling with those feelings that say, "I still can't forgive myself." I am going to show you from David's psalm how to plant your feet on the solid rock of forgiveness and stop the struggle with guilt. David shows us that we will act forgiven only when we accept the forgiveness that God has applied.

## **Recognize Your Sin**

Even though this is a song about a failure, it is a song of gladness rather than sadness. It begins with the words, “Blessed is the one” and it ends with the word, “Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice.” The word *blessed* literally means “happy.” The happiest person in the world is a person whose conscience is clear and whose fault has been forgiven.

If you know David’s story, then you know that he tried at first to cover up what he did, but that didn’t work out too well for him. “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (Psalm 32:3-4 ESV).

We all have this tendency to cover up when we have messed up. David finally realized you will never get clean until you come clean. He recognized his sin at its very depths, using three different words to describe his faults.

First, he refers to *transgression*: “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven” (Psalm 32:1 ESV). The word *transgress* literally means to “trespass.” We trespass into forbidden territory such as jealousy, anger, lust, selfishness, or indifference. Transgression is when you say yes where God says no.

Then he uses the word *sin*: “Blessed is the one...whose sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1 ESV). When you do something you should not do, that is a transgression. When you don’t do something you should do, that is a sin. It is when you know you should have offered help, withheld judgment, given some support, or said something about Jesus to somebody, but you didn’t. When God says, “You shall,” and you say, “I won’t,” you have sinned.

The last word David uses is *iniquity*. “Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity” (Psalm 32:2 ESV). Iniquity is when we take something that is right, but we use it the wrong way. For example, we take sex (which is right) and turn it into sex outside of marriage or sex with someone else’s spouse (which is wrong). When we pervert justice or pollute the environment, we are committing iniquity. We are taking what was meant for good and turning it into something bad.

David goes into such depth about sin’s depth because he wants us to realize that not only do we have faults, but those faults run deep, and there’s only one solution for them.

## Realize God's Forgiveness

Remember, this is not a song of sadness but a song of gladness. Yes, David was sad over his faults, but he was even more glad over his forgiveness! For every way we do wrong, for every fault we have, God has the perfect remedy. For every spiritual sickness, God has a spiritual cure.

The word *forgiven* in Psalm 32:1 literally means to “carry away.” It means to lay the blame on somebody else. Have you ever heard the term *scapegoat*? A scapegoat is somebody who takes the fall for somebody else. In David's time, once a year the high priest would take a goat and lay his hands on the head of that goat and he would confess over it all the transgressions of the people. Then, he would send that goat out into the wilderness never to be seen again.

That is what God does with our transgressions. He carries them away and lays the blame on Jesus. When God allowed his Son to be crucified on the cross, he made him our scapegoat, took all of our iniquities, laid them on Jesus, and he carried them away.

The word *covered* in Psalm 32:1 might seem a little ironic. When we try to cover up our sin, God will reveal it, but when we confess our sin, God will conceal it. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, his blood covered all of our sins. This means that God cannot see our sin through the blood of Jesus Christ.

What do we do with the guilt we feel years after our transgression, sin, or iniquity? To put it plainly, we need to forget. God forgives our sins and then forgets our sins; he charges our sins to Jesus' account and wipes them off our books. Sometimes we feel guilty even though we are not because we keep trying to remember what God has forgotten and trying to uncover what God has covered.

When we remember what God remembers, we are guilty.

When we remember what God forgets, we feel guilty though we are not.

When we forget what God forgets, we are not guilty and won't feel guilty.

“Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity” (Psalm 32:2 *ESV*). As deep as our faults go, forgiveness goes even deeper. For everything we have ever done against God, God has carried it away, covered it up, and cancelled the debt. We need to realize God's forgiveness.



## Receive God's Grace

The longest verse in the entire psalm just might be the most important verse. Listen to the heart of what David is saying: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*" (Psalm 32:5 ESV). Don't miss the progression. When we acknowledge our sin, when we uncover our iniquity, when we confess our transgression, God completely washes away the dirt of all of our guilt. When we conceal our sin, guilt will imprison us, but when we confess our sin, grace will free us.

On March 5, 2010, lawyer Mario Gonzalez lodged a complaint with the Spanish Data Protection Agency against a newspaper and against Google. Three years earlier, Gonzalez's house had been auctioned off to pay his debts. A newspaper googled his name, found this information, and ran an article about it.

Google took the case to the highest legal authority, which confirmed the original decision that a search engine should remove links to an individual on the grounds that the information might be prejudicial. His right to have it forgotten should be honored. In doing so, the court endorsed a relatively new addition to the catalog of human rights. It is called, "the right to be forgotten."<sup>28</sup>

The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution includes a double-jeopardy clause. Once a person is found innocent of a crime, he or she can never again be tried for that crime. There is also a spiritual law of double jeopardy. Once God reminds you of sin and you confess that sin and repent of that sin, you receive forgiveness, and God will never bring up that sin again. If you are struggling with old sins like this, you're dealing with the accusations of Satan, not God.

The wonderful news is you have the right to have your sins forgiven and forgotten because of the cross of Jesus Christ. When David cried out to God, God forgave him. The same God who forgave David will forgive you. Through Jesus Christ, you can plant your feet on the solid rock of God's grace and stand on the unshakable ground of God's forgiveness.

**Prayer for This Week:** *God, I want to follow you into forgiveness. In this moment, root out my past so that I might recognize my sin.*

**Question for This Week:** When you think of a particular sin, where do you think you are in the process of forgiveness? Confession, repentance, or reception of God's grace?

## PART TWO

### Poetic Justice

*God is just, but also merciful and forgiving.*

# 15

## The Great Depression

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 42
- Numbers 11:10-15
- 1 Kings 19:1-9
- Psalm 34:17-22
- Psalm 121:1-2

### **The Facts of Depression**

I want this chapter to be a help for the hurting because nothing is more devastating than the loss of a life due to hopelessness. Every one of us has bad days, bad moods, and disappointing experiences. Yet, there's a difference between ordinary time-to-time sadness and depression. When our down days last for more than two weeks, we venture into depression, and depression interferes with every sphere of life.

Psychologists have described depression in this fashion: "A feeling of helplessness and hopelessness that leads to intense sadness." Doctors are telling us that we are in "the age of melancholy" and depression has become so pervasive that it is now nicknamed "the common cold of mental illness." Consider the following:

- Depression costs U.S. workplaces \$23 billion in missed days of work.<sup>1</sup>
- Depression affects 15.7 million adults in the United States, or 6.7 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup>
- Every American faces a 17 percent chance of suffering from depression at some time in life.<sup>3</sup>
- Depression doesn't just affect adults—2 out of 100 children and 8 out of 100 teens will encounter real depression.<sup>4</sup>
- Women are nearly twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression.<sup>5</sup>
- Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the U.S. for all ages. Every day, approximately 105 Americans die by suicide.<sup>6</sup>

One of the greatest heroes of the Old Testament, King David, battled depression, and he wrote about it in Psalm 42. Depression was both a malady and a mystery to David. Yet, he climbed out of the pit of despair, so let's learn from his dos and don'ts.

## **Do Face Depression**

David did not ignore his depression. Twice he asks the question: “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” (Psalm 42:5,11 ESV). The first step on the road to recovery is to admit this truth. That's hard. But consider that some of the most influential men in history battled depression.

Abraham Lincoln wrote: “I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on earth. To remain as I am is impossible. I must die or get better.” Winston Churchill, the greatest prime minister in the history of Great Britain, called depression a “black dog” that followed him all his life. Moses and Elijah both battled depression. The great preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon struggled with it.<sup>7</sup> Health, wealth, fame, or faith doesn't protect you from the affliction of depression.

For some, reading through the following list will help in facing the fact of your depression. A psychologist would diagnose you with major depression if you exhibit four of these symptoms and chronic depression if

you have three: feelings of sadness, hopelessness; insomnia, early awakening, difficulty getting up; thoughts of suicide and death; restlessness, irritability; low self-esteem or guilt; eating disturbance—usually loss of appetite and weight; fatigue, weakness, decreased energy; diminished ability to think or concentrate; loss of interest and pleasure in activities once enjoyed, such as sex; chronic pains that fail to respond to typical treatment.

Know that if you are depressed, that does not make you ungodly. Because we might think depression is a sign that we aren't close to the Lord, we can hesitate to admit our depression. It is not a sin to experience depression, so if these symptoms fit you, face the fact of your depression and keep reading.

## **Don't Fear Depression**

Practically all psychologists and psychiatrists agree that depression is caused by a combination of physical, emotional, and spiritual factors. Let's look at David's experience through some modern definitions.

I've found that, in the Bible, depression was primarily caused by three things: physical collapse, emotional crash, and spiritual catastrophe. First, it may be a *physical collapse*. David said in verse 3, "My tears have been my food day and night." David was physically exhausted—absolutely worn out. All he could think about were his problems. This is called psychotic depression. It is linked to a nervous breakdown, a mental disorder, or even brain disease. David was at his physical limit just as a workaholic or a stay-at-home mother might find themselves.

A physical collapse could also be due to a chemical imbalance when the various hormones in our body get out of sync. This stimulates within us the emotional reaction called endogenous depression. When your body is physically run down, your diet is unhealthy, you're not getting enough rest, and your nerves are shot from pressure and anxiety, then you are a prime target for the monster of depression.

David reveals his *emotional crash* when he asks, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" In the Scriptures, the soul is the seat of the emotions. What the psychologists call today the psyche, the Bible calls the soul. Emotional or psychological depression comes because of upsetting circumstances. This is called reactive depression and it comes on the heels

of the death of a loved one, a divorce, a breakup with a boyfriend, or the loss of a job. Like a plane that has lost all engines, your emotions can come crashing down as well.

Therapists tell us that the endogenous and reactive types account for most cases of depression.<sup>8</sup> There is a fourth type called toxic depression, which is caused by an alien substance such as a viral illness, the wrong type of drugs, or a poor diet. But what David is battling here is different.

Finally, this may be David's *spiritual catastrophe*. I believe more often than we realize, and perhaps indirectly all the time, depression stems from a spiritual problem. The devil is a master strategist and a great tactician. He knows exactly when, where, and how to attack you. He might use the mistakes of our own hands to push us down, or he might interfere in relationships or attack our health. This shouldn't be our only explanation for depression, but we should at least examine it.

Regardless of where your depression stems from, there is hope and there is help greater than the force that is vexing you.

## **Do Fight Depression**

The problem with depression is that the initial feeling often degenerates into deeper and darker phases of emptiness. Depression goes through increasingly serious phases, from listlessness to helplessness, hopelessness, rejection, and even attempts at death. This is not the end that God has called us to. He has called us to walk on the mountaintop of victory.

I find in Scripture three simple steps to take when you are depressed. First, *lie down*. David said, "therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar" (Psalm 42:6 ESV). David was saying, "I'm going to stop, lay down all my worries, take a break, and just meditate and rest." Jesus himself took time away, and following his model, solitude and silence have been Christian practices for ages.

The second step is to *launch out*. David wrote, "These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival" (Psalm 42:4 ESV). David said, "When I remember why I was depressed, I would get out with other people and be with them." Martin Luther once said, "Isolation is poison for the depressed

person. For through this the devil attempts to keep him in his power.” One of the most dangerous things you can do if you are depressed is to pull down the shades, crawl into your cocoon, and isolate yourself.

Finally, *look up*. David says in verses 5 and 11, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (ESV). David got his eyes off himself and his circumstances. He got his chin up, his head up, his eyes up, and he focused on the Lord.

I believe the greatest medicine of all for depression is the word of God. Claim the promises of God. Believe in the providence of God. Rely on the provision of God. Cloak yourself in the presence of God and in his word. You may be in the middle of the great depression, but remember, as long as there is God, there is hope for real victory.

## **Don't Fix Depression**

Maybe you're not struggling with depression, but you care about someone who is. Depression touches all the lives connected to that loved one. It's hard to see them struggle when you can envision a flourishing life for them.

Depression is not a character flaw, and medical treatment shouldn't be dismissed. But some well-meaning Christians' attempts to help feel more like acts of judgment, which only alienate the afflicted. We should never treat lightly the malady that feels like “a deadly wound in my bones” (Psalm 42:10 ESV). Most of us, clergy included, are not trained counselors, so rather than attempt to fix our friends, we should offer them comfort and support through their struggle.

Someone once asked psychiatrist Karl Menninger, “What would you advise a person to do who is experiencing deep depression and unhappiness?” They thought he would say, “Go see a psychiatrist.” But here's what he said: “If you're severely depressed, do this: Lock the door behind you, go across the street, find somebody that's in need, and do something to help them.”

Invite your friend to be with you as you help others. Volunteering is associated with lower depression and increased well-being.<sup>9</sup> This isn't a fix, but it is a beneficial way to foster a relationship with your struggling loved one.



Whether you experience depression yourself or you love others who do, seek guidance and support. We need one another if we're going to face and fight depression. God has a hopeful life ready and waiting.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Dear Jesus, lift my soul on the darkest days that I might walk in your light of life.*

**Question for This Week:** What makes you lose hope? What might finding hope in Jesus look like for you?

# 16

## Take Refuge

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 46
- Isaiah 41:8-10
- John 14:25-31
- Numbers 14:13-19
- Micah 4:1-5

### **When You Need to Retreat**

Everyone needs to get away sometimes. We dream about vacations, plan retreats, and take a little “me” time frequently. Our lives are busy—we work a lot, commute long hours, juggle our kids’ schedules, take classes, and keep up our homes. It’s no wonder we all need a chance to just be still.

But what if being still isn’t enough? What if you live in a hot spot of disaster and danger, and someone suggests, “Just unplug, pour a cup of tea, and kick up your feet”? That would be some unfitting advice. Most of us have the luxury of being able to just turn off our screens when we’ve had enough of the hard headlines. But that’s not everyone’s story. That might not even be your story. What if you are living in the middle of all the bad news?

In the days of the psalmists, people lived through some major battles—real battles with hostility and bloodshed. They couldn't just crawl behind a rock and wish it away. In Psalm 46, a fierce battle is raging, and out of this scene come some of the most well-known lyrics ever sung: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

During ugly family, political, or cultural conflicts, we need a place to find real security and shelter. How can you be still when the world only wants to wound you? You can take refuge in God's presence, peace, protection, and plan.

## Take Refuge in God's Presence

What are you afraid of? A nationwide study in 2016 found that Americans' top three fears were corrupt government officials, terrorist attacks, and not having enough money for the future.<sup>10</sup> One of the first things we feel when we're in the midst of turmoil is fear. But there's no need to fear when God is always near.

The psalmist uses three words to show us why we can trust God even when “the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling” (Psalm 46:2-3 ESV). Those words are “refuge,” “strength,” and “help” (verse 1). The psalmist isn't telling us to muster up our strength or gather our bands of backers. And he doesn't say we should ask God to tell us how to find them. He said God *is* our refuge, strength, and help.

If God is our *refuge*, then he is our shelter. We don't run into tents when we're tough and tenacious. We don't seek out asylum when we're able and active. Instead, it is when we are susceptible that we seek shelter. The greatest refuge God provides isn't so much his power as it is his presence.

For God to be our *strength*, we have to stop imagining that taking refuge in him is like huddling under a tree in a passing storm. This is not a picture of strength. Instead, taking refuge in his presence is like running to a bomb shelter in the middle of a war, a place where you know that though you'll feel the earth shake around you, you'll come out unharmed into a different landscape.

When the psalms call God a *helper*, they aren't calling him an assistant or a collaborator for our plans and dreams. A helper in the Old Testament is

a warrior [ezer] who rescues the weak and powerless from destruction. God's presence with us rescues us from death to life. I can't imagine any greater help than that!

These song lyrics aren't talking about treating God as a metaphorical refuge, strength, and helper. No, whether or not you trust in him, he *is* refuge, he *is* strength, and he *is* help in trouble. It's not a matter of whether you have faith but who you have faith in. This is how we take refuge in God's presence.

## Take Refuge in God's Peace

The phrase "peace like a river" comes from the book of Isaiah, but it was popularized by the moving hymn, "It Is Well with My Soul." The story of this hymn is tragic. In 1871, Horatio Spafford had already endured great loss: his young son to pneumonia and his family business to the great Chicago fire. Two years later, he sent his wife and four daughters to Europe for a planned trip, but he stayed behind to take care of some business. When the family's ship collided with another ocean liner, it sank, taking the lives of all four girls. Horatio's wife, Anna, was saved by a passing boater. As Horatio sailed across the ocean to be with her, the ship passed over the location where his daughters' ship had sunk. From this experience, this beautiful hymn was written by a grieving father with an enormous trust in God.<sup>11</sup>

How do we find peace in the hard places in life? The psalmist moves to a different hard place—human hostility. The surrounding kingdoms are attempting to overtake Jerusalem, "the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (Psalm 46:4 ESV). The attacking army is likely the Assyrians, known for barbarism, burnings, and the removal of the population of the northern ten tribes of Israel to Assyria.<sup>12</sup> Jerusalem is in chaos, but God's people can take refuge in God's peace because of three truths they believe about God.

*God sustains his people.* "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved" (Psalm 46:5 ESV). Jerusalem can withstand national upheaval, but that is not what preserves it; God's presence within it is the true stronghold. Though the earth "gives way" in verse 2, here God's presence does not let the city fall. The only thing melting away is the power of the invaders.

*God saves his people.* “God will help her when morning dawns” (Psalm 46:5 ESV). God rescues his people so they can live in his peace. It references Exodus, where Moses stretched out his hand and swept the sea back into place “when the morning appeared” (Exodus 14:27 ESV), drowning the Egyptians within it. God saves his people and brings them to peace and freedom.

*God speaks for his people.* “He utters his voice, the earth melts” (Psalm 46:6 ESV). Try to imagine the cacophonous noise of a battle and the uproar of combative warriors. As much power as that invading army might display, God’s voice sails above all of it. It thunders over the forceful waters and peals across the battlefield to save and cease the conflict.

Can you say, in the midst of your prevailing conflict, that it is well with your soul? We have peace like a river by God’s river of peace, the river he fashions out of the chaos and calamity and turns into calm currents by his grace.

## **Take Refuge in God’s Protection**

God doesn’t exist in a mighty fortress—he *is* a mighty fortress. He breaks bows and makes peace. His presence with us is our greatest joy and our strongest protection.

The psalmist continues, “The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress” (Psalm 46:7 ESV). This is a military God, a God of armies who is more powerful than George Patton, Douglas MacArthur, and Winfield Scott combined. He has proved himself in battles again and again. We don’t have to fear when God’s protection is near.

It’s not just God’s power that protects us but it’s his presence. Have you ever been to an event that required high security? You probably gaped at the politician or the celebrity, so it’s unlikely that you noticed his or her bodyguards. These individuals are discreet and calm under pressure, and their very presence communicates safety and protection. Even more so, God’s presence is a powerful protection for his people. When we see him as our refuge, we see his presence as our rescue.

The psalmist issues us an invitation. “Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth” (Psalm 46:8 ESV). This kind of desolation is actually desirable; it’s the wreck that reorders the

chaos. This is not a desolation *of* the earth but a desolation *on* the earth. It means that God is the one who stops the machine of war and institutes the mechanisms for peace. He makes strong forces weak, strong weapons worthless, and strong enemies weary. God outlasts, outstays, and outfights them all.

## **Take Refuge in God's Plan**

Now we come to the most famous line of this psalm, which is also the most misunderstood. When we read this passage with its military backdrop, it's difficult to see how "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10) can possibly mean, "Step back and take a breath." This verse does not invite us to the inaction of releasing our cares but to the action of redoubling our confidence. Being still is a call to surrender more than it is a call to contemplate.

We surrender our hopes, our efforts, and our aggressions to God. And we do this because we know him. We know he is strong. We know he is present. We know he sustains, saves, and speaks for our good and for the good of the world.

When we know this with resounding confidence, we act on our confession. Every soldier feels some sense of fear in battle and the "knowing" the psalmist talks about is like a "foxhole profession" that reorients us toward trust in the Almighty, the Lord of hosts, who protects and preserves his people.

We can take refuge in God's presence, God's peace, and God's protection. But we must also surrender to God's plan: "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" (Psalm 46:10 ESV). This is the plan of our almighty God. No matter how deeply humans think they are in control, God triumphs over all. God will come out on top, and we can exult in his exaltation.

God's plan is certain. God's plan is failproof. We can live within it, as refugees of grace, and know that it will succeed. When everything that used to be right is now completely wrong, we can take refuge in the presence, peace, protection, and plan of God.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty God, though I feel the earth shaking, I will look to your strength for refuge and your presence for peace.*

**Question for This Week:** What is causing chaos for you right now? What is needed to reorder that chaos through the power of God?

# 17

## What Does God Want from Me?

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 50
- Jeremiah 33:10-12
- Proverbs 12:19
- Romans 15:7-13
- Revelation 4:6-11

### God Wants Me to...What?

The tunnel under the jungle in El Salvador has been growing for over eighteen years. Santiago Sanchez spends every day underground, digging—work he believes God gave him to do. He doesn't know where the tunnel is supposed to go or how much longer he will need to dig. But he knows, with great conviction, that it is God's assignment for him because he is "God's tunnel digger."<sup>13</sup>

A lot of us struggle to know what God wants from us. We ask big questions such as, "What did he put me on the earth to do?" or "Who does God want me to become?" He might not want us to build a tunnel. He also might not want us to go into medicine, go on vacation, or even go on the mission field. But, then again, he might! Determining what he designs for us can launch us into paralyzing fear or powerful freedom.



In specific situations, we ask smaller but equally important questions: “What does God want me to say to this friend?” “How should I approach this conflict?” “Why should I give a donation?” While we seek clarity on bigger questions, we can still follow God’s will in the questions of our daily life. In following Jesus, the “what” might not be nearly as important as the “why” and the “how.”

Think about that question for just a moment—“What does God want from me?” Your next question probably is, “How much is it going to cost?” Well, God does not want nor does he need your money. God tells us three simple things in Psalm 50: he owns everything there is, he has everything you need, and he does not need anything.

There is nothing that God needs, but there are some things that God wants. It may surprise you that through just a couple of verses in this song of Asaph, you can know exactly what it is God wants from you.

## **God Wants Me to Be Thankful**

Asaph says, “Sacrifice thank offerings to God” (Psalm 50:14). In the Old Testament a variety of sacrifices were done at different times in different circumstances. The thank offering, also called the peace offering, is what God is requesting here. This was a meat offering, much like the burnt offering, but it was done when someone already knew they had received a favorable response from God. They were in right relationship to God and this was their act of thanksgiving.

It sounds simple, but there is a great emphasis on gratitude in God’s word. He has done amazing works on our behalf. He wants all of us to always be thankful in all things every day in every way. The problem is too often instead of being thankful for what we have, we complain about what we don’t have. It is far better to lose count of your troubles by counting your blessings than to lose count of your blessings by counting your troubles.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude.”

We can probably spend hours thinking of all the things we have to be thankful for. Here are three big ones to include.

- We should be thankful for the goodness of God. God is good all the time and all the time God is good.
- We should also be thankful for the grace of God. He gives us more than enough grace to be grateful.
- We ought to be thankful for the guarding of God. The only reason we are alive at this moment is that God has protected us, spared us, and continues to give beats to our heart and breath to our lungs.

If we were going to give a thank offering, as the psalmist mentions, then above all else we should be thankful for our present relationship with God. He gives us a way to come near to him through his own offering of his Son, Jesus, on the cross. For this, God wants us to be thankful.

## **God Wants Me to Be Truthful**

The rest of verse 14 continues, “fulfill your vows to the Most High.” There is a call for ritual in this verse, even though God doesn’t *need* our thank offering. The truthful heart of the worshiper is what God is after. We aren’t being helpful to God by worshiping him and we aren’t doing him any favors by living sacrificially. He already has everything, even the things we think belong to us.

He’s asking here for honesty and integrity in our worship and daily life. The twin virtues of honesty and integrity should bookend our lives every day. Honesty is saying truthfully what we will do. Integrity is doing what we truthfully said we would do. Emily Bronte wrote in *Wuthering Heights*, “Honest people don’t hide their deeds.” Keeping our word and keeping our vows are what God wants from us. God’s word is his bond, and since we are learning to be like him, our word should be ours.

Nothing builds character like honesty and integrity. There is a high price to pay for always telling the truth. There is a high price to pay for always doing what you say you will do. There is no greater recommendation of

your character or of your usefulness than to be a person who is always truthful in saying what they will do and trustworthy in doing what they say.

Dr. Ray Pais, an oncologist at the East Tennessee Children’s Hospital, sat with J.J. and Traci Dower and delivered the bad news—their fifteen-month-old daughter, Ali, had lymphoblastic lymphoma. Later, in the middle of Ali’s treatment for the cancer, he looked at her worried parents and vowed that he would dance with Ali on her wedding day. Twenty years later, he kept his word. Ali was married in 2015, and during the last song of her reception, he approached and asked if he could keep his promise. Ali, whose new last name is Miracle, said, “Just the fact that he remembered the promise and did not hesitate at all to back that up...meant so much.”<sup>14</sup> God wants us to be truthful.

## **God Wants Me to Be Trustful**

The next words of Asaph are “and call on me in the day of trouble” (Psalm 50:15). Who do you call when you are in trouble? Your mom? A lawyer? A spouse? When trouble comes into your life, as it does for all of us, God wants your first reaction to be trust not trembling, and faith not fear. You will get plenty of opportunity to show God your trusting character.

Troubles are inevitable. Cormac McCarthy wrote in his book *The Road*, “If trouble comes when you least expect it, then maybe the thing to do is to always expect it.”<sup>15</sup> Jesus himself was “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (Isaiah 53:3). No one is exempt from trouble. Jesus didn’t escape troubles or evade troubles or eliminate troubles, and neither will you.

Furthermore, troubles can be inexplicable. You don’t always understand how you got into trouble, why you got into trouble, or sometimes even when the trouble all started. Every time you are in trouble, God is always asking you one question: “Do you trust me or not?”

When trouble comes we are to “call on” God. We’re to ask him for something and expect him to do it. Trouble is a tool God can use to build our faith. It is a test meant to strengthen the faith that we have. But we need to understand what trust is.

Trust is not believing that God will always do what we want him to do. It is asking God to do what he wants to do, believing it is best and leaving

the result to him. This is how we are to relate to God, clinging, connecting, and conforming. This is what it is to be trustful.

## **God Wants Me to Be Thoughtful**

Doing what God wants means we consent to a complete makeover of our life. God's will should not only have top priority, but should impact every corner and every crevice of who you are. If we are doing what God wants, then we are giving him our whole selves. Dallas Willard once wrote, "There is an obvious Great Disparity between, on the one hand, *the hope for life expressed in Jesus*—found real in the Bible and in many shining examples from among his followers—and, on the other hand, *the actual day-to-day behavior, inner life, and social presence* of most of these who now profess adherence to him."<sup>16</sup> Doing what God wants means we consider how we can open our whole life to God for the purpose of giving him glory.

Can you consent to God's complete transformation in your day-to-day behavior? The final phrase of Psalm 50:15 says, "I will deliver you, and you will honor me." When God delivers, he delivers completely. And when we recognize his miraculous movement in our lives, we respond by honoring him—not ourselves.

In all things in all ways, God wants us to bring honor to him. That is why we have been created—to glorify God. Believe it or not, you have made it this far in life because of the goodness of God. Every miracle Jesus performed, every lesson Jesus taught, every prayer Jesus prayed, every work Jesus did, and every moment of suffering unto death that Jesus endured was all to glorify God (John 17:4).

The great composer Johann Sebastian Bach would always put the letters *SDG* at the end of his compositions. Those letters stood for the Latin phrase "Soli Deo Gloria," which means "to God alone be the glory." Ultimately, what does God want from us? Simply to glorify him.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, I want to honor you with my life. Show me where my daily life can give more glory to you.*

**Question for This Week:** Consider your level of being thankful, truthful, trustful, or thoughtful. Which could you give more attention to?

# 18

## Sin Sick

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 51
- Mark 7:20-23
- James 1:13-15
- 1 John 1:8-10
- 1 John 3:4-10

### **Sin Infects Us All**

Doctors were recently asked their opinion on the most terrifying, horrifying sicknesses in history. The top three responses were the black death, smallpox, and HIV/AIDS. The first is now known as the “plague,” which happened almost seven hundred years ago. It was caused by a single bacterium carried by rats and fleas. It caused the death of 75 million people, which was 60 percent of the population of Europe.

One could argue that smallpox is the worst disease ever known to humanity. Between 1880 and 1980, it killed about 500 million people, including five European kings in the eighteenth century alone and 80 percent of the children under five years of age. In 1918 my own grandmother buried a three-year-old daughter and a six-year-old son in the

same week from smallpox. Thanks be to God that this disease has been eradicated from the earth.

Globally, 75 million people are infected with HIV/AIDS and 36 million have died. Though there are drugs to manage it, as of now there is no cure.<sup>17</sup>

Even so, there is yet one sickness that is worse than all of those. Everybody is born with this disease. Though everyone is stricken with it, only God can cure it. That sickness is sin. The cause of this sickness and the symptoms of it are described in a song King David wrote.

The background to this psalm is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible (and one we've already looked at in chapter 14). While the rest of his army was off to war, David stayed behind. One evening he walked out of his palace only to see a beautiful woman bathing on her rooftop below him. Rather than turn around, he gave in to temptation, called her to the palace, and got her pregnant. Then, to cover up his deed, he had her husband killed in battle and took her for his wife. One look set off a series of sins—coveting, stealing, adultery, and murder. He was no different from all of us. David was infected by sin.

## **Sin Defiles the Soul**

As king, David was dressed in long flowing robes, the best sandals, a crown of gold, and sparkling jewelry. He was freshly bathed, groomed, and perfumed. Yet, when David faced his sin, he felt filthy. The first thing David asks for is a sin-cleansing shower: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51:1-2). He felt dirty and filthy because sin defiles our very soul.

You can throw a pig in the slop and he will wallow in it. But if you throw a French poodle in, he will get out. Anyone who doesn't know God feels the freedom of their sin, but anyone who does know God feels the filth of it. One of the biggest differences between someone who is a part of God's family and someone who is not is how they see and react to sin.

Everyone, Christian or not, can and does sin. When God comes into your life, he does not change you so you can't sin again, but he does change the way you feel about sin. Sin affected David emotionally. As a man “after

God's own heart," he desperately wanted to be clean and uses different phrases to emphasize it.

He says in verse 1, "blot out my transgressions." He doesn't want to just be dusted off; he wants the record wiped clean. He then says in verse 2, "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." David doesn't want even one speck of dirt left on his soul. He wants to go into sin detox. He doesn't want to see his sin, sense his sin, or smell his sin any longer. He wants to be undefiled, purified, and holy.

## **Sin Dominates the Mind**

Have you ever heard a tune and suddenly you couldn't get it out of your head? Psychologists have a term for that. They call them "earworms."<sup>18</sup> Well, to a healthy believer, sin is a heartworm. Once it gets into your system, and into your mind, you cannot get it out of your mind until you get that sin before God.

Sin affected David mentally. David *knew* his sin. "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:3). For a solid year, David was haunted by the ghost of guilt. When he rose or slept, ate or ruled, his sin was like a song he couldn't get out of his head. His sin may have been out of sight, but it was not out of mind.

We try to put our sinful acts in the back of our mind, but they keep coming in through the front door. We are constantly reminded of them in a picture, in a song, or in a conversation. Unconfessed, unforgiven sin will always become unforgotten sin.

When I was a small boy, a lady named Mrs. Gunter used to keep me every Saturday while my mother worked. Her son, Scotty, owned a Civil War hat that I wanted to have. One day I packed that hat into some extra clothes I had brought and took it home with me. When I put it under my bed, I thought I had gotten away with it.

But I thought about that hat at school. I thought about that hat when I was playing. I lived in fear that my mother would find it. The week I kept that hat was the most miserable week in my life. The next Saturday when I stayed with Mrs. Gunter, she asked me, "Have you, by any chance, seen Scotty's hat?" Well, I couldn't wait to have her accompany me back to my



house to get it. That is a sure symptom of sin sickness. Our sin will not leave our mind without the cleansing of God.

## **Sin Disheartens the Heart**

Three people knew about David's sin for an entire year: Bathsheba, Joab (David's chief military commander), and David. While Bathsheba and Joab lived with the knowledge of his sin, David lived with the guilt of his sin. For that year, it was as if David had been in spiritual solitary confinement. Sin not only affects us emotionally and mentally, but most of all spiritually.

When something devastating happens to us, we say things like, "I was crushed," or "That utterly destroyed me." David feels the same way. "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice" (Psalm 51:8). Up until this time, David and God had grown a tight relationship. But now when God spoke, David didn't hear joy and gladness in God's voice; he heard judgment and sadness.

Sin is always a drag on the spirit. A healthy believer is glad when he is living right; he is also sad when he is living wrong. Recognize that while this is a symptom of sin-sickness, it's also a sign of improvement. Wanting to be well is the first step toward health. Healthy Christians are unhappy sinners.

Sin sinks your soul into depression. It saps your heart of joy. Sin sickens your spirit with sadness and sucks the gladness out of your heart. Just as surely as night follows day, in the life of a true believer sorrow follows sin. That is exactly what sin should do to the life of a believer because sin dishonors the Lord.

## **Sin Dishonors the Lord**

If anything should motivate all of us who know God, love God, and worship God to avoid sin like the plague, it should be this verse: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge" (Psalm 51:4). Though David sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, he confesses directly and primarily to God because God is always the first offended.

When you break a human law, you commit a crime; when you break God's law, you commit a sin. Sin is only ever against God because he is the lawgiver. When you sin, you don't just break God's law; you break God's heart. David wanted to get back to the place where he could hear God joyfully and see God gladly. When we stay in or cover over sin, life begins to grow dim and God goes dark.

In Green Bank, West Virginia, you cannot carry a cellphone because they are banned and you'll likely get no reception. In fact, there is no radio activity whatsoever. Do you know why? Because Green Bank is within the National Radio Quiet Zone where the Robert C. Byrd Green Bank telescope is earnestly listening for the faintest sounds of exploding galaxies at the edge of the universe.<sup>19</sup> Nothing is allowed to get in the way of this transmission.

When the dirt of sin clogs up God's communication line, you will not hear him, see him, or enjoy him the way you should until things are made right. Being made right comes only through God's redemption and restoration. If you sin against me, I can remove my bitterness, but I can't remove your guilt. God can do that and he always will and he always does through Jesus Christ.

If breaking God's heart breaks your heart, then you have a healthy heart. There is no barrier or breach between you and God. You don't want to disgrace the God who created you, loves you, and sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for you. A healthy body fights infection and a healthy believer resists sin. God is the only cure for the devastating sin sickness that plagues us all.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Loving Lord, reveal my sin to me and have mercy. Wash me and make me clean so that I might follow you with gladness.*

**Question for This Week:** What do you need to confess to the Lord today? What is clogging up your communication line to God?

# 19

## Goodbye to Guilt

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 51 (reprise)
- Ecclesiastes 8:7-8
- Romans 3:21-26
- John 8:31-36
- Isaiah 35:8-10

### Rejecting Guilt

Can I confess something here? I never got into Shakespeare. Either I am too dumb to understand his writing or I am too lazy to try. However, when I was in high school I had to read several of his plays, so I'm familiar with the famous lament of Lady Macbeth. In *Macbeth*, Lord Macbeth was spurred on by his wife to murder King Duncan and seize the throne. After he committed the murder, she took the blood of the king and smeared it on some sleeping guards to implicate them in the murder.

Later the plot focuses like a laser beam on Lady Macbeth herself. Night after night she walks in her sleep, staring at her hands and pleading these famous words, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!...Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!"<sup>20</sup>

Lady Macbeth was suffering from the common illness of human guilt. Guilt is difficult to cure because we fail to determine the cause. The cause of all guilt is sin. Sin is the wound; guilt is the infection. And the only cure is forgiveness, which is found in God.

Previously in this psalm, David describes the terrible effects of sin-sickness. He lives with his sins of adultery and murder. Though he is confronted with his sin by the prophet Nathan, he is convicted of his sin by God. As a result, David wants to come clean, and he writes this psalm to tell us how we too can say goodbye to guilt by asking God to do four things.

## **Release Me from My Guilt**

A lot of diets boast of their ability to detoxify the body, but it's debatable whether they work. Our healthy livers and kidneys already do a beautiful job of cleansing our bodies. However, when we ingest an unnatural toxin like alcohol, cocaine, or nicotine, we require detoxification, which is the "process of allowing the body to rid itself of a drug while managing the symptoms of withdrawal."<sup>21</sup>

In effect, sin is the toxin that causes our heart and our conscience to malfunction. It infuses the bloodstream of our soul with guilt. On our own, we are helpless to get rid of it. Sin is an inside job that requires outside healing. It is a problem within and it requires forgiveness from above.

Too often when we are filled with guilt, we try to cover up our sin instead of running to God and coming clean. To be released from our sin we need to offer an honest confession. This is what David did. "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge" (Psalm 51:3-4).

David uses three words to describe sin. The first is the word *transgression*. It means to "cross a forbidden boundary" and "to rebel against God's law." The word *iniquity* means "perversity," because it is perverse to think that you could sin against an all-knowing, ever-present God and get away with it. The word *sin* means "to miss the mark." It means to miss the mark of what is best for you.

We often explain away our sin and call it a “mistake” or a “misfortune” or a “misjudgment.” But David calls it what God calls it. To confess means to agree with God on what sin is. It is not an affair—it is adultery! It isn’t fudging the figures—it’s lying! It is not borrowing indefinitely—it is stealing!

To be released from our own perspective takes radical surgery, so what does David ask for? As we saw in the previous chapter, David asks God to *blot out* his transgressions, to *wash away* all his iniquity, and to *cleanse* him from his sin. David is asking for a spiritual detox because that is the only thing that will release him from his guilt. And it’s the only thing that will release us as well.

## **Renew Me by Your Grace**

David takes a bigger step in his forgiving process, which far too many of us don’t take. When we don’t take this step, we find ourselves committing the same sin over and over and over. He knew forgiveness was not the only need he had; he sinned with his hands, but the problem was his heart.

We all sin because we are all sinners. We do what we do because we are what we are. David doesn’t want to deal with the symptoms of his problems; he wants to deal with the cause. David realizes, “I don’t just need pardon; I need purity.” We don’t just need to be cleared of our sin; we need to be cleansed from our sin. David says, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10).

We can’t just scrape sin off the surface of our heart or apply a home remedy. It takes a heart remedy. It takes radical surgery like a spiritual heart transplant. It really takes a miracle. That word for “create” is the same word used in Genesis to describe the creation of the world. It means to “create something out of nothing.” It is a miracle that only God can perform.

To get a pure heart, we need a new heart, a complete spiritual overhaul. When our problem is sin, we can’t just deal with what we do; we have to deal with what we are. And the only thing that can accomplish this kind of renewal—the kind that changes us from the inside out—is God’s grace. It is grace that makes all things new.

## **Revive Me for Your Glory**

David's next statement is surprising and a little frightening. "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:11). No one wants to lose the presence of God or the Holy Spirit in their lives. What is he referring to?

David is not referring to losing your salvation—to God's complete absence from your life forever. He's saying that in order to have a pure heart, take the right path, make the right call, and exercise the right decision in everything that he does, he needs the presence of God and the power of God.

If you refuse to give your life to Jesus Christ because you think, "Oh, I could never live up to that. I could never live the Christian life," let me give you some discouraging news and then some encouraging news. The discouraging news is that you are absolutely right. You cannot live the Christian life. You can't come clean, be clean, or stay clean on your own. The good news is that you don't have to and God doesn't expect you too.

The Christian life is not you living for God; it is God living through you. When you give your life to Jesus Christ, you immediately get the presence of God in you and the power of God for you. That is what revival is. Revival is knowing I am going to live a life of purity, not because of my performance but because of God's presence and the Spirit's power.

## **Restore Me to Your Gladness**

The saddest, most miserable people I have ever met are followers of Jesus who are living in unconfessed, unforgiven sin. I can say this with confidence: If you can live in sin and be happy, then you are not a follower of Jesus. If you are a follower of Jesus, you cannot live in sin and be happy. David knows this and pleads, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (Psalm 51:12).

David doesn't ask for his salvation to be restored—because he never lost it. He asks for the *joy* of his salvation to be restored. You never lose your salvation, but you can lose the joy. For a year, David had been miserable living in the filth of sin and living in the misery of guilt. But he wants to be restored to God's gladness. Maybe you to do. What would this look like?

First of all, you become a witness again. David says, “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you” (Psalm 51:13). Sin not only soils the soul, but it seals the lips. But when you are right with God, you will live for God and tell his story.

Second, you become a worshiper again: “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise” (Psalm 51:15). When you are swallowed by guilt, worship gets halfhearted and hard. You don’t read your Bible. You don’t go to God in prayer. But when you say goodbye to guilt, every time you open your lips you want to declare God’s praise.

Let’s deal with where you may be. If you are feeling guilty right now, there are all kinds of possible reasons. Perhaps you are abusing drugs and alcohol. You had an abortion. You cheated on your spouse. You betrayed a friend. You’ve stolen or lied. So how can you be sure that God will accept you and forgive you? Jesus did not come to this earth and die on a cross and rise from the grave to make us better, he did it to make us forgiven. His cross and his blood guarantee your restoration. He didn’t come to reject but to release, renew, revive, and restore all people. The only sin God cannot forgive is the sin of refusing to ask for his forgiveness.

- Sin puts you on the shelf; forgiveness puts you on the stage.
- Sin sinks you into guilt; forgiveness showers you with grace.
- Sin puts a frown on your heart; forgiveness puts a smile in your soul.
- Sin will cost you everything and give you a guilty conscience; forgiveness costs God everything but gives you a clean heart.

David has written a beautiful song. It tells us plainly that God is always waiting, willing, and wanting to forgive. You must only be willing to say goodbye to guilt.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, thank you for not rejecting me even in the midst of my shameful sin. Cleanse me and show me the way to gladness.*

**Question for This Week:** What gets in the way of the joy of your salvation? Where do you need to begin to confess your sin?

## Betrayed and Broken

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 55
- James 5:13-16
- Romans 12:1-2
- Luke 17:3-4
- Ephesians 4:31-32

### **The Imprisoning Pain**

If you hope to change the course of history, you might choose to be a great philanthropist or a fearless American president. But if you really want to be *remembered* for changing history, then build a friendship with an influential person and betray them in a very regrettable way. Think Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus. Think George Washington and Benedict Arnold. Think Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot.

I think of a former staff member, a friend I helped to begin in ministry. After he betrayed me with his disloyalty and deception, he never spoke to me again. I'm not actually recommending that we all take up betrayal in order to change the world, but if you live long enough, your world will likely shift when you are betrayed and broken by a spouse, best friend, family member, business partner, or perhaps even someone in ministry.



Betrayal is a very personal, very profound, very painful act. The act of betrayal handles relational trust, which has been built up over time, with unexpected destruction, denial, and dishonesty. Betrayal turns intimacy into injury and the damage is often irreparable. It's no wonder that it is noted in Dante's *Inferno* as the ninth and deepest level of hell.

David wrote a sad song in Psalm 55 as he dealt with this human heartache. Even the greatest among us experience this devastating disappointment. It is crushing when someone goes from having your back to sticking a knife in it! This is what happened to David, and this song tells us how to deal with betrayal so that our pain doesn't become our prison.

## **Tell Your Hurt to God**

Anguished. Fearful. Trembling. These are the revealing words David chooses to describe his reaction to betrayal. In the first eight verses of Psalm 55 we read of his restlessness and even of his longing to be able to just fly away. Perhaps you've been there?

If you've ever been to counseling, or made an appointment for some time with your pastor, you know that sometimes you don't even realize the depth of your feelings until you express them out loud. For this reason, we don't need to veil our desires from God. We need to vent them.

In 1943, Anne Frank turned thirteen years old and acquired a diary as a birthday gift. She named her diary Kitty and used its pages to write down her fears and frustrations as she came of age while hiding in a Jewish Annex in Amsterdam. Anne wrote in her diary, "I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support." Her confessions and musings in the later published *Diary of a Young Girl* became the subject of plays and films and is read in middle school classes across the country. Her diary abruptly ends, and history tells us that her family, potentially victims of betrayal by an employee, was discovered by the Nazis and taken to concentration camps where all but her father, Otto, died.

When we can speak or write or otherwise name our painful reality, we begin to recognize it for what it is and we can invite God into it. When we are betrayed, we feel unsafe and shaken right out of our skin. Sharing our

hurts with someone who will listen is a proven way to release our sadness, anger, and pain. Who better to tell than God, who is intimately acquainted with rejection and knows pain firsthand?

What is so wonderful about God is that he is bigger than we imagine. We can heap on his shoulders what others have heaped onto ours. We can fill his ears with our hurts and trust his heart with our heartache. When we are reeling from the burn of betrayal, we can tell our hurt to God.

## **Tune Your Heart to God**

Have you ever complained about something so persistently that it was almost as if it was your job to do so? Was there ever something that rattled you so deeply—an injustice, a crime, an immoral proposition—that you just couldn't help talking about it? When we tune our heart to betrayal, then betrayal tends to leak out of every crook and cranny of our conversation. It finds a way into our story: “We left because they fired us,” “My wife left me,” “My former best friend said...” What might happen if we tuned our heart to God instead?

Sometimes we think the betrayals we endure are the most important thing we can think about, and our thoughts feel tethered to the behaviors of our enemies and exes. But the most important thing in our mind is our idea of God and associated images we have of him.

In verses 16-19, we can see that David believes God is a Savior, a listener, a rescuer, and a ruler. When he tunes his heart to what he knows about God, he also has to consider that God is a forgiver. We see David slowly release his pain into God's hands, “he will hear them and humble them, because they have no fear of God” (Psalm 55:19). Where David's cries were once filled with vengeful wishes (“Let death take my enemies by surprise” [Psalm 55:15]), he submits and relies on God to humble his enemies instead.

When you take your pain to God, he helps you tune your heart to his. David brought his unbearable pain to God, “evening, morning and noon” (Psalm 55:17). If we are going to tune our heart to who God is and to what he is able to do, we need to do it more than once. We need to do it more than once a week. We need to pray persistently, again and again and again. When we do, we begin to notice all the ways, big and small, that God saves

us from the torment of our former thinking. When we are tuned to God, we can begin to forgive like God.

## **Trust Your Healing to God**

In verses 20-21, David does something that might be a little risky. Nowadays, if we're betrayed, we might still follow that former friend on Facebook or look through their Instagram photos to see if they're living an unreasonably happy life. This kind of activity only breeds resentment. But David looks back at his friend who betrayed him and reflects in a whole new way. We like to think that experience is the best teacher, but that's not true; what makes us learn is our reflection upon that experience.

Notice the difference between the way he reflects in verses 12-15. In these earlier verses, he is heartbroken and grieving, but here in verses 20-21 we sense the beginning of his healing. He objectively sees the behavior of his former friend who attacks others, breaks promises, and uses smooth talk. This is a lightbulb moment for David, and he can now step away from his feelings about the experience and notice the true character of the one who betrayed him.

Betrayal can so easily turn into bitterness. When we turn bitter, we don't get better. In bitterness, we can't entrust our future to God's redemptive care because we are too upset about not having had a better past. We don't have a right to bitterness, to hold grudges, or to slander those who hurt us. We shouldn't ignore an abuse, but letting it turn into resentment damages our intimacy with the God we are calling out to. We can choose to repent rather than repine and move toward gratitude rather than grumbling.

Nelson Mandela led the movement that eventually ended South African apartheid. During his fight, in just three years' time, he was arrested for treason, a second time for leaving the country, and then he was put on trial for sabotage for which he was sentenced to life in prison. He did hard labor and slept on a hard floor in a cell with no toilet. He could receive a visitor for only thirty minutes one day per year. He spent several years under house arrest, making his total imprisonment twenty-seven years. Upon walking free in 1990, he said, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."<sup>22</sup>

Tell your hurts to God, tune your heart to God's forgiveness, and trust your healing to God rather than live in bitterness. But there is still one more thing you can do to live in spite of betrayal.

## **Tie Your Hope to God**

Betrayal feels like a death, but it doesn't mean that your life is over. What you thought was true in a relationship was utterly false and that discovery might mean a change in job, connections, friends, and even livelihoods and family dynamics. We need to grieve the losses we incur. But then we must cut the cord that tied what was lost to our sense of hope so we can firmly tie our hope to God.

With God's nature firmly understood, and God's nurture fully established, David begins to dream a new dream. Notice how much steadier he feels at the end of the psalm. "Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken" (Psalm 55:22). What a difference from his hopeless and horrified days! He went from wanting to scam to wanting to stay. Now he finds a source of hope in the power of God's forgiveness and the potential of God's justice.

By casting all his cares on God, David can stand steadfast. He knows that God will sustain him, that God won't let him fall, and that God will "bring down the wicked" (Psalm 55:23). When we can stand firm even in the aftermath of betrayal, we tell the world that we are not broken apart, only broken open to the heart, healing, and hope of God.

When the rest of the world shouts, "Revenge!" we can exclaim to God, "I trust in you" (Psalm 55:23). The final witness we leave to the world, then, isn't one of captivity but one of liberty.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Loving Lord, I trust that you are Savior, listener, rescuer, and ruler. Take my hurts and redefine my hopes that I may learn to trust you more.*

**Question for This Week:** How has bitterness crept into your life? Ask God for healing and for the ability to forgive those who've hurt you.

# 21

## Misery Needs Company

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 56
- 1 Samuel 12:20-25
- Acts 20:17-21
- Deuteronomy 31:1-6
- Job 1

### Measuring Misery

Have you ever had a time when relationships spiraled out of control to the point that your reputation was battered, your confidence was scattered, and your achievements no longer mattered? Whether you experienced divorce or disaster, slander or suffering, you needed some company. And the best companion is God.

The misery index was initiated by Arthur Okun, an adviser to President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s. It is simply the unemployment rate added to the inflation rate. A combination of rising inflation and more people out of work implies a deterioration in economic performance and a rise in the misery index.<sup>23</sup>

We all have a misery index. It's a combination of our circumstances, attitude, and fear and worry. As our faith and trust in God go down, our

misery index goes up. David wrote a song about a time when he was drowning in an ocean of misery. He gives us an antidote to the misery index of life that involves the God who guards us through grief with faith, assurance, and courage.

## **Replace Fear with Faith**

When food was scarce during the Great Depression, hunting with dogs became more necessary. Dogs could capture coons, rabbits, and squirrels with ease, inspiring the hungry poor to ignore hunting laws in order to find enough to eat. Good hounds have tenacious stamina, great noses, and a love of the chase. They are fast and driven, even working from a cold scent to get their prey.<sup>24</sup>

David felt just like this when he wrote this psalm. He reflects on his frightening flight from Saul during the story we can read in 1 Samuel 20–23. Saul was relentless. He was always two steps behind David, killing those along the way who assisted David’s escape. When David hiked left, Saul was on his heels. When David cut right, Saul pursued with precision. David was hunted like prey.

“Be merciful to me, my God, for my enemies are in hot pursuit; all day long they press their attack. My adversaries pursue me all day long; in their pride many are attacking me” (Psalm 56:1-2). David experienced some terrifying days and no place felt safe, but God cared for him in some practical ways with food, weapons, and shelter. This turned his fear into faith.

Every time we are fearful, God always asks one question: “Do you trust me or not?” Troubles are always divine invitations to trust. Falling short financially is an invitation to trust. Losing your home is an invitation to trust. Political unrest is an invitation to trust. David said, “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you” (Psalm 56:3). And when he thought about the infinite ability and attentiveness of God, he courageously said, “What can mere mortals do to me?” (Psalm 56:4).

The world can’t touch the person of trust because when we trust in the Almighty, we replace our fear with faith.

## **Replace Anxiety with Assurance**

David goes on to write what might be the most heartrending verse in this psalm: “Record my misery; list my tears on your scroll—are they not in your record?” (Psalm 56:8). The agony of his circumstance has reduced David to a puddle of tears and he’s sobbing to be seen by God. In verses 5-7 he is drawing God’s attention to the wickedness of his pursuers, but in this moment in verse 8, he’s evoking the heart of God to pay close attention to his pain.

When you are anxious, how do you imagine God to be? Is he detached from your worries, too busy to care? Does he need to be convinced to intervene? Do you envision that he’s disappointed and your misery is merely a consequence? David does not believe in an indifferent God but a sensitive God. God records our every heartache, registers every tear, and remembers every cry.

The NIV says “list my tears on your scroll,” but some translations use the phrase “put my tears in your bottle.” I imagine God’s memory like a Library of Congress with rolling ladders and rows and rows of hardbound books that record every moment of misery, every day of doubt, every tear of trauma. This is the God David trusts, the God who tallies our turmoil and counts every cruelty. When we break down in tears, we need to know that we have a Friend who listens and cries with us and never forgets the pain we endure.

When we think God has forgotten us, remember that he hasn’t! He may seem distant but he is near. He may seem blind but he watches our every movement. He may seem absent but he is ever present. We can replace our anxiety with assurance when we know that we are specially seen by God.

## **Replace Concern with Courage**

Lieutenant General Lewis B. “Chesty” Puller is the most decorated marine in U.S. history. He was brave and daring, facing enemies head-on and leading his battalions from the front. During the Korean War, as Puller’s men set up base camp near the Chosin Reservoir, they were quickly surrounded by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. The enemy was on their left. The enemy was on their right. They were surrounded in front and behind. Chesty determined that the Chinese behind them were the weakest link in the chain, so he ordered his men to turn around and attack. Puller’s

response was calmly militant and stalwart: “We’ve been looking for the enemy for several days now. We’ve finally found them. We’re surrounded. That simplifies our problem of finding these people and killing them.” It took courage to believe that though the situation was concerning, the enemy would not get away this time.<sup>25</sup>

David’s psalm ebbs back and forth between fear and faith, concern and courage. In verse 9, he finds his courage in God: “Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me.” David is coming out fighting. Though the circumstances are concerning, he isn’t going to surrender because he is confident in the companionship of God.

When you face trouble that attacks or surrounds you, there are just four words you need to believe: “God is for me.” You plus God are always a majority. Better to have the whole world against you and God for you than the other way around. When you feel like you’re staring into death’s jaws, you can have the courage of the bold commander who said, “Men, they have us surrounded. Don’t let one of them escape!”

Verses 10-11 are virtually the same as verse 4: “In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?” (Psalm 56:10-11). Our second declarations are always more convincing than our first. When a basketball announcer takes the microphone to center court and asks the crowd to cheer, he gets a half-hearted response. But when he asks again, everyone musters up their voice and raises the roof. Everyone is attentive, everyone is on board.

David is on board with his own statement of faith and courage. He is on board with the God he praises and trusts, who is more powerful than any man who hounds him. When he is brave, he is bulletproof, and we can fully sense that he has replaced his concern with courage.

## **Replace Worry with Worship**

The next thing out of David’s mouth isn’t another gripe, but gratitude. “I am under vows to you, my God; I will present my thank offerings to you” (Psalm 56:12). David’s heart is now turned toward worship. He has asked God for heightened grace, heartfelt care, and holy vengeance. Perhaps God answered him or perhaps David received a sign that he would answer him



soon. We don't know what God's resolution is, but we do know that David's response is to enter into worship without worry.

A.W. Tozer once wrote, "Without worship, we go about miserable." David could have continued in his fear, anxiety, concern, and worry, but he chooses to trust it all to God. He chooses to refocus his attention on the One who deserves it most. He chooses to make a sacrifice and give God his worth. In this psalm that rocks back and forth between the power of man and the power of God, David offers his submission to God rather than man.

"In God I trust" tells us that David remembers all of God's faithful acts. As he ran from Saul, even daring to run through Philistine territory, perhaps David promised God, "As soon as this is all over, I'm going to offer you the biggest, juiciest sacrifice!" Here we see that whatever that promise, he has every intent of fulfilling it. His promises were binding and his presents were acts of appreciation.

How many times have you been in despair and made big promises to God? "If you get me out of this mess, I'll go back to church," or "If you fix this situation, I'll serve the poor." These kinds of promises are typically remembered (if they are) in a very dutiful way. We fulfill them begrudgingly, often wishing we'd never made them.

But David is offering his sacrifice and worship to God with thanksgiving. David remembers—just as he asks God to remember his miseries and keep track of each one—and he chooses to respond with gratitude. He is not just grateful for the past, but he is grateful for a God who will walk with him into his future, "that I may walk before God in the light of life" (Psalm 56:13).

When things are at their worst, don't become grumbly hateful. Instead, choose to be humbly grateful. If you fall, God will pick you up. If you doubt, God will build you up. If you worry, God will back you up. God will deliver you both through life and death. Walk with God through the darkness of this life, and he guarantees you will walk before him in the light of the life to come.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Precious Lord, as I pour out my miseries to you, please hold them in your compassionate heart and give me a greater trust in you.*

**Question for This Week:** What worries are getting in the way of your worship? How can you give them to God?

## Under Fire and Under Water

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 66
- Romans 1:18-25
- Colossians 1:15-20
- Romans 12:3-8
- 2 Peter 3:10-14

### Gasping for Air

One of my dearest friends was a three-star admiral in the Coast Guard. He invited me to his base and arranged for a tour on a submarine. We were not allowed to take photos while on board, and when I asked if we were on a nuclear submarine, no one would confirm my suspicion that we were.

Though the power of this submarine was nothing short of awesome, one thing is for sure: a submarine needs to be built with the best technology and the highest quality because a submarine at the height of battle can be underwater and taking on water, under fire and on fire all at the same time.

Life is the same way. Have you ever felt as if you were in battle where the fire is burning and the water is flooding? Well, someone did so much he wrote a song about it. Indeed, one of the stanzas goes like this: “For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and

laid burdens on our backs. You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance” (Psalm 66:10-12). This songwriter gives us principles to follow when we can’t get our head above water, can’t flee the fire, and can’t escape the flood.

## **Keep God’s Power in Your Mind**

In 2014, the world watched as the worst Ebola outbreak in four decades swept through West Africa. Nancy Writebol was an American missionary nurse serving in Liberia. In the early days of the outbreak, she thought she had come down with malaria. But when her test for Ebola returned positive, she was suddenly under fire and under water.

The day she received her diagnosis she said to her husband, “‘It’s gonna be okay. It’s gonna be okay.’ I had no clue what was going to happen. Of course, I knew what the outcome could be. And yet there was no fear. There was just this sense of the Lord’s peace and presence with us. And I thought whether I live or whether I die, it’s gonna be okay.’”<sup>26</sup>

Infected with an almost-certain killer virus, Nancy was flown to Georgia and received the experimental drug ZMapp. The quick response and strong medicine kept her from becoming one of the eleven thousand who lost their lives. Nancy doesn’t give the drug all the credit. Her faith in God’s perfect power was strong and she knew, “This is not our story, it is God’s story.”<sup>27</sup>

The power of God is on the mind of the psalmist in Psalm 66. The writer remembers God’s remarkable story and the parting of the Red Sea. When you’re in the middle of your own trial, “Say to God, ‘How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you’” (Psalm 66:3). Don’t go a second without saying it or a moment without mouthing it. God’s power has been great in your past, is great in your present, and will be great in your future.

With God, we are never under our circumstances, we are always over them! His miracles in the past and his mastery over the present promise us his majesty over the future. His hand is on the throttle of the universe. There is no luck. Nothing is random. When you are under fire and under water, he still parts seas, stills storms, and kills giants.

## **Keep God's Praise on Your Lips**

The psalmist writes, "Praise our God, all peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping" (Psalm 66:8-9). It's easy to give praise to God when the sun is shining, the bills are all paid, and the children are cooperative. But what about when you're sinking in uncertainty and you spend your days putting out fires?

In verses 8-12, the psalmist describes a dark time for his people. He's likely talking about the very dark days of the Assyrian conquest, when a foreign king rose up against the nation of Israel and God's people were imprisoned, burdened, and in many ways put through the fire. What is there to be grateful for in a time like that? What can you possibly praise God about?

The psalmist says we can praise God for preserving our lives. He is the one who holds all things together and gives us each breath. He has not abandoned us but daily gives us the ability to keep walking through life. We can also thank him for what The Message translation calls "keeping us out of the ditch" (Psalm 66:9). No matter how bad the news, how horrible the horror, how unbearable the pain, it can always be worse. We can always fall farther. But the God who sustains us is with us. Though we go "to hell and back," his powerful presence refines us in the fire and cleanses us in the flood.

One of the hardest things to do is to keep your attitude up as the plane of your life seems to be losing altitude. But my friend Zig Ziglar was right when he said, "Your attitude, not your aptitude, will determine your altitude."<sup>28</sup> Praise has a way of keeping your focus on the God who is in control of your circumstances, not on the circumstances that appear to be in control. This is not the "power of positive thinking" but the "power of praise-filled worship." Keep God's praise on your lips.

## **Keep God's People in Your Life**

The psalmist now moves from praise to practice. In verses 13-15 he describes how his response to God's worship is more worship. Having remembered God's amazing deeds and rekindling his trust in God's awesome power, he's ready to put some skin in the game. As faithful as God has been to him, the psalmist vows to be faithful in return.

He enters the temple to offer sacrifices and not just out of the leftovers of his flocks. Verse 15 calls them “fat animals,” ones that have been grass-fed and well cared for so that one day they might be the delicious centerpiece for a banquet. The psalmist takes this whole investment and sacrifices it, burning it on the altar of God. He also sacrifices rams, valued for their wool, milk, and meat. He holds nothing back from the God whom he knows will continue to provide, protect, and prevail.

Not only does he give copiously, but he gives in community. The temple was brimming with the worship of God’s people. This should remind us that we don’t have an independent faith but an interdependent one. We worship together as one heart and one mind. We are called a “body” that is submissive to Christ as our “head.” We treasure God together. We do not sacrifice solo. We do not adore him alone.

One of the most dangerous things to do when you are feeling the heat and fighting the waves is to isolate yourself. I have seen it time and time again. People go through tough times and withdraw or pull the covers over their head and mope. That is like staying away from the doctor when you are growing deathly ill. There is no greater shelter in the storm than the church and no antidote to the pain of hurt and heartache like enjoying the fellowship of God’s people, expressing worship beside God’s people, and experiencing God with God’s people.

## **Keep God’s Purity in Your Heart**

The psalmist now presents us with the crux of the matter: “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66:18). Can you truly see God’s power if you’re just trying to get a piece of it yourself? Can you tell of his wondrous works if your own reputation is clouded by lies, gossip, envy, and anger? We cannot cherish our sin and all the while expect to receive anything from God.

Psalm 119:9 asks how we can stay on the path of purity, and the answer given there is to hide God’s word in our hearts. This means that we need to do some housecleaning. We need to sweep out the cobwebs of covetousness, dust away the lust, and air out the arrogance. We must come to God with clean hearts. Yet, no matter how much we mop, we can never do enough. The only one who can scour us spotless is Jesus Christ.

Sin is the one barrier that plugs God's ears and dams up the river of his peace. Bad times can bring bitter feelings. Sin held and harbored in our hearts cuts us off from prayer, which is our greatest resource in troubled times. We can't ask for forgiveness if we are not willing to forgive. We can't ask for God's provision if we are unwilling to be generous. We cannot ask for his favor if we are fouling our bodies. Purity is always the pathway to God's peace in us, God's power through us, and God's protection of us.

Janine Turner is best known for her role as Maggie O'Connell in the television show *Northern Exposure*. Facing thousands of auditions and being told she wasn't good enough, Janine turned to alcohol to deal with her stress. When she was twenty-three she got sober until she went back to drinking again at twenty-seven.

When Janine describes her life in that dark pit, she says, "What I thought was the worst thing that could have ever happened to me turned out to be the best thing."<sup>29</sup> She knew that God was with her and he didn't give up on her. As she sought sobriety again, she moved with God toward purity. She says, "If I hadn't have had God to pull me out of those black holes and if I hadn't been sober to hear it, it never would have happened." She believes in the hope of Jesus for what he did and in his everlasting promise of what he will do.

Janine's story, like so many others, shows us that sorrow and suffering are opportunities for God's grace and peace to be made real in our hearts. When we're under fire and under water, we have hope that we'll emerge refined and not rejected. God will not withhold his love from us.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, I want the cleansing power of Jesus to make me pure so that I might see your power and praise your name among your people.*

**Question for This Week:** What suffering is distracting you from remembering God's power?

## 23

### God Bless Us, Every One

#### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 67
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-15
- John 16:12-15
- Exodus 33:12-20
- Romans 8:14-17

#### Mixed-Up Blessings

Even if you haven't read any works by Charles Dickens, you have probably seen either a stage or a movie rendition of *A Christmas Carol*. It is a timeless classic on the spirit of Christmas and, for many, it is a family tradition to watch it together.

Yet one tradition came to an unbelievable end for a school in Pennsylvania in 2016 over perhaps the most famous words in the entire story. They are uttered by the beloved Tiny Tim who says, "God bless us, every one!" Some of the school's parents cried "Bah! Humbug!" over the mention of God, and the fifth-grade production spanning forty years at Centerville Elementary School was cancelled.<sup>30</sup>

The question is begged: Who wouldn't want the blessing of God on his or her life, family, community, city, nation, or even the entire world? It can



only be someone who doesn't understand what blessing is and doesn't understand who truly gives it.

An anonymous songwriter penned a beautiful ancient song describing the fruit of God's blessings. These blessings are for anyone and everyone who would seek and desire them. Deep down we are born with this desire for blessing, and what the psalmist reveals to us is that the blessing we're truly looking for is for grace, guidance, goodness, and God's glory.

We might instinctively pray for divine blessing on those who sneeze, say a blessing at the dinner table, or ask for a father's blessing to marry his daughter, but the psalmist reveals a deeper, more satisfying kind of blessing that can come only from God.

## **God's Blessing Brings Grace to Our Hearts**

If you ask your friends and family what they consider to be the biggest blessings in their lives, chances are you won't hear answers like cars, incomes, vacation homes, or swimming pools. Rather you'll likely hear, "My friends," "My children," "My neighbors," or "My church family." Relationships tend to take top honors when we reflect on and count our blessings.

The psalmist begins with this same idea: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us" (Psalm 67:1). This is the psalmist's way of saying, because God is close and caring, we are truly blessed. God's presence offers us acceptance and love. You've likely experienced the healing forgiveness of a gracious friend or beamed under the shining face of your proud parent. Who isn't blessed by the acceptance and love that others offer us in relationship?

God's salvation ushers us into the most beautiful relationship possible. There is no greater blessing than God's salvation of the human race. When we come to him in faith through the sacrifice of Jesus, he gives us acceptance and love in abundance. But that's not where it ends.

The psalmist declares that we are accepted by God not just for ourselves, but "so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations" (Psalm 67:2). We are blessed to be a blessing. God's grace is not only available to all who need it but accessible to all who want it. Those of us blessed to experience his gift of grace are to make that gift

available to others. God's blessing brings grace to the hearts of all those who say yes to a relationship with him.

## **God's Blessing Brings Guidance to Our Decisions**

The psalmist continues, "May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples with equity and guide the nations of the earth" (Psalm 67:4). Right now, as I write this, we have inaugurated a new American president, and the nation is experiencing some mixed reactions. Though the transfer of power isn't always peaceful, God's inauguration only ever brings joy and gladness.

Countries might riot and protest over corrupt leaders and false governments, but God's people can rejoice for we know that our ruler guides with equity and his fairness is not just for one country, but for all the people of the earth. This is international joy. The nations are glad!

Not only does God rule, but he guides. Psalm 23 shows us how our God is a shepherd who cares for and guides his flock. God isn't a ruler with a heavy hand but a leader with a responsive rod and a sensitive staff. He guides our lives from darkness to light, from peril to peace, and from storm to safety.

There are two kinds of lighthouses. Some are built near rocky reefs and dangerous coastlines and their lights warn ships to steer clear to avoid destruction. Other lighthouses are built near the mouths of bays and inland waterways and invite sailors into safe waters. When sailing through the fog of indecision and the choppy waters of doubt, it is reassuring to see the glowing beacon that lights the way.

In a world drowning in a sea of moral confusion, battered by the waves of conflicting voices declaring right wrong and wrong right, God and his word is a lighthouse to show us the right way to live, think, and navigate through the dark storms of life. God's blessing comes to us when we see his guidance leading us to the right place along the right path.

## **God's Blessing Brings Goodness to Our Lives**

As in many poems and songs, there is repetition and here the psalmist repeats a line twice: "May the peoples praise you, God; may all the peoples praise you" (Psalm 67:3,5). Typically, when something is said twice, it

means we ought to listen twice as much. In this case, we ought to praise twice as much!

We should praise God for the way he rules and guides us with fairness and forethought, but we should also praise him for the goodness he brings to our lives. Praising God with resounding joy is the right response when we experience his bountiful blessings.

Blessing is mentioned 415 times in the Old Testament alone, and God's blessings are revealed in these Scriptures through virility and victory, relationship and rewards. Fertility was a blessing. Defeating enemies was a blessing. God's presence was a blessing. Every provision was a blessing. H. Norman Wright tells us, "The Old Testament Hebrew word for blessing means the transmission or endowment of the power of God's goodness or favor."<sup>31</sup> This means that when God's goodness is transferred to us, we are blessed indeed.

In the psalmist's day, one of the most visible ways to see the goodness of God was through agricultural abundance. In fact, this psalm was known to be a harvest song that was likely sung during the Feast of Tabernacles, a fall pilgrimage festival. The most important word to any farmer is *harvest*. That word is the difference between plenty and poverty, between thriving and surviving, between life and death.

As good as the fall harvest is, as satisfying as it is to see one's storerooms bursting with grain and silos filled to the brim, the psalmist recognizes that God's blessing is even greater: "The land yields its harvest; God, our God, blesses us" (Psalm 67:6). It's as if he's saying, "The land can produce as much as it's able, but God blesses us even more." The harvest might be the farmer's goal, but it's really just the believer's starting point because God's goodness is so much greater than the fattest fall harvest can ever be. His provision deserves our praise for what he has given to us, not pride for what we think we have gained for ourselves.

Everything we have—whether it be health or wealth or "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—is a gift of God. God's blessings are the reason we live from "hand to mouth"—from his hand to our mouth. Truly, God's blessing brings goodness to our lives.

## **God's Blessings Brings Glory to Himself**

When God brings grace, guidance, and goodness to his people and when God's people allow him to govern, he receives the glory. Just imagine, if God's people were living with changed hearts, purposeful direction, and abundance that they couldn't help but share, the world would be changed and alive with praise to God.

We can't expect the world to let God guide if God's people don't let him guide. We can't expect the world to let God govern if God's people won't let him govern. So often our very lives distort and corrupt the grace, guidance, and goodness that God has to offer. And even worse, we hoard all that God gives so that we can flourish even while the world is suffering without God's blessing—a blessing that is ours to share.

Ultimately, all God does for us is not just or even primarily for our good but for his glory. To be blessed by God is to be ready to be used by God. One day all the earth will fear him and give him the reverence, respect, and honor he deserves. That is the greatest blessing of all—when all the redeemed of all the earth unite in the worship of the only one who is worthy.

A woman walked into a bank and said, "I'd like to open a joint account." "With whom?" asked the banker. "A millionaire," she answered. Wouldn't we all! But we may open a joint account with the One who's kinder than the kindest, greater than the greatest, and richer than the richest. For your grief, you may draw on his grace; for your problems, his wisdom; for your weakness, his strength; for your needs, his wealth; for sins, his forgiveness. Yes, God bless us, every one, indeed!

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord God, make me a conduit of your blessing so that the world may know you, fear you, and sing for joy.*

**Question for This Week:** How can you offer grace, guidance, or goodness to the world around you this week for the glory of God?

## PART THREE

# Always Faithful

*God is faithful to his word and his world.*

## Lasting Leadership Lessons

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 78
- 1 Kings 9:1-9
- 2 Samuel 7:18-29
- Psalm 41
- Matthew 20:29-34

### Legendary Leaders

It's much easier to remember facts when they are put to music. Songs teach us the books of the Bible, the letters of the alphabet, and many of us can give credit to the old Schoolhouse Rock music cartoons for teaching us and our kids about grammar and government.

Psalm 78 is described as a “maskil,” which is a class of instructive psalms. The Hebrew root of this word is *sakal*, which means “to have insight, to teach.” This is not just a lyrical song but a teaching song.<sup>1</sup> Asaph, the author, is actually setting history to music. His history of Israel covers the exodus, the wilderness wanderings, the settling of the land, and culminates with the leadership of one of the two greatest kings in Israel's history, King David.

If there were an official ranking of the greatest leaders in history, King David would certainly be near the top. If there were a Mount Rushmore of world leaders, his face would easily belong there. Consider:

- He conquered Jerusalem, set it up as Israel's enduring capital, and made it one of the world's greatest cities.
- He brought the ark of the covenant to the city, ensuring God's favor and presence on his people.
- He set up a dynasty that would be carried on by his son, resulting in the greatest kingdom in the world and perhaps all of history.
- He successfully defeated all of Israel's enemies, including the Amorites, Hittites, Amalekites, Moabites, and Philistines, ushering in Pax Israel and the beginning of incredible wealth and prosperity.

In the concluding verses, Asaph gives some lasting leadership lessons from this magnificent king that work even in our technologically advanced age. However, David's leadership far surpassed what he accomplished with his hands. It had far more to do with what was in his heart.

## **Lead with Conscious Fidelity**

David was a God-chosen, God-called, God-commissioned leader. Asaph tells us, "He chose David his servant" (Psalm 78:70). David didn't make it to the throne on his personality, ability, ingenuity, or creativity, but because of the gracious choice of a sovereign God, and he never forgot that. David was faithful both to remember his calling and to fulfill the responsibilities of his calling.

The first chapter of 2 Samuel tells the story of Saul's death and the resulting lament that swelled in David's heart. Another man who'd been promised the throne would have sought immediate power and privilege, but David was faithful to wait on God's direction. In 2 Samuel 2, after a time of mourning, David asked God if it was time for him to go to Judah. God said, "Go up," and so David did. And in the city of Hebron, the same ancient city that was home to Abraham, the faithful friend of God, David was crowned king of Judah.

Every leader should likewise realize that their position, platform, and power come from God. Leadership requires stewardship for which God will hold us accountable and responsible. Indeed, God’s choice always precedes our own. Think about it. God chose your time and place of birth, including your parents and family. Any choices we make after are predicated on his prior choice of us. Likewise, those of us in any leadership position should exercise conscious fidelity not just to our job, but to the God who chose us for that job.

## **Lead with Continuous Humility**

David was a lowly shepherd. Psalm 78:70 continues, “He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens.” He was not college educated nor was he a blue blood. He had no kingly training. He had no degree nor pedigree. In the ancient world, rulers were called shepherds because they were expected to lead and love their people as a good shepherd would.<sup>2</sup> But many shepherds used and abused their sheep and were considered on the same level as prostitutes and lepers.<sup>3</sup>

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins determines what distinguishes good companies from great ones. He describes how it hinges on what he calls a Level 5 leader, which is “an individual who blends extreme personal humility with intense professional will.”<sup>4</sup> Collins says that “Level 5 leaders channel their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company. It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious—but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Leaders who are concerned for their company and its future apart from their influence are the ones capable of building a business that will outlast their leadership. David was this kind of leader. Even though he had the chance to kill Saul, whom he called “the LORD’s anointed,” his humility fueled his restraint (1 Samuel 24:5-6). When he was finally crowned king over all of Israel and found support from the king of Tyre, he knew “that the LORD had established him as king over Israel and had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel” (2 Samuel 5:12).

“From tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance” (Psalm 78:71). David’s success



wasn't for himself but for the people he was shepherding, and it was all done with reverence for the Lord who established his every step.

David never forgot where he came from or how he got to where he was. Getting from a dirty sheep pen to a palatial palace just doesn't happen. Any true leader should be humbled by who he is and where he is and humble in the way he treats others and handles his duties. The greatest danger any leader faces is pride, which happens often when we forget where we came from.

## **Lead with Consistent Integrity**

The integrity of David's heart was the secret sauce to his success. A heart of integrity is a heart wholly committed to God and his will. Integrity of heart leads to stability of thinking and acting. But a divided heart leads to instability of conduct and discernment.

The friendship between David and Saul's son Jonathan is renowned. They were dearly devoted, and because of their great commitment, they pledged to keep peace between all their descendants (1 Samuel 20:42). Jonathan died the same day as his father, and when Jonathan's son's nursemaid heard the frightening news, she swept up his five-year-old boy and fled, dropping and crippling him in the process. In the course of time, David remembered his commitment to Jonathan and sought out Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, in order to show him kindness (2 Samuel 9:1).

Asaph tells us, "And David shepherded them with integrity of heart" (Psalm 78:72). No one brought this old, dusty promise to David's attention. No one reminded him that he held this obligation. In fact, it was customary for the new king to slaughter the family of the old king to ensure against subversive acts. However, because of his great integrity, David did just the opposite. Rather than slay this forgotten crippled son of his beloved friend, he instead met Mephibosheth and personally promised him the wealth of his grandfather's land and invited him to eat always at David's own table (2 Samuel 9:10). If we are a person of good integrity, we do what we say we will do, wholeheartedly and consistently.

Dwight Eisenhower, one of the greatest leaders of any century, said, "The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a

football field, in an army, or in an office.”<sup>6</sup> People hunger for leaders who keep their promises and do what they say they will do.

## **Lead with Committed Servility**

Asaph finishes his tribute to David with this phrase: “with skillful hands he led them” (Psalm 78:72). David had legendary skillful hands. With a shepherd’s crook in his hands, he could lead sheep and kill bears and lions. With a sling in his hands, he could launch a rock like a missile into the forehead of a giant. With a harp in his hands, he could calm the rage of a jealous king with beautiful music. With a sword in his hand, he became the greatest commander-in-chief in Israel’s history.

David used those skillful hands to lead and serve his people. He used those hands to provide both the plans and the resources to build the most beautiful temple ever constructed. David risked his life in battle to see to it that his people might worship in a glorious house of God (1 Chronicles 29:1-9).

David was a servant leader. But another strong leader lived a thousand years after him and was called “Son of David.” This man was Jesus. Jesus “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He emptied himself and implored his followers to work hard to be last rather than the first. To be like Jesus is to be a servant, and if our desire is to be a servant, we should also expect to be treated like one.

The greatest leaders are the greatest servants. The higher we get, the lower we should go. In the end, we will be known far more for the number of people we served than the number of people who served us. If Jesus came to serve rather than to be served, how much more should we do the same?

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty God, show me my pride, my dishonesty, and my selfishness so that I might turn to you to learn faithfulness, humility, integrity, and service for the sake of others.*

**Question for This Week:** Choosing from fidelity, humility, integrity, and servility, which of these four character areas will you commit to nurture this

week in concert with God's transforming power?

## The Prayer of a Patriot

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 80
- 2 Peter 1:3-4
- 2 Timothy 2:1-7
- 1 Peter 4:12-19
- Titus 3:1-8

### History Repeats Itself

Among all the nations of the world, Israel was God's crown jewel. For hundreds of years she enjoyed the unmatched favor of God, experienced undivided fellowship with God, and was enriched with the unparalleled fortune of God. But golden dreams disintegrated into filthy ashes and Israel forgot God. When Israel forgot God, God forsook Israel. Having exchanged the gold bracelets of freedom for the iron shackles of slavery, Israel went from being a nation of conquerors to a nation of captives.

Asaph, who wrote Psalm 80, was a true patriot. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines a patriot as "one who loves and loyally or zealously supports one's own country." Asaph loved his country, but he was also a man of God and felt burdened as he saw Israel move from blessing to bondage. Asaph cried out to God to save Israel. "Hear us, Shepherd of

Israel...Awaken your might; come and save us” (Psalm 80:2). This was the desperate cry of a wise man who knew that the mighty ship of his country had run aground upon the rocks of her rebellion. Three times Asaph makes this statement: “Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved” (Psalm 80:3,7,19).

When I think about Asaph and Israel, I think about America. I see many of the same patterns and problems, but I also see the same solution. Asaph asked God to do three extraordinary things for Israel. What might happen if we ask for the same things for our country?

## **Remind Us of Your Goodness**

For two hundred years of American history, no enemy army has set foot on our land and no enemy flag has flown over our nation’s capital. Do you know why America has been so productive, so prosperous, and so powerful? It’s not because of our goodness but because of God’s. God was good to Israel in the same way.

In Scripture, three different plants symbolize the nation of Israel: the olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine. The olive tree represents Israel as she will be one day when the Lord sets up his kingdom on earth. The fig tree represents Israel between the time she rejected Jesus and the time of his second coming. But in Psalm 80:8, Israel is compared to a vine, which represents Israel from the time she entered the promised land until she rejected God.

As a vine, Israel had several characteristics. Psalm 80:8 says, “You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.” Israel did not accidentally stumble upon the promised land; she was plucked out of Egypt by the hand of God and sovereignly planted in a land flowing with milk and honey to be a holy nation for himself.

Second, God saw to it that Israel was prepared for Canaan and that Canaan was prepared for Israel. “You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land” (Psalm 80:9). Nonnative transplants don’t often survive, but God ensured that the conditions were right for Israel to flourish.

Additionally, the psalm says in verses 10-11, “The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. Its branches

reached as far as the Sea, its shoots as far as the River.” Israel became so powerful and so prosperous that the queen of Sheba, when she saw Israel at the height of its power, said, “The half has never been told.”

Israel did not rise to greatness on her own looks and charm. Her prosperity and privilege were derived from the hand of a good, gracious, and glorified God.

## **Renew Us to Your Grace**

Sorrow follows sin just as surely as night follows day, and Israel was crying herself to sleep at night. Laughter had turned to tears and singing to sobbing. “You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful” (Psalm 80:5). Tears had become both her bread and her drink. They needed God to renew them to his grace.

What’s worse, the surrounding nations lost respect for Israel. “You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us” (Psalm 80:6). God’s chosen people became the laughingstock among the nations of the world. The world is laughing at America today too regarding our laws, policies, and leaders.

It is striking how much verse 12 reflects what is happening in America today: “Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes?” America is being plundered by a secular mindset that maximizes the rights of man and minimizes the rights of God. Never has the heart of America been more post-God than today.

All over America, people are praying for the wrong thing. We don’t need to be praying for revival but for repentance. Our problem is not just that we are a sinful people, but that we are a people who refuse to repent of our sin. Dr. Vance Havner once said, “At the rate America is decaying morally, we should change our national symbol from an eagle to a vulture.”<sup>2</sup>

Yes, we are plagued by the presence of sin, but we suffer more from the absence of God. Asaph knew that God had left the scene in Israel and he prayed, “Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine” (Psalm 80:14). We would do well to pray this prayer right along with Asaph. But prayer is never enough; it is never a smokescreen for repentance. The road to renewal always leads through the door of repentance that opens up to us by God’s grace.

## **Revive Us for Your Glory**

We love to see things restored. Television shows about “fix and flips” are wildly popular. We love seeing makeovers, renovations, and whole-life transformations. Asaph wanted Israel to be the next recipient of an extreme makeover. “Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved” (Psalm 80:19).

The word *restore* literally means “to turn.” As long as our back is to God, we will never see his face. The people of Israel were the ones who needed to turn around, not God. To be restored means to be restored to a right position—one that is facing God.

Notice the difference between restoration and revival. First, restoration is for the sake of man. Asaph says, “Restore us...that we may be saved.” But revival is for the sake of God: “revive us, and we will call on your name” (Psalm 80:18). I think some people want revival because they are afraid that if we don’t get right with God, our way of life might be threatened and we might fall into a deep depression. But maybe that is exactly what we need to have happen.

Revival is not for the prosperity of man, it is for the praise of God. It is not for the ease of man but for the exaltation of God. It is not for the good of man but for the glory of God.

Do you know why we need revival in America? Psalm 85:6 says, “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” The psalmist doesn’t say, “Revive us so that the stock market will not collapse, the terrorists will not win, and so our standard of living will not go down.” No, he desired revival “that your people may rejoice in you.”

Never forget the proper sequence of revival. First, there is repentance, then restoration, then revival, and then rejoicing. America’s hope for all of this lies in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **History Is His Story**

I am convinced that America is a vine that God sovereignly planted, specifically prepared and specially privileged. No nation in history has blossomed like America. Contrary to what some historians contend today, America was founded to be a Christian nation.

The pilgrims wrote in the Mayflower Compact that the express purpose of their coming was: “For the glory of God, and the advancement of the Christian faith.” One of the first pilgrims, William Bradford, wrote in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, “Whereas we all came into these parts of America with one and ye same end and aime, namely, to advance the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to enjoye ye liberties of ye gospel in puritie with peace...”<sup>8</sup>

Over a ten-year period, political science professors at the University of Houston collected and catalogued fifteen thousand writings by the founding fathers. Their goal in examining the sources these men most often quoted was to determine the primary source of ideas behind the Constitution. They discovered that 94 percent of the founding fathers’ quotes were based upon the Bible: 34 percent directly from its pages and 60 percent from men who had used the Bible to arrive at their conclusions.<sup>9</sup>

Patrick Henry said, “It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded not by religionists, but by Christians, not on religion but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>10</sup>

God saw to it that America was especially prepared as a place where people could pray, preach, and practice the gospel freely. I also believe that we have the opportunity to participate in the life of our nation in ways that demonstrate that gospel. We can do that by letting Jesus remove our shackles of slavery, remind us of his goodness, renew us to his grace, and revive us for his glory.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, hear our prayers for renewal. Awaken your might and align our hearts so that our collective lives will glorify you.*

**Question for This Week:** How often do you pray for the leadership of our country? This week, pray Asaph’s prayer daily on their behalf.



## Getting the Big Picture

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 84
- James 1:2-4
- 2 Corinthians 4:13-15
- 1 Peter 5:10-11
- 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

### **The Grand Scheme of Things**

Who is God to you? Do you often stop and think about that? Is he a revered grandfather who lives at a distance? A vending machine for all your dreams? A source of life and truth? Is he a vengeful authority you fear and obey? A caring friend you respect and appreciate? An inspiring mentor you model your life after?

When we have a small picture of God, we have a wrong picture of God. There is much more to God than what our experience tells us and much more to God than what one Scripture tells us. If we're going to know the truth of who God is, we need to see what the whole of Scripture teaches.

Without question, the psalmist who penned Psalm 84:11 had a deep relationship with God. He knew what God was and he knew who God was.

I love this verse. But I also love that this verse confirms and considers what other books of the Bible teach us.

Often when I'm asked to sign a book, I'll put this verse at the end of my signature. Listen to it: "For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Psalm 84:11).

In this short verse, we are told who God is and what God does. This one verse opens us up to what the rest of the Bible teaches us about the guidance, grace, glory, and guarantee of God.

## **We Enjoy God's Guidance**

The Lord is a sun above us and a shield around us; he is the sun who gives us heat; he is a shield who gives us help; he is a sun to guide us; he is a shield to guard us.

In many places the Bible shows us how God guides us through darkness, but I like what Isaiah 50:10 says: "Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God." Whether you are walking in intellectual darkness, financial darkness, spiritual darkness, or emotional darkness, God is a sun. His light will guide you to truth, comfort, joy, and peace.

Have you ever seen a miner's hat with a lamp in front? When a miner is down in the darkness of the mine, that light can shine somewhere around twenty-five feet in front of him. If he said to himself, "I'm not going to take another step until I can see the end of the tunnel," then he would never take another step. He walks in the light he already has, and as he walks in the light, he will find that light moving out in front of him. The more he walks in faith, the more guiding light he has. God's guiding light is like this; it is given only in proportion to one's absolute trust.

Not only does God guide us, but God guards us. He is not only a sun; he is also a shield. He protects us, puts his hand over us, puts angels beside us and his Holy Spirit within us. That's why Paul could say, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:18). Think about that. The Lord will deliver you from every evil work.

You may be thinking, “Well, something evil happened to me, and I wasn’t delivered.” I once heard this from a wise pastor: “If this promise is true, then if something happens to you, and God did not deliver you from it, then it wasn’t evil.” Romans 8:28 tells us that God works all things together for the good of those who love him. There is the guidance and protection that we enjoy.

## **We Experience God’s Grace**

Psalm 84:11 says, “the LORD bestows favor and honor.” What does this mean? The word “favor” is the Hebrew word also translated “grace,” and the word “honor” is elsewhere translated “glory.”

First, we are promised that we will receive the grace of God. Grace can be expressed by this acrostic: God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense. The one quality that makes grace what it is is that it’s always given to people who do not deserve it. God gives us this kind of favor even when we are enemies of his. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” What this verse means, and what Psalm 84 also means, is that the cross was God’s grace in action. Jesus died for the undeserving. The heavens declare the glory of God, but the cross reveals the grace of God.

Grace is a huge topic, but here are five quick things about grace that we find all through the Bible:

This grace is *saving grace*. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Grace is not a reward for the righteous; it is a gift for the guilty. It is not a down payment for future salvation, but a full payment covering the whole of our life. Grace is what brings us to God both now and after we die.

Next, it is *sanctifying grace*, which means grace sets us apart to become more and more like Christ. “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say, ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11-12). God’s grace not only saves you from sin, but it turns you against sin, and from there you pursue a life of virtue, hope, and love.

God's grace is also *sufficient grace*. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. He asked the Lord three times to take that thorn away from him. God did not do it because God had a greater plan for Paul. He wanted him to learn something about his grace, and here's what he said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). That's all Paul needed, and that's all Paul needed to know—that in every situation God's grace is sufficient.

God's grace is also *satisfying grace*: "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). No matter what fear you face or what foe you fight, God's grace can enable you to overcome it.

Grace is *surviving grace*. "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6-7). Do you realize that for all eternity we are going to be trophies of God's enduring, eternal grace?

## **We Expect God's Glory**

Someone once said that "Grace is the bud of glory, and glory is the flower of grace." We live in grace, but we look for glory. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2).

Now it stands to reason that if God has given us grace, he will give us glory. At the same time, if we do not accept the grace of God, we will not experience the glory of God. I believe that grace and glory are twins. When a church expresses the grace of God, it will experience the glory of God. But if a church ever fails to emphasize the grace of God, it will lose the experience of the glory of God.

When we walk in the grace of God, we are made new. But when we walk in legalism, our minds are made dull and God's glory departs. It would be tragic to live without the glory of God! But we don't have to. Second Corinthians 3:18 says, "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Could you receive a

better compliment than if someone were to tell you, “In you I found the grace of God and experienced his glory.”

## **We Embrace God’s Guarantee**

Psalm 84:11 finishes with this: “no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.” This promise is conditional. It is only to those whose “walk is blameless.” Psalm 34:10 says, “Those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.” Jeremiah 5:25 offers more guidance: “Your wrongdoings have kept these away; your sins have deprived you of good.” The only thing that can withhold the goodness of God from our life is our sinful acts and attitudes. Yet, if you love God and live for God, you will be surrounded by God’s goodness.

We are living in a world full of darkness, fraught with danger, oozing with disappointment, radiating despair; but if Psalm 84:11 is true, so are the words of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Have faith in God, he cannot, he will not fail you.”

I don’t know what you are facing this moment. You may be under the searing heat of financial, emotional, or vocational pressure. Your life may be dark. But reassurances are woven throughout all of Scripture. God is a sun who will shine through your darkness. God is a shield who will protect you from fire. You will have his guidance when you are lost and his grace when you are lacking. When you live with the big picture of God in focus, you’ll see his glory and his guarantee.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, when my image of you is small, grow it so that I might see and experience more of you.*

**Question for This Week:** How do you experience the grace of God? Is there anywhere in your life where you feel it is not satisfying or sufficient?

## Revive to Thrive

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 85
- 2 Chronicles 7:11-16
- Habakkuk 3:1-2
- 1 Peter 4:12-19
- 1 Peter 1:3-9

### **Confession Is the Start of Revival**

Though the Psalms were originally songs put to music, Psalm 85 is more than a song—it is a prayer written by a desirous people to a delivering God. Israel had been restricted in a foreign land and now they were reestablished in the promised land. God graciously restored them to the place he originally promised. God was good to this rebellious nation.

Now they were not the strong virile nation that God promised to Abraham. No, this nation was just a shadow of its former self. But at least they were free.

They enjoyed the generosity of God. “You, LORD, showed favor to your land” (Psalm 85:1). This was a land flowing with milk and honey. The soil was rich and fertile. The vegetation was green and lush. God didn’t return the people to a wasteland. He “restored the fortunes of Jacob” (Psalm 85:1)

and they emerged with the forgiveness of God. “You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins” (Psalm 85:2).

The people were repentant—genuinely repentant—to a holy and a righteous God. Where once they turned their back on God, they now turned back to God and confessed their sins. This is the open door that lets revival in. When we see the mighty works of God, on our behalf and for our favor, we too can pray a prayer of repentance and see the revival of God.

## **Complacency Is the Stoppage of Revival**

These people escaped the fury of God. Where God was once provoked, he was now pleased. “You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger” (Psalms 85:3). The heavy hand of a holy God had been taken off this nation. But something was missing. Israel had been restored, but she had not been revived. And so a heart cry goes up for the nation, “Restore us again, God our Savior, and put away your displeasure toward us” (Psalm 85:4).

Let’s connect this to home. Americans make more money, eat better food, drive nicer cars, live in nicer homes, and have more churches than anyone else in the world—but something is missing. I believe that America faces one of three futures: revolution, ruin, or revival. Many people discount this, but any nation born through revolution can die by a revolution. The greatest danger to America is not that we might be conquered from without but that we might rot from within.

Professor Pitirim Sorokin, a sociologist at Harvard University, made no pretense of being a Christian. In 1956 he wrote in his book *The American Sex Revolution*, “Unless there is a change in America, we are doomed for the asking. No civilization, no empire, no nation has survived obsession with such planned impurity. This disease is eating the heart out of America.”

Theodore Roosevelt, one of our greatest presidents, said, “The things that will destroy America are prosperity at any cost, peace at any price, safety first instead of duty first, the love of soft living, and the get-rich-quick theory of life.”

You may call me a pessimist, an alarmist, or a cynic, but I think America’s only hope—not her best hope, not her strongest hope, but her

only hope—is revival. It is revival or ruin. It is revival or retribution. This is the prayer we need to be praying for America, “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?”

## **God Is the Source of Revival**

The last thing this world needs is more half-hearted, take-it-or-leave-it, milquetoast Christianity that most people practice today. If we truly had a revival, we would have to change our ways. A real revival would change the way a lot of us live. But we don’t want to change the way we live. Because of this, we know that revival can’t begin with us. It must begin with God.

Every now and then a pastor will call and ask if I will hold a revival meeting for him. We don’t need to hold revival meetings; we can’t bring revival. We can preach and we can pray. But you don’t stir revival up; you pray it down. Only God can send revival. And I do believe that God can send revival to America.

I believe that revival is always possible because I believe in a God of resurrection. No matter how far down the river of sin a country has gone, as long as there is a God in heaven, revival is just around the bend. How do we get ready for it?

First of all, we must admit that we need revival. Too many of us are pretty proud of our religion. We are pretty pleased with our brand of Christianity. We are satisfied with the status quo.

Second, we must want revival. We must truly desire it. Do you hear and feel the pathos in the psalmist’s statement, “Will you not revive us again?” This is not just a prayer but a cry of desperation. They didn’t just talk about revival or preach about revival. No, they longed for revival. Do we really long for revival? Is that really the hunger of our heart?

Then, we must pray until revival comes. We must take hold of God in prayer and, like Jacob who wrestled with the angel, say, “God, we will not let you go until you send revival to our land.” God can send revival, but we will not have revival until we long for it as a thirsty man in the middle of a desert longs for water.

Many people do not believe that revival is possible. They believe we are just too wicked. We are too far gone. It is the ninth inning and there are two



outs and two strikes. Well, that may be true, but if God is the last batter, don't leave the ballpark. When things are at their worst, revival can be at its best.

## **We Are the Subjects of Revival**

“Will you not revive us again?” Notice who revival is for. The prayer is not to revive a nation, school, state, or politician. The prayer is to revive *us*, the people of God.

In the strictest sense, America does not need revival. She needs regeneration—to be saved. A dead nation does not need revival, it needs resurrection. But this will happen only if the church is revived. We, in the church, are the subjects of revival.

Some preachers today are predicting that God is going to send judgment to America. Well, I believe in many ways God is sending judgment. But if God is yet going to bring catastrophic judgment to America, it will come first to the church.

The whole book of Jonah is a book about revival. Too many people read Jonah and get caught up in the fish story and miss the main point of the book. The highlight of the book is not when Jonah is swallowed by a great fish but when God sends revival to a sinful city called Nineveh.

The reason Jonah was swallowed by a great fish was so that God could do a work in his heart. You see, God would not, and did not, send revival to the city until he sent revival to the preacher. Until God's man got right, the city could not get right. But when God's man got right, the entire city got right.

We cannot blame a lack of revival on God. We cannot blame a lack of revival on America. We can blame a lack of revival only on us. Yes, revival depends on the sovereignty of God, but it waits on the will of man. The church is not depending on America to get right with God. America is depending upon the church to be revived.

## **Joy Is the Sequel to Revival**

Revival may come through weeping and wailing, tears and praying, sackcloth and ashes, but the ultimate result is joy. “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Psalm 85:6). When revival

has come, the people of God rejoice in their God and there is renewed joy in worship, work, and witnessing.

Revival produces joy in worship—a burning, blazing, radiant, and enthusiastic love for the Lord Jesus Christ. When revival comes, religion is no longer a dull habit but an acute fever. Worship is not a duty but a delight. When revival comes, the church experiences God’s power, hungers for his presence, bathes in his praise, and focuses on his person.

Revival produces new joy in work. When revival comes, you are so full of God that you want to use your gifts for him. People who can sing join the choir. People who can teach enter the classroom. People who can encourage get down with the destitute. People who can give offer their resources. Everybody does something and nobody does nothing. When revival comes, you work in the power of the Spirit, and you learn that the yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light.

There is also a new joy in witnessing. Revival is for the church, but when revival comes, the world is affected. Sinners get saved, baptisms surge, and disciples are made. Because a revived church is so on fire for God, it cannot help but teach and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Charles G. Finney said, “The fact is, Christians are more to blame for not being revived than sinners are for not being converted.” He was so right. It is not the lost who care nothing for the church that need revival, but it is the church that cares nothing for the lost.

When it comes down to it, revival is what will make all of us thrive. But it doesn’t start outside of ourselves or outside of our churches. It starts within with people who are seeking it, seeing it, and singing it. Let’s let it in!

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, revive my heart so that I might respond to your movements. Renew my joy so that your world may be restored through me with your unfailing love.*

**Question for This Week:** If God were to revive your heart, what would the world around you look like as a result?

## The Way to Pray

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 86
- 1 John 1:8-10
- Romans 1:18-23
- 2 Timothy 2:11-13
- Exodus 34:4-7

### The Labor of Prayer

A young reporter in Israel decided to look for a human-interest story. She heard about an old man who'd been going to the Wailing Wall to pray twice a day, every day, for a long time. She went to the Wailing Wall and found him. She asked, "Sir, how long have you been coming to the Wailing Wall and praying?" He said, "For fifty years." She asked, "What do you pray for?" "For peace between the Jews and Arabs." She responded, "How do you feel after fifty years?" He replied, "Like I'm talking to a wall."

I confess that, at times, I feel like I am talking to a wall when I pray. I'm sure many of you have felt the same way. Others of you may feel that your prayers are more like trying to dig *through* the wall. No matter how you chip and shovel and shove, you don't feel like your prayers are breaking through.

Norwegian theologian Ole Hallesby says that prayer is quite a bit like demolition mining.<sup>11</sup> In order to create a mine shaft, there must be perseverance to tunnel through the rock. It requires great exertion, endurance, and expertise to complete the hole. The second kind of prayer is more exciting—it's the blast that comes once the explosives are inserted, the fuse is lit, and bits of rock shoot into the air to our great satisfaction. Something happens, and our work was only to light the fuse.

In one of David's songs, he tells of a time of desperation when he really needed to light a fuse and see the clear activity of God, but all he could do was keep boring the hole. In this heartfelt cry, he shares some secrets to supplication that will add both substance and confidence in our praying. The key is to remember that we are never talking to a wall; we are talking to the God whose very character invites us to pray.

## **Remember that God Is a Forgiving God**

The first thing David does is appeal to God's mercy: "Guard my life, for I am faithful to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; have mercy on me, Lord, for I call to you all day long" (Psalm 86:2-3). As he asks God to bend his ear to his prayer, to see his faithfulness to God and his faith in God, he calls on God's compassion. He does the same thing in verse 6 and verse 16. The truth is we are at the mercy of God 24/7. We live, move, and breathe only because of his mercy.

Mercy and grace have one thing in common: both are undeserved. A woman once fell to Napoleon's feet seeking a pardon for her father. Napoleon refused, saying that the man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death. "But I don't ask for justice," the daughter said. "I plead for mercy." Her prayerful plea was too much for Napoleon and he replied, "I will grant mercy because of you."<sup>12</sup>

What is remarkable about David's prayer is that it is not focused on his physical needs. We don't see him asking for safe travel, renewed health, or prosperous dealings. He is asking for his spiritual needs, and the foremost spiritual need of this prayer is mercy. Fortunately, God's store of mercy is infinite and he gives from it with a bountiful charitableness. Charles Spurgeon once wrote, "God's mercy is so great that you may sooner drain

the sea of its water, or deprive the sun of its light, or make space too narrow than diminish the great mercy of God.”

The God we pray to is a merciful God always ready, willing, and able to forgive our flaws and failures no matter how great and small. God will never refuse to hear you, see you, or receive you even in your lowest moments of spiritual failure because he is a forgiving God.

## **Remember that God Is a Forever God**

David acknowledges the pantheon of gods who vie for the attention and affection of the human race. However, he also makes it plain that there is no God like *his* God: “Among the gods there is none like you, Lord; no deeds can compare with yours” (Psalm 86:8). He is the God of the momentous not the monotonous, and rather than being the creation of someone’s imagination, he is the creator of all things.

Four times David uses the name *Yahweh* (translated “LORD”), which means self-existent Eternal One. Four more times he uses the name *Elohim*, which means powerful, creator, and Most High God. David is convinced that the God he is praying to is the universal God who will one day be worshiped by all nations. “All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name” (Psalm 86:9). Seven times in this psalm David uses the name *Adonai* for God. It means Lord Over All. Over and over again, he confesses that his God is the only God there is.

Do you pray this way? Do you believe that God is infinite? An infinite God can affect the world, not just for today but for tomorrow. An infinite God isn’t hindered by time, space, or skill. An infinite God sees all, knows all, and is present in every place. Sometimes we pray as if we are inviting God to leave his world and intervene in ours—not as if he is already here with us, exerting power over all things with majesty and might and mercy. There are really two barriers to our prayer life: we don’t believe that God is personal and we don’t believe that God is infinite.<sup>13</sup>

Hideyoshi, a Japanese warlord who ruled over Japan in the late 1500s, commissioned a colossal statue of Buddha for a shrine in Kyoto. It took fifty thousand men five years to build, but the work had scarcely been completed when the earthquake of 1596 brought the roof of the shrine

crashing down and wrecked the statue. In a rage Hideyoshi shot an arrow at the fallen colossus. “I put you here at great expense,” he shouted, “and you can’t even look after your own temple.”<sup>14</sup> Well, our forever God dwells in an eternal temple that is both immaterial and indestructible. We pray to the God who transcends time and space because he is forever God.

## **Remember that God Is a Faithful God**

If God were unfaithful to us even for one second, all the faith we have in the world would make no difference. A faithful God calls for an undivided heart.

I have counseled many married couples, and whenever there is trouble, I know it will take a wholehearted effort by both spouses to become one in heart again. But if one has been unfaithful to the other, then both hearts are divided. The unfaithful spouse has already evidenced a divided heart by the infidelity. The spouse who has remained faithful now has a divided heart as to whether the love and trust can ever be restored. We pray to a God who, though we are unfaithful to him, remains forever faithful to us. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:13, “if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.”

David continues, “Teach me your way, LORD, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name” (Psalm 86:11). We often want God to act in sudden moves to change our circumstances, but here David is asking to be taught, to be changed, and to create habits of reliance and reverence. This will require faithfulness from David, but, gratefully, he’s following the example of an immeasurably faithful God.

We often mistake our own faithlessness with what we perceive to be God’s. Do we pray without ceasing? Do we own our sin and confess it? Do we pray for God’s will rather than our own? Is it really God’s faithlessness we think we experience or just the reflection of ours? God is not unfaithful, and we think too highly of ourselves if we believe that we are not. Someone said it well: God writes with a pen that never blots, and speaks with a tongue that never slips, and acts with a hand that never fails. God is more reliable than the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. Our God is faithful to hear, act, and move on our behalf.

## Remember that God Is a Faultless God

What more can we say about this marvelous God we pray to? There are even more wonderful attributes to consider! David says, “But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15).

When we are hardheaded and hardhearted, God is soft in his love toward us and gentle in his discipline of us. The word “compassion” comes from the Latin word meaning “to suffer” combined with the prefix meaning “with.” Jesus is with us in our plight and our battle against temptation. No cold-hearted taskmaster is our God—he feels our pain and empathizes with our stumbles and falls.

He is “gracious” and “abounding in love.” God’s love supply is endless, as is his patience. Most every child knows about Buzz Lightyear, one of the heroes in the *Toy Story* movies. This character’s trademark phrase showed up in a preschool Sunday school class when the lesson was about God’s unlimited love. At the end of class, the teacher asked the children, “So, how much does God love us?” Four-year-old Ashton shouted, “To infinity and beyond!”

Rivers may run out of water, cars may run out of gas, banks may run out of money, guns may run out of bullets, but the God we pray to will *never* run out of love or grace. When we remember the God we pray to, it will help us to know that praying in response to his character will always ensure that he will hear and he will answer.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, let my prayers be more fully focused on the truth of who you are so that I may live with an undivided heart and praise and glorify your name daily.*

**Question for This Week:** What do you believe about God? How is what you believe different from how you behave? How can you bring these two things more closely together?

## Help Yourself to Happiness

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 89
- Isaiah 35:8-10
- Revelation 20:4-6
- 3 John 1-4
- Deuteronomy 33:12

### Happy Place

I recently read a post on Facebook that was both insightful and revealing: “Beware of Destination Addiction: a preoccupation with the idea that happiness is in the next place, the next job and with the next partner. Until you give up the idea that happiness is somewhere else, it will never be where you are.”<sup>15</sup> The author’s insight pinpoints the never-ending chase for happiness that so many of us engage in from day to day. It also reveals an honest admission of what drives so many people to eat, drink, and be merry even at the cost of family, health, reputation, and sometimes freedom and life itself.

Happiness, understood from a biblical perspective, is God’s desire for all of us—except what we call being happy the Scripture calls being “blessed.” Both the Hebrew and Greek words for “blessed” in the Old and



New Testaments mean “happy.”<sup>16</sup> From this we can conclude that one of the marks of a holy people is that we should also be a happy people.

In a maskil from Ethan the Ezrahite, a friend of Solomon, we learn some key reasons why we should be happy and key ways to be happy regardless of our circumstances.

## **We Should Be Happy in Our Worship of God**

Blessed are those who “have learned to acclaim you” (Psalm 89:15). There is a joy and happiness to be found in worship that is simply unmatched. The Hebrew uses “joyful sound” for the word *acclaim*. Note that we must *learn* to do this. I believe many of the worship wars in our churches are due to simple ignorance about who worship is really for.

Bob Smith visited a church near his home, but realized he didn’t care for their style of worship. He liked the minister’s sermon and thought he might be open to advice on how they might improve their worship. The pastor asked Bob, “What was it you think the Lord didn’t like?” This question made Bob realize that worship isn’t about him. He decided that the only thing God didn’t like was his critical spirit. Real worship occurs when we focus on God rather than our personal preferences.

If worship is going to be a source for our happiness, then our worship must be true. Professor James Bryan Smith says that we malign the focus of our worship with two false beliefs.<sup>17</sup> The first is that the central aim of worship should be to inspire us. For many, worship is about what tantalizes them rather than what trains them. But the psalmist says we *learn* to worship God and inspiration is not the focus but a byproduct of that worship.

The second false belief is that the purpose for worship is to repay God what we owe him. We can’t possibly repay God what we owe him and particularly not by giving him just a weekly hour of church attendance! The purpose for worship is to align us with the truth. When you realize the great gap that lies between you and God because of your sin, and when you see the tremendous work God did to bridge it, you will long to express abundant joy when you meet with God. If we have a low view of our sin, then we will never find happiness in our worship.

The French have a proverb that provides insight for worship: “A good meal ought to begin with hunger.” It is hard to enjoy a meal when you’re not hungry, but when you are starving, anything tastes good. As we approach worship with a hunger to meet God, we will be filled and satiated. When we come preoccupied or filled with our own self-sufficiency, we don’t experience meaningful worship. It’s true—happy worship begins with a hunger for God.

## **We Should Be Happy in Our Walk with God**

Walking is another act that brings us happiness. “Blessed are those... who walk in the light of your presence, LORD” (Psalm 89:15). This concept occurs earlier in Psalms: “It was not by their sword that they won the land...it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them” (Psalm 44:3). The light of God’s face gave Israel their land. Imagine walking through the productive fields knowing they represent God’s goodness. Picture in your mind inspecting your burgeoning flock of sheep, believing each bleating face is a testament to God’s smiling presence. It would be hard to not be happy with that perspective!

My favorite time of the day has always been ten o’clock in the morning. Maybe it’s because it’s the last hour of the morning just before midday. Or maybe it’s because most adults experience their most effective thinking and productivity in the late morning.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, there is nothing like a walk in the bright sunshine of a beautiful day when it is not too hot nor too cold. Likewise, nothing brings more happiness than walking in the sunshine of God’s presence any time of the day.

Being happy when our lives are warm and sunny is far easier than being happy when circumstances are tiring or traumatic. But if we’re walking with God and aware of his presence, it’s not impossible.

Bethany Hamilton learned to surf when she was a preschooler. From her first surfing competition at age eight and her first surf sponsorships at age nine, she was a rising athlete.<sup>19</sup> In 2003, at the age of thirteen, she was attacked by a shark, which tragically tore away her left arm. Her life was made into a bestselling biography in 2004 and a feature film in 2011.

Where is the happiness in this story? Bethany gave her heart to Jesus when she was about five years old. In the years since, she had established

her walk with God. As she was being rushed to the hospital on the day of the attack, she said that “being able to turn to Jesus in this crazy moment in my life gave me a sense of peace and calmness and I think that’s one thing that just kept me alive.”<sup>20</sup> Bethany recovered to become a world-class surfer. She still sees the ocean as a gift from God—her chance to walk in the light of his presence—and is happy being his light to others along the journey.

## **We Should Be Happy in Our Witness to God**

Ethan the Ezraite continues, “They rejoice in your name all day long; they celebrate your righteousness” (Psalm 89:16). God’s name represents his character, and because of who he is, we can witness to him and for him in so many ways:

- To the lonely we can share him as *Jehovah Shammah*, who is right beside us 24/7.
- To the needy we can reveal him as *Jehovah Jireh*, who provides all our needs.
- To the struggling we can call upon him as *Jehovah Nissi*, who fights our battles and is the banner over us.
- To the weary we can proclaim him as *Jehovah Shalom*, who is peace and gives peace beyond all understanding.
- To the confused we can show him as *Jehovah Roi*, our shepherd who feeds us and leads us to where we need to go.

The worship of God’s happy ones extends throughout the day when we focus on him. We don’t find happiness just by changing our attitude from focusing on what’s wrong to focusing on what’s good and beautiful. No, we must focus on God, our maker and sustainer. He must be our focus if we want to flourish.

C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*,

What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could “be like gods”—could set up on their own as if they had created themselves—be their own masters—invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.

Lewis ends by saying, “God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from himself, because it is not there.” Happiness is telling a world in need the truth that God can meet any need in the world.

## **We Should Be Happy in Our Worth to God**

Ethan goes on to write, “For you are their glory and strength, and by your favor you exalt our horn. Indeed, our shield belongs to the LORD, our king to the Holy One of Israel” (Psalm 89:17-18). God is our strength when we are weak. He is our favor when we are weary. He is our shield when we are worried. He is our glory when we feel worthless. He is our all in all. We are worth more to him than all the gold and the galaxies, all the silver and the stars, all the platinum and the planets.

If we are ever going to be happy, then we must build our true identity on the way that God sees us—not on the things we do nor on the passions we pursue. How we see ourselves is likely quite different from how God sees us. While we like to think of ourselves as dust, God views us as beloved. On any given day I can name myself by my work, my possessions, my net worth, or my relationships, but God looks at me through the work of the cross and calls me loved.

Christian psychologist David Benner writes, “Identity is never simply a creation. It is always a discovery. True identity is always a gift from God.”<sup>21</sup> And that gift comes to us as much when we look at God as it does when we know how he’s looking at us.

Do you know how God sees you? He sees you as an image of God, forgiven and beloved. Knowing your worth in God is a source of happiness

that propels you into wholeness. He is your constant presence, your consistent provider, and your continuous protection. With God you can always be happy. Without God you never will be.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, reveal to me how my happiness is founded in the wrong things. Establish my joy in you.*

**Question for This Week:** Which name of God can you take delight in this week? How can you joyfully share that with someone else?

## Rainy Days and Mondays

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 90
- Hosea 6:1-3
- Genesis 16:7-16
- John 15:9-17
- Colossians 3:23-25

### **Singing the Blues**

The composer of every song comes to life when we perform his or her masterpiece. When we hear Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, we experience his thunderous heart. When we hear Ella Fitzgerald croon "Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall," we catch the essence of her personal struggle. Listening to the Carpenters sing "Rainy Days and Mondays Always Get Me Down" gives us a sense of their blues.

Psalm 90 is no different. It is the only song in this book of Scripture that is attributed to Moses. This makes it the oldest of all the psalms, but like fine wine it only gets better with age.<sup>22</sup> It is not the first song of Moses (see Exodus 15:1-18 and Deuteronomy 32:1-47), but it may be the most profound and sorrowful as it gives us a glimpse into the life of Moses.

We all have rainy days even when the sun is shining and we all face Mondays even when it's Friday. So, if you are in one of those days, put in your earbuds and listen to this soothing song that will calm your heart and lift your spirits. There are four things that are always true about the God of all days.

## **Permanently, I Live in God's Eternal Presence**

The oldest home in America is thought to be the Fairbanks House in Dedham, Massachusetts. It was built between 1637 and 1641 for Puritan immigrants Jonathan and Grace Fairbanks and their six children. It was then passed down through the family for seven more generations.<sup>23</sup> The final family member to live in the home moved out in 1904. For 270 years, the house was home to a family and is now a museum.

To Moses, a house like this would have felt like a dream. There would have been no desert wandering if he had a home to go back to. Instead, he claims God as his abode, his place of security, and his site of trust. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations" (Psalm 90:1). Though the people of Israel had neither a cot nor a cottage, they could run to the eternal safety of God.

From eternity past to eternity future, those of us who know God live in God and he lives in us. There is no expiration date on his presence and no boundary to his dwelling. We cannot go where he is not already. Even when we feel he is absent, he is present. He can leave our presence but we can never leave his. He is our true home and he wants us to make ourselves at home every day.

For us, a day can seem like a thousand years, but to God a thousand years is like a day. From an eternal perspective, God has all the time he needs to do what he needs to do in your life. The God of eternity knows no limitations of time or space. "Late" or "early" is not in his vocabulary. Someday, someone else will own and live in the home you dwell in today, but God's home—God himself—is ours to live in forever.

## **Perpetually, I Live under God's Paternal Perspective**

Photos from space can zoom in to life on earth with amazing detail. Satellite cameras can identify objects as short as one foot and can spot

home plate in Camden Yards.<sup>24</sup> Satellite photos capture crop circles across Kansas cornfields, rainbow stripes stretched over Dutch tulip fields, mazelike vineyards in Huelva, Spain, and floating island resorts off the coast of Dubai.<sup>25</sup> When you look at the photos, it feels like nothing can ever truly be hidden.

Moses had this same sense in Psalm 90: “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence” (Psalm 90:8). He speaks metaphorically, as if God doesn’t dwell with us, but looks down with a blazing spotlight on our misdeeds and sin. Moses knows that we are all “found out” under the sharp eye of our heavenly Father.

What we do in the night, God sees in the light. What we put on the back page, God headlines on the front page. What we write in fine print, God posts in bold. He sees our external acts and our internal thoughts and motives. From the first day of our lives to the last, his paternal view never grows dim.

Not only does God see every corner of our lives, but he sees the length of our years: “All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures” (Psalm 90:9-10). It’s amazing to me that our life expectancy in the U.S. still hovers around seventy-eight years.<sup>26</sup> What an amazing testament to God’s perpetual perspective.

Yet our greatest problem is not our physical frailty but our spiritual failures. It is true that our lives are short, but the larger problem is the sin and sorrow that come with the sun’s rising and setting. Adrian Rogers once said, “Humanity has only three problems—sin, sorrow, and death,” which is exactly what Moses just told us!

The good news is God loves us enough to get righteously angry, which is why, when we fall into sin, as our Father he lovingly convicts us and corrects us. When we fall into sorrow, he tenderly comforts us. He is even willing to teach us to spend our time wisely so we avoid sin consistently and accept sorrow faithfully. We can be thankful to live under the perspective of such a loving Father.

## **Prayerfully, I Live with God’s Internal Peace**



When life is rainy and gray, we typically feel unsettled and insecure. When our job is unstable, our relationships unreliable, and our success uncertain, we feel anything but peace. In those times, we should not assume that God isn't looking in our direction. He is always with us though he might feel like a sharp master over his simple servants. In verse 13, Moses asks the Lord to take a new stance and turn his callousness of verse 11 to compassion: "Relent, LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants."

What Moses desires is a change of status. He wants to be more than a servant. He sings about being free with satisfaction and joy: "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days" (Psalm 90:14). Don't we fill our lives with things that will never satisfy us? Moses doesn't ask to be satisfied by pleasure, possessions, or power. Instead he desires to be satisfied with God's undeniable, unfathomable, and unconditional love.

On the rainiest of days and the darkest of Mondays, we can have the peace of knowing that God loves us steadfastly. His love is not fickle like a game of "he loves me, he loves me not." His love is both unconditional and unfailing. Five words you will *never* hear from God are, "I don't love you anymore." He will shine the light of joy into your darkness as you ponder his grace for your grief, his help for your hurt, his gladness for your sadness, and his provision for your problems.

## **Personally, I Live for God's External Purpose**

In the end, Moses wants to move from servanthood to significance, from living in the way of wrath to loving his way of work. All work is sacred when we do it for the glory of God. Work that is established by God is work that honors the way he made you, the wish he gave you, and the why for which he saved you. You have a design, a desire, and a destination—all should be glorifying to him.

George MacDonald's *The Genius of Willie MacMichael* beautifully illustrates Moses's desire: "May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children. May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands" (Psalm 90:16-17).

Young Willie asks his father, “Does God work?” His father answers, “Yes, Willie, it seems that God works more than anybody—for he works all night and all day...If he were to stop working, everything would stop being...and worst of all, your little heart would stop loving.”

“No, Papa,” cried Willie. “I shouldn’t stop loving, I’m sure.”

“Indeed, you would, Willie.”

“Not you and Mamma.”

“Yes—you wouldn’t love us any more than if you were asleep without dreaming.”

“That would be dreadful.”

“Yes, it would. So you see how good God is to us—to go on working, that we may be able to love each other.”

“Then if God works like that all day long, it must be a fine thing to work,” said Willie.

“You are right. It is a fine thing to work—the finest thing in the world, if it comes of love, as God’s work does.”<sup>27</sup>

You are unique. There is not, has never been, nor ever will be anyone like you. Not only are you one-of-a-kind (even identical twins are not identical<sup>28</sup>), you are also unique in your purpose. You have been put here from eternity to do God’s work, to do it well, and to make sure it is finished before you are. God is at work in us to make sure *we finish our work*.

You have been put here to do God’s work, to do it well and to make sure it is finished before you are. So, if you are getting wet on a rainy day or depressed on a Monday morning, pop in this psalm on the MP3 player of your mind and remember the Maker of days wants to favor you for fulfillment.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, teach me to sing of your love so that I might live for your purpose.*

**Question for This Week:** If you wrote a song for your own rainy days, what might it say about God?

## PART FOUR

# Under Control

*When things seem out of control, God is in control.*

# 31

## Security Blanket

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 91
- Luke 2:8-15
- 1 Peter 1:1-5
- Hebrews 6:13-15
- Deuteronomy 23:14

### **Blanket Coverage**

When you buy a car, a computer, or even a set of luggage, you probably get one with a good warranty. With regular use, products break down, and consumers who don't have a warranty are often left without recourse. If only there could be a guarantee that if something goes wrong, it will all be okay in the end.

On April 30, 1789, George Washington delivered his first inaugural address, paying homage to God's providence in his life and the life of his country. At twenty-three years old, he had had two horses shot out from under him and four musket balls pass through his coat. A Native American named Redhawk later testified to having shot at Washington no fewer than eleven times. He was convinced that Washington was bulletproof. Of the

thirteen hundred British soldiers, only thirty survived. And every other officer on a horse besides George Washington was killed.<sup>1</sup>

Washington believed all of his life that somehow he was under the protection of the God of Providence. The truth is every child of God is under divine protection until God says it's time to go. He is the ultimate security blanket.

Psalm 91 is one of the most popular, most quoted, and most memorized psalms of all. In this magnificent melody of ministry, the songwriter reminds us all that regardless of what difficulty we face, God is a security blanket that never frays or wears out.

## **We Rest Under the Shadow of God's Peace**

When you are out in the summer sun working, playing, or hiking, don't you make note of the closest shady spot? As the heat beats down on you, you keep your eyes out for trees, awnings, and arbors so you can duck into the shade and rest. The shade always seems to exist just out of our reach, separate from us, and in order to enjoy it we must stop what we're doing and go to it.

But the psalmist describes a shade that we don't have to strain our eyes to find or hike a little farther to discover. "Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty" (Psalm 91:1). When we walk with the Lord, the shade of the Almighty is always with us. The temple was a fortress for the psalmist to shelter in, but the shadow of God was with him everywhere else too.

When a city was under attack, the people of the area would run to find safety within the city walls. These stone strongholds were their refuge and they could feel peace knowing those walls would stand. Dwelling within the city walls offered rest on the outside but not rest on the inside; they could rest in a mighty God, a personal God, who offered hope.

God is our ever-present shelter in the storms of life and a constant shadow that cools us when we face the heat of trials. We live life daily behind the walls of "Fort God" and we can always trust his heart even when we cannot see his hand.

## **We Walk Behind the Shield of God's Power**

The psalmist uses imagery in these next verses to draw from our experience of birds. “Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare” (Psalm 91:3). A fowler is a professional bird catcher and his snare might be a net, a throw-stick, or an arrow. Not only are birds seen as pests who kill small livestock, but they are used for food and are trapped alive to be used as sacrifices in the temple.

This is the kind of danger the psalmist is speaking of—entrapment, surprise, and even certain death. Where can we find security in the midst of difficulty, danger, and disease? The psalmist says our salvation is found in the faithfulness of God. “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart” (Psalm 91:4).

How do we avoid such powerful snares? We don’t do it by scamming the enemy, slandering the adversary, or slaying the traitor. We do it by staying behind the shield. The security of God is likened to the wings and feathers of the mother bird. Our safety is found not when we thrash about wielding our own finite power, but when we settle into the sustaining power of God.

The ancient Greeks used a fighting formation called a phalanx in which they would stand shoulder to shoulder, close in rank both in front and behind, with their upright shields overlapping. This transformed them into a formidable force that could sweep through battlegrounds. This wasn’t done necessarily to kill off the enemy, but to hold ground and to not give up the battlefield. The sight of it was imposing, and it often intimidated opposing armies to such an end that Grecian armies could win a battle without bloodshed.<sup>2</sup>

This is the kind of protection God offers us. Like a full-body shield or a chick under the mother hen’s wings, God’s favor covers us. His faithfulness is a shield that deflects the arrows of betrayal and blight of bitterness. We may be outnumbered, but the more numerous the enemy, the quicker they fall. In time, God is the one who convicts every culprit and rights every wrong; we must only stay behind the shield.

## **We Look to the Security of God’s Promise**

For those who live life with God daily, in his shadow and behind his shield, the promises of the psalmist come in quick succession: “no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent” (Psalm 91:10). This could be a picture of an army sneaking up on you in a battle encampment. It could also be speaking of the harm caused by disease or plague, which was mentioned in verse 6. No matter the threat, the protection of the Lord is a promise.

Now, forgetting that we live in a fallen world, we can take these promises to an extreme and say, “Nothing bad can happen to me!” But if we’re under the shadow of God and behind the shield of God, then we also live within the security of God. The painful experiences that do come our way do not demonstrate that we have somehow stepped out of the shadow or have been shoved away from the shield. God is with us even in our trying times. In time he will deliver us, whether on earth or on to heaven, and in the meantime he will never leave us.

Verses 11 and 12 are a good example of how we can distort the promises of God: “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (Psalm 92:11). We are surrounded by supernatural supporters, and it’s tempting to think this makes us untouchable. In fact, Satan chose to twist this very passage of Scripture in Matthew 4, where he tempts Jesus to trust in God’s protection so pridefully that he ought to throw himself from the temple mount and let the angels save him. How often we fall into this distorted kind of thinking.

Be assured, we should not test God to rescue us from our sinful behavior, but we should trust God to receive us in spite of it. We often, voluntarily, throw ourselves into difficulties, but we should not be so arrogant as to think God will find it good to withhold the consequences. We should be very careful about how we apply the promises of God. We do not write the terms of our security, God does.

When we take our eyes off our foes and our hurts and turn our eyes to our Father in heaven, we are reminded that God has promised that no lasting harm or permanent disaster will overtake us. He dispatches his “secret service angels” to accompany us wherever we go to ensure that his purpose for our lives will be fulfilled.

The psalmist reminds us that when you hike through a canyon, it’s very possible that you’ll stumble over rocks and even encounter a snake or a

predator on the trail. These verses promise not only the presence of God's supernatural aid but also his sweeping victory. When we love God, he rescues us from hidden dangers, ransoms us from hidden difficulties, and rights us from hidden disasters.

## **We Live in the Sureness of God's Protection**

When the Orange County Sheriff's officer responded to the domestic violence call on August 26, 2016, he didn't expect a miracle to happen. After he knocked on the door of the home, a man ran outside, jumped into a car, and spun off through Huntington Beach, California. Already in quick pursuit, the officer was surprised when the suspect quickly turned his vehicle around and opened fire.

One of the bullets punctured the officer's windshield and struck his badge. The officer didn't notice and continued the pursuit. Eighty-five miles later, the suspect rolled his car off the freeway where it burst into flames. The officer was amazed to discover that his badge had protected him.<sup>3</sup>

In these final verses of Psalm 91, we hear from God himself. We have no reason to distrust the psalmist's description of God's peace, power, promises, and protection. Yet, when God speaks here, we tend to listen a little bit harder and believe it all the more.

God says, "Because he loves me...I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name" (Psalm 91:14). The person God is speaking about is likely a king, the leader the psalmist has been writing to for the entire psalm. How reassuring it must have been for the king's nation to hear straight from the Lord that they would receive God's protection in danger, his presence in trouble, and his pardon for all eternity.

When we call, God answers. He will deliver us from or through every danger; he will meet sorrow with satisfaction, heartache with honor, sin with salvation. This is our God of delight and deliverance who is indeed one security blanket no one can do without.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty God, I want to love you so fully that I dwell in the shelter of your shadow and am shielded in the comfort of your arms.*



**Question for This Week:** What promise of God do you need to believe as an expression of your love for God?

Sabbath Song

**Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 92
- Isaiah 58:13-14
- 2 Corinthians 1:18-22
- Exodus 20:8-11
- Hebrews 4:1-11

**Remember the Sabbath**

From the beginning of time the Sabbath principle has been observed by millions of people around the world. The Sabbath principle simply says to set aside one day a week to rest, to worship, and to fellowship with God's people. Since the resurrection of Jesus, Sunday has been the day for Christians to observe the Sabbath in this way. This principle was even ingrained in the Constitution of the United States in what is known as "the pocket veto":

If any Bill shall not be returned by the President within ten Days (*Sundays excepted*) after it shall have been presented to him, the Same shall be a Law, in like Manner as if he had

signed it, unless the Congress by their Adjournment prevent its Return, in which Case it shall not be a Law.<sup>4</sup>

Now why would Sundays be excepted? And while we're examining it, why is mail not delivered on Sundays? Why are many businesses closed on Sundays? Because our founding fathers believed there was something special about Sundays and the Sabbath principle.<sup>5</sup>

An ancient songwriter agreed and wrote a song about the Sabbath day. In fact, this is the only psalm in the Psalter specifically designated for the Sabbath. In this beautiful song, we are told how to approach our Sabbath in a way that honors God and blesses us.

## **Our Sabbath Must Include the Celebration of God's Name**

The psalmist begins with a merry declaration, "It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High" (Psalm 92:1). One thing is for certain: worship should be a delight not a duty, a blessing not a burden. It is good for God because he deserves our praise and worship. It is good for us because life's greatest joy is to "glorify God and to enjoy him forever."<sup>6</sup>

The name used for God in the last part of this verse is *Elohim*. It means "superior" or "highest." At the very least, it means that we can't possibly know better than God how we ought to spend our Sabbath day. It's important to get your homework done, finish a brief, plan the gala, or submit that article. Yet we convince ourselves that it's necessary to work on the day God set aside for rest. This reveals our low thoughts of God and our high opinion of ourselves, and we risk acting as if we know better than the Most High.

Celebrations require preparation. We can't just throw a wedding together or check in for a celebratory dinner out without a reservation. Instead we send out invitations, order food, make decorations, and tidy up. There is preparation in the process of partying, and yet most of us don't smooth the way for Sunday. To prepare your heart for worship on Sunday, consider how the way you spend Saturday might impact your adoring approach to the Most High God the next day.

We're all familiar with the acronym TGIF ("Thank God it's Friday!"). Why are we thankful? So we can celebrate Saturday. Perhaps we should adopt a new acronym TGIS—"Thank God it's Saturday" so we can celebrate Sunday. I believe God followers should be more excited about Sundays than the world gets about Saturdays. Regardless, verbal praise, vocal worship, and vibrant music<sup>7</sup> should be the hallmarks of our Sunday gatherings for we honor the name above every name.

## **Our Sabbath Must Include the Proclamation of God's Character**

We should be "proclaiming [God's] love in the morning and [his] faithfulness at night" (Psalm 92:2). The love of God saves us by sending Jesus to die for our sins and the faithfulness of God secures us by sending his Holy Spirit to seal us until we enter into eternity.

This verse also indicates that the whole Sabbath day is God's. The psalmist indicates that there is a prayerfulness and an awareness of God throughout the day. The morning was likely begun with prayers anticipating God's loving commitment and bookended with prayer in the evening, examining how God offered his faithful presence throughout the day. What a beautiful practice and picture of awe and intimacy. Imagine how our hearts would be tuned to God all day long if we did the same.

Songs have sermons embedded within them. Music contains messages that can communicate truth through the ears and into the heart. A Duke University historian of Christian worship studied the difference between the messages in evangelical hymns and the messages in contemporary praise music. After comparing the two groups, he found that our modern praise songs focus so highly on Jesus that the Father and Holy Spirit are often left out.<sup>8</sup> As our music has increasing focus on our role in praise, it loses the full locus of God's personality.

I love modern praise music, and praising Jesus is wonderful, but praising all persons of the Trinity is vital to proclaim God's authentic character. Right now, as I write this during the sunrise, this stanza from "Holy, Holy, Holy" is echoing in my head: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee. Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty. God in three persons, blessed Trinity!"<sup>9</sup>

Whether it is “How Great Thou Art” or “How Great Is Our God,” our songs should make our heart soar in their proclamation of the God who loves at all times and is faithful 365 days a year.

## **Our Sabbath Must Include the Exaltation of God’s Actions**

The psalm continues to laud, “How great are your works, LORD, how profound your thoughts!” (Psalm 92:5). From the work of creation to salvation to reconciliation to restoration, God’s works are simply great. They are great in their reach—universal and worldwide. They are great in their results—forgiven sin, transformed lives, changed hearts, rebuilt marriages, magnificent ministry. They are great in their reality—miracles of healing and deliverance, resurrection from death, and fellowship of twice-born believers whose influence is felt in every continent on the planet. His wisdom is unparalleled! His works are unrivaled!<sup>10</sup>

To the same extent that the observance of Sabbath exalts the actions of God, it must also diminish the actions of his people. Sabbath is made for man and is designed for rest (Mark 2:27-28). Study after study has been done on the correlation between the negative effects of stress and lack of sleep. One study noted that when our bodies are ill-rested, our behavior is more improper.<sup>11</sup> Not only that, but a former practicing doctor, Matthew Sleeth, determined that when we subtract a day of rest from each week of our lives, we diminish our life expectancy by eleven years.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, rest, productivity, and happiness have frequently been linked in a positive way. Adequate physical rest benefits us. Some studies show that better sleepers are better workers<sup>13</sup> and a Harvard study even shows that naps improve performance.<sup>14</sup> Imagine what a whole day of rest can provide not just to your body but to your spirit. What is clear in all these studies is that we are designed by God to rest.

Not only do we exalt God’s acts when we observe the Sabbath, but we have to trust his acts. At its core, Sabbath is a spiritual practice of surrender. Once a week we walk away from our illusions about the extent of our power and influence and trust that God can accomplish his work without us. Our influence is finite, but God’s is forever. The psalmist says, “But you, LORD, are forever exalted” (Psalm 92:8). Yes—forever he is! Exalted in his power, exalted in his perception, exalted in his preeminence, exalted in his

position. It takes much longer than a day to glorify the whole of God, but a Sabbath day is his holy place to begin.

## **Our Sabbath Must Include the Anticipation of God's Goodness**

For those of us who know the Lord of the Sabbath, what a gracious future our good God has promised us. "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree...planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God" (Psalm 92:12-13). For the righteous, our future is always onward and upward. Our spiritual strength will grow stronger even as our physical strength waxes and wanes.

Sabbath helps us anticipate God's continual purpose for us. The righteous "will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green" (Psalm 92:14). My precious mom died at the ripe old age of ninety-four, and even in an assisted living facility and then in a nursing home, she was still bearing witness to her faith in Jesus. She even took marketing phone calls so she could share the gospel of Christ free of charge. Even old trees bear good fruit, and God's people should be fruitful until closing time.

Finally, the Sabbath helps us anticipate his consummate perfection of us. As a result, we can be firm in our testimony. With our last breath and into our last days we should be "proclaiming, 'The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him'" (Psalm 92:15). The God who gave us the Sabbath deserves our highest celebration, proclamation, exaltation, and anticipation. With him the best is yet to come in that day when we are all united to live in eternal Sabbath forever!

**Prayer for This Week:** *Most High God, let me celebrate your majesty, proclaim your mercy, exalt your virtue, and anticipate your victory in my life and in the world you made.*

**Question for This Week:** List all the good reasons you have for not observing a Sabbath. How can you cooperate with God to establish this practice in your life?

Going Global

**Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 96
- John 14:5-14
- Deuteronomy 6:1-9
- Ephesians 4:1-6
- Luke 24:36-49

**We Must Go Global**

Economists tell us that one of the greatest ways we can grow our economy is to get more companies exporting more products overseas. If you own a company that exports products, you not only grow faster, but you are almost 10 percent less likely to go out of business than companies that don't export. In fact, there are several nations around the world whose very existence depends upon their ability to export petroleum.

Exportation is extremely important to our country too. We export over two trillion dollars a year of goods and services, which accounts for almost 14 percent of our economy. Exporting creates almost seven million jobs in the United States.

For a totally different reason, the church, too, has to be in the export business. We have two things we need to export: a master and a message.

We need to export these things not for a bottom-line profit but because the world needs what we have to offer! Additionally, our founder, Jesus Christ, commanded this “exporting” that we call “missions.”

There are people both inside and outside the church who do not believe we ought to be exporting our message. Some people think there are enough folks here in America who need Jesus so we ought to pour all our energy into making that fire burn brighter right here. Others believe that we worship the same God as every other religion, so what is the point? Still others say that all religions teach the same thing, so sharing about Christianity is no different than any other faith. None of these are true, and Psalm 96 shows us why.

## **We Must Share the Only Guarantee That Is Reliable**

The brilliant philosopher Madonna made a statement that reflects modern thinking: “I do believe that all paths lead to God. It is a shame that we end up having religious wars, because so many of the messages are the same.” In this one statement, Madonna promoted two false ideas: we all worship the same God (just in different ways and call him different names) and all of our messages and paths to God are the same. She may be the bestselling female recording artist of all time, but she severely fails at her religious philosophy.

For instance, Hinduism teaches that many gods (devas) exist and each one reflects some aspect of ultimate reality. Buddhism rejects Hinduism, not because of Hinduism’s belief in many gods, but it rejects belief in God altogether. You don’t have to have a PhD to see there is a fundamental contradiction. Christianity teaches that there is one God, and if there is one God, there cannot be many gods.<sup>15</sup> Since this plurality of thought exists, then the methods to reach that God or ultimate reality must be (and are!) equally diverse.

In Kyoto, Japan, there is a very unusual place of worship called “The Temple of the Thousand Buddhas.” It is unique because you can go into that temple and custom design your own god. This temple is filled with more than a thousand likenesses of Buddha, each one a little different from the other one. You simply enter and choose which god you like the best.



Because of what we believe as Christians, we have to courageously stand by the claim and the conviction that two-thirds of the world's peoples are mistaken in what they believe. I realize that is breathtakingly audacious, and many would say wickedly arrogant, to say that of the 4200 religions in the world, 4199 of them are wrong. Where in the world do we get such an idea? It comes directly out of the Bible.

Psalm 96 unequivocally teaches that we have both the responsibility and the accountability to *go global* with our master and with our message. It provides several key reasons why we must be mission minded if we want to be faithful to what we believe and who we believe in. We must make God known to those who don't know him.

## **We Must Share the Only God That Is Real**

One basic doctrine threads through the entire Bible's sixty-six books: There is only one God. The people God called out for himself—first the nation of Israel and later the Christians—were marked by a belief in one God.

The psalmist supports this same doctrine and exposes why it's so important: "For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens" (Psalm 96:4-5 ESV). The psalmist says that all of these other so-called gods are *idols*. The Hebrew word for idols literally means "nothings." It is not just that any other god except the God of the Bible is ineffective, or not quite as powerful, or of a lesser quality; it is that they are nonexistent. If you worship anything or anyone else, you worship *nothing*.

Something you never hear about in our culture is idolatry. The Bible is not concerned so much with atheism as it is idolatry. It was everywhere, and now we live in a culture that increasingly worships gods of our own design. You hear it all the time. "My god is okay with how I live." "My god would never allow someone to go to hell." "My god would never say there is only one way to him." To which both the psalmist and the entire witness of Scripture says, "There is only one real God." This is why we must go global. We must share the only God who is real.

## **We Must Share the Only Gospel That Saves**

The psalmist begins with these words. “Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day” (Psalm 96:1-2 ESV). Now the word “tell” is the Hebrew term *basar*. It means “to announce good news.”

Evangelism is simply sharing the good news that salvation is available to anyone who will place their faith in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead. Missions is simply taking that message around the world to others who need to hear it as well. We have no right to keep this good news to ourselves, which is why the psalmist goes on to say, “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!” (Psalm 96:3 ESV).

In this one message we find that there is only one salvation—not many. There is only one path to that salvation—not many. There is only one God who gives salvation—not many. While every other religion on this planet demonstrates humanity’s way of trying to get to God, Christianity is the belief that God is the one reaching out to humanity.

The same thing is true about salvation. Buddhism says you save yourself by ceasing all desire for worldly things. Confucianism says you save yourself through education, self-cultivation, living a moral life. Hinduism says you save yourself by detaching yourself and trying to live in transcendental unity with the divine force of the universe. Islam says you save yourself through a life of good deeds. Judaism says you save yourself by keeping the law. Christianity says you can’t save yourself! You need a savior and his name is Jesus.

We have a message called the gospel. This gospel is that God has come to rescue and redeem all of creation by sending Jesus Christ who died on a cross for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead, thereby allowing us to place our faith in him for forgiveness and salvation. We need to share the only gospel that will save. This is what that gospel is.

## **We Must Share the Only Grace That Is Available**

During a religion conference in Great Britain years ago, a debate took place regarding what made the Christian faith so unique. Big ideas such as the incarnation and resurrection didn’t seem to get much agreement. Then

C.S. Lewis walked into the room, and the debaters turned to him and asked, “What is it that makes Christianity so different from every other religion in the world?” Lewis replied, “That is easy. It is grace.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though this psalm doesn’t use the word grace, grace animates the whole psalm. It’s as if the psalmist declares that God doesn’t choose the nation of Israel because they are mighty or wealthy. He simply chooses them because he loves them. It was all out of grace. The workings of grace make these verses unique.

“Say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.’ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it” (Psalm 96:10-11 ESV). God wants the world to know his grace as he judges and brings the truth to light. His grace is for everyone.

We need to go global. On one mission trip, I was out in the bush in Kenya. Our group split up in different directions with the challenge to return in an hour with anybody we led to Christ. I had one of the most incredible experiences of my life. In a little over an hour just walking along a path, I met 28 people, some walking, some riding bicycles, and some off the path sitting in huts. The youngest was about 15 and the oldest about 75. I brought all 28 people back to the meeting place where to my amazement 117 people prayed to receive Christ. We started two churches under two palm trees that day!

I will probably never see those people again on this planet, but I will see them again in heaven, and I will experience great joy when each one comes up to me and says, “I want to thank you for going global. Because you went global, I found the true way to God.” We are to take the God that we know and make that God known to others. Let’s do it together. Let’s go global.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, fill me with trust and truth so that I might lovingly share your gospel and your grace with others.*

**Question for This Week:** We were not designed to keep all of God’s truth for ourselves. What keeps you from sharing it with others?

## 34

### Thank You, God

#### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 97
- Proverbs 15:3
- Nehemiah 9:32-37
- Deuteronomy 32:1-4
- John 8:12-20

#### **Thanks, But No Thanks**

We love to encourage one another to be thankful, but most of the time, our gratitude only goes up to a point. We thank God for our health, until we lose it. We thank God for money, until we don't have any. We thank God for our job, until we are fired. We thank God for our family, until our home becomes a war zone.

We all live demanding lives. We all have times when it is difficult to show gratitude. Sometimes, it is even hard to be around thankful people. In these times, we feel some tension when we read in Ephesians 5:20 to "always giv[e] thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God" (NASB). We'd like to say to the apostle Paul who wrote those words, "That's easy for you to say!" But when we learn that Paul wrote those

words in a Roman prison facing death, we grow quiet again. How could he always have an attitude of gratitude in his heart? How can you?

I believe the answer is found in Psalm 97. The author of this psalm is awed by the greatness of God. He is astounded at what God does and who he is. We learn from the psalmist that it's possible to always be thankful to God when we focus on who he is and what he does. We need to learn to be thankful not just for the gift but for the giver. According to this psalm, there are several things we can always be thankful for.

## **Be Thankful That God Is Ruling Over the Earth**

In the 1960s in the Congo, there was an uprising when the Mau-Mau revolutionaries invaded the country. Helen Roseveare, a British medical missionary, stayed through the unrest. She was a godly, gracious, innocent woman of God and she was raped, assaulted, humiliated, and degraded beyond belief.

While recovering from that horrible event, she said that she and the Lord grew closer than they had ever been before. She wrote this statement in her Bible in the form of a question from God to her: "Can you thank me for trusting you with this experience even if on this earth I never tell you why?" Helen decided that she could, and even though she left the Congo, she returned six years later to continue to build hospitals and reestablish the torn community.

Dictators come and go. Empires rise and fall. Nations wax and wane. Civilizations live and die. But God reigns forever. He is not only the maker of this universe, but he is also the ruler of this universe. Psalm 97 begins: "The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice" (Psalm 97:1). People don't like it, despise it, and want to deny it, but God is in charge. He is ruling and overruling the affairs of humanity.

You can deny the very existence of God, but it doesn't dilute the fact that he is in control. Benjamin Franklin once said, "I have lived a long time, and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men."

That means several things: Nothing can happen anywhere in the universe without God's awareness. God is never taken by surprise and is never removed from his sovereignty. God knows every thought going

through a person's mind, every word that comes out of a person's mouth, and every deed performed by a person's hands.

Though God does not will every circumstance, he does have a will in every circumstance. This means there are going to be times when things will happen that you will not understand. Even so, you can be thankful for God's loving leadership. He never stops ruling over all the earth.

## **Be Thankful That God Is Righteous in All He Does**

Two words capture the very foundation of who God is and how he acts: righteousness and justice. "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" (Psalm 97:2). We never have to defend what God does, because he always does what is right. He cannot do wrong. He is righteous.

This verse also says that God is just. Righteousness is the way that God deals with us, but justice is what God gives to us. Everyone, the wicked and the righteous, will receive justice. There will be no technicalities and no loopholes. The wicked will experience no leniency, no bribing of the judge, no high-powered lawyer to get them off. Justice will be done.

Even when things are at their worst, God is still doing the right thing. Corrie ten Boom was a Christian who was taken captive by the Nazis and sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Upon arriving, she and her sister, Betsy, walked into the barrack. Not only did they find it overcrowded, but it was also infested with fleas.

That day they read together Paul's instructions in 1 Thessalonians to rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances. Corrie said, "I'll give God thanks for some things, but I am not going to thank God for these fleas." Betsy persisted and said, "God said to be thankful in all things, so we want to give thanks for the fleas." And so they did.

During the months at that camp, they openly held Bible studies and prayer meetings in their barrack, and the guards never interfered. Not until they were getting out of that prison did they learn the reason the guards would not enter the barrack—they didn't like the fleas.

Charles Spurgeon once said, "When you cannot trace the hand of God, you can always trust the heart of God." God always does what is right and acts justly. That is why we can always be thankful.

## **Be Thankful That God Is Real Even When It Doesn't Seem Like It**

God is not only magnificent, he is mysterious. He cannot be solved by concentration, calculation, or computerization. “For you, LORD, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods” (Psalm 97:9). Words like “Most High” and “exalted” are not referring to distance or altitude. The psalmist is not painting the picture of some far-out deity who is remote and removed from the world he created. Just the opposite—God is intimately concerned with the affairs of his people.

When I was a freshman in college, my faith went through a severe testing. An atheistic professor publicly challenged the existence of God, and when I discussed the matter with him privately, he asked me, “Where did God come from?” I went back to my room and began to ponder that question. For the first time in my life, my Christian faith was shaken to its very foundation. I began to doubt there even was a God. I naively thought that everything had a beginning, and if everything had a beginning, then God had to have a beginning.

Fortunately, I felt comfortable to call my Bible-believing pastor and share my doubts. He said something I have never forgotten: “Son, if you could know everything there is to know about God, he would no longer be God.” I was reassured at this. I do know God, but I do not know him exhaustively, and that is why he is God. I can be thankful that God is real even at times when I wonder.

There are times when God doesn't seem real just because we cannot understand his ways. We think to ourselves, “If I were God, I wouldn't let things happen like that.” That is why verse 2 says, “Clouds and thick darkness surround him” (Psalm 97:2). It is hard to see through clouds and darkness. Even though in one sense we can see God through the Bible, we still see him in a dark and limited way. The psalmist is reminding us that God is sovereign and in control. We can always be thankful that God is absolutely real and he is absolutely controlling the whole universe he created.

## **Be Thankful That God Is Responsive to Our Needs**

Right now, pull out a pen and note three things about God that you are thankful for—not *things* you're thankful for but things about God himself. For instance, his graciousness for healing you from sickness, his faithfulness for hearing you when you call, or his generosity for providing for your every need. Write down three things, and then take note that none of those things about God will ever change, and you can always be thankful for this regardless of your circumstances.

Here are two things you can take away with you. First, God will always guard you. Verse 10 tells us, "Let those who love the LORD hate evil, for he guards the lives of his faithful ones" (Psalm 97:10). That word "guards" literally means "to put a hedge around" or "to build a fence around." Whether you see it or not, if you are a child of God, God has built a fence around you. The only things that penetrate that fence are used by God for your ultimate good. Even when you follow the Lord, you are going to have troubles, trials, tribulations, and temptations just like everybody else, but the hand of God will protect you from each one of them.

Not only will God guard you, but God will guide you. Verse 11 says, "Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart" (Psalm 97:11). Light in the Bible is a metaphor for the guidance of God. When you become his follower, God guarantees that if you will live for him, love him, serve him, and obey him, you will never walk in darkness. He will guard you as you do his will and he will guide you in every decision you make.

If you follow God long enough, you will discover something. You will be able to look back on your life and see how God ordered your steps. That is why the psalmist closes with these words, "Rejoice in the LORD, you who are righteous, and praise his holy name" (Psalm 97:12). Be grateful for the Lord and his persistent guard. Be glad in the Lord no matter where his guidance takes you. Be thankful for who the Lord is and what he does.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, I am grateful that you are ruling, righteous, real, and responsive! I am thankful for your guard and your guidance in every circumstance of my life.*

**Question for This Week:** Keep adding to your list of gratitude. Add more characteristics of God that you have experienced firsthand.



Open the Doors

**Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 100
- Luke 24:50-53
- Deuteronomy 28:47-48
- Ephesians 1:15-23
- Hebrews 13:15-16

**Meeting God Willingly**

I have met two presidents, the prime minister of Israel, hall-of-fame athletes and coaches, and world-champion golfers. But the one person I've met who awed me like no other was Chuck Norris.

You may know Chuck Norris from his action films and television shows. You may not know that before Norris was a celebrity, he was a six-time undefeated world professional middleweight karate champion and the first human being in the Western Hemisphere to earn an eighth-degree black belt in tae kwon do. Chuck Norris is one tough dude.

Though I've met famous people before, I've never had the opportunity to meet an earthly king. And yet I have a standing invitation to walk into the very throne room of the King of all kings who created and runs this universe. What's remarkable is not so much that you can meet with this

King any time you want, without reservation or appointment, but that this King wants to meet with you! He has even given you the keys to the door and tells you how to act and what to say when you walk in. You don't have to be nervous. You don't have to be fearful.

Certain keys open doors into the presence of the King of this universe. Psalm 100 is a beautiful song that describes how to approach God anytime, anywhere. When you come into God's presence the right way with the right heart, you get up close and personal every time. Here are four practices that ensure us an audience with the King we desire.

## **Worshipping God Joyfully**

No book in the Bible talks more about worship than the book of Psalms and no psalm talks more about worship than Psalm 100. Get ready, because the worship we find here is far different from the worship that takes place in most churches.

“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!” (Psalm 100:1 ESV). The psalmist says real worship involves shouting, serving, and singing. The word for “noise” literally means “a sound that splits the ear.” The psalmist is talking about worshipping with energy, enthusiasm, and excitement. Worship should show emotion. We shouldn't act like maniacs, but it's easier to cool down a maniac than heat up a corpse.

Too often, particularly in our public worship, we are conscious of who is standing around us. Instead, we ought to think less about how others interpret us and more about how God inspires us. It might change the way we worship. When we come into God's presence, he ought to know by the way we act and look that we are glad to see him.

## **Serving God Gladly**

The more up close and personal you get with God, the more eagerly you want to serve God. The psalmist says, “Serve the LORD with gladness!” (Psalm 100:2 ESV). I know some of you are saying, “Wait a minute. I thought we were talking about worship? Where does service come in?”

You haven't really worshiped God until you serve him and his creation. When you begin to see your service as an act of worship, and when you begin to see what you do for God as an act of gratitude for what he has done

for you, you will no longer see service as a duty. It will be a delight. It won't be a job; it will be a ministry.

God is not interested in people just doing a job. He wants you to serve him "with gladness." How do you know when you are close to God? For me, it is when I am happy to serve him and his people. Paul, speaking to the men of Athens, throws us some more food for thought: "Nor is [God] served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25 ESV). We are to serve God with gladness, because when we serve him, we are not bearing the burden of meeting his needs; we are rejoicing in a service where he meets our needs.<sup>17</sup> God doesn't need us serving him to make him happy. We need to serve God to make us happy. That is another key that opens the door.

## **Thanking God Humbly**

All I have talked about so far has gotten us to the entrance, but before you can get to the King, you've got to go through the gate and then into the court. The key to the gate is gratitude: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving" (Psalm 100:4 ESV). We are told to just come on in and enter his gates. He requires no ticket nor credentials, but he also doesn't want us to bring our griping and complaining. Enter his gates with thanksgiving.

We have every reason to be thankful in America. Many of us will eat more food in a day than most of the world will eat in a month. We will drive air-conditioned automobiles, forgetting that billions of people walk gravelly roads to work. We've got more clothes hanging in our closets than the average person will ever see in their lifetime. We will sleep in a bed when much of the world sleeps on dirt floors.

When we believe that we are the real source of our resources, we fall prey to greed, rebellion, lust, irresponsibility, and poor stewardship. We won't give thanks if we perceive that we are the one pulling all the weight. Offering thanks to God releases us from the place of control and puts God in that position, where he firmly belongs.

Giving thanks once a year just isn't enough. If we save up all our gratitude for Thanksgiving, then how can we possibly worship the other weeks out of the year? Gratitude is a form of worship, and if we're going to

enter God's gates any time we want, then we need to make this a regular practice.

Always enter into his presence with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is the music that brightens the face of God. It is the spark that warms the heart of God. It is the love that kisses the hand of God. No matter how bad our situation, we all have something we can be thankful for.

## **Praising God Constantly**

With thanksgiving you get into the gate, but with praise you get into the court. God wants you to come into his presence, and when you do, before you ask him for anything, thank him for what he has done and praise him for who he is. The Hebrew word for "praise" literally means "to be excited with great joy."

The first half of this verse changed my view about music. It says, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!" (Psalm 100:4 ESV). I know some people criticize praise choruses, but I believe our entire life ought to be a praise chorus. When you think about a God who created you when he didn't have to, who loves you even though you don't deserve it, who sent his Son to die for your sins, and who even now is creating an eternal home for his children, how can you not be filled with praise every time you come into his presence? Bless his name, indeed!

When we get up close and personal with God and worship him, it is not so he will bless us, but so we can bless him. Why are we to praise him? Why are we to thank him? Why are we to be shouting and serving and singing? Why should we be so enthusiastic in our worship? Why should we make it a point in our life to carry God with us everywhere we go and to always live in his presence? The answer is in verse 5: "For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations" (Psalm 100:5 ESV).

God is good all the time. He loves us with an everlasting love that will never quit. He is faithful to us at all times and all places and never fails to keep his promises. No wonder we ought to meet God willingly, worship God joyfully, serve God gladly, thank him humbly, and praise him constantly. Not only did he design you, but he wants to connect with you

and keep you in his presence. And to be in his presence, we have to first open the doors.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Holy Father, give me the desire to meet with you, the faith to worship you, the strength to serve you, and the humility to praise you with gratitude.*

**Question for This Week:** Challenge yourself this week. Write down five things you're thankful for every day and offer them to God as your practice of worship.

## **Are You Lonesome Tonight?**

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 102
- Ecclesiastes 4:7-12
- Psalm 25:16-22
- Psalm 68:4-6
- John 16:25-33

### **Loneliness and Isolation**

One of the more remote areas in America may well be Thorofare Ranger Station. It lies in the southeast corner of Yellowstone National Park and consists of a cabin, a barn, and a corral. To get to the station, one of the rangers drives about fifteen miles from his home, then saddles up a horse and rides thirty-two miles into the wilderness. The station is in the middle of nowhere.

The most remote place in the world, however, is the heart of a lonely person. Several years ago I read a news story that saddened me. The mummified body of a man named Bill was found sitting in a chair in front of his TV. Doctors determined that he had been dead for more than four years and had died of natural causes. He was unemployed, fifty-one years old, and no one had reported him missing. He had no relatives and lived in

an attic apartment of an otherwise unoccupied house. His body was found when a real estate dealer went to inspect the house for someone who inherited it.

Thomas Wolfe, one of our country's greatest novelists, once wrote: "Loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon...is the central and inevitable fact of human existence."<sup>18</sup> We know this is true because people from all walks of life experience loneliness. Money cannot insure against it; position cannot rise above it; power cannot stand before it. Janis Joplin, queen of the rock singers in the mid-sixties, died from an overdose of heroine. Shortly before she died she said to a friend: "When I'm not on the theatre stage, I just lie around, watch television, and feel very lonely."<sup>19</sup>

The author of Psalm 102 knew what it was to be lonely. He says in verses 6 and 7, "I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert. I lie awake, and am like a sparrow alone on the housetop" (NKJV). Many of you reading this might be thinking, "That's exactly how alone I feel." Let's consider how to rise above the cloud of loneliness.

## **Define the Problem of Loneliness**

You can be alone without being lonely. As a matter of fact, there are times when we all need to be alone. But you can be lonely without being alone. You can be in a crowd of thousands and still feel very lonely. Henry David Thoreau once said, "A city is a place where hundreds of people are lonely together." We all want to be noticed by someone else. We all want recognition. But we pass by one another often without noticing or being noticed.

Loneliness is not isolation in space, it is insulation in spirit. It is feeling as if you're cut off, unnoticed, unloved, uncared for, unneeded, maybe even unnecessary. The silence of loneliness speaks loudly at night as you crawl into an empty bed because your spouse has walked out or recently died or you're in a home that is quiet because all the kids have moved out. Loneliness calls out from an empty mailbox or from a phone that never rings.

Loneliness is destructive to our psyches. It has been estimated that 80 percent of the people who seek psychiatric help do so primarily because of

feelings associated with loneliness.<sup>20</sup> Many people become suicidal because they cannot handle the overwhelming feeling of it.

The root cause of loneliness is sin. The first emotion Adam felt in the Garden of Eden after he sinned was loneliness. He knew that his fellowship with God had been cut off and he tried to hide his loneliness from God. But even there in the Garden we see and understand that God himself can cure loneliness.

## **Determine the Presence of Loneliness**

If you're going to battle loneliness successfully, you must at least understand why you are lonely. There is no denying the existence or the effects of loneliness; it permeates our culture. Our advertising is replete with happy relationships, and our social media pages brag about relationships and connections. The result is that we can feel left out. We've even added a new acronym to the dictionary: FOMO. This "fear of missing out" is a new anxiety that everyone is somewhere else doing something important or exciting without us.

Loneliness can be either an infrequent state or a way of life and it comes in different varieties. Dr. Jeffrey Young of Columbia University describes three kinds of loneliness:

- *Transient loneliness* lasts anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours, and periodically almost everyone experiences transient loneliness.
- *Situational loneliness* results from a significant event. Some people are lonely because their spouse dies, or their best friend moves away, or perhaps they move to a different location where they know absolutely no one.
- *Chronic loneliness* is where people tend to become preoccupied with themselves and with their problems. They, in effect, determine to be lonely. Young classifies chronically lonely individuals as those who feel lonely for more than two years at a time apart from any traumatic event.<sup>21</sup>



Some people are lonely because they choose to be alone. We call them “loners.” Some people are lonely because of their own faults. They are so in love with themselves and so opinionated that people can’t stand to be around them. Still others are lonely because they are in a position that has no peers, such as being the president of a major university, chief administrator of a large hospital, or senior pastor of a large church.

So with loneliness affecting so many of us in so many parts of society, what do we do to counter it? How can we become more connected and less alone?

## **Defeat the Power of Loneliness**

Loneliness leaves a vacuum in every soul, which people try to fill in every way imaginable. But here is what I think works the best.

First of all, reach up to the Savior. Jesus understands your loneliness. Psalm 102 is a messianic psalm, which means it is a prophecy of Jesus Christ himself. Jesus knew what it was to be lonely. In fact, I believe Jesus knew loneliness as no other person who has ever lived has known loneliness.

Jesus understands what it is to be rejected. He can relate to that feeling of “nobody cares.” John said about Jesus, “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). Rejected by his family, rejected by his friends, and rejected by the religious elite, Jesus knew what it was to be lonely. At his greatest hour of need, the crucifixion, his closest friends deserted him.

Even on the cross Jesus was rejected by his own Father. You remember as he died on the cross he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” At that moment Jesus Christ became the loneliest person who ever has lived or ever will live. Believe me, Jesus understands your loneliness.

He knows what it is to be alone, and he knows what it is to be lonely. But Jesus has given us a promise that with God we will never be alone. As a child of God, you enjoy the permanent company of God the Father who said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5). You enjoy unbroken fellowship with God the Son who said, “surely I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). You enjoy the continuing presence of

God the Holy Spirit whom we are told will “be with you forever” (John 14:16). The first cure for loneliness is to reach up to the Savior.

## **Diminish the Plenitude of Loneliness**

Second, reach out to the suffering. Look for someone else who is lonely and befriend them. Set aside your loneliness and try to be with them in theirs. People everywhere are feeling deeply alone and purposeless. Confusing circumstances cloud their vision to their true identity. They fear loss and aren't sure who to reach out to. Sometimes they try reaching out to anyone who will listen.

In the spring of 2015, a J.K. Rowling fan reached out to her on Twitter with a solemn question: “This may get lost in the noise, but what would you say to someone who has failed to find meaning and wants to finally give up?” J.K. Rowling did not let this cry for companionship and care go unanswered. She tweeted back and forth with the girl, and her final statement was, “And I'd say, the world is full of wonderful things you haven't seen yet. Don't ever give up on the chance of seeing them.” If a highly respected celebrity can take the time to allay someone's fears of not being seen or heard, what might you be able to do with the checker at the grocery store, the barista, the neighbor, the friend?

Jesus is the God of all comfort. Through his death, Christ defeated our greatest source of stress, which was a fractured relationship with God. We are members of God's flock, and he is our shepherd; therefore we have present and eternal comfort.

Several years ago, I met an elderly woman by the name of Alma on an airplane. Alma had become pregnant at sixteen, and she told me that back then it carried much more shame than it does today. All her former friends deserted her and she felt so alone. One day she was contemplating suicide when she said a voice spoke to her out of the blue, “Alma, you are not alone if you have me.” That's all the voice kept saying, “Alma, you are not alone if you have me.”

She said at that point she began to honestly and diligently seek the Lord. She eventually got on her knees and asked Jesus Christ to come into her heart. “Brother Merritt, that was over fifty years ago,” she said, “and I

realize today that as long as I have Jesus, I am not alone.” If you are lonely, come to Jesus Christ and you will never be alone again.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, I confess that instead of finding comfort in you, I succumb to anxiety. I do not seek your Spirit, and I do not obey your word. Draw me to you again so that I might know your companionship.*

**Question for This Week:** Consider who in your circles of relationships might be feeling lonely right now. What can you do this week to reach out to them with the gift of companionship?

## Never Forget

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 103
- Romans 6:1-7
- Matthew 9:1-8
- Ephesians 1:3-10
- Philippians 4:10-19

### **Commit to Memory**

A recent ad campaign for an insurance company claims that “life comes at you fast,” and this is so true. Your daily interactions offer you a host of things to remember: where did you put your phone, what is the next word in your presentation, did you feed the pets, and when do your kids need to be picked up? It is amazing that such important details are so easy to forget, but with all the information we’re bombarded with it is no wonder.

A recent research study was commissioned by the people at 3M to find out the things we often forget. They came up with a list called “The Forgotten Fifty” and these five items top the list:<sup>22</sup>

1. forgetting what you went into a room for
2. misplacing keys

3. forgetting things on your grocery shop
4. people's names when you're introducing them
5. where you put your pen

While there are mental tricks for remembering more urgent needs, some things need to go into our long-term memory so that we can never forget. David reminds us of this in one of the most beautiful uplifting songs in the entire psalter. Psalm 103 is unique in that it is not addressed to God or to others but in fact the psalmist is singing to himself.

In the first two verses David is reminding himself never to forget the benefits and blessings of God: "Praise the LORD, my soul...and forget not all his benefits" (Psalm 103:1-2). Then he recounts four specific benefits we should remember all the days of our lives.

### **Never Forget that God Releases Us from Guilt**

God is the one who "forgives all your sins" (Psalm 103:3). That word "all" is big to David. In verse 1, he wants to praise God with "*all* my inmost being." In verse 2, he is thankful to God for "*all* his benefits." In verses 21 and 22, he wants "*all* [God's] heavenly hosts" and "*all* his works" to praise him. When David says all, he means *all*.

We should remember to praise and thank God for forgiving us of *all* our sins and releasing us from guilt. Forgiveness is foundational to a relationship to God and just one renegade, unforgiven sin would prevent any chance of knowing God personally. Even one sin would block us from entering into an eternal relationship with him. This is by far our greatest God-given benefit, for nothing else in life matters at all if sinners are not cleansed from "all their guilty stains."<sup>23</sup>

This release is breathtaking in its scope. David describes our forgiveness in this way, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Max Lucado puts this in great perspective:

How far is the east from the west? Further and further by the moment. Travel west and you can make laps around the globe

and never go east. Journey east and, if you desire, maintain an easterly course indefinitely. Not so with the other two directions. If you go north or south, you'll eventually reach the North or South Pole and change directions. But east and west have no turning points.<sup>24</sup>

Nothing or no one can or will ever bring up our sins again! We are totally released from our guilt.

## **Never Forget that God Relieves Us of Grief**

God also “heals all your diseases” (Psalm 103:3). One of the greatest causes of personal grief is physical sickness, either ours or those close to us. When our bodies revolt against our wishes, when we find ourselves disabled in some way, and when those we love are incapable of living as they once lived, we experience real loss. We love to plant our identity in what we can do, and when we can't do it anymore, that faulty identity experiences a significant shift.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that this benefit follows the statement that God forgives all our sins should make us at least examine our illnesses to see if personal misdeeds might be contributing. That said, sickness is not always directly caused by our sinfulness. Does personal sin cause cancer? Certainly not. The fact that we live in a fallen world leaves us open to the possibility of cruel maladies. But forgiving sins often accompanied Jesus' physical healings. Past sin can contribute to present afflictions, and if God is the healer of *all* our diseases, then we should consider both the physical and spiritual ailments we suffer as something he desires to heal.

The psalmist's statement is true in two ways. On the one hand, all healing is from God. There is a saying that “the doctor treats but God heals.” All the doctors, drugs, and hospitals in the world cannot heal a common cold without the help of the Great Physician. Hanging on the wall of one doctor's office was this quip: “God does the healing. I charge the fee.” Ambrose Pare, a sixteenth-century French surgeon, said, “I apply the dressing, but God heals the wound.”

This statement is also true in the sense that God does indeed heal *all* our diseases either temporarily or permanently. Even if God heals us here and

now, eventually we still die. However, one day our healing will be permanent and eternal, and we will go to a place where disease and grief are never seen again. We should never forget how God relieves us of grief, both now and forever.

## **Never Forget that God Redeems Us by Grace**

God is the one who “redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion” (Psalm 103:4). Again, we can see the connection between the last benefit and this one. Not every illness leads to death, but some do. Here, the pit is Sheol, which is a place of spiritual death. David is giving us a remarkable picture of resurrection. Because of Jesus, we will have our bodies resurrected from physical death and our souls from spiritual death.

This redemption is free but it is not cheap. In the Old Testament, redemption involves deliverance from bondage based on the payment of a price by a redeemer.<sup>26</sup> God is the only one who can redeem us. In the Old Testament, God is revealed as the only one capable of redeeming Israel. No one else could pay the price or bear the cost.

We try to establish our own redemption in many different ways: we minimize, fantasize, and rationalize. We succumb to addictive behaviors. We hide or we do the opposite and falsely perform. All of these efforts are really attempts to forget our faults and failures.

A short scene in the classic allegory *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry demonstrates this:

“Why are you drinking?” demanded the little prince.

“So that I may forget,” replied the tippler.

“Forget what?” inquired the little prince, who was already sorry for him.

“Forget that I am ashamed,” the tippler confessed, hanging his head.

“Ashamed of what?” insisted the little prince, who wanted to help him.

“Ashamed of drinking!”

Trying to fix and forget our flaws is like trying to fix a Rolls-Royce in the driveway with ramshackle tools and defective supplies. The policy of Rolls-Royce is that the only place a Rolls-Royce can be repaired is in the factory where it was made. Likewise, only the God who made us can redeem us and only the perfect sacrifice of God’s Son can meet the price tag

of our guilt that requires our redemption.<sup>27</sup> We can never forget God's true redemption by his grace.

## **Never Forget that God Rewards Us with Good**

Finally, we are told that God is the one who “satisfies your desires with good things” (Psalm 103:5). God satisfies our desires not by giving us what we always want but what we always need. The one thing we might forget the most is the goodness of God in our everyday life.

I take for granted my ability to hear the birds sing, the ocean roar, and children play, but I have a wonderful brother who is deaf. I can go to the store and buy milk any time I need it, but Venezuela is in a food crisis causing people to loot stores.<sup>28</sup> The things we overlook as simple and ordinary are truly evidence of the God from whom every good and perfect gift comes (James 1:17).

Our brains are quite capable of remembering even the simplest things. Science tells us that the one billion neurons in our brains combine in order to create memory space that is equal to 2.5 petabytes (or a million gigabytes).<sup>29</sup> To fill all that storage space, I could record and save three million hours of televised golf—a blessing I would relish. I could just watch golf for more than three hundred years. I would never forget it!

You have been given a lifetime. In that lifetime you have about 29,200 days or 700,800 hours. You experience joy and loss, calm and challenge, welcome and rejection, and shifts and stagnation. God's goodness is present with you in *all* of it, in the everyday workaday minutes and in the electrifyingly wonderful moments. He is always good, and we have each living moment in which to experience it.

Another psalmist, Asaph, describes how his true treasure was simply to be with God: “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good” (Psalm 73:28 NASB). Things, money, family, titles, appearances, power, the past and the future are not, ultimately, my “good.” Anything that we put in place of nearness to God is not his ultimate reward. We like to take good things and make them ultimate things, but his ultimate reward is himself.

As a boy growing up I remember well an old song my small country church sang many times: “Count your many blessings, name them one by



one, and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.”<sup>30</sup> Keep counting and never forget!

**Prayer for This Week:** *Spirit of Life, recall to my mind and my heart the remarkable works of your goodness and grace.*

**Question for This Week:** If you never forgot these truths about God, how would it affect the way you live?

## 38

### God Thing

#### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 103:19
- Psalm 115:2-8
- Psalm 135:5-7
- Matthew 10:26-31
- Matthew 6:25-34

#### **I Can Replace Distortion with Doctrine**

Have you ever had an experience that against all odds, despite all the mistakes you contributed, worked out in a shockingly positive and extraordinary way? People of Christian faith often call an experience like this “a God thing,” but I’ve noticed that “God things” typically refer only to good things. Are the bad things, then, the “devil’s things”?

Who decides what things happen and when and to whom? Does the devil have control over “his things”? If so, we should live in constant fear of the uncertainty of whether the next thing is a God thing or a devil thing. After all, the greatest God thing of all was the cross of Jesus Christ. How many of us would have called it a devil thing if we’d witnessed it?

There are four words that will debunk this way of thinking and change your entire perspective on your past, present, and future. They are *the*

*sovereignty of God.* And with these four words as our filter, all things become God things.

Over and over, the Psalms tell of the sovereignty of God:

- “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all” (Psalm 103:19 NASB).
- “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (Psalm 115:3).
- “I, too, give witness to the greatness of GOD, our Lord, high above all other gods. He does just as he pleases—however, wherever, whenever” (Psalm 135:5-6 MSG).

These verses tell us that God is in control. A sovereign God possesses supreme power and authority over everyone and everything so that he is in complete control and can accomplish whatever he pleases, whenever he pleases, and wherever he pleases.

This means that everything happens because God either directly causes it or consciously allows it. It also means there’s no such thing as luck. Nothing happens by chance. Lastly, it means that God is in perpetual motion. He never stops, and this, I find, is comforting especially when I’m lost in pain and confusion. The pain you experience from your past, the pressures you’re experiencing in the present, and problems you may face in the future can be trusted to the God who controls and allows it all.

## **I Can Replace Bitterness with Blessing**

One of the greatest verses in the Bible comes from the life of Joseph, a man who endured abandonment, slavery, mistreatment, rape accusations, and then spent thirteen years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit. Upon meeting up with his brothers, who had started it all twenty plus years earlier, he said to them: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20). If we understand the context of this statement, we learn that God had his hand on Joseph in a very special way. Though the circumstances of Joseph’s life were insufferable, they were not beyond the hand of God.

If anyone had reason to feel bitter, it was Joseph, but God showed him how to bless instead. You see, Pharaoh eventually made Joseph the prime minister of Egypt, and because God placed Joseph in that position, he was able to provide food for his family and save an entire nation from starvation.

God sovereignly allows the actions of others for his greater purposes. Joseph also said to his brothers, “So you see, it wasn’t you who sent me here but God” (Genesis 45:8 MSG). God used the evil that his brothers did to advance goodness and glory. He does that with our lives too. No matter how mistreated or manhandled we are, we are not at the mercy of our abusers, but at the mercy of God who is for our flourishing.

The sovereignty of God makes a difference in our perspectives of our past. If you do not believe that God is in control, then you will struggle with anger and bitterness toward others for the rest of your life. However, when you believe that God is in control, you can look back at the people that have mistreated you and say, “I can replace my bitterness with blessing.”

## **I Can Replace Fear with Faith**

One day you can be on top of the world—your job goes well, your family is great, relationships are super, and you wake up and say, “What a beautiful day!” In about five seconds, all of that can change. The doorbell can ring with unannounced company, the office can issue you a pink slip, the doctor can find a spot on the X-ray. If God is in control, then you can know that whatever happens to you today has been filtered through his fingers of wisdom and goodness.

God is sovereign over your past and he is sovereign over your present. Every day we can face our problems in only one of two ways—with fear and frustration or with faith and firmness. I don’t like to think about tragedies we’ve suffered, but I do like to think about how many tragedies we’ve been spared. Countless tragedies are prevented by God, and we don’t even realize it. Maybe you didn’t get that job, but maybe that job would have cost you your marriage. Maybe you got cancer, but that illness and recovery forced you to fill your life with more than work. Maybe you had that financial setback, but you learned what true generosity looks like when others came to your aid.

No life is without problems. Some of you will have a child diagnosed with cancer. Some of you may have a spouse leave you for a lover. Some of you are forced into retirement too early to receive your benefits. The only thing that will help you hold it together and keep you from losing your mind is to remember that God is sovereign. He is in control.

If God is not in control, then I ought to face life with fear; but if God is in control, then I ought to face life with faith. That is the difference God's sovereignty makes to our present—it enables us to trust God. It enables us to face life with faith and not with fear.

## **I Can Replace Worry with Worship**

Some of us have a hard time dealing with the past. Others of us have great difficulty coping with the present. And still more experience anxiety about the future. What do we do with a tomorrow that we have yet to see? Jesus said, "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes" (Matthew 6:34 MSG).

If God is sovereign, why drive yourself into the ground every day as if everything depends upon you? If God is sovereign, why stay up all night, pace the floor, and worry? If God is sovereign, then everything is not on your shoulders but on his. What if you replaced your worry with worship? What if you replaced your grumbling with gratitude and your pessimism with praise? Hasn't God seen you through some difficult traumas already? Why would he not be consistent in the days to come?

The early Christian theologian Augustine, who influenced much of Western Christianity, once said: "We count on God's mercy for our past mistakes; we count on God's love for our present needs; but we count on God's sovereignty for the future." Tomorrow is not in the hands of chance, luck, or blind faith. Tomorrow is in the hands of a merciful, loving, sovereign God.

If the phone rang today and you got the worst news you could imagine, how would you respond to your future? There is a magnificent verse of Scripture that astounds me every time I read it. It describes righteous people who totally trust God: "They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are

steadfast, trusting in the LORD” (Psalm 112:7). Even bad news cannot shake the faith and the foundation of the one who believes in a sovereign God who forgives our past, guides our present, and controls our future.

## **I Can Replace Despair with Dependence**

Just before September 11, 2001, Todd and Lisa Beamer enjoyed a wonderful week together in Rome. The trip was a reward from Todd’s work for a sales contest. While they traveled, Lisa prepared for a Bible study that would start once she returned home. The passage in her study guide for that first week’s lesson was Romans 11:33-36: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” She was thinking about the sovereignty of God and how glad she was to know that God was in control of her life.

They got back home to New Jersey on September 10, and the next day terrorists attacked our country and drove us all into grief and fear and loss. Lisa’s dear husband was one of the victims. Several months later, Lisa discovered something that she would always cherish. The FBI had impounded all the cars belonging to passengers aboard Flight 93. After they released Todd’s car, Lisa’s friends removed all of Todd’s belongings. In the armrest tray between the front seats, they found some Scripture memorization cards Todd used while he was driving. The top card on the stack, the one he read on his way to the airport on 9/11, was Romans 11:33-36, the exact passage of Scripture Lisa had been studying two days before.

The verses that God had put into Lisa’s heart on September 10 were the same verses that God put in Todd’s heart on September 11. Lisa Beamer is a walking testimony that concerning yesterday, you can replace bitterness with blessing; concerning today, you can replace fear with faith; concerning tomorrow, you can replace worry with worship.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord Jesus, whether I struggle with pains from my past, obstacles in my present, or worries about my future, you are with me in all of it because you are merciful, loving, and sovereign.*

**Question for This Week:** Reflect on a time when God's sovereignty provided a blessing to your life and the lives of others. Use this memory to renew your faith in his care of you and your future.

## Some Other Time

### Scriptures for Today

- Psalm 118
- Isaiah 25:9
- Luke 10:38-42
- Ephesians 5:15-20
- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

### Meet Every Day Wisely

Time seems to matter more than ever, but it wasn't always that way. In our own country, there was a time when time *didn't* matter. Before the invention of the railroad, time didn't really matter to anybody. When the railroad was built, trains had to run on time, and time suddenly was moved to the top of people's priority lists. Expressions that had never been heard before, such as "Time is wasting" or "The train is leaving the station," began to be heard all over the country.

In 1790, less than 10 percent of Americans had a clock in their homes and most of those had no minute hand. What we now call standard time came about when railroad schedules were first published in 1883. Our country was divided into four time zones and time became very important.<sup>31</sup>



You can use time in only one of two ways: wisely or foolishly. That is why something the apostle Paul wrote is so true and so important: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:15-17 ESV). That phrase “making the best use of the time” is an accounting term. God wants you to get the full value, to squeeze all the good, out of every moment of your life.

God has not left us alone to sort out how we ought to spend our lives. The wise psalmist wrote, “This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24 ESV). In this one simple statement, we find the single greatest principle on how to get the most out of time: The most important use of our time is to spend it on what’s most important. Let’s consider some steps we can take to use our days wisely.

## **Approach Every Day Thankfully**

The psalmist begins by saying, “This is the day that the LORD has made.” Every single day of our life is a day the Lord made whether it is a sunny day or a rainy day, a hot day or cold day, a good day or bad day—it is a day the Lord has made.

Interestingly the word “made” is the same one that is used throughout the first two chapters of Genesis to describe how God “created” this world. When God created space, he also created time. God created the time we needed to live in his world. In other words, every single day you live is a God-given day.

God gives twenty-four hours a day to everyone. Rich people don’t get twenty-five and poor people don’t get twenty-three. Every watch should remind us of what a precious gift time is. Every day is a gift wrapped up in the platinum of God’s love. Every second is a diamond. Every minute is an emerald. Every hour is a ruby. We should be thankful for every day called “today.”

Have you ever had someone ask you, “What is today?” Normally, they are either asking what day it is or what date it is. One way you can always answer is to say, “This is the day the Lord has made!”

Moses prayed, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). When you have a heart full of God’s wisdom, you will number your days. Every single morning you wake up is a present from God. Will you be thankful for it?

## **Spend Every Day Usefully**

The psalmist isn’t talking about yesterday (“That *was* the day that the Lord made”). He isn’t talking about tomorrow (“That *will be* the day that the Lord will make”). Let me emphasize the present tense verbs in this verse: “This *is* the day that the LORD *has made*.”

The only day that is a gift from God is today. You can’t use yesterday; it is just a memory. You can’t use tomorrow; it is just a possibility. The only time we have to use is today.

When we left the agricultural age and entered the industrial age, we began to realize that time was money. The idea of making workers more efficient, more productive, and making every second count was the order of the day. Many businesses now are open twenty-four hours a day. We multitask feverishly. People rarely just drive a car today; now, we drive and get dressed, or drive and eat, or drive and talk on the phone.

We talk about “saving time” or “making time” or “borrowing time,” but you can’t do any of those things. The time you waste today is gone forever. The time you don’t use today cannot be carried over until tomorrow. We can’t call a timeout like in a ball game. We can’t store time, stretch time, or subtract time. Time knows only one direction and that is forward.

The good news in all of this is that most of us desire to make the best use of our time. The bad news is most of us don’t do it. We regret that we don’t spend every day usefully.

## **Manage Every Day Principally**

The person who summed up the best way to manage our time was President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who said, “What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.” *Urgent tasks* demand your attention right now. These are things like daily deadlines, emails from your boss, perhaps a phone call to return. On the other hand, *important tasks* contribute to your long-term goals. These are things like staying healthy

and fit, getting financially secure, spending time with your family, and growing spiritually.

Eisenhower said you could divide everything you do into four categories:

1. Important and urgent. These are things like taking care of a crying baby, handling a work crisis, or sending your mortgage payment in on time.
2. Important but not urgent. These are things like attending your child's performance, getting enough sleep and exercise, or spending time with your good friends.
3. Not important but urgent. These are things like booking a flight, answering a phone call, or returning someone's email.
4. Not important and not urgent. These are things like watching *The Walking Dead*, checking your Twitter account, eating dessert, or playing Pokémon Go.

If the important doesn't get on your calendar first, the urgent will dominate your time. Of those four categories, the two that ought to always make your to-do list are the "important and urgent" and then, second, the "important but not urgent." Whatever is truly important always gets top billing and top priority.

Begin today to think about those things that you would tag as important in your life and put those first daily. There will still be time for those things that are neither important nor urgent, such as playing golf, watching TV, or going to a movie. As my dear late friend, Zig Ziglar, put it, "If you will do what you ought to do when you ought to do it, then you can do what you want to do when you want to do it." This is the day the Lord has made. Manage it principally.

## **Live Every Day Joyfully**

All of us are going to have days when we encounter things we can't change and have no control over. Our to-do list will get interrupted, things won't go the way we want them to go, and experiences won't pan out like

we'd hoped. Those are things we simply cannot control and lead to what we call "bad days."

I can guarantee you that you can count on at least one bad day a month. But the psalmist tells us, "let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24 ESV). The psalmist is plain that we should enjoy every day God gives us. Don't let the bad things that happen take the joy away from all the good things that happen to us every day. There is always a rose we can smell somewhere. No matter what else is going on in our life today, we can rejoice that God loves us, he is for us, and he will work everything out for our good. We can rejoice that we are forgiven and we have eternal life if we know Jesus. We can rejoice that we have another day where we can thank God, praise God, love God, serve God, and worship God.

One of the greatest college football coaches of all time was Paul "Bear" Bryant at the University of Alabama. When he died, his family found a crumpled yellowed piece of paper in his wallet. It was obvious he had carried that with him for years and had folded it and unfolded it and read it and reread it many times. He never shared it with anyone. This is what it said,

This is the beginning of a new day. God has given me this day to use as I will. I can waste it or use it for good. What I do today is very important, because I am exchanging a day of my life for it. When tomorrow comes, this day will be gone forever, leaving something in its place that I have traded for it. I want it to be a gain, not a loss—good not evil, success, not failure—in order that I shall not forget the price I paid for it.<sup>32</sup>

Time is very short and eternity is very, very long. What you do with your time in this life will determine the eternity you spend in the next life. I say, without apology, that any time you spend without Jesus Christ as the Lord of your life is wasted time. The most important use of your time will be to surrender your life to Jesus Christ because he is the maker of time and exists in every second of it. He even redeemed time by dying for you and rising from the grave so that you could spend time with him today and eternity with him tomorrow. If you find yourself saying, "Some other time," maybe that time is now.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Dear God, your selflessness to reach through all of time and give your life for me is the model I want to wisely and joyfully follow all my life.*

**Question for This Week:** If every day is a gift, how can you discern, develop, and manage a better strategy for the use of your time?

## 40

### Coming Clean

#### **Scriptures for the Week**

- Psalm 119:9-16
- Psalm 107:43
- Romans 13:11-14
- Ephesians 5:25-33
- Matthew 22:34-40

#### **Clean Living**

Ohio is home to the largest population of Amish folks in the entire world. Because they live an insulated life and practice intermarriage over the course of generations, researchers hypothesized that they would have a high rate of cancerous gene mutations. But they were wrong. After studying the Amish of Holmes County, Ohio, researchers found the opposite.

The Amish are less susceptible to cancer largely because of their clean living. They practice minimal alcohol and tobacco consumption, wise sun protection, and monogamous sexuality within the confines of marriage. All of this was found to be connected to very low cancer rates.<sup>33</sup> Clean living simply keeps us healthier.

Most of us can see why clean living equals healthy living. But many of us still pollute our lives in various ways. God gives us some instructions on

how to live a clean, pure life, but we have to read the Bible to know what they are, and very few people read the Bible regularly. More than half of Americans think the Bible has too little influence on a culture they see in moral decline. Yet, according to a new survey, only one in five Americans reads the Bible on a regular basis.<sup>34</sup> One major reason given is “I don’t know how.” In Psalm 119, the longest song in the Bible, there is a stanza that gives specific instructions on how to let the Bible clean up and transform your life.

## **Heed God’s Word in Your Life**

Does purity really matter? If you’re taking supplements for good health, do you want traces of other harmful drugs in your tablet?<sup>35</sup> If you’re rewiring your house, only pure copper wire will consistently conduct electricity. If you’re downloading a file, even a small virus could crash your computer. If you’re drinking water that isn’t pure, you’ll probably contract cholera or typhoid. So, yes—purity matters in all domains of life, so why don’t we consider it a spiritual priority?

Perhaps we think it is impossible to be pure. Eliphaz and Bildad, friends of Job, thought this and they were not all that helpful to Job: “How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure?” (Job 25:4). Yet, Isaiah (Isaiah 1:16), Paul (2 Corinthians 7:1), James (James 4:8), and John (1 John 3:2-3) all say that we are to purify ourselves. So, the question then becomes, how?

This is the question of the psalmist: “How can a young person stay on the path of purity?” and he answers with, “By living according to your word” (Psalm 119:9). Purity might sound preposterous, but it’s still prescribed. When we surrender to God’s word and safeguard his promises, we find our way into purity of life.

Each year, millions of people die as the result of poor choices. A 2004 study showed that about half of all deaths in the United States in 2000 were due to preventable behaviors and exposure.<sup>36</sup> I consider Psalm 119:9 to be preventative healthcare before the term was even known. This advice is written to young people for good reason—so many of our bad decisions are made way too early in life.

Generally, mistakes and missteps happen in inverse proportion to our physical, emotional, and spiritual maturity.<sup>37</sup> Beginning the early habit of obeying God's commands pays off big—but it's never too late to start! The path to purity is also the path to peace and true prosperity.

## **Hide God's Word in Your Heart**

If you visit the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, and walk up the fifty-eight steps from the plaza to the chamber, you'll see the nineteen-foot-tall marble sculpture of Abraham Lincoln. Inscribed on the wall behind this incredible sculpture are these words: "In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the Union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever." Barring some catastrophic event, this inscription and this memory of Abraham Lincoln will last for ages to come.

What is inscribed on the temple of your heart? Perhaps it's a great achievement, a great attachment, or a great attainment. The psalmist says, however, that it should be a great commandment. It should be the word of God. "I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands" (Psalm 119:10).

If the word of God is inscribed on our hearts, then we will not stray from a life with God. The heart is the driving force of all we do. What is inside our heart dictates what comes out of our mouth (Luke 6:45). The heart determines how we manage our money (Matthew 6:19-21). The heart decides for or against the resurrection of Jesus (Romans 10:9-10). Either sin will keep you from the Bible or the Bible will keep you from sin. The psalmist instructs us, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11).

The word of God can either pass through us or it can live in us, so the way you hide God's word in your heart is through memorization. Charles Swindoll wrote,

I know of no other single practice in the Christian life more rewarding, practically speaking, than memorizing Scripture... No other single exercise pays greater spiritual dividends! Your prayer life will be strengthened. Your witnessing will be sharper and much more effective. Your attitudes and outlook



will begin to change. Your mind will become alert and observant. Your confidence and assurance will be enhanced. Your faith will be solidified.<sup>38</sup>

## **Herald God's Word with Your Mouth**

Our mouths are good for all kinds of wonderful things. While kissing probably tops the list, I imagine that speaking words of life and encouragement is pretty high up there. On the other hand, when we use our mouths for lying, we establish an inner sense of impurity. One scientific study shows that when we lie with our lips, we have an increased desire to use mouthwash.<sup>39</sup> Our morality is inherently connected between our body and our heart.

As a result, the psalmist wisely chooses to practice purity in every part of his body; his mind, heart, and mouth are all listed in these few verses. "Praise be to you, LORD; teach me your decrees. With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth" (Psalm 119:12-13). He practices reciting the word of God, letting it flow from his lips, and this becomes a cleansing discipline that keeps him on the path toward greater purity.

The psalmist isn't just speaking to the wind, however. He's proclaiming to others the word that God spoke first. We really only proclaim things we are committed to. We proclaim love to a hopeful fiancée, we proclaim truth from a witness stand, and we proclaim war on enemies we pledge to crush. Proclamation is both passionate and public.

Repetition is the mother of all learning and teaching. As God speaks his word to you, take every God-given occasion to speak his word to others. The greatest thing you can ever say, and the greatest thing others can hear, is truth from God's word, which comes straight from God's heart. The right word from God at the right time at the right place can bring comfort to a broken heart, clarity to a confused mind, calmness to an angry spirit, and cleansing to a guilty conscience.<sup>40</sup>

## **Hold God's Word in Your Mind**

A second strong expression is listed in verse 14: "I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches." Just like proclamation, rejoicing is the outward expression of strong feelings, feelings of joy and

delight. If you are brimming with joy, there's no way that's going to stay stuffed inside you.

The origin of joy actually begins in our minds. It comes in knowing that what is happening is what is truly right. Each of us wants to see God's rich words and righteous works lived out in the world. When we see others following in his path of truth, and when we see the amazing life change the word of God generates in our lives and the lives of others, we can't help but display our joy. This is when we know that God is working to make everything right.

We can consider all of God's wonderful works by meditating on his truth. The psalmist says, "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways" (Psalm 119:15). After we memorize God's word, the next step is to meditate on it. This requires remembering God's word, thinking deeply about God's word, and considering how it applies to our world.

Meditation is like holding God's word in your mind, seeing it from all angles, and observing it in different lights. Contrary to some beliefs, meditation is not an Eastern spiritual practice of emptying the inner conscience, but it is a biblical discipline in which we fill our minds with the truth of God. Every Christian should practice it, and we already do—we just do it in a negative sense. Rick Warren put it best:

When you think about a problem over and over in your mind, that's called worry. When you think about God's word over and over in your mind, that's meditation. If you know how to worry, you already know how to meditate! You just need to switch your attention from your problems to Bible verses. The more you meditate on God's word, the less you will have to worry about.<sup>41</sup>

Not only is meditation associated with decreased stress, depression, anxiety, pain, and insomnia, but it is a practice that can also allow God to change our minds.<sup>42</sup> The path toward purity is paved with God's word, which opens us up to the change God wants in our lives. Heed it, hide it, herald it, and hold it. It is your pathway to coming clean.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, give me the desire to know your word deeply and to live it out publicly.*

**Question for This Week:** What verses will you begin to memorize this week? Write them on a note card and get started!

## PART FIVE

### All in All

*God deserves all of our praise, worship, and love.*

# 41

## Follow the Directions

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 119:89-96
- Romans 15:1-4
- Hebrews 4:12-13
- Deuteronomy 17:14-20
- James 1:22-25

### **Why Should I Read the Bible?**

Most of us have an unquenchable thirst and an insatiable appetite for information and communication. The Baby Boomer generation saw the first home televisions. The Gen Xers celebrated the first portable CD players. Generation Y rejoiced at the first iPods, and Millennials were the first to take smartphones to school. We saturate ourselves with information at the cost of face-to-face conversations. In the middle of this maelstrom of information, it's sometimes hard to remember that God still wants to speak to you and to me.

One of the first things we learn about God in Genesis is that he reveals himself in words. The first chapter of Genesis uses "God said" at least ten times. God didn't stop speaking at creation. He still speaks today. The question is, "How do we hear his voice?"

There are more Bibles in print and in people's homes today than ever before. Yet, millions of people suffer from spiritual anorexia. They are starving to death from spiritual illiteracy.<sup>1</sup> A survey given to thousands of churchgoers discovered that 1 in 5 people read their Bible every day. That might be surprising, but this is shocking: an equal number said they don't read the Bible *at all!*<sup>2</sup>

Why don't believers and church attenders read the Bible? Here are the top three reasons. Perhaps you find yourself saying the same things:

1. I don't know where to begin.
2. I don't see its relevance.
3. I don't know how to find things.

Do you feel like you have stuffed God into a weekend worship experience and just left him there? For many people, God often stays on the shelf right next to his word. But I've found that every time I open God's word, God opens his mouth and speaks directly into my life. I want to offer you four directions for reading the Bible to give you a place to begin.

### **Direction 1: Appreciate the Bible**

The psalmist makes an amazing statement about the Bible that is not true of any other book ever written: "Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89). Jesus put it this way, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

The famous atheist Voltaire held up a Bible and said, "In fifty years I will have this book in the morgue." Fifty years to the day, Voltaire was in the morgue, and the Geneva Bible Society owned his house and used it as a place to store Bibles. The Bible is indestructible!

I want you to appreciate the miracle of this book. The sixty-six books contained in the Bible were written by forty different authors over fifteen hundred years in three different languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic) and on three different continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe). Those books have been divided into two sections: the Old Testament (or Covenant) and the New Testament. The Old Covenant has thirty-nine books and the New

Covenant has twenty-seven, and yet they are all threaded with the same promise of the Messiah who would rescue and redeem the world.

Did you know that the New Testament has roughly three hundred explicit quotations from the Old Testament and close to four thousand references to the Old Testament? In fact, the Old Testament makes the promise that someone is coming to deal with the problem of sin. The New Testament says that promise has been fulfilled—someone has come and his name is Jesus. Even though this book is actually a library of books, it all has one purpose—to lead you into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Too many people think you meet Jesus only when you get to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But the miraculous truth is that you meet Jesus from the very first chapter of the first book. We can appreciate the Bible as God’s word for a lot of reasons, but foremost because it gives us the cohesive story of our Savior.

## **Direction 2: Appraise the Bible**

You don’t have to be a believer to appreciate the Bible. The Bible is rich in story, poetry, and imagery. Some colleges teach whole courses on the Bible as literature. We can certainly approach the Bible like any other book, or we can approach it with the hope and the faith that it will affect our lives. For this to happen, we need to look first at its author.

When I appraise a book to read, I read the back-cover reviews and the inside flaps. I appraise the book on several levels, from its publisher to its length. But the most important piece is to weigh the value of the author. The psalmist appraised God’s word based on God himself. “You are righteous, LORD, and your laws are right. The statutes you have laid down are righteous; they are fully trustworthy” (Psalm 119:137-138). To say that God is righteous means that he always does what needs to be done. He does what his holy nature requires him to do and all his actions are just.

If the author is just, then the work he produced will likely follow suit. If we can trust that God is a worthy author, then we can conclude that his word will not disappoint. The Bible is not some irrelevant ancient writing. It is the word of the God who was and is and is to come.

Of all the charges that God brought against his people, one stands out to me. Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God said, “I wrote for them the many things of my law, but they regarded them as something foreign” (Hosea 8:12). The people of Israel treated God’s word as *foreign*. A foreigner had no home in Israel—no permanent dwelling place—and that person had no voice or vote. God said, “You treat my word as something foreign. It has no voice in the way you live your life. When it comes to how you conduct your affairs, my word is ignored.”

What is your true appraisal of the Bible? Can you trust the author? If you can, then you can also determine to trust his word and give it an active voice in your life.

### **Direction 3: Assimilate the Bible**

The Bible contains treasure troves of spiritual jewels just waiting to be collected. God wants us to open our eyes to see where these are. He wants to help us find them. “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119:18). You have to do one thing for this to happen—read your Bible and read it daily. There is not a day in your life that you do not need to hear from God. There is not a day in your life that you don’t need to listen to God. Daily Bible reading keeps you tuned in to God’s voice.

How many of us who claim to believe the Bible from cover to cover have ever read it cover to cover? Did you know if you read the Bible just fifteen minutes a day, you will read it completely through in a year? We check our smartphones multiple times a day for as long as up to five hours.<sup>3</sup> But it takes the average person forty-four hours to read the Bible.<sup>4</sup> If you gave up one hour of phone time per day, you could read the entire Bible through eight times in a year!

I realize the easy part is to know where to start. The hard part is, “How do I understand it?” It really is not that difficult.

#### **Step 1: Personalize the Bible**

With every text of Scripture, simply ask these four questions:

1. What does this passage say to the original reader?



2. What was the author trying to accomplish or communicate?
3. What is the timeless truth in this passage?
4. How am I going to respond to what God has said?

### ***Step 2: Memorize the Bible***

Memorize key verses that speak to your heart. We memorize a lot of things: our Social Security number, other people's birthdays, sports scores, and jokes, so we can also memorize Scripture. There are all kinds of ways to do it. The best way I've learned is to write a verse on a card, put it where you'll see it, and go over it every week until you have it down. God can bring certain Scriptures to mind that you need to hear at certain points when you need to hear them.

### ***Step 3: Actualize the Bible***

Simply put, you obey it. You do what it tells you to do. I guarantee if you take these three steps, when you personalize the Bible, memorize the Bible, and actualize the Bible it will revolutionize your life.

### **Direction 4: Apply the Bible**

I've put great emphasis on reading your Bible, but it is not enough to read it. It is not enough to remember it. You've got to reproduce it in your life. Psalm 119:9 stuck with me as a teenager: "How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word."

If I am to do the word and not just hear it, that raises the question of what has the final say in my life? When I am forced to face reality or my back is against the wall, when I've got to decide how I am going to respond or react, where do I turn?

Sometimes people will compliment me on a message I have preached and say, "I wish I had heard that when I was younger" or "I wish I had known that before I got married." I want to say, "It was all right there before you. You didn't have to wait on me to tell you." God's truth is just as available to you and open to you as it is to me. We simply need to appreciate it, appraise it, assimilate it, and apply it.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, give me the desire to approach your word daily, to give it a voice in my life, and to trust it as your way of leading me to a closer relationship with Jesus.*

**Question for This Week:** If you do not read the Bible and want to develop a plan to begin, what changes will you have to make in your life to make space for this practice?

## Flip the Switch

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 119:97-104
- Proverbs 6:20-24
- Psalm 19:7-11
- Proverbs 2:20-22
- 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

### **The Bible Tells Us Where to Begin**

When our son Jonathan was considering studying medicine, Teresa and I set out to drive him to Macon, Georgia, to tour Mercer University. Two major interstate highways head south out of Atlanta—Interstate 75 leads southeast and Interstate 85 takes you southwest. I mentioned our travel plan to one of my best friends, and he told us of some tempting restaurants where we could stop and eat. As we coasted down the interstate, I was delighted by a sign that said, “Sprayberry’s Barbeque.” Sprayberry’s is a Georgia icon that has endured for four generations. It’s been the pit stop for celebrity lunches and presidential campaigns. I instantly knew I wanted to stop there.

I loftily declared, “Forget those other restaurants—let’s eat at Sprayberry’s!” As we pulled in, I felt excellent about my decision. After we

ordered, I called my buddy and announced, “Guess where we’re eating?” He guessed the two restaurants he had referred me to, and I said, “Oh, no! I’m better than that. I’m eating at Sprayberry’s Barbeque!” He said, “James, you have to take Interstate 85 to get to Sprayberry’s Barbeque.” I said, “So?” He said, “Interstate 75 is the road that takes you to Macon.”

Maybe some of you have taken the long way around in life because you didn’t listen to God. Usually when we wind up in the wrong place, it is for one of two reasons: either we didn’t know the directions or we didn’t follow them.

The longest chapter in the Bible sits near its middle. It tells us the benefits of reading the Bible, the blessings of knowing the Bible, and what happens to the person who reads it and heeds it. One of its key verses says, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105). You need a lamp and a light only if you are in the dark. So let’s let Psalm 119 flip the switch on so we can explore the Bible together in the light.

## **The Bible Shows Us Where We Belong**

When the psalmist spoke of God’s word, he was talking about writings that were already hundreds of years old. Notice that the only verb in the entire verse is in the present tense. He doesn’t say the word *was* a lamp and a light. He said the word *is* a lamp and a light.

Immediately, that tells us something about the Bible and why we need to read it. You see, everyone is born into spiritual darkness. We live in darkness the entirety of our lives as we make big decisions, such as who to marry, where to work, or who to associate with. We may worry about tomorrow, but the truth is that we can’t even see to the next second. We are truly in the dark.

The Bible is the switch that illuminates the path that traverses the will of God. In my life as a follower of Jesus Christ, from the time I was nine years old to the present, I have read my Bible every day (unless I was extremely sick). It is the one thing that makes the greatest difference in my life, and it’s been my habit for well over fifty years.

Think about the metaphors from this verse. A lamp shows you where you are; a light shows you where to go. A lamp pinpoints your present location; but a light points out your future direction. A lamp is used inside

the house to show you where you are; a light is used outside the house so you don't stumble or fall. When we grasp this analogy, we see why we need to flip our Bible switch every day.

Getting in God's word every day has saved me more heartache, given me more wisdom, protected me from more mistakes, infused me with more comfort, and provided me with more encouragement than anything else I have ever done. Nothing, I repeat, nothing has grown me, strengthened me, or changed me like reading my Bible. This one short verse tells us that one practical reason to read our Bible every day is that it will tell us where to travel—in God's will where we belong.

## **The Bible Gives Us What to Believe**

Did you know the term *Bible* is never found once in the Bible? Do you know what the Bible's term is for itself? It is *Scriptures*. Luke puts it this way: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). *Scriptures* comes from the Greek word *graphe*, which means "that which is written." I believe God wanted us to have something we could hold in our hand and place in our heart to guide us in what we believe.

"Your word is a lamp for my feet" (Psalm 119:105). Wherever your feet are, there you are also. It is impossible to be somewhere where your feet are not. A lamp can tell you not only where you are, but it can also tell you if you are standing in a good place or a bad place.

There are two ditches the church can fall into when we let anything except the Bible have authority over our beliefs: *legalism*, in which we substitute our human opinion for God's authority, and *liberalism*, which tempts us not only to believe the wrong things but to believe all things.

We fall into these ditches when we use statements like "We've never done it that way before" and "We've always done it this way." Both are just a way of saying, "It doesn't matter what the Bible says." We will save ourselves a lot of heartache and pointless arguments if we simply let the Bible be the lamp to guide us in what we believe.

## **The Bible Tells Us How to Behave**

Do you have any skeletons in your closet? Things that you regret? Things you wish you hadn't done? Every time you failed it was likely because either you didn't have God's direction or you didn't understand it. The best way to fight temptation and keep clear of regrets is to treasure God's word in your heart. The psalmist says, "How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word...I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:9,11).

Every word in our key verse is very important: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Psalms 119:105). Feet refer to where you are—that is, what you believe—but the path refers to where you are going and how you behave. Psalm 37:23 says, "The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives." God is interested in the steps you take daily. He is interested in seeing that you behave in the way of goodness and righteousness.

Becoming computer literate is a constant work in progress for me, and I've come a long way from where I was. One of the things I've learned is that a computer has only so much memory. Once the hard drive is full, it can't make room for more. When the hard drive of your heart and mind is full of God's word, then neither sin nor Satan can find any place to store files. There won't be any room because the memory is full. The psalmist says, "Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me" (Psalm 119:133).

When you not only read your Bible, but you obey it, it will always give you the right steps and take you on the right path. If you want God's word to direct your steps, then turn on the lamp so you will know what to believe, turn on the light so you will know how to behave, and flip the switch so you will know where you are and where you need to go.

## **The Bible Shows Us What to Behold**

Charles Swindoll makes this profound statement about the necessity of being in the word:

If I can have only one wish for God's people it would be that all of us would return to the word of God; that we would realize once for all that his book has the answers. The Bible is

the authority. It is the final resting place of our cares, our worries, our griefs, our tragedies, our sorrows, and our surprises. It is the final answer to our questions and our search. Turning back to the Scriptures will provide something that nothing else on the entire earth will provide.<sup>5</sup>

I know some of you are coming up with reasons why you don't read your Bible daily. Let me assure you that things will always get in our way because the last thing Satan wants is for us to grow in the knowledge of God's word.

I believe, however, that God wants to speak to you. He wants to meet you each day in his word. He wants to guide your steps. He wants you to trust him for the details of your life. Here is a simple assignment. Read a passage from the Bible for five days (Monday–Friday). I've chosen some for you:

- Monday: Genesis 1
- Tuesday: Genesis 3
- Wednesday: Matthew 1
- Thursday: Luke 24
- Friday: Acts 1

Each day answer, “What is the main theme of this Scripture?” and “What is the greatest truth I learned?” At the end of the week ask, “How do these five chapters fit together?” If I could, I would gather us all together to be enlightened by the truth of these Scriptures. But you need to flip the switch for yourself. It is my passionate hope that you will.

**Prayer for This Week:** *God, I want to know where to walk, what to believe, and how to behave. Help me listen to you through your word.*

**Question for This Week:** Do you think you tend to fall more in the way of legalism or liberalism? What do you need to do to let the Bible speak more directly to your belief and behavior?

## 43

### A Song for Any Day

#### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 121
- Jeremiah 32:17
- 2 Corinthians 12:1-10
- Psalm 18:30-36
- Luke 9:21-27

#### **Singing in the Rain**

Music, the universal language, speaks to every culture, every creed, and every color. God’s love of music is evident in his great hymnbook, the Psalms, the most beautiful songs ever written. When we read the Psalms, we find that there is truly a song for almost any situation.

Music hasn’t changed much. We still write songs about love and hate, tribute songs for our country and our heroes, dance songs for our weddings and celebrations, contemplative songs of loss, and soothing songs of peace. Songs help call us all to action, to worship, and to remembrance.

We make playlists for road trips, wedding receptions, and parties. Psalm 121 was written for a road trip—the journey to Jerusalem. It’s called “a song of ascents” because pilgrims walking to Jerusalem, an elevated city, would sing this as they made the journey together.



We don't know who wrote this song, but travelers surely loved it. The psalmist provided encouragement for them if they were feeling weary, helpless, or hopeless. We find in this psalm four stanzas upon which we can build the foundation of a life that will stand against any storm.

## **When I Am in Need, the Lord Is My Provider**

The psalmist describes what we tend to do when we are in trouble; we look every place but the right place, try everything but the right thing, and ask every person but the right person. The Message translates verses 1 and 2 this way: "I look up to the mountains; does my strength come from mountains? No, my strength comes from GOD, who made heaven, and earth, and mountains." Too often we never solve our problems because we look to the wrong place for solutions.

The psalmist quickly realized that the right place to look for help is from "the Maker of heaven and earth." Is there anyone you would rather have as your helper than the God who created this universe? Think about a God who is higher than the hills, above all the armies, and greater than all the economies. The God who created everything controls everything and can help you no matter what your need might be.

Frederick Nolan was a Christian in Africa who was being pursued by some unbelievers because of his stand on the gospel. They pursued him over hill and valley. He could find no place to hide and soon fell exhausted into a cave, expecting his enemies to find him at any moment.

While he was lying there in fear, he watched as a spider began weaving a web. Within minutes, that little spider had woven a beautiful web over the mouth of that cave. The pursuers arrived and glanced at the cave, but when they saw the unbroken spider's web, they thought it was impossible for anyone to have hidden there, so they quit searching.

Having escaped death, Nolan wrote this: "Where God is, a spider's web is like a wall. Where God is not, a wall is like a spider's web."

The God who created and controls this world can do anything in, through, for, or with this world. "But our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Psalm 115:3 NASB). Whether it is a time of trouble or tragedy, God is your hope. If we would only realize how powerful our

mighty God is, we would understand that when God is the only help we have, he is the only help we need.

### **When I Am Weak, the Lord Is My Power**

The God who is our provider is also our power. The next time you are in need, think about one single bolt of lightning. The lightning flash you see across the horizon is caused by air that is heated to 30,000 degrees Celsius, five times the temperature of the sun's surface. That one lightning bolt may have up to one billion volts and a thousand kilowatts of power. If we could harness the power of a lightning bolt, we could supply power to a small town for one day. When you add that approximately two thousand thunderstorms are happening around the world at any one time, and a typical storm has one to three lightning flashes every minute, you are talking about some kind of power!

The God who can help you controls all that power. That is why the psalmist says, "He will not allow your foot to slip" (Psalm 121:3 NASB). That is, God will not allow you to fall flat on your face. One of the greatest promises in the Bible is Proverbs 3:25-26: "Do not be afraid of sudden fear nor of the onslaught of the wicked when it comes; for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught" (NASB). With that kind of power behind you, you can stand against anything.

Trusting God's power will bring peace to your heart. "He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:3-4 NASB). There is not a parent on earth that can watch their children twenty-four hours a day. Parents must sleep, but God never does. God is on watch 24/7, fifty-two weeks a year. No matter how deep your need may be, God is powerful and perceptive on your behalf.

### **When I Am in Trouble, the Lord Is My Protector**

Verse 5 says, "The LORD is your keeper" (NASB). The word "keep" is used six different times in this psalm, and it means "to protect" or "to guard." The verse continues, "The LORD is your shade on your right hand." Because shields were held in the left hand in battle, the right hand was the most vulnerable point. The Lord places his strength at our point of greatest

weakness. In the bright light of the sun and the night light of the moon, the Lord is our shade and our shield that protects us from heat and hurt.

Paul Harvey told this remarkable story: During WWII, a B-29 took off from Guam for Kokura, Japan, on a bombing mission. When it got to its primary target, it circled above a gigantic cloud that covered that target for half an hour, then three-fourths of an hour, and then fifty-five minutes until the gas supply began to dwindle. The crew felt they had no choice but to pass up their primary target, so they decided to hit their secondary target, Nagasaki, and they unleashed their terrible atomic bomb.

Just a week before, thousands of Allied prisoners of war, the biggest concentration of Americans in enemy hands, had been moved to a camp in Kokura. Miraculously, that solitary cloud prevented thousands of Americans from dying that day.

You understand and I understand that Satan and this world seek to drop their fiery bombs of doubt, discouragement, depression, despair, and disappointment on you and me every day, but God is our shade and our shield, and we are promised his protection.

## **When I Am Being Tempted, the Lord Is My Preserver**

We all face temptation of some sort. We are all tempted to not do what we ought and to do what we ought not. The psalmist says, “The LORD will protect you from all evil; he will keep your soul. The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever” (Psalm 121:7-8 NASB). “Protect” is the same word that is translated “keep” in other parts of this psalm and it can also mean “preserve.” The Lord does preserve us. Verse 7 tells us he preserves us from all evil.

“Evil” here does not refer to evil that is done to us, but to evil done *by* us. Jesus told us to pray, “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13 NASB). Deliver us from the evil within. I’ve got wonderful news for you. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, there is not a sin on this planet that can defeat you in the power of God.

He preserves us from evil and for eternity. Verse 8 says, “The LORD will guard your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forever.” God will be faithful not only to the end, but also beyond the end.

When you feel as though you are at the end of your rope and your enemy is going to win, whether your enemy is disease, disappointment, or discouragement, remember who your God is and what your God can do. He is your provider and peace, your protector and preserver. His great acts on your behalf are a song you can sing any day.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, as I lift up my weakness and trouble to you, assure me of your powerful presence and preserve me for your divine purpose.*

**Question for This Week:** Where do you typically look to find your help? What might it look like for you to fully depend on God?

## Can I Get a Witness?

### **Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 126
- Matthew 28:16-20
- Romans 10:14-15
- 2 Timothy 1:1-5
- Psalm 95:1-5

### **In the Presence of Many Witnesses**

One of the highlights of going to London is to visit the magnificent Westminster Abbey. This stately cathedral, where all the monarchs of England are crowned and the burial site of luminaries such as Isaac Newton, George Frederic Handel, William Wilberforce, Charles Dickens, David Livingstone, and Alfred Lord Tennyson, is simply an awe-inspiring experience.

As I was walking through that gorgeous edifice, I thought of the story I heard of an elderly lady who was in a group of tourists listening to the tour guide recount the storied history of this “cathedral of the stars.” When the guide asked if they had any questions, this lady asked, “Has anyone been saved here lately?”

What a great question! One that should be asked of every church regularly. It has been said, “If a person has a soul (and he or she does), and if that soul will spend eternity with God or apart from God (and it will), then the most important work in the world is to bring men and women to faith in Jesus Christ.”

The author of this beautiful song in Psalm 126 would certainly agree with that sentiment. The last two verses are a picturesque agricultural metaphor applied to the task of evangelism as the believer sows the seeds of the gospel and witnesses to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

## **We Should Be Circulating as a Witness**

Psalm 126:6 says, “Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.” A farmer’s job is as simple as sowing and reaping. Back in the day the farmer went about with a bag of seed looking for fallow ground where he could sow his seed. The farmer’s main job is to sow the seed. It is God’s job to give the harvest so the farmer can reap. But the only way the farmer will sow is to go to the field where the seed needs to be planted. Those who “*go...carrying seed to sow*” are the ones who reap.

In Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, Call of Hope trains Christian leaders to farm on leased land in Muslim villages. When the land prospers, it attracts the interest of nearby Muslims who then seek advice on how to make their crops grow. As these Christian leaders are going about their work, they build relationships with their neighbors, which allows them to share the gospel with their fellow farmers. The more people come to Christ, the more churches are planted, disciples are trained, and people are freed from the shackles of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

As we go about our daily lives working, playing, and socializing, we are to be sowing the seed of the good news of the gospel. A follower of Jesus is to be on the go into the neighborhoods, offices, stores, and stadiums looking for fallow ground where the seed of faith can be sown.

Not one verse of Scripture commands the unchurched to come to church to hear the gospel; the command is always for the church to go to the unchurched and share the gospel. We must go daily, always being open to sow our seed wherever fertile ground awaits.

## **We Should Be Communicating as a Witness**

As we go, we are to be “carrying seed to sow.” Literally translated this means “leaving a trail of seed.” The seed, of course, is the word of God and specifically the gospel of Jesus (Luke 8:11). It is the seed of the gospel that is the power of God for salvation for those who believe (Romans 1:16-17).

We must consider the soil we’re planting in. The way we toss out the seed isn’t chosen to hone our own capability but to honor the listener’s capacity. Different people will be attracted to the gospel in different ways, so it’s necessary to make it culturally relevant.<sup>2</sup> Jesus communicated differently with different kinds of people. He didn’t change the message; he just met them where they were—going continuously and sowing consistently. This is good communication. That is exactly what Jesus did.

With the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus used his request for water to lead into a discussion about true worship and eternal life (John 4:1-42). When he heard the pleas of the Syrophenician woman to heal her possessed daughter, Jesus used a cultural metaphor to unearth her view of salvation (Mark 7:24-30). Jesus let Mary initiate her own interest in him when he visited her and her sister, Martha (Luke 10:38-42), but he started the conversation with the grieving widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-15).

To the thirsty woman drawing water from a well, he said, “Have you ever heard of the living water?” (John 4:4-14). But think of the other conversations he might have had. To the butcher he could say, “Have you heard of the lamb that was slain before the world was formed?” (Revelation 13: 8). To the baker he could ask, “Have you ever tasted the bread of life?” (John 6:35). To the electrician he could say, “May I tell you about the light of the world?” (John 8:12). All God asks of us is to be his witness—not his prosecuting attorney. Our task is communication; God’s is salvation.

## **We Should Be Captivating as a Witness**

Psalm 126:5 says, “Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.” Seeds must be watered if they’re going to grow, and the water for the seed we sow comes from the tears of our compassion. We are to “sow with tears” and “go out weeping.” We must weep before we reap.

How can crying be captivating? English singer and songwriter Adele has performed some beautiful songs and infuses them with emotion. She

says, “In order for me to feel confident with one of my songs, it has to really move me. That’s how I know that I’ve written a good song for myself—it’s when I start crying.”<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that her passion is appealing, which is why she’s one of the best-selling recording artists of all time.

The psalmist is talking about that kind of passion, the kind that shows you’re living for something. Figuratively speaking, the farmer agonizes over his work, believes in its value, and anticipates the success of an abundant crop. In the end this deep compassion for those who are outside of the kingdom and separated from the King should move each of us to get out of the barn and into the fields.

It is true that people will not care how much we know until they know how much we care. Before we can break up hard ground for the gospel, God must first break our hearts for those whose hearts are hardened. The biggest barrier to evangelism in the church and in the Christian is not ignorance; it is indifference. When we care we share.

## **We Should Be Celebrating as a Witness**

In both verse 5 and verse 6 we see the phrase “songs of joy.” Look at the sequence the songs of joy come in—it is after we “sow with tears” and after we “go out weeping.” Weeping and joy go hand in hand. As much as we wish we could experience God’s joy without life’s hardships, delight often comes only after difficulty.

Old Testament scholar John Goldingay translates this word “joy” as “resounding.” This is a word that describes an electrifying jubilation. We use this image when we sing the Christmas hymn, “Joy to the World.”

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns!  
Let men their songs employ;  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat the sounding joy,  
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

What a beautiful picture of the way that all of creation reflects back to God his own magnificent joy over the wonderful, saving power of Jesus.



When we join with Jesus in his suffering, we also join with him in his celebration, and this is a continual party that reaches from the ends of the earth to the hosts of heaven. This is the “joy of our salvation,” and God wants everyone at his party.

There is no greater joy in the Christian life than seeing someone go from death to life and from darkness to light. I can honestly say that I get more joy out of seeing someone come to Christ through my witness than I did when I came to Christ myself. When you have the privilege of reaping where you have sown, you cannot help but sow with “songs of joy.”

One godly, faithful woman in my church felt a substantial weight over the fact that her husband and teenage son were not yet followers of Jesus. One Saturday morning I sat down at their kitchen table. The son, Russell, was just sixteen years old. In our time of conversation, I led both the father and son to Jesus.

Russell now pastors a thriving church not far from one of my own church campuses. He never fails to share his story with others when we are together. He thanks me for sharing my witness of Christ with him. I am so proud of him, but I am even more grateful and humbled that when God asked me, “Can I get a witness?” I answered, “Yes...you have mine.” How will you answer today?

**Prayer for This Week:** *Heavenly Father, teach me to be a good sower and a joyful reaper of your great gift of salvation.*

**Question for This Week:** Where are you sowing the seeds of faith? How can you communicate it so that others will listen?

**PG: Parental Guidance Required**

**Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 127
- Matthew 19:13-15
- Isaiah 38:15-19
- Hebrews 12:4-13
- Ephesians 6:1-4

**The Work of Raising Children**

The 2009 BBC headline said it all: “US Homebuilding at All-Time Low.”<sup>9</sup> The rate of construction of new homes in the United States hit an all-time low in December 2008. To be fair, this story wasn’t really referring to homes but to houses. I don’t have to tell you the difference between a house and a home. Our biggest problem in America is not that we aren’t building houses but that we are not building homes.

Anybody can build a house, but only God can build a home. The wisest man who ever lived said, “Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1). Another translation puts it this way, “Unless the LORD builds a house, the work of the builders is wasted” (NLT). This means the work just doesn’t count without God’s blueprint.

Families are God's idea. It was God who gave the first woman to the first man and God who gave the first child to the first parents. He wants us to get our families right. He wants us to be attentive to and strategic with the critical years of a child's life from the time the child is born until he or she reaches adolescence. If you truly do everything you can to raise your children to love God, serve others, and share their story, you will have done a great work. To accomplish this, we must give our children four key things.

## **Give Your Children Valuable Distinction**

There are a lot of conflicting opinions worldwide about the value of children, but notice how children are described in this passage: "Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3). The Hebrew word for "heritage" literally means "property" or "possession." That is the noun form of the word. The verb form carries the idea of giving an assignment to someone. This sheds new light on the value of children.

Children are the property of the Lord. They are not just born from below, but they are given from above. That means your children are not really your children. They are on loan to you. Your children truly belong to God. They are his property and his possession. Do you understand what that means? That means there is no such thing as an unwanted or illegitimate child. Every child's legitimate purpose for living is given by God himself!

Children are also called a "reward." Children are not just a result of a biological process. They are not just a tax deduction. They are not just another chair at the kitchen table. They are far more than what some people call a nuisance. If you understand what children are and what children can do, you begin to see how they truly are God's loving reward. They are extremely valuable to God and to the world he placed them into. Be sure to tell them this openly and often.

## **Give Your Children Spiritual Direction**

I have never shot a bow, but I know an arrow must fulfill two purposes or else it is useless. First, it must be shot in the right direction. Second, it must hit the right target. What is true of an arrow is true of children. Our job as parents is to make sure that from the time our children are born, they are

shot in a godly direction and they hit the target of having a relationship with God.

Solomon makes this comparison in verse 4: “Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one’s youth.” The tragedy today is that many children are being launched without ever being aimed. Here are a few practical ways to give your children spiritual direction:

- Read Bible stories to them for as many years as you possibly can.
- Let them hear you pray for them to know God in their lives.
- As you take them to church, explain what the various rituals (Lord’s Supper, baptism) really represent.
- Teach them early the real meaning of Easter and Christmas.
- Be sensitive to and take time to answer their spiritual questions well.
- Buy Christian DVDs and biblical graphic novels that present biblical truths.
- Find a time every day (for us it was at the breakfast table) where you can study a passage of the Bible together.

Above all, please remember your child is the arrow and you hold the bow. For the first few years of each child’s life, you will determine where each arrow is pointed, how it is polished, and where each child is propelled.

## **Give Your Children Loving Discipline**

Have you ever wondered why a young child who learns more than one language doesn’t have even a trace of an accent? An older adult who learns a new language will only be able to approximate the sounds made by native speakers.

Researchers have learned that a young child’s larynx assumes the shape necessary to make the proper sounds. It then solidifies in those positions, making it impossible or very difficult to make other sounds later in life. In other words, there is a brief window of opportunity when anything is possible linguistically for a child.

This is also true for disciplining a child. The best time to instill respect is during late infancy and toddlerhood. If we borrow from the arrow analogy again, this is the period when the feathers on an arrow need to be straightened for the arrow to fly straight.

Discipline is most useful with toddlers and preschoolers between eighteen months and six years of age. It has the intent of correcting a behavioral problem and bringing the child back into relationship with you. It should never be done out of anger, nor should you cause physical harm.

Here are some guidelines:

*First*, use discipline selectively and only for deliberate disobedience and misbehavior, such as a persistent defiance of your instruction.

*Second*, discipline should always be a planned action and not a reaction. It should come only after the child has been forewarned.

*Third*, the child should clearly understand why he or she is being disciplined and should always be welcomed back into relationship with you afterward.

All God asks of parents is that they discipline their children the way he disciplines his. Proverbs 3:11-12 says this, “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” Discipline applied lovingly is one of the greatest ways you can love a child.

## **Give Your Children Emotional Development**

The first thing an archer does with an arrow is polish it. After he polishes it he sharpens it. If he doesn’t, that arrow will not do what it was intended to do. Likewise, God wants us to help our children to develop emotionally.

Once again, you’ve got to begin early, when the child is two or three years old. Around 65 percent of your child’s working vocabulary is acquired by the age of three, 80 percent of their character is formed by the age of five, and 90 percent of their personality is set by the age of seven. You have a small window of opportunity to spiritually direct, lovingly discipline, and emotionally develop your child.

I want dads to especially listen here. One thing vital to your child’s emotional development is your time. Did you know that parents in America

spend less time with their children than parents in any other nation in the world? Research shows that in Russia, fathers spend as much as two to three hours a day with their children, while in this country fathers average about thirty-seven minutes a day with their young children. And they spend less than fifteen minutes a week in serious discussion with their children.

One of the things my family and I did was to designate every Friday night as family night. Each family member took a turn to decide on what we did, where we ate, and what activity we engaged in. I usually dreaded it when Jonathan's night came around because he always picked out the most expensive restaurants, got the most expensive meals, and wanted to do the most expensive activities. But we did it because it was family night.

There is so much more that I could say, but I will close with this thought. Those arrows in your quiver will ultimately be pointed somewhere. They will be polished some way. They will be propelled in some direction. You will never do anything greater in your life than to make sure that you launch those children in such a way that you will leave a legacy that will last.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, thank you for polishing, pointing, and propelling me. Help me to teach my children in a way that reflects your loving care for me.*

**Question for This Week:** In what ways are you pointing your children toward God? In what ways are you pointing them away from him?

## No Place Like Home

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 128
- Joshua 24:14-15
- Ephesians 5:21-33
- 1 Timothy 5:3-8
- Proverbs 27:8

### **The Home Stretch**

The man who coined the phrase “There’s no place like home” was John Howard Payne. He never held an elected office nor was he wealthy. He was an actor and a playwright. Later in his life, he was in government service and ended up in Tunisia. He died there and was buried in Tripoli.

But in 1823 Payne had composed a song, “Home, Sweet Home,” for an opera. It was first performed in London and then spread quickly around the world. Even today, it is a standard song of Americana and home life. Because of his popular tune, his body was disinterred from Africa so that it could be buried in Washington, DC, where he was given a magnificent funeral procession in 1852 attended by dignitaries, cabinet members, and the president himself.

When twelve thousand teens were asked in 2009 if “Having a good marriage and family life is ‘extremely important,’” 80.5 percent of girls and 72.2 percent of boys said yes. What is surprising about this statistic is that the percentages haven’t changed much since 1976. In that year 80.2 percent of girls and 69.4 percent of boys agreed.<sup>10</sup>

Even in the hearts of our young people, there is a hunger and a desire for “home, sweet home.” Unfortunately, not every home meets that standard. Psalm 128 speaks about the home, with a word specifically to fathers, and we can explore God’s view of what makes a home sweet.

## **Fear the Lord in the Home**

There is no greater gift you can give to children than the gift of a good solid home. God wants the home to be whole, but he also wants the home to be happy. God’s word is very clear on how to have a happy home. Happiness comes to a home when that home finds the Lord. The happiest home, I believe, is when the entire family—the father and the mother and the children—all know and love the Lord Jesus Christ.

The psalm begins with this exact idea: “Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways” (Psalm 128:1 NKJV). The word “blessed” is the Hebrew word for “happy.” God wants every home to be a happy home, but this means it must also be a holy home.

Happiness comes when the home fears the Lord. It may sound contradictory, but fear and happiness go hand in hand. In fact, when a man fears the Lord, he can be happy in knowing he doesn’t have to fear anyone else. He doesn’t have to fear anything in life or in death itself, knowing that God is in control.

Happiness also comes when the home follows the Lord. We must “walk in his ways.” This is so true of my family. When I, my wife, and my children are all closest to the Lord, we are at our happiest as a family. When you are happy in the Lord, you’ll be happy with each other. You will never have the home that you could have until your home fears the Lord.

## **Feed Love to the Home**

A man can have no greater treasure than a godly wife, and there is no greater thing that man can do for his wife than to love her. If he does, he



will find her to be “a fruitful vine.” The psalmist sings, “Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table” (Psalm 128:3 NKJV). In many homes, the mother is the heart of the family. The way to have a healthy heart and a happy heart is to give love to her heart.

Why is the wife compared to a vine? Well, first, a vine clings. A vine puts out its tendrils and wraps itself around whatever it’s growing near and clings to it. That’s what a loving wife will do. She will cleave to her husband and strengthen him and support him.

A vine also climbs. Once a vine is adequately supported, it will begin to grow and mature. Its roots will go down, its branches will grow out, and it will cover whatever it is clinging to and make it a thing of beauty. That’s what a wife does for her husband and her children.

A vine also clusters—that is, it brings forth fruit in abundance. A loving wife and a loving husband can together bring forth the precious fruit of children. That is why the Bible says in Psalm 127:3, “The fruit of the womb is a reward” (NKJV).

There is not a more powerful force on the face of this earth than a wife and a mother who is happy and secure in the relationship she has with her husband, and who is loved by and supported by her family.

## **Furnish Leadership for the Home**

Psalm 128:3 speaks of “your wife” and “your children,” so that logically assumes this psalm is addressed to husbands and fathers. Now why is this psalm addressed primarily to the father? Because in God’s plan the father is to be the head of the home. He is to give leadership for the home. Nothing we have done in the Southern Baptist Convention has caused more of an uproar and debate than when we simply stated that the husband should be the head of the wife and the primary leader of the home. All we did was quote Ephesians 5:23 which says, “The husband is head of the wife.” God intended for the father to be the head of the home.

Backing up to Psalm 128:2 we see that it says, “When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you” (NKJV). If I were to lay the blame for America’s moral disintegration at the feet of

anyone, I would lay it at the feet of fathers. America will never be right until our homes are right, and our homes will never be right until our fathers get right.

Not long ago, Hallmark Cards assigned several staff members to go into a penitentiary to provide free greeting cards to any inmates who wanted to send one to their mothers. They were amazed by the number of prisoners who lined up to write greetings on a card to send to their mothers. That program was such a success that Hallmark decided to do the same thing a month later to celebrate Father's Day. Can you guess what happened? Not one prisoner lined up to send his dad a greeting card. Why? Because very few men in prison have any relationship with their fathers (70 percent of the men in prison grew up without knowing their father).

One of the chief characteristics of our Father God is faithfulness. But one of the chief characteristics of contemporary American fathers is their unfaithfulness. One-third of America's children are not living with their natural fathers. Over fifteen million kids are growing up in homes without any father. What will it take for dads to be loyal, loving leaders? What will it take for it to "be well with you"?

## **Finish the Legacy of the Home**

If you don't think the home is important, and if you don't think fathers are important to the home, listen to what the psalmist says: He says the only hope for the capital of a nation is the home. "The LORD bless you out of Zion" (Psalm 128:5 NKJV). In the psalm, Zion stands for the political heart of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was to Israel what Washington, DC, is to America.

Godly homes are the only hope for the city. "And may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life" (Psalm 128:5 NKJV). We've got many problems in the inner city, but they are due not to the lack of money but to the lack of men taking responsibility for the babies they help conceive, being faithful husbands, godly fathers, and rearing those children in the nurture and counsel of the Lord.

But godly homes are also the only hope for the country. If our own capital city understood the strength of this statement, then there would be more profamily legislation because the more you strengthen the home, the more you strengthen the nation. "Yes, may you see your children's children.

Peace be upon Israel!” (Psalm 128:6 NKJV). Plato said long ago, “The life of a nation is the life of the family written large.” The pulse of a nation is determined by the heartbeat of its homes, and if we are going to have a legacy, we must put our efforts here.

As president of the United States, Ronald Reagan did everything he could to limit the regulation and size of the government. He knew that the stronger the government, the weaker the family, so he made this statement: “We fear that government may be powerful enough to destroy families; we know that it is not powerful enough to replace them.”

How important is the family to you? When former president George H.W. Bush was asked, “What is your greatest accomplishment in life?” he could have said being a fighter pilot in World War II. He could have said being the U.S. ambassador to China, the director of the CIA, the vice president of the United States, even the president of the United States. But he said, “My greatest accomplishment in life is that my children still come home.” Your children will still come home too if there’s no place like home, and there’s no place like home where Jesus Christ is Lord.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Father, I look to you for the abiding source of love for our home, for the nurturing leadership of our home, and for the legacy of our efforts. Be the head of our home as we submit to you.*

**Question for This Week:** How does your family fear God in your home? How do you think you can go deeper into following God together?

## United We Stand, Divided We Fall

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 133
- John 17:20-26
- 2 Corinthians 13:11
- Philippians 2:1-4
- 1 Peter 3:8-12

### God's Greatest Expectation

What is one thing that God desires, and even requires, which Satan works day and night to undo? Here's a hint: it is something Jesus himself prayed for just before he went to the cross. It is the one thing the Bible says will convince the world that the church has something special. What is it I am talking about? Unity.

Unity is not the same as union, which is when you are bonded with someone with whom you may not have a common connection. Unity is not the same as uniformity, which is when everyone looks alike, sounds alike, and thinks alike. It's not even unanimity; there is no place on earth where everybody agrees with everybody on everything.

By unity I mean a oneness of heart, a similarity of purpose, and an agreement on the basics of Bible doctrine and truth. Romans 14:19 says,

“So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up” (NLT).

The devil is no match for a united church no matter how small that church may be. So, Satan’s strategy to defeat the church is to divide and conquer. No matter a church’s size, budget, or influence, it can still be defeated one member at a time. Satan’s motive is to deceive us so that he can divide us and thereby destroy us.

However, a united church can withstand Satan’s attacks. When every flank is covered and every side is protected; the gates of hell cannot prevail against a church united in its love for Jesus Christ and for one another. When our founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin stood up and said, “Gentlemen, now we must all hang together, or surely we shall all hang separately.” This is equally true for the church, and Psalm 133 shows us why.

## **God Expects Us to Adopt Unity**

Whose job is it to protect the unity of the church? Is it the job of the pastor? The deacons or elders? The prayer team? No. It’s the job of every church member. Paul was speaking to the entire church when he said we should “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

In The Message version of the Bible, Psalm 133:1 reads: “How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along!” In fact, the Lord Jesus prayed that we would be one. We are to be one just as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are One. Jesus prayed this beautiful prayer for the church: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21).

The Trinity is not three Gods; it is one God in three persons. It is a perfect unity. Unity is in the very nature of God himself. Therefore, disharmony and disunity grieves God because it is against his very nature. We must adopt this unity if we’re to be the church God intended.

One thing the Holy Spirit will not and cannot do is work in a church that is divided. Dwight L. Moody said, “I have never known the Spirit of God to

work where the Lord's people were divided." Satan gets his way when we're too active to assemble, too wounded to worship, too haughty to be humble, and too stingy to sacrifice. When we adopt unity, we refuse autonomy.

Years ago, I read a study about why Canada geese always fly distances in a V-formation. The research revealed that as each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately behind it. Flying in a V-formation, the whole flock adds at least 70 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

Naturalists discovered something else: when a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag of trying to go it alone, and it quickly gets back into formation and takes advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front of it. If we just have as much sense as geese, we will stay in formation, and we'll be headed in the same direction following the will of God.

When people have a unified goal of following God's will, obeying God's word, and living together in total surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ, they can go farther and have more success than they could traveling alone. God expects us to adopt a position of unity with one another, but there's more to it than that.

## **God Expects Us to Advertise Unity**

It is a beautiful sight to behold when God's people are united under the banner of the Lord Jesus Christ and under the umbrella of his authority. Twice in his prayer Jesus uses phrases like "so the world will know" or "believe that you sent me." The greatest advertisement for the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a billboard, a newspaper advertisement, or even a television program. The greatest advertisement for the gospel of Jesus Christ is a church that is unified in the Holy Spirit regardless of any disagreements they might have.

There isn't always strength in numbers. There is only strength in numbers if those numbers are unified. One brick by itself is worthless, but many bricks together can make a wall. One shingle by itself is worthless, but many shingles together can make a roof. One link alone is worthless, but many links together can make a chain.

We can be a mighty club in God's hands to defeat the devil at every turn if we will be a fellowship of unity. What does it communicate to the world when we fire our pastors because they don't meet our growth expectations? Or when we disagree on carpet color just to protect our small kingdoms? The world will never see our unity if we are committed to touting our differences.

God expects us to advertise our unity. In a world of political, national, philosophical, and theological division, God is glorified, magnified, and satisfied when his children are unified.

## **God Expects Us to Apply Unity**

Henry Ford once said, "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, but working together is success." Why should we come together and work together? I can think of three words that should give us plenty of motivation to apply unity with great intention.

The first word is *family*. Psalm 133 was addressed in verse 1 to "God's people." That is what a church is; it is nothing less than the family of God. It's a lot easier to have fellowship with a family member who acts like a family member than with someone who claims to be a family member but doesn't act like one.

The second word is *fruitfulness*. David makes a comparison that's very interesting. He compares unity to "precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe" (Psalm 133:2). Why is unity like oil? Oil in the Bible is a symbol of the Holy Spirit of God. The Lord gave a specific measure of each element that was to be used in making this sacred anointing oil and warned that it must never be imitated, nor must it ever be substituted, and anyone who tried would be cut off from the people of God (Exodus 30:22-33).

The way those various ingredients came together to form this beautiful anointing oil is similar to the unifying oil of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is Jesus living in me, Jesus living in you, Jesus living in this brother, and Jesus living in that sister. God's desire is that we all be blended into one body by the gracious unifying work of the Holy Spirit of God.

The third word is *focus*. The New Testament tells us, "Let us concentrate on the things which make for harmony, and on the growth of

one another's character" (Romans 14:19 PHILLIPS). We need to focus on what we have in common, not on our differences. God wants unity not uniformity, but for the sake of unity we should never let differences divide us. We must stay focused on what matters most, which ought to be loving each other as Christ has loved us.

## **God Expects Us to Advance Unity**

David not only compares unity to oil but he compares it to dew. "It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore" (Psalm 133:3). In that hot Mediterranean climate, dew is vital to plant life. It is like refreshing lotion that God sends to lubricate that dry parched land of Israel. There was no irrigation back when this psalm was written and very little rain. Farmers were dependent upon the morning dew to water their crops.

There was not a more beautiful sight to a Hebrew farmer than that morning dew that he knew was sent from God to water his crops. That dew meant food for the table and clothing and shelter for his family. When that dew settled, there would be great rejoicing in that home.

There is nothing sweeter than when the dew of unity falls on a church. I'm sure some readers have seen the bitterness of a church divided, and you know what it is to rejoice in the blessing of a church united. Dew, like unity, makes the land fertile and fruitful. Dew gives the land its greatest potential to do what it was created to do. What dew does for the land, unity does for the church.

What's true for geese is true for the church; what's true for the church is true for a family. I'm limited in what I can do alone for God, but we are unlimited by what we can do together. United we stand, divided we fall. As Paul would say today, stay united around your love for Jesus and your love for one another.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Lord, help me to be a creator of unity. Reveal to me where my attitudes might not create the bonds of family, fruitfulness, or focus.*



**Question for This Week:** Are you sitting back and waiting for an invitation to be more fully involved in your church? How can you more fully enter in to the life of your church family with oneness of heart and purpose?

## Heartbreak Hotel

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 137
- 2 Peter 2:17-22
- Ezekiel 18:24-32
- Isaiah 24:4-13
- Galatians 3:1-9

### **A Resort of Remorse**

One of the greatest spiritual principles I have ever learned came from an old saying I heard long ago. The principle actually comes out of the first three chapters of the Bible and we are living it out in the twenty-first century. It goes like this: “Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.”

There is indeed a high price to low living. A song written by an anonymous prisoner of war illustrates it sadly and poignantly. This Jewish believer in God was in bondage in Babylon because his nation had rebelled against God. They were eating the bitter fruit of backsliding. Where once they enjoyed the fresh fragrance of freedom, the sour stench of slavery filled their nostrils.

Everyone who decides to go their own way, forsake God's law, and forget his commandments will always check into Heartbreak Hotel. Be forewarned: the rent is outrageously high; the rooms are incredibly dirty; the roommates are totally depressed; the atmosphere is thick with grief. So if you are contemplating "going off the reservation," before you do, consider the consequences.

## **You Cannot Shake the Sadness of Backsliding**

The psalmist begins with a sorrowful tune, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1). He and his community have been dragged away to a pagan land. I imagine they are sitting by the edge of the water, in shock, wondering, "How is it that we are not in Zion anymore? How did this become our life?"

The memory of Zion only intensifies the grief. Zion represents Jerusalem where God dwells in fellowship and friendship with his people. The joyful experience of this relationship was expressed in natural, continual praise—the kind that reaches the ends of the earth (Psalm 48:10). Yet, now their hearts were so heavy that they had hung up their harps (Psalm 137:2). No joy in Mudville. No dancing. No music. No partying. The saddest person on earth is not the person who doesn't know God—it is the person who does but is out of fellowship with him.

From your first day on backsliding boulevard, misery will be your constant companion. One of the marks of a true believer is not that one cannot sin but that one cannot enjoy it. God will let a believer go to Babylon, but he won't let him enjoy the stay. Disobedience always makes a nonrefundable reservation in Heartbreak Hotel. If you are determined to sin, you are destined to suffer.

If you are sad and sleepless, depressed and discouraged, helpless and hurting after choosing the wrong path, listening to the wrong voice, hanging with the wrong crowd—take heart! It means you are a citizen of Zion who is a POW (prisoner of wickedness) and there is a way out. Backsliding puts you in Heartbreak Hotel, but there is still a check-out time.

## **You Cannot Stand the Shame of Backsliding**

Have you ever been mocked? You are not alone. When Jesus hung from the cross his persecutors cried out, “Save yourself! Come down from the cross!” (Matthew 27:38-40). In Job’s darkest time, he was jeered at and rejected by his community (Job 16:10). When Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall, Sanballat hurled insults and called the Jewish builders “feeble” and inept (Nehemiah 4:1-3). Mocking happens because other people are sinful.

But mocking also happens when we are sinful. You see, there is a difference between sin and a mistake. A mistake is something you do unintentionally like writing the wrong amount on a check, calling someone the wrong name, or forgetting your wedding anniversary. A sin, however, is something you do with intent like stealing from your company, telling a lie about a friend, or having an affair.

John Edwards got caught in a sinful affair during his vice-presidential campaign, though he consistently downplayed it and called it a mistake. From 2006 until his indictment in 2011, he lied, denied his daughter, and used campaign money to hide his mistress.<sup>11</sup> Edwards was a Christian who oversaw his church’s urban ministries and attended Bible study. Make no mistake, his sinfulness was what was really at work.<sup>12</sup> Well, you throw a rock at a pack of dogs and the one that barks is the one that gets hit. As a result, he and his mistress were both mercilessly mocked.<sup>13</sup> As late as March 2016, when asked to pose for a selfie in an airport, he declined in shame.<sup>14</sup>

The psalmist says, “For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” (Psalm 137:3). While the world might want to mock us for our mistakes, they certainly want to crucify us for our sins. Sin brings shame. The world doesn’t celebrate the victories of God’s people, but it throws a party at the vices. Charles Swindoll put it well: “The scoffers and critics of Christianity never stand any taller or shout any louder than when God’s people publicly fall into sin and are forced to suffer the inevitable consequence. All Satan’s host dance with glee when believers compromise, play with fire, then get burned.”<sup>15</sup>

The world loves to load its cannon with the fodder of fallen Christians. Like a rock thrown into a lake, the ripple of our sins hurts our friends, our family, and our faith. Most of all it brings disgrace to the God of all grace and shame to the Savior who died for our shame. How many people have

ruined a lifetime of character building over one moment of indiscretion? But the jeers of the crowd can be turned into the cheers of the church when regret is met with remorse and repentance.

## **You Cannot Sing God’s Song While Backsliding**

One of the joys of walking in God’s path of righteousness is the songs of salvation, grace, and peace that fill your heart. But sin paralyzes the vocal cords. When a Christian is in the “Babylon of backsliding,” the songs of peace and joy get stuck in the throat. Why? Because the songs of God are the songs of deliverance.

During a decade of downfall, Mel Gibson likely wasn’t singing too many songs of deliverance. Gibson was a highly celebrated actor and director, even one of Hollywood’s biggest stars due in large part to his movies *Braveheart* in 1995 and *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. Soon after the controversial *Passion* movie, he was arrested for drunk driving, spewed anti-Semitic remarks at his arresting officer, and later was accused of abusing the mother of his daughter. Gibson, a devout Catholic, seemed to spiral quickly down, and Hollywood blacklisted him.<sup>16</sup>

The psalmist writes, “How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4). When we experience the consequences of our sinfulness, it feels like we have been exiled to a foreign land, a place where it seems that God isn’t active at all. David wrote in Psalm 32:7, “You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.” But this isn’t the tune of the one who has checked into Heartbreak Hotel.

The first song in the Bible is the song of Moses (Exodus 15), and this patriarch debuted it after the Red Sea crossing when God delivered Israel from the bondage of Egypt. This is my paraphrase of that song:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me;  
I once was in Egypt, but now I’m out  
And old Pharaoh’s in the Sea!<sup>17</sup>

Neither sorrow nor suffering can take away the song of the joy of salvation from a believer's heart. Only one thing can rob a believer of his song, and that is sin. Remember: *the only people who are happy in Babylon are Babylonians*. Backsliding leads only to bondage, bitterness, and brokenness. But there is good news.

## **You Must Seek the Savior When Backsliding**

In verse 5, there is a change in subject from “we” to “I.” “If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill” (Psalm 137:5). Anyone, anytime, anywhere can leave the bondage of backsliding and shake the shackles of sin by remembering where he came from and who he belongs to. While we collectively belong to God, we must individually commit ourselves to him. The psalmist is taking that responsibility here.

We belong to God and we are citizens of heaven. Jerusalem is the seat of the temple, which symbolically was where God dwelled. Today we are the temples where God's Spirit dwells. God's presence is no longer a place but a person—Jesus! We can always remember the One who will never forget us and who never forsakes us even when we may temporarily forsake him.

When our sons were small, we would always say to them as they left for school, “Remember who you are and who you belong to.” They knew their response: “We are Merritts and we belong to God!” Our reply was, “Live like it!” But we don't always do this, do we?

When Billy Sunday was converted and joined the church, a Christian man put his arm on the young man's shoulder and said, “William, there are three simple rules I can give to you, and if you will hold to them you will never write ‘backslider’ after your name. Take fifteen minutes each day to listen to God talking to you; take fifteen minutes each day to talk to God; take fifteen minutes each day to talk to others about God.”

Good advice. Why not start today and stay out of Heartbreak Hotel?

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty God, turn my heart back to you. Reveal to me my sin and restore me to your favor that I might, once again, sing your songs of deliverance.*

**Question for This Week:** Do you remember who you are and whose you are? Has anything lured you away?

Great God

**Scripture for This Week**

- Psalm 139:1-18
- 1 John 3:19-24
- Jeremiah 23:23-24
- Isaiah 45:11-13
- Isaiah 55:8-13

**God Is Omnirelevant—He Astounds Me**

The blue whale is the largest animal ever known to have lived on earth. These magnificent marine mammals grow up to one hundred feet long and can weigh upward of two hundred tons. Their tongues alone can weigh as much as an elephant. Their hearts can weigh as much as an automobile.

But a blue whale isn't anywhere near as big as Mount Everest. If you could put one hundred blue whales inside of a huge jar, you could put millions of those whale jars inside of a hollowed-out Mount Everest.

And Mount Everest isn't anywhere near as big as the earth, which isn't anywhere near as big as the sun, which is dwarfed by Antares, a red super-giant star situated in the Milky Way galaxy, which is greater still. It goes on and on throughout the universe, which still remains beyond our human ability to calculate.



When I look at the world through a microscope or a telescope, three words come to my mind: God is great! A.W. Tozer said: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” Putting all of that in perspective, how do our problems truly compare? Sometimes we reduce God to the size of our biggest problem, so could our problems be big merely because our perception of God is too small?

King David wrote a song that gives us the Bible’s most exhaustive description of the greatness of God. It shows us that God is too great to fail. We can always trust him.

## **God Is Omniscient—He Knows Me**

I want to introduce you to three Latin words describing God: omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. These words mean that God is all-knowing, all-present, and all-powerful. They demonstrate the very magnitude and greatness of God.

*Omniscient* essentially means that God knows everything all the time. He’s not pretending like a know-it-all and he’s not mistaken like an adolescent. He really knows everything. His way of knowing is not just intellectual but personal. God doesn’t just know about you; he *knows* you. He knows you better than you know you.

God knows who you are. Psalm 139:1 says, “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!” (ESV). He sees your dirty and your clean, your wrong and your right. You may think you are insignificant, but God knows you better than you know you and loves you anyway!

God knows what you think. “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar” (Psalm 139:2 ESV). God can read your mind just as easily as you can read email. Each thought goes directly into the headphones of God. You can’t keep a secret from him because he already knows everything.

God also knows where you go. “You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways” (Psalm 139:3 ESV). Whether you lie down or get up, sit down or stand up, God’s eyes are on you with every step. God knows the what, when, where, and why of every path you take.

Finally, God knows what you say: “Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (Psalm 139:4 ESV). Is that not incredible? God not only knows what you say, he knows what you’ll say before you speak it.

David goes on to say in verses 5 and 6, “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it” (Psalm 139:5-6 ESV). To be known so completely by God is not something to be feared. It is wonderful to be known inside and out and to still be loved and wanted. We are never out of the sight or out of the mind of our great and loving God.

## **God Is Omnipresent—He Is with Me**

Yogi Berra once made a great observation. He said, “I have noticed that everywhere I go—there I am.” I could add, “Everywhere you go, there God is.” He is omnipresent. Let’s put this to the test though. Is God truly with us everywhere? What about things like death, distance, or darkness? Isn’t there *some* place that God isn’t?

David hits the hardest one first; death cannot take us away from the presence of God: “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” (Psalm 139:7-8 ESV). A busy life, a bad decision, or even death cannot take you away from the presence of God. David lived on the brink of death on several occasions so he *knows* this. When you go to your grave, God is there waiting to gather you to his side to be with him in heaven.

Distance can’t take you from the presence of God. Every time I get into an airplane and we fly above the clouds, I look out at those clouds and think about Psalms. “If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me” (Psalm 139:9-10 ESV). If you could fly like a bird or swim like a dolphin, you would still be in the presence of God.

Darkness cannot take you from the presence of God. David thought the way we all do, that darkness is a cover. “If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” (Psalm

139:11-12 ESV). God doesn't need night goggles; his eyes can pierce through any darkness.

God is so high you cannot get over him. God is so low you cannot get under him. God is so wide you cannot get around him. God is always with you and never leaves you behind. You may feel lonely but you are never alone. Everywhere you go, God is right there behind you encouraging you, beside you protecting you, and before you guiding you.

## **God Is Omnipotent—He Exceeds Me**

God is omnipotent—all-powerful. There are some things that even God can't do, such as lie, die, do wrong, or tempt others to do wrong. But anything consistent with his character and his word, God *can* do.

Our bodies contain over thirty trillion cellular machines that carry genetic information. Each cell contains the rough equivalent of a library of four thousand books. To catalog all the genetic information in your body would take a library of thirty trillion times four thousand books.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that the human body is a magnificent machine was not lost on David even thousands of years ago. He was no doctor and had no medical training. But he concluded that the human body had to have been created by a great God. “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb” (Psalm 139:13 ESV). David said, “I am not here because of Mother Nature. I am formed by God himself.” And so are all of us!

Your brain can store 100 trillion facts. Your mind can handle 15,000 decisions a second. Your nose can smell up to 10,000 different odors. Your touch can detect an item 1/25,000 of an inch thick. David might not have known all the statistics, but he knew our bodies were elaborately woven: “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139:15-16 ESV).

Pollster George Gallup once said, “I could prove God statistically if I had to. Take the human body alone—the chance that all the functions of the individual human being would just happen is a statistical monstrosity.” The

human body is not an evolutionary accident thrown together by chance; it was a miracle purposefully put together by a great, powerful God. May we all declare with David: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well” (Psalm 139:14 ESV).

## **God Is Omnidirectional—He Surrounds Me**

David could somewhat grasp the amazing makeup of the body, but he couldn't wrap his brain around God's mind: “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you” Psalm 139:17-18 ESV).

If God is this great, then what problem do you have that God cannot solve? What part of your life can't you trust him with? None and nothing. Not only can you trust him on earth, you can trust him for eternity.

Listen to how David closes this magnificent song: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24 ESV). When God searches our hearts, he sees the envy, pride, jealousy, and selfishness we all have within us. But he searches us not to punish us but to reconcile with us. Revealing all that ugly truth about us doesn't push God away. It brings him closer in love.

Through his Son, Jesus, God did the impossible; he paid for all your sins. He accomplished the inconceivable and solved the insoluble. And he did it all through a manger, a cross, and an empty tomb. God is so great that he cannot be contained by the universe, but through my faith in his Son, he can live in my heart. What a great God he is!

**Prayer for This Week:** *Holy God, I ask you to know me, be with me, form me, and help me. I trust in your great power, believe in your great knowledge, and long for your all-encompassing presence today.*

**Question for This Week:** What have you been trying to hide from God? Would you bring it to him and allow him to lovingly search you, purify you, and bring you closer to himself?

## Why You Should Come Clean with God

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 139:19-24
- James 4:1-10
- Philippians 4:4-7
- Psalm 51:1-12
- Proverbs 15:24

### **A Dangerous Prayer**

Who is sitting in your seat reading this book? Before you assume that I've lost my mind, here's a follow-up question: Which "you" is sitting in your seat? You see there are actually three people in your seat. There is the person you think you are, the person others think you are, and the person God knows you are.

When I was a boy, one of my heroes was Superman. One of the things that amazed me about Superman was his X-ray vision. He could see through buildings, walls, doors, and trees. There was only one thing he could not see through, and that was lead.

God has spiritual X-ray vision, but unlike Superman not only can he see through walls and buildings, he can see through you. Nothing can block his

vision. As Adam and Eve learned, you can run from God but you can't hide. That is exactly why you should come clean with God.

This passage we are going to study today, Psalm 139:23-24, is put so beautifully in Eugene Petersen's *The Message*: "Investigate my life, O God, find out everything about me; cross-examine and test me, get a clear picture of what I'm about; see for yourself whether I've done anything wrong—then guide me on the road to eternal life."

In these verses David asks God to make sure he's clean. This is a dangerous prayer. He asks God to do four things for him that would reveal any sin and cleanse any stain in his life. If you will make these four things your habits as well, you will always know that you are clean with God.

## **Lord, Search Me Thoroughly**

The heart is the most powerful part of the human body. A little bigger than a clenched fist, the heart expands and contracts seventy times per minute in the average man, pumping an average of fifteen hundred gallons of blood every day. In a lifetime, the heart pumps enough blood to fill thirteen supertankers each holding one million barrels.<sup>19</sup>

But the heart is not only the engine that keeps us alive, it is the very core of our being. It is only through the heart that a man can be saved and know God. Romans 10:9-10 says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved."

At the beginning of Psalm 139, David declares that God has searched him and knows him. And yet at the end of the psalm, he says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (Psalm 139:23 NKJV). I think he says this twice because he knows there is a difference between relationship and fellowship. Our relationship with God is permanent, but our fellowship with God is not. God can fellowship only with a person who has a pure heart, and David didn't want just a positional relationship; he wanted pure, intimate fellowship.

When you pray this "search me" prayer, you are asking God to put you under his spiritual CAT scan and to bring to light what would normally be hidden from everyone else. David asks God to search his heart because God

is more intimately acquainted with it than David is himself. I've heard people say, "Well, if I know my heart..." Well, you don't know your heart. You know some tendencies, but you don't know the full truth. Only God can truly know and touch the heart.

Sometimes we let any riffraff knock on the door of our heart and we willingly throw it open. If anger shows up we let him in. When pity wants to have a party, we show him the fridge. When lust rings the bell, we change the sheets on the bed. That's our heart. Its desires change and its desires conflict and that's why we can't rely on it. That's why we need God to search our hearts.

## **Lord, Show Me Completely**

Did you know that the mind is more powerful than the body in determining the quality of the life you live? You can be sick in your body, but if you've got a healthy mind, you can live a productive life. You can be an Olympic weightlifter, but if you've got a sick mind, you'll have a sick life. The Caring Institute puts it this way:

Keep your thoughts positive because your thoughts become your words.

Keep your words positive because your words become your actions.

Keep your actions positive because your actions become your habits.

Keep your habits positive because your habits become your values.

Keep your values positive because your values become your destiny.

But notice it all begins with the mind. David says, "Try me, and know my anxieties" (Psalm 139:23 NKJV). We don't always like to reveal what is on our minds, especially if it's negative or embarrassing. Sometimes God

will bring tests into our life to try us, to show us where our anxieties and fears are, that we might put our trust in him even when it's hard.

We don't need to hide our fears, our anxieties, or our worries. We need to let God reveal them so that he might deal with them and grow our faith and fix our fellowship with him. That's why the Bible says in 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Jesus even said the greatest commandment of all was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37).

As he moved from the heart to the mind, David is saying to the Lord, "Show me any thoughts that carry me away from fellowship with you." It is just as important to keep your mind clean as it is to keep your heart clean.

## **Lord, See Me Clearly**

Today, if you talk about sinful or wicked ways, others will roll their eyes as if you are a Victorian prude living in the wrong century. We no longer talk about wickedness, we talk about weakness. We don't call an adulterous relationship sinful, we call it inappropriate. We don't talk about transgressions, we talk about problems.

We live in a society that thinks it has figured out a way to eliminate right and wrong. First, you do away with God. When you do away with God, you do away with sin. When you do away with sin, you do away with guilt. When you do away with guilt, you do away with responsibility. When you do away with responsibility, you do away with punishment.

But David isn't trying to cover anything up. He prays, "And see if there is any wicked way in me" (Psalm 139:24 NKJV). This verse literally says, "See if there is a way of pain or grief in me." David wants no attitude or action in his life that would cause pain to his Lord or grief to other people. David wanted God to put him under the knife and cut out any sin cancer that might be growing in his life.

The reason David wanted God to do this to him wasn't so that God would find out something he didn't know. God *already* knew everything about David that there was to know. But if David allowed God to search him thoroughly and show him completely, then David could also learn the truth about himself. When we know the truth about ourselves through the



eyes of God, we can then also know the truth about God and how he made us to be.

When a doctor operates on you, he doesn't operate on you for his sake; he operates on you for your sake so that you can see the result. That is what David is saying: operate on me, pull out of me anything that is wrong, show it to me, and remind me of how wicked it is so that I might live a life closer to you.

## **Lord, Steer Me Rightly**

Several years ago, I was in Birmingham, Alabama, and had to get up very early to catch a shuttle to the airport. The shuttle driver was named Bill and on the way to the airport we got to talking. He had moved to Alabama from New Jersey ten years earlier after being fired from his job. His family wanted him to take a certain job that he didn't want, so they kicked him out of the house and turned their back on him. He hadn't seen his mom, dad, or sister for ten years.

He said, "I don't ever want to see them again. I have no feelings for them at all." He went on to tell me that he lived alone, had no friends, no relationships, no real social interaction. "I'm happy with my life, and that's the way I want it," he said.

I began to share with him how God was a Father that would never turn his back on him, and that God had sent Jesus Christ to establish a personal relationship with him and to be a friend who would stick closer than a brother. When I finished, he looked at me with sad eyes and said again, "I'm happy with my life just the way it is."

David wasn't going to settle for that kind of isolation. He asked God, "Lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:24 NKJV). David knew there was a right way and a wrong way, a high road and a low road. Proverbs 15:24 says, "The way of life winds upward for the wise, that he may turn away from hell below" (NKJV). David wanted to get on that way of life, the road to heaven, the way to God, and the path to virtue.

What is so valuable about a Christian is not who he is on the outside but what he is on the inside. We ought to live in such a way, and we ought to be so clean with God, that when someone sees our life, they see a picture of Jesus. When you come clean with God, that is exactly what people will see.

**Prayer for This Week:** *Heavenly Father, give me the faith to open all of myself for your searching and your revealing so that I might be brought into closer fellowship with you.*

**Question for This Week:** What is it in the closet of your life that you feel should be kept hidden from God? What would happen if he revealed it?

## How Great Is Our God

### Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 145
- 1 John 4:4-7
- Daniel 4:34-37
- Acts 2:36-41
- 1 John 1:5-7

### Great Wonders

When people think of big things, they often think of Texas. But Georgia has some pretty big claims to fame as well. The largest college campus in the world is Berry College, which sits on twenty-seven thousand acres in the town of Rome. Georgia also happens to be the largest grower of peanuts in the United States, and the world's largest (fake) peanut is situated just off I-75 in Ashburn. Most people don't connect this, but the largest natural wonder in all the world also happens to be in Georgia—or at least touches it—because it's the ocean.

The ocean is magnificent. I'll spend five or six hours driving to the coast to visit the ocean. I love the clammy air and cadenced waves, the peeping gulls and the pliable sand. Gazing out on that vast, blue-gray expanse is indescribable. I cannot see the entire ocean, touch its bottom, or

conceive of its volume. The ocean is far greater than I am. To appreciate its grandiosity, I have to acquiesce to its greatness.

The greatness of God is the subject of Psalm 145, the last specifically identified psalm of David. It is the only psalm with the title “A psalm of praise.” This song is a part of the grand finale of praise that continues through Psalm 150. It is also the last of eight acrostic psalms where each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So Psalm 145 is the A to Z of praise.<sup>20</sup> God’s unparalleled greatness merits his unrivalled praise. As when I stand next to the ocean, in order to appreciate God’s grandiosity, I have to acquiesce to his greatness.

We know *that* God is great. We don’t know *how* great God is. This is why Chris Tomlin’s magnificent song “How Great Is Our God,” one of my favorites of all time, could also be in the form of a question. Just how great *is* our God? David gives us just some of many ways to realize how great our God is.

## **God Is Great in the Power of His Works**

We can almost always measure the greatness of any person by what they do. We might note the number of home runs he hits, the number of Oscars she wins, the great policies she enacted, the myriad books he wrote, and on and on it goes. God’s works are greater than all of these. David says to God, “Every day I will praise you and extol your name forever and ever. Great is the LORD and *most* worthy of praise; *his greatness no one can fathom*” (Psalm 145:2-3 italics mine).

I can remember who won the Oscar for Best Motion Picture this year, but I’ll likely forget which film project won it just two years ago. I’ll forget great lines from the books I read, great movements in our government, great moments in sports, but if I’m anything like David, I’ll never forget the works of God if I praise him for them every day.

If you want an idea of how great and powerful God is just take two swallows of some H<sub>2</sub>O. In eighteen milliliters of water (about two swallows) are  $6 \times 10^{20}$  molecules of H<sub>2</sub>O. How big is 10 to the power of 23? A good computer can carry out 10 million counts per second. It would take a computer two billion years to count 10 to the power of 23. A stack of five hundred sheets of paper is two to three inches high. How high would it

be if you had 6 times 10 to the power of 23 sheets? The stack would reach from the earth to the sun over one million times! That is the vastness and density God has put into creation.<sup>21</sup>

## **God Is Great in the Performance of His Will**

The longest reigning monarch in all the world was Sobhuza II of Swaziland. He reigned for eighty-two years ending in 1982 when he died... at the age of eighty-two. This means that when he was named king on December 10, 1899, he was just shy of five months old. It also means that though he bore the title of king, he didn't directly reign until he was twenty-one. In the meantime, his grandmother and his uncle led the nation. This an impressive record in human terms, but it's nothing compared to God's reign.

King David, who himself reigned for forty years, realizes there is only *one true King*, and David is not that king! "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations" (Psalm 145:13). God's kingdom is a forever kingdom. There never has been a time nor will there be when God has not been in total control of everything and every creature. We talk a lot about generational differences, but every generation has one thing in common: God is King over everyone. His kingdom is eternal in time and universal in scope.

This means we are neither the masters of our fate nor the captains of our own souls. In the ancient Middle East there existed suzerains—sovereign rulers over the land. Their authority and dominion was absolute. It was the sovereign's prerogative to initiate a treaty with those under him. It was totally self-imposed, not bilateral. All of his subjects were bound to him, completely surrendering the ownership of their very lives to him. In return, on his own initiative he pledged himself to protect, defend, and provide for his people. Blessings or burdens would be dictated by the people keeping covenant with their ruler.<sup>22</sup>

Our sovereign divine King has a will for us that will ultimately be fulfilled. Every molecule of the universe is subject to his beck and call. To those who trust him, it is comforting to know that the Lord God (not luck), Christ (not chance), and the Spirit (not superstition) rule our lives from morning to night, beginning to end, from birth to death.

## **God Is Great in the Promise of His Word**

When Tiger Woods was five, he asked his father to buy him a tricycle. Earl Woods said he had to think about it. This went on for a couple of months until one day Earl finally said, “Okay, you can have that tricycle.” Did Tiger jump up and down with joy? No. “I got absolutely no reaction at all,” Earl remembers. “I wondered why, but then I realized it was because Tiger trusted me. Most kids would have wanted details—when, what kind, etc. But for Tiger, it was enough to know I said I would get it for him.” Tiger knew his dad’s promise was platinum and his word was gold.

David knows the same thing is true of God when he writes, “The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does” (Psalm 145:13). Even the best of us have made promises we either couldn’t keep or didn’t keep. There have been times we have all failed to do our best. But with God a promise made is *always* a promise kept. His word is his bond and his bond is unbreakable.

Promises are really transfers of power. If we hold power and privilege, it is solely so that we can advance it to those who do not have it. We value promises when they can fulfill a desire that we cannot fulfill on our own. We rely on those promises being made good. When people don’t really care about the powerlessness around them, they make empty promises. Plenty of parents and politicians have been guilty of making empty promises and thus keeping power to themselves. God is not like this. When his people are enslaved, he frees them; when they are oppressed, he lifts them; when they are broken, he heals them.

God is the only being in the universe that has a 100 percent record of keeping every promise he has ever made. No other god in any religion acts in this way. No other deity offers himself to restore righteousness by giving himself. God followers never have to worry; God is faithful to keep every promise.

## **God Is Great in the Purity of His Ways**

David repeats half the stanza from verse 13 in verse 17: “The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does.” Even the best of us are not always righteous nor are we always even right. But God is.

To say that God is righteous is to say that God is pure. There is nothing contaminated in his being, thinking, or acting. There is no hint of selfishness, sinfulness, or shamefulness. God is always right in what he does, when he does it, and how he does it. Even when we doubt or want to deny his righteousness, he is still the gold standard of what is right.

Habakkuk 1:13 says: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”

For all of our greatness, God can still find the guilt. For all of our sweetness, he can still smell the slander. For all of our fame, he can pinpoint the fault. Romans 3:10 says, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” For God to even look upon us, he must do so through the blood of Jesus who purifies us from all our sin. This frees us to the wonderful possibility of dipping our toes into the vast, ocean-like greatness of our God.

In 1715, Louis XIV of France died. He called himself “Louis the Great.” His court was the most magnificent in all of Europe. He even planned his funeral to be spectacular. To dramatize his greatness, his body was put in a golden coffin. He had given orders that the cathedral be dimly lit, with only a special candle set above the coffin. Thousands waited in hushed silence. Then Bishop Massillon slowly reached down, snuffed out the candle, and said, “Only God is great!” Indeed “How Great *Is* Our God!”

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty God, let me gaze upon your mighty works and be humbled by your holiness, purified by your power, and grow wiser in the ways of your will.*

**Question for This Week:** How many ways can you praise God for his greatness? Write a psalm this week using every letter of the alphabet.

Doxology

**Scriptures for This Week**

- Psalm 147
- Romans 12:1-2
- Daniel 2:17-23
- Matthew 15:29-31
- Deuteronomy 26:16-19

**Praise Completes God’s Worship**

I grew up in a quintessential deep South country church with hymnbooks, homecoming dinners, holy hollering, and yes, “hellfire and damnation preaching.” I was baptized in the same church where my mom and dad were baptized. Jeans were verboten—perish the thought of women wearing pants! Every single Sunday, as certain as Santa Claus coming on Christmas Eve, the service closed with the singing of the “Doxology.”

A doxology is a general praise saying, but Christians have grown accustomed to one that is set to a particular tune. To this day, each week around the world, thousands of Christian congregations raise their voices in worship and close their services with this centuries-old chorus:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;



Praise Him, all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host:  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.<sup>23</sup>

The “Doxology” we use today was published by Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken in 1709, it has been sung everywhere in churches and cathedrals around the world. No one knows exactly how or when this became a customary closing in so many churches, but no one can question the logic of either beginning our worship or closing our worship of God by offering him the sacrifice of praise. Likewise, the largest hymnbook ever written closes with one long doxology comprised of the last six songs from Psalm 145 through Psalm 150.

In Psalm 147, the psalmist exhorts us to praise the Lord and gives us rich and remarkable reasons to do so. There is tremendous spiritual power in the elevation of praise, theological truth in the expression of praise, and personal encouragement in the exercise of praise.

## **Praise Brings God Pleasure**

This song tells us why God demands, desires, and deserves our praise. With its more than twenty references to God and Lord (including pronouns), it puts God at the center of attention as he should be in all of our praise.<sup>24</sup> Praise should not focus on us but on God.

The psalmist says, “Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him!” (Psalm 147:1). It is “fitting” to praise God for he demands our praise, but he alone also deserves our praise. It is good for us to praise him in order to take our focus off of us and to put our focus on him.

There are many things that give God pleasure. For instance, he takes pleasure in his Son, Jesus (Colossians 1:19). He takes pleasure in his creation (Genesis 1:31). He takes pleasure in our ability to reconcile with one another (Proverbs 16:7). And he takes pleasure in our praise. Later in this psalm we learn that “his pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of the warrior; the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love” (Psalm 147:10-11). When we

give him praise for being our fearless hope and our unfailing lover, he is delighted.

Sometimes we think that being a Christian means we're invited only to the cross and suffering. But we are also invited to join God in joy and singing. Not only are we invited into it, but we are especially fit for it. We were designed to party for the Lord! Anything that is good to God is good for us, and nothing warms the heart of God more than when his people shower him with praise.

## **Praise Recognizes God's Power**

Nothing will stretch your thinking about God like stepping outside on a clear night and looking up. I will never forget being in Zambia camping out on the Zambezi River. I awoke in the middle of the night and stepped outside my tent to one of the most breathtaking views I have ever seen. There is no pollution in that part of the world, and it appeared as if someone had just thrown a trillion buckets of stars against that dark canvas. I had no idea there were so many stars!

Yet without a telescope you can see only about three thousand stars from any point on earth.<sup>25</sup> Even though those three thousand stars took my breath away, scientists estimate the universe contains at least seventy sextillion stars.<sup>26</sup> Think of that: that is seven followed by twenty-two zeroes. Yet not only does God have them numbered, he has them named. The psalmist writes, "He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit" (Psalm 147:4-5).

Yet the point of these verses is not the power of God that created the host of heaven but the power that sustains the humble against the wicked. Verses 2 and 3 tell us what this looks like: the homeless, brokenhearted exiles are gathered and bandaged and given a rebuilt home in Jerusalem. As God's people freely choose to move back to their homeland, their community is built up, sustained, and empowered.

This is the source of our shared praise, when we can come together in unity and healing in spite of trial and trauma. Notice in verse 1 the communal word "our." It is certainly good to give praises to "my" God in personal worship, but when we can come together to give praises to "our"

God, it is because the brokenness we've experienced together is now collectively healed by the power of his mercy and might.

“The LORD sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground” (Psalm 147:6). Even the most wicked heart melts before our powerful God and even the most wicked hand withers before the strength of his might. When we give praise to God, we can perceive the possibilities of his power.

## **Praise Honors God's Provision**

God is a God of climate control and animal care. He is the one who forms the clouds, brings the rain, grows the grass, and sustains the birds of the air and the beasts of the field. These middle verses in Psalm 147 are a great lesson for all believers that we should be conscious of creation care, committed to the well-being of animals, and appreciative that no part of God's creation is unimportant to him.

Christians haven't always been praised for their involvement in creation care. Arguments over what is science and what is speculation can keep some believers from engaging in practical acts of stewardship. As a result, science researchers think that evangelicals don't care or don't “get it.”<sup>27</sup> We should not be dodging the discourse but instead showing the way as stewards.

God values all life—not equally but consistently. Certainly human life takes priority in his heart, but animal and plant life are also important to him as a part of his divine creation. Everything he created was good. Everything he created is interconnected. Verses 8 and 9 demonstrate this with the food chain: the clouds produce the rain which bolsters the grass which satisfies the cattle whose carcasses nourish the ravens. His provision for the birds and the bees come from the flowers and the trees. His provision for the cow and the lamb come from the water and the land. The way it all works reminds us of his care and provision for us. God's immense creation shows us God's endless greatness and extensive care.

When you praise him, praise him for his good gifts of family, faith, forgiveness, and friendship. Praise him for his nature of goodness, grace, and glory. But don't leave out praising him for the created world around you. His provision is worthy of your praise.

## **Praise Secures God's People**

God delights not just in the praise of his people but in the *people who praise him*. He does this by guarding them with peace within their borders and protection with the bars of their gates. We can praise God for providing wise leaders who pass laws to protect our liberties, doctors who care for us in our illnesses, educators who enlighten us to wonder, and farmers and even factory workers who feed us.<sup>28</sup>

The psalmist says, “He strengthens the bars of your gates and blesses your people within you” (Psalm 147:13). Martin Luther understood these bars to include “everything else that helps to protect us, such as good government, good city ordinances, good order, stern punishments, and pious, faithful, and wise rulers.”<sup>29</sup> When we give praise to God for our lesser lords, our way of life, and our liberties, we further entrust ourselves to the God who is over all of it.

“He grants peace to your borders and satisfies you with the finest of wheat” (Psalm 147:14). The fundamental barrier to peace is fear. God assures us in these two verses that we have no reason to fear as a result of our weaknesses, our droughts, our enemies, or our barrenness. He assures the pathway through all of it and secures his people in shalom, wholeness, and harmony in our cities.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever.”<sup>30</sup>

Everything we have is a gift from God. Everything we do. Every breath we take. Every freedom we enjoy. We ought not steal the praise of God by praising ourselves. We can indeed “praise God from whom all blessings flow!” Praise is the gift that keeps on giving for it exalts the Giver (James 1:17). Praise the Lord!

**Prayer for This Week:** *Almighty Father, I praise you for you are great and rightly to be praised. I praise you for your power and provision and for the simple reason that my praise brings you pleasure.*

**Question for This Week:** What do you often overlook that you can praise God for? How has he lifted you up? How has he fed you? How has he built your home?

## Acknowledgments

Probably no book in the Bible has ministered to more people at more times under more circumstances than the Psalms. These ancient songs have comforted countless numbers of people in their hurts and heartaches for now going on three millennia. I am certainly one of them. One part of one stanza of one song was a life preserver to me as I was about to enter into one of the toughest meetings of my life. I hope this book will inspire many to listen to and live out the lyrics of these songs, which come straight from God's heart. So many thanks are due to so many for this book.

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## About the Author

James Merritt is senior pastor of Cross Pointe Church in Duluth, Georgia, and the host of *Touching Lives*, a television show that broadcasts weekly in all 50 states and 122 countries. He formerly served as a two-term president of the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination. As a national voice on faith and leadership, he has been interviewed by *Time*, *Fox News*, *ABC World News*, *MSNBC*, and *60 Minutes*.

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Follow him on Twitter at [@DrJamesMerritt](https://twitter.com/DrJamesMerritt).



## Notes

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### **Part Three: Always Faithful**

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