

# Lessons on the Psalms

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Taken from the Book of Psalms.

John Hendershot

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*Dedication*

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to “pass  
it on.”

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## Blessed Is The Man - Psalm 1

“Start at the very beginning, that’s a very good place to start.” (*Sound of Music*) “Start at the beginning and when you get to the end, stop.” (*Alice in Wonderland*)

With that good advice we begin a study of the Psalms, one of the most neglected parts of the Scripture. Just why would one want to study the Psalms?

- ✚ First, there is the “Hallmark Card” effect. Have you ever looked for the words to say just what you mean? Psalms do just that.
- ✚ Psalms are the prime source of Godly meditation (NOT the “chant your mantra” stuff.) For those who are greatly contemplative, this is the part of the Bible to contemplate.
- ✚ Those who study prophecy will soon find Psalms a prime source. The seeming randomness of the Psalms is often made clear in the New Testament.
- ✚ It is said that God inhabits the praise of his people. The psalms have been used for thousands of years as the primary form of praising God.
- ✚ There is also this: when God withdraws from you – and he will at times – to what do you appeal? Where do you go?
- ✚ All of us deal with fear, uncertainty and doubt. So did the Psalmists; their words are a comfort in such times.
- ✚ All Christians must have the virtue of hope – and nowhere is hope easier to find than in the Psalms.
- ✚ Each of us struggles with sin; so did the Psalmists. If there is a more elegant expression than Psalm 51, I do not know it.
- ✚ The Psalms also teach you to fear God and his judgment. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

There is, no doubt, more to be said. But this should get you through the first lesson.

### A side note – Hebrew poetry

You will notice that the Psalms are set as if they are poetry. They are, even though they do not rhyme in the sense we normally use “rhyme.” We are accustomed to “rain, Spain, main, plain.” Such rhymes stick in the memory; that is one chief use of rhyme. But the Psalms don’t rhyme that way. One reason, of course, is that they were written in Hebrew, not English.

The main reason that they work as poetry, however, is that they do rhyme – in thought. For example,

The Lord is my shepherd,  
I shall not want.

That’s a thought rhyme. You might see it as “*since* the Lord is my shepherd...” to make the connection clearer.

Thought rhymes can be quite complex. We shall not make a point of working out the rhyme patterns, but you should be aware that this is how it works. This means poetry, and of course poetry cannot be taken as literally as prose.

Blessed is the Man  
Psalms 1:1-3 NIV

## Blessed is the man

who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of mockers. (2) But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night. (3) He is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither.  
Whatever he does prospers.

The word “blessed” here has an interesting point: it’s plural. It’s an artistic touch by one who knew how the Lord blesses such a man. It reminds one of a story told by a former pastor. He said that when he asked people who did not tithe, “why not?” they usually had a very precise answer. When he asked those who did tithe why they did, they usually did not. They just look at the ground, shuffle their feet and begin with, “Well, the Lord has blessed us so much...”

## Bad to worse

The Psalmist gives us a picture of the progression of sin in the unsuspecting.

- ✚ First, you walk in the counsel of the wicked. Have you ever taken “good advice” that turned out to be anything but? If you’re listening to those who are evil, you become more like them as they “show you the ropes.” Good advice comes from good people.
- ✚ Next, you stand in the way of sinners. Ever been in the wrong place at the wrong time? (Hint to the women: Prince Charming will not be in the bar tonight.) If you inhabit the bars and brothels, guess what you become?
- ✚ Finally – note well – the progression ends with pride. The mocker, the cynic, has everything figured out. He knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. It is a point of pride that I can sneer at you. And pride is Satan’s own sin.

## Meditate

The word meditate in the Scripture means, according to Noah Webster, “To dwell on any thing in thought; to contemplate; to study; to turn or revolve any subject in the mind.” One aspect which we must see is that this is not a five minute exercise; rather, it is a continuing habit of mind. The Psalmist correctly says that we should do this day and night.

Please understand that this is not Zen meditation, so popular these days. It is very different. It involves conscious study; it requires bringing your mind into focus on individual truths of the Scripture. It is the character of the Scripture that its truths can be treated this way. It is *not* simply mindless repetition of a thought – a mantra.

And what are we to meditate on? God’s Law – for us contained in the precepts of Christ. As Thomas à Kempis put it, “The teaching of Jesus far transcends all the teachings of the Saints, and whosoever has His spirit will discover concealed in it heavenly manna.”<sup>1</sup> You will know you are successful when you meditate on his words and hear yourself responding, “That is so true.”

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, tr. Leo Sherley-Price, Penguin, Hammondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1952.

## Results

It is always important to distinguish results from causes. If you do these things, the results will be as promised. But the results are not the cause; the meditation causes, and these things result.

- ✚ “A tree planted...” Notice the verb – “planted.” God chooses where he wants you; if you are his true follower, it will be a good place. (I will admit to some difficulty in knowing a good place when I see one.)
- ✚ “Fruit in season...” Think of the fruits of the Spirit. Each of those fruits is a good thing – but each has a proper season. Patience is most cherished in affliction, for example. These things will be there when you need them.
- ✚ “Leaf does not wither...” It’s not just the important stuff, the fruits, that God provides. Even in the trivial matter of a leaf, God sustains the righteous man who contemplates God’s words. God cares for the hairs on your head, and all other small and scarce items too.

Such a man prospers. For some, that’s monetary prosperity; for others, it’s much deeper than that.

## Not So The Wicked

[Psalms 1:4-6 NIV](#) Not so the wicked!

They are like chaff  
that the wind blows away. (5) Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. (6) For the LORD watches over the way of the  
righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Have you ever seen a dust devil? Students in the western United States will be familiar with these things. There are two things these are noted for: first, they produce confusion. Stuff gets picked up, whirled around and eventually dropped someplace else. Next, you can be sure the dust devil has no destination, no orbit – it’s just going along at random. The comparison is to that stuff the dust devil picks up. Bricks are immune.

But there is more. Like its World War II synonym, chaff also has the function of concealing that which is behind it. So often we make the mistake of assuming that the dust devils of the church really are harmless. We should ask what they conceal as well as what they reveal.

Ultimately, however, like the chaff of the desert, the wicked are gone. In the church in every age we see those who whirl the flighty around, causing chaos as they go. But where are the chaos makers of yesterday? Man is designed to be eternal, not whirling garbage.

Ultimately, God is just. He is righteous. Therefore we know two things about the wicked:

- ✚ The will not be able to stand on the Day of Judgment. The righteous judge will give them what they deserve. (Remember, you’re eternal.)
- ✚ Wherever the righteous wind up in the end, the wicked won’t be there. There are no visitor passes for heaven.

## The Lord, He Knows

We have, as a church, forgotten what our ancestors knew well: the Providence of God. God the all-knowing is also the sustainer of the universe. As Paul puts it,

**Romans 8:28 NIV** And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,<sup>[10]</sup> who<sup>[11]</sup> have been called according to his purpose.

The Lord knows the wicked and the righteous, and he has told you what he will do. God is righteous; that righteousness will be brought home to the wicked. His righteousness applies to all of us; those who accept Christ for salvation, those who reject him for everlasting judgment.

## The Heavens Declare - Psalm 19

One of the most neglected areas of Christian thought today is that of the glory of God. Our present thinkers are far too busy revising God's words to fit the world in which they find themselves to be bothered with such an obsolete concept. Reality, however, has not changed – and we shall see how that affects us.

### Glory of God in Nature

**Psalms 19:1-6 NIV** For the director of music. A psalm of David.

The heavens declare the glory of God;

the skies proclaim the work of his hands. (2) Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. (3) There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. <sup>[1]</sup> (4) Their voice <sup>[2]</sup> goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, (5) which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion,

like a champion rejoicing to run his course. (6) It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

### The concept of glory

The story is told (so far unconfirmed) that when the Voyager probes were being prepared for launch the scientists asked a music professor at Cal Tech (perhaps *the* music professor at Cal Tech) what he thought ought to be on the records included with man's first expedition beyond the solar system. "Bach – nothing but Bach. We can apologize for the rest later." To anyone who loves classical music the expression is understandable. Bach's music is glorious.

Glory – what style is to the artist, glory is to God. If your ear is only attuned to the latest recordings, then consider another view. Bach's motto was always *sola Deo Gloria*, "To God alone be the glory." You can see the glory of God as well in the physical world as well. If you have ever camped overnight in the Mojave desert, you have seen it. First there are the stars; then at dawn the long shadows - the magnificence of the mountains combined with the subtlety of the colors. God's style – magnificent, as it should be.

### Nature shows the glory of God

As we shall see in the next section, nature's revelation of the glory of God parallels the revelation of the Scripture itself. The poem gives us its thought rhymes.

✚ *Heavens and skies.* The phrase here accounts both for the atmospheric sky and the spatial heavens above that. They show us the glory of God – this is how God does things, not sparingly but lavishly, in power. The Christian will find them a source of knowledge – a remarkable statement in a time 2500 years before modern science. But it is so; in the orderly movement of the stars we can see the utter consistency to God; he is true to himself, and his works reflect this.

✚ *Day and night.* It does not matter when you are looking; nor, for that matter, where. The physical and natural universe show the character of God at all times – a reflection of the constancy of God. There is no "shadow of turning" with God.

✚ *Pour forth speech.* It's plain and evident – anyone who wants to look will see the glory of God. But in no sense can you say it's forced on you; God does not yell at you in nature. You have to listen, for nature has no words – only signs of triumph. You must learn to listen.

### Dominating element – the sun

To an observer in Palestine one physical fact would be most obvious: everything feels the heat of the sun. David will shortly match this up against God's law, in particular the Ten Commandments. If you've ever been in the Mojave in August, you know the feeling. Even indoors, under the air conditioner, lemonade in hand you know it's *hot*. The sun is the dominant fact of life; its effects are felt everywhere. It is the one agent from whom nothing can hide. As such, it is the symbol of the Ten Commandments and a forerunner of the Christ.

### A note about poetry

You should note that David makes a sharp transition in verse seven. He's expecting the listener to make the connection. This description of the glory of God revealed in nature will now have its echo in the glory of God revealed in the Scripture, particularly the commandments. (I told you to watch out for the thought rhymes; this one in particular is perhaps subtle at first, but once you see it, the parallel is powerful indeed).

### The Glory of God in His Law

**Psalms 19:7-11 NIV** The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul.

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,  
making wise the simple. (8) The precepts of the LORD are right,  
giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant,  
giving light to the eyes. (9) The fear of the LORD is pure,  
enduring forever.

The ordinances of the LORD are sure  
and altogether righteous. (10) They are more precious than gold,  
than much pure gold;  
they are sweeter than honey,  
than honey from the comb. (11) By them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.

(The reader will note that there is not a verse-by-verse thought parallel. Verses were added much later, and they do not always reflect the real structure of the Psalm).

### Glory of God in His Word

David now takes us through the glory of God as shown in the Scriptures:

✚ *Law and Testimony.* David starts with something that would have been a very present fact to him: the Ark of the Covenant, or as it is sometimes referred to, the Ark of the Testimony.<sup>2</sup> In doing this he reminds his hearers of the giving of the Ten Commandments – a list so profound that three

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Exodus 25:16

thousand years later it still stands as the definition of Judeo-Christian morality. It also reminds the Israelites of the way God delivered them from Egypt – with a mighty hand. But God’s glory is shown not only in his might and power, but also in his forgiveness and forbearance. The Ark contained not only the tablets of the Law, but also manna – a reminder of God’s providence for his people. It had Aaron’s rod, the reminder of the power of God used to rescue his people. Commandment, mercy and power – still reminders of God’s glory to us today.

✚ *Statutes and commandments.* It’s easy for us to focus on concise statements like the Ten Commandments. But we must also remember that God gave far more instruction than that, both in the time of the Israelites and in our own. The sign of God’s glory is this: unlike man’s laws, God’s laws always fit together. If you’ve ever done your taxes by hand, you’ll understand this one.

✚ *Fear and judgments.* We are reminded here that God is still awesome; what he did to Pharaoh and Egypt he can do to anyone. He is not the kindly grandfather who wants you to be blessed; he is the Father who wants you to be like him. To that purpose he tells you to fear him (as Pharaoh didn’t) and beware of his judgments.

The parallel to the desert sun is fairly obvious. The sun scorches everything in the desert – but is also the source of life and energy. The Word of God searches us out:

**Hebrews 4:12 NIV** For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

As the sun seems to seek out every living thing in the desert, so the word of God seeks out every living human being.

#### Carrot and stick

You cannot train a man without penalties for failure, nor without rewards for success. The striking thing about the word of God is how desirable is the study thereof. This author has been teaching the Scripture for over thirty years as of this writing, and it is clear: reading the word, studying it and taking it into the heart, these things are actions of joy. I read through the Bible each year; each year I discover new things, new insights that bring light to my mind.

This is not to say there is no negative to it. The stick is there with the carrot; you need to know that there is such a thing as sin, and that it has consequences which are not pleasant over all. It is much better to be guided away from trouble than to be able to say that you went through it.

Ultimately, though, the study of the Scripture reveals the glory of God – and thus provides its own reward. Most of those who complain of how hard the Scriptures are to read are those who have never tried it.

#### Man’s Response

**Psalms 19:12-14 NIV** Who can discern his errors?

Forgive my hidden faults. (13) Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me.

Then will I be blameless,

innocent of great transgression. (14) May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart

be pleasing in your sight,

O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

David points out something here that we have almost forgotten. We are so used to the “good buddy Jesus” religion of our day that we don’t like to deal with the awesome God. He asks us a question: if God made a mistake, how would you know it? It is the definition of futility itself. You can’t know it. It’s like saying gravity should have been weaker – it might help with your weight loss program, but it’s completely absurd even to make such a judgment. Let’s remember just who is God – and who is not.

#### Cleanse and keep

What then is the proper reaction of man to the glory of God?

- ✚ First, as the sun seeks out all the living in the desert, so we should ask God to seek out all the *secret* faults we have – the ones we won’t share with anyone else. We should ask him to cleanse us from them – and keep us that way.
- ✚ Next, we must ask him to keep us from the *dominion* of presumptuous sin. Presumptuous? “Me and Jesus in the phone booth” is presumptuous. Do we treat God like our good buddy? If we do, that sin will soon gain dominion over us; we will come to enjoy treating God as our equal. That is so hard to break.
- ✚ Finally, we ask him to keep us from the “great transgression” – the unforgivable sin. What is that? The sin which you deny as being sin – is unforgivable. For first you must admit your sin – and if you will not take that first step, you will not be forgiven.

#### Finis

David ends with his prayer for himself.

- ✚ He summons up both word and thought – “words of my mouth” and “meditations of my heart” so that his plea will not be words only and hypocritical.
- ✚ He asks that these be acceptable to God. Note, he does not ask that they be perfect, for perfection belongs to God alone. It is a note of humility in a great king.
- ✚ Finally, he acknowledges God for who he is. He is my redeemer, the one who forgives my sins and snatches me away from the penalty of hell. He is also my strength, ready to sustain me in the temptations and trials of life.

## The Earthquake Psalm - Psalm 46

The reader should note that this lesson is deliberately shorter than usual, and its content was selected for the same reason: we have the privilege of hosting a presentation by Courtney Pierce of the Northwest Haiti Christian Mission. As she has asked for at least half an hour, the lesson is short. As she will be speaking about the recent (January, 2010) earthquake it seemed appropriate to prepare a lesson on earthquakes.

Refuge and Strength

Psalms 46:1-3 NIV

God is our refuge and strength,

an ever-present help in trouble. (2) Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, (3) though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

Selah

In what do you trust?

It should be noted that this question is best answered before the earthquake hits – and the answer is best known after the earthquake hits. Many of us just don't think about this; even in earthquake-prone Southern California. There are some common answers:

- ✚ For many, we trust in ourselves. We have our earthquake readiness kit, and we are proud of our self-reliance. It's an American tradition, right? Don't worry, God, we'll handle it.
- ✚ For the postmodernists among us, we trust in the government. Man is supreme, not God. The state tells us what is right and wrong; the state therefore is supremely powerful – and will rescue us. (Which is not to say the state shouldn't try; just that we shouldn't make it our point of trust.)
- ✚ For the Christian, trust is always in God. It's just that it's not often practiced that way.

See how the Psalmist repeats this in echoes of thought. First there is refuge – a place to go for comfort and safety. It's our first thought. Then we will need strength – and finally we'll admit we need help.

Fear Not

The logical conclusion ("therefore") of this is to "fear not". Fear is hierarchical. We fear things because of what they *might* do. Therefore, the greater the power, the greater the fear. With God, the fear is thus the greatest of all – or should be. With him, all other fears fade into the background.

So, then, listen to him. He told you that earthquakes and other disasters would occur. You should therefore take appropriate precautions. We teach children in school to drop under their desks in an earthquake. We don't wait until the earthquake hits to do this.

Likewise, the Christian should train himself to always depend upon God – even when it doesn't appear necessary. That way, when the time comes that it is obviously necessary, you'll be in good practice.

Fear the one most powerful. Science rests upon nature; faith rests upon the God who created nature.

## Eyes of the Spirit

**Psalms 46:4-5 NIV** There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy place where the Most High dwells. (5) God is within her, she will not fall;  
God will help her at break of day.

It's pretty simple, really. The universe didn't change because of the earthquake. The universe rests on the unchanging nature of God Almighty – and you should rest upon it too. Just remember who you're dealing with here!

## Things to Come

Matters now take a prophetic turn:

**Psalms 46:6-9 NIV** Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
he lifts his voice, the earth melts. (7) The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.  
Selah (8) Come and see the works of the LORD,  
the desolations he has brought on the earth. (9) He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;  
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear,  
he burns the shields <sup>[2]</sup> with fire.

I hope you see the point. At the end of all things God destroys this earth, these heavens; the earth melts. He destroys all power and authority which is not his own. Even under this trial, the instruction is the same: God is our fortress. We are not being assaulted, we are watching his power. It brings up two questions:

- ✚ What should we do on the day of his return?
- ✚ Knowing that, what should we be doing in preparation for it now?  
(Answers may be found in places like Matthew 24-25.)

## Be Still

**Psalms 46:10-11 NIV** "Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth." (11) The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.  
Selah

## Be still

The phrase is used in several places in the Bible, but here are two significant ones:

- ✚ Moses, at the crossing of the Red Sea,<sup>3</sup> tells the Israelites to be still and see God's deliverance.
- ✚ Christ, in calming the sea, uses this phrase as a command.<sup>4</sup>  
See the picture as being one of a Father calming his children in a storm. All is well; it just doesn't look it at the moment.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 14:14

<sup>4</sup> Mark 4:39

## Know that I am God

The modern church is greatly concerned with social justice; with making sure the government is charitable; with building community and other things which might be described as “the church of the world.” In our zeal to do this, I fear we forget to seek God while he may be found.

To know God, the self-existent one, is to set your universe in order. To know God, the unmoved mover, is to understand the source of all physical reality. To know God, the uncaused cause, is to understand the beginning and sustenance of all things. To know God, the necessary being, is to understand that it is by grace that you even exist. To know God, the perfect being, is to know that perfection exists, and that the perfect One is leading you. To know God, the intelligent designer, is to understand that the universe is not purposeless but a reflection of his glory – even in earthquakes.

## Conclusion

The matter is simple:

✚ The Lord is with us; what else could we fear?

✚ God is our fortress – a mighty fortress is our God; the outcome of all things is clear too.

Selah – a musical notation which may mean, “think about that!” Meditate upon the greatness of God and his sure protection of his people. Even at the very end of reality as we know it, fear God – dread naught.

## Why So Downcast -Psalm 42

It is not mentioned at this point, but most scholars think that David wrote this Psalm while fleeing from the revolt of his son Absalom.<sup>5</sup> From this small fact we can learn some things.

First, remember please that David knew he was in this situation because of his own sins.<sup>6</sup> Nathan the prophet told him that such an event would come, and here it is. It's a classic instance of the hold we give Satan by secret sin.

It's most interesting, however, to consider just how far David has fallen – and what he really longs for. David was king; wives and concubines in abundance, money and victory, praise and the esteem of men were all his. By the standards of our world – and certainly in David's thought – his fall has been very great. But David is a man after God's own heart; therefore the one thing he misses is his fellowship with God. Remember that in these days such fellowship was to be found primarily in the Tabernacle – and David, it seemed, was banned from such worship for life. And that life didn't look to be too long. But God is constant, and we shall see how this works out.

David's longing is brought out by great trial. Isn't that typical of such an experience? Trial and anguish do not create longing, they reveal it. It brings out the very heart of man. David's love for Absalom is very great, but the one thing he longs for is fellowship with God. It is a longing of great intensity; when you separate lovers, the longing is great.

### True Christian Longing

Just what should the Christian long for in times of trial and anguish?

**Psalms 42:1-4 NASB For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah.** As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. (2) My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God? (3) My tears have been my food day and night, While *they* say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" (4) These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng *and* lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

See the intensity of the longing! The poor deer, its tongue hanging out, at all hazards must have water – even if the hunter lurks at the water hole. Let's look at this in detail:

- ✚ It is the *soul* that longs for God. The innermost essence of the man seeks for God; it is the total commitment of man.
- ✚ Longs? *Thirsts*. We know little of thirst these days, but even yet we get a sample of such desire when our designer water bottles are empty. It is a consuming, all-encompassing longing.
- ✚ It is a thirst for the *living God*. The gods of this world – the flesh, the world and pride – cannot generate such a longing. You may want the pin-up girl on your wall, but that is nothing to the desire for the lady love of your life.

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<sup>5</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 14-20

<sup>6</sup> See 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 12:11

- ✚ David asks “when” – not “if.” He knows he will again appear before God, but the matter is so important it will not wait. The constancy of God is proclaimed – and the weight of our longing for Him.
- ✚ What is the event he has pictured? That he will appear before God.<sup>7</sup> Have you ever considered that your weekly worship is in fact you appearing before God? David is not going to meet his buddy; he’s going to praise his God.

That last is important. Give some thought to the real reason for worship. God wants us to know him as he is – and if we do, the natural, logical reaction is not “howdy buddy” but adoration, praise, thanksgiving – in short, worship.

David complains of two things:

- ✚ His own tears – the sign of a heart in distress. He’s in pain, and he wants the pain to go away. (You don’t?)
- ✚ Perhaps referring to Shimei<sup>8</sup>, he complains of the mockery of others. It’s an easy thing to do; if you’re such a great Christian, why hasn’t God rushed to your side and relieved you of this problem?

So what does David do? He knows that he is a creature in time, but that God is timeless, eternal. That which he remembers is just as true as that which he is experiencing. He will recall the joy he once had in worship, and bring that experience before God – and ask why he can’t have that again.

David chastises David

David now takes himself to task for his thoughts. His emotions have ruled over him; now he must come to himself.

**Psalms 42:5-8 NASB** Why are you in despair, O my soul? And *why* have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him *For* the help of His presence. (6) O my God, my soul is in despair within me; Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan And the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. (7) Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me. (8) The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, A prayer to the God of my life.

David then pins down the matter in two questions:

- ✚ Why do you despair- why have you given up hope in the Hope of Israel?
- ✚ Why are you disturbed – a soul in commotion? Do you not know the peace of God, which surpasses understanding?

Let’s begin with hope:<sup>9</sup>

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

"Hope is one of the theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking but one of the things a Christian

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<sup>7</sup> The reason we are using the NASB instead of the NIV in this lesson is the translation of this verse. David “appears before” God; we “meet” our good buddy Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 16:5-13

<sup>9</sup> Next two paragraphs taken from a previous lesson – just couldn’t resist it.

is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this."

There is a physical analogy to this. Have you ever been to a circus and watched the tightrope walkers? You and I would probably keep our eyes on our feet and on the rope; their eyes are straight ahead - in the direction they are going. This is how they keep their balance! So it is with us in our spiritual lives. If we pay most of our attention to the things of this world, we become a "Protestant tea sipping society" - concerned with good works, indistinguishable from any other charity except by our old customs. Soon enough such a congregation will wither and die - cut off at the roots. The root is hope. By setting our minds on the hope we have, all earthly virtues come with it.

Every football fan knows the two minute drill. If you're down by four, with two minutes left and the ball, you have to believe you can score a touchdown. If you have no hope, you cannot win – even though hope is an intangible. If your hope is in God, earthly things fall right in.

David then does something that we might know well: he talks directly to God about it. It's a short, wonderful passage. He remembers the beauty of the Banias Falls at the foot of Mt. Hermon (the source of the Jordan river) as seen from Mt. Mizar. He remembers the roar of the falls (there are several in that location) as if they were the voice of God speaking – and then jumps from God's natural world to an image of that world (waves and breakers) overwhelming him. In this David gives us three thoughts:

- ✚ I can always appeal to God the Creator – for I can see his power.
- ✚ In his creation I see his nature – deep calls to deep; magnificent!
- ✚ But as his nature can overpower, I am overpowered.

We can be overwhelmed by the waves and breakers – but remember, they are *his* waves and breakers. Do not rage; appeal to the master of ocean, earth and sky.

In the day I can see his lovingkindness, his mercy. In the night, when I cannot see – the dark night of the soul – I still can hear his song. There is a reason we learned those hymns we used to sing.

David now composes his prayer.

### David's Prayer

**Psalm 42:9-11 NASB** I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" (10) As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" (11) Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

I will say to –

- ✚ God – the Almighty one, who cares for me
- ✚ My rock – the one who is always strong; my place to hide.

What shall I say? First, don't you remember me? Things used to be so great! Second, why is it that I'm now oppressed, going around in mourning?

These questions take some answering. God does remember you; the real problem is that things used to be so great. When we see this in others the temptation is to say, "that's life." Our real question is – why me? In this instance David should know. See how that fact makes no difference?

One thing this passage does: it defines your real enemies. They are the ones whose "comfort" consists of telling you how you must be a secret sinner – and thus God has abandoned you. Or those who openly mock you for being a Christian. It's like having your bones broken – pain that won't go away.

So what's the answer?

David's already given it to us.

- ✚ Why are you downcast, in despair? Do you not know the God you serve? This will be for a season, then he will lift your head. Remember the past; look forward to the future in hope.
- ✚ Why are you disturbed? What's all the commotion in your heart? Receive the peace that passes understanding. Don't try to understand it; you can't. But you can have it.
- ✚ Put your hope in God.

God is the "help of my countenance." Picture someone downcast, eyes on their shoes – and the father comes along, takes them gently by the chin and lifts their eyes. It's not for a stern lecture; it's for a hug.

We call him, like David calls him, my God.

- ✚ He is *my* God – because I have chosen him. Stick with it.
- ✚ He is *my* God – because he has chosen me, and will never fail me.
- ✚ He is *God* – *Elohim* – the Almighty One. Things over your head are still under his feet.

## Imprecation - Psalm 109

It sometimes astonishes the Christian to discover the imprecatory Psalms. It seems unimaginable that Scripture would contain such things – but it does. We shall examine one here and attempt to deal with the difficulties.

### Complaint

**Psalms 109:1-5 NASB For the choir director. A Psalm of David.** O God of my praise, Do not be silent! (2) For they have opened the wicked and deceitful mouth against me; They have spoken against me with a lying tongue. (3) They have also surrounded me with words of hatred, And fought against me without cause. (4) In return for my love they act as my accusers; But I am *in* prayer. (5) Thus they have repaid me evil for good And hatred for my love.

### The nature of God

One of the principles found in the Psalms is the constant appeal to the nature and character of God. David points out two such characteristics – which also outline his complaint:

- ✚ First, God is the “God of my praise.” No reader of the Psalm could doubt that David praised God continually in his life. It is to that God that David makes his appeal, as if to say, “I praise you; you are worthy of it.”
- ✚ So then it makes some sense to ask God not to be silent in return. It seems that this silence is now grating, and David pleads for God to act. It’s “just do something.”

### The nature of the righteous

Please note that David does not bring up his many sacrifices to God, nor his following the Law. His complaint comes down to this:

- ✚ He is being persecuted by the wicked *without cause*. He has done nothing to deserve any such treatment as this.
- ✚ Indeed, his actions are characterized not so much by obedience as by love. He has followed Christ’s dictum to “love your enemies.”<sup>10</sup>
- ✚ So much does David love them that he has done the ultimate in love: he has gone to the Almighty in prayer on their behalf.

Do you see the point? It’s not David’s obedience to the Law, but his following God in loving his enemies that counts.

### The nature of the evil

This is a very penetrating analysis of the nature of evil people. This is not a description of David’s enemies in the field; rather, of those who surround him. See if any of this sounds familiar:

- ✚ First, there is false accusation. Something rises in the human heart which wants to point the finger. Often enough the accusation is so outrageous, so out of character that its very improbability argues for it. No one would accuse him of that unless it were true, so to speak. This is very difficult to defend against.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:43-48

- ✚ Look at this phrasing: “surrounded by words.” It’s that halo of misrepresentation, misquotation, scorn and satire that makes such talk attractive. (This is why the Scripture calls gossip and slander sin). The attack is not legal but social.
- ✚ Worst of all, *because I love*, they hate. It’s a commonplace today. As C. S. Lewis once said of “moderns,” they hate. Period.<sup>11</sup>

## Imprecation

This is the hard part:

**Psalms 109:6-20 NASB** Appoint a wicked man over him, And let an accuser stand at his right hand. (7) When he is judged, let him come forth guilty, And let his prayer become sin. (8) Let his days be few; Let another take his office. (9) Let his children be fatherless And his wife a widow. (10) Let his children wander about and beg; And let them seek *sustenance* far from their ruined homes. (11) Let the creditor seize all that he has, And let strangers plunder the product of his labor. (12) Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him, Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children. (13) Let his posterity be cut off; In a following generation let their name be blotted out. (14) Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD, And do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out. (15) Let them be before the LORD continually, That He may cut off their memory from the earth; (16) Because he did not remember to show lovingkindness, But persecuted the afflicted and needy man, And the despondent in heart, to put *them* to death. (17) He also loved cursing, so it came to him; And he did not delight in blessing, so it was far from him. (18) But he clothed himself with cursing as with his garment, And it entered into his body like water And like oil into his bones. (19) Let it be to him as a garment with which he covers himself, And for a belt with which he constantly girds himself. (20) Let this be the reward of my accusers from the LORD, And of those who speak evil against my soul.

## Fundamental problem

Let us state the obvious question: how can a loving God approve of such a request from a loving follower? After all, God is the God of mercy, right?

Take it from first principles: the Christian is a follower of Christ, an imitator of Christ. Does Christ ever show such anger? Indeed he does, in clearing the Temple. He shows such imprecation towards the Pharisees too, often starting with, “woe to you, Pharisees ...” Evidently it is permissible – particular when its object is the hypocritical religious leader.

There exists such a thing as righteous anger. It is a part of God’s character, called the wrath of God. Indeed:

**Psalms 7:11 NIV** God is a righteous judge,  
a God who expresses his wrath every day.

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<sup>11</sup> I remember the bitter venom of the National Organization of Women towards the Promise Keepers movement – a man’s marital fidelity was somehow equal to enslaving his wife.

Apparently, then, we have neglected this part of the Scripture, for righteous anger is nowhere to be found in the church today. The main argument against it is something like this: after all, those folks are sinners just like us. To answer this, we must take a side trip into a little bit of philosophy.

### Concept of “just desert”

The modern concept of justice is rather different from the ancient one. Our system of justice says there are three reasons for locking up a criminal:

- ✚ One is to warehouse the criminal. If he’s off the streets, he won’t commit the same crime until he’s out. Warehousing reduces crime.
- ✚ A second reason is deterrence. By locking up someone we think is guilty, we discourage others from doing the same thing.
- ✚ The third reason is rehabilitation – that the prisoner might become, somehow, a productive member of society.

But will you please note that *not one* of these reasons cares about the guilt or innocence of the prisoner? You don’t need to be guilty; only convicted.

The ancient theory started with a different concept: just desert. Even if the punishment did nothing to warehouse the criminal, or deter others, or rehabilitate the criminal, punishment was inflicted because the prisoner deserved it.

And, prophetically, this one does deserve it. In the first chapter of Acts Peter applies this to Judas. Now you see the just desert. He earned it.

So we see the possibility of invoking God’s wrath. But do not neglect the righteousness needed to stand before God.

### Why doesn’t God just slay the wicked?

So, then, to take the other side, why is it that God doesn’t just automatically slay the wicked? It would save us so much time and trouble, right?

- ✚ There is the problem of free will. If one is free to choose righteousness and love, one is free to chose evil and hatred. God earnestly desires that you love him. Evil is the price of that desire.
- ✚ God is also patient. He is giving the wicked a chance to repent.<sup>12</sup>

But deal with me...

**Psalms 109:21-31 NIV** But you, O Sovereign LORD,

deal well with me for your name's sake;  
out of the goodness of your love, deliver me. (22) For I am poor and needy,  
and my heart is wounded within me. (23) I fade away like an evening shadow;  
I am shaken off like a locust. (24) My knees give way from fasting;  
my body is thin and gaunt. (25) I am an object of scorn to my accusers;  
when they see me, they shake their heads. (26) Help me, O LORD my God;  
save me in accordance with your love. (27) Let them know that it is your hand,

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<sup>12</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:9

that you, O LORD, have done it. (28) They may curse, but you will bless; when they attack they will be put to shame, but your servant will rejoice. (29) My accusers will be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as in a cloak. (30) With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD; in the great throng I will praise him. (31) For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him.

But deal with me

It's a logical question: why should God treat me any differently? We're all sinners. David's answer is found in two things: the nature of God and David's affliction.

### The nature of God

Note that the appeal is made not on David's merits but upon the mercy, the loving kindness of God. There are two threads of thought here:

- ✚ First, David appeals for the sake of God's name. It is to God's glory that he is ever constant, ever ready to help us. It's God's reputation at stake.
- ✚ Next, he appeals to the character of God – who delights to help the helpless and defend the widow and orphan.

### The Suffering Servant

Next, David appeals on the basis of his suffering. He is human; he has human needs. Three appeals may be seen:

- ✚ There is physical suffering.
- ✚ There is also social suffering. We are social animals; to be the object of ridicule and whisper is genuinely painful.
- ✚ There is spiritual suffering; it is the wounded heart. A man betrayed by a good friend knows such suffering.

In this way David establishes his appeal to God. God is loving; David is needy.

### At the judgment

Finally, this poem is a prophetic one as well. It is a picture of the Last Judgment. Our accusers will put forth the charges, but do not fear. The wicked will rise from the dead only to be clothed in shame and dishonor. The righteous will find Christ at their right hand, defending them, now and forever.

There is comfort in this: you are not alone. Many other children of God have been slandered, whispered about and condemned. But God knows your name; he knows your character. Go on doing good, loving your enemies and praying for them. The Lord, He knows.

## Teaching the Young - Psalm 34

One particular type of Psalm is called *Didactic* – which is to say, a teaching Psalm. Here is an example of that type. It is specifically designed to be instructional and easy to memorize – at least in Hebrew.

### Magnify the Lord

First, a little background. This Psalm has 22 verses, the same number as the letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In Hebrew, it is an acrostic. Each verse starts with the next letter in the alphabet, which is an aid to memorization. That's one reason it's classified as didactic; it was intended to be memorized by children.

The background of the Psalm is noted at the top. Briefly, it is a Psalm about the lessons David learned from his brief sojourn with King Achish. David was running away from Saul. He stops on the way to obtain Goliath's sword from the high priest, and figures he will present himself and his services to the enemy of his enemy, Achish. That's David relying on the world's methods, not God. Achish's lieutenants are not fooled and insist that David must go. In terror, David feigns insanity. It's a narrow escape.

Incidentally, you will see that the king in question is named Abimelech. Some have thought that this is a scribal error; others note that the word "Abimelech" means "father of the king." It then could well be an official title for Achish

### Magnify

**Psalms 34:1-3 NASB** *A Psalm of David when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who drove him away and he departed.* I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. (2) My soul will make its boast in the LORD; The humble will hear it and rejoice. (3) O magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together.

David begins with the praise and blessing of the Lord. In any relationship, the first step is to truly know and recognize who the other person is. So David commands the following:

- ✚ First, that we should bless the Lord and praise him *at all times*. Our constant praise of his name cements our relationship to him, for it acknowledges who he really is.
- ✚ Is there strength? Decide now whose strength you will rely upon – indeed, boast about. If you are constantly telling the world how wonderful (and no doubt humble) you are, God will allow you to handle things in your own strength. If you tell the world how great God is, things change.
- ✚ We are to exalt his name together. The praise and blessing of God is not a solitary activity; one of the purposes of worship is to praise and bless God for who he is and what he has done.

### Rescue

**Psalms 34:4-7 NASB** I sought the LORD, and He answered me, And delivered me from all my fears. (5) They looked to Him and were radiant, And their faces will never be ashamed. (6) This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him And saved him out of all his troubles. (7) The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, And rescues them.

There is an interesting change of pronouns here.

- ✚ First, David tells us of how he (singular) sought the Lord. It's as if to say that even if no one else seeks the Lord, one is sufficient. The Lord will deliver that one from all his fears.

✚ But then “they” looked to the Lord. They (plural) were “radiant,” it says. It is the look of those who see God (the pure in heart). They will not be ashamed – for God delivers them as well.

See the picture David paints. It is not the king or the warrior who cries out to God, but the poor man. It is the humble who are heard by God – and then rescued. David pictures it as being the angel of the Lord (often a figure of the pre-incarnate Christ) encamping around him. He sees the unseen, the legions of heaven, and knows that God’s providential care will be given to him.

### Passing the Faith Along

All well and good so far; but this is an instructional Psalm, so we need to instruct.

### Experience

**Psalms 34:8-10 NASB** O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! (9) O fear the LORD, you His saints; For to those who fear Him there is no want. (10) The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; But they who seek the LORD shall not be in want of any good thing.

This is a very important concept: the experimental nature of faith. We are familiar with the experience method – that faith must be absolute before any results will be obtained. It’s often preached that way. But it is also true that God invites his followers to “taste and see.” Experimental faith is not condemned – but given as a method of learning about God. Two cautions:

✚ That’s faith in God – not necessarily his people. Remember that we have both the weak and the hypocrites among us.

✚ You are blessed as you take *refuge* in him. That’s not you giving him advice; that’s God sheltering you.

Note too that this is a relationship that is based on the fear of the Lord. We are so accustomed to the “good buddy Jesus” relationship that we forget who the awesome God is. But if you take refuge in him, did you really want refuge with a good buddy, no stronger than you? Or did you seek the refuge of the awesome and powerful Jehovah?

If you do, it will not be long before you note that God treats you differently. David makes the point in metaphor; you’d think the king of beasts would always be able to feed the cubs. But even when food is that scarce, God provides.

### Advice to the children

**Psalms 34:11-14 NASB** Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. (12) Who is the man who desires life And loves *length of* days that he may see good? (13) Keep your tongue from evil And your lips from speaking deceit. (14) Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it.

Having learned the lesson, David now wants to pass it on.

✚ “Come, and listen.” This is not something the kids are going to pick up by osmosis. It’s important; they need to come to dad and listen attentively. Put down the video game, kid – this is something you need.

✚ He offers them the means to a long and good life. This is not something you do because you have to; you do it because it works.

So – what does he recommend to the kids? They have the example – here are the do’s and don’ts.

- ✚ Do “depart from evil.” In other words, watch who you hang around with. What are they doing? What kind of people are they?
- ✚ Do “keep your tongue from evil.” Just because you can shoot your mouth off doesn’t mean you should. Often enough you say something which commits you to evil you did not intend. Speak the truth in love.
- ✚ Do good. Examine your ways and ask if what you are doing is a good thing. You’re going to be doing something; make it a good something.
- ✚ Seek peace. This must have been hard for David, who was a warrior since his youth. But it must be so; always look to resolve the conflict. Blessed are the peacemakers.

You can see David’s experience with Achish in this. He went to join the enemies of his people, telling them he would help them against Saul. Later, he realizes the error of his ways – and God’s rescue from a tight place.

### Righteous versus evil

**Psalms 34:15-22 NASB** The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous And His ears are *open* to their cry. (16) The face of the LORD is against evildoers, To cut off the memory of them from the earth. (17) *The righteous* cry, and the LORD hears And delivers them out of all their troubles. (18) The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit. (19) Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. (20) He keeps all his bones, Not one of them is broken. (21) Evil shall slay the wicked, And those who hate the righteous will be condemned. (22) The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.

We need so often to be reminded of how God treats the righteous (even if the righteous are fretting over it):

- ✚ He sees and hears what’s going on. You don’t have to explain it to him – but you often have to acknowledge it. Don’t bother with giving him advice. He already knows better than you. You should acknowledge that, too.
- ✚ He comforts his people. Often enough in the time of trial we ask for instant rescue. Rescue comes when God finishes bringing you through trial. In the meanwhile seek his comfort and be blessed by it.
- ✚ He delivers. One way or another, he delivers the righteous. At any given moment the wicked look to have total sway, but be patient. It will pass.

### To the evil

The hard part for most of us is that it seems that God is ignoring the evil and the destruction they cause. He does not – but his purposes must be served as well. It may be that he is giving them time to repent. It may be that he wants to use them as a bad example to you (a cheap lesson). It may be that there is some other divine purpose; why was the American Civil War so bloody? Many at the time thought it the nation’s punishment for the Mexican War.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> One such person was Ulysses S. Grant.

In fact, God doesn't ignore the evil, but is rather flint-faced toward them. You think your prayers are unheard? How do you think God deals with the self-righteous in prayer?

There is a key to God's treatment of the evil here. "Evil shall slay the wicked." What goes around, comes around. The universe is a moral place. The instrument by which God destroys the evil is often another set of evil people.

#### **In the end**

Ultimately, at the last judgment, there will be a divine reckoning. May we point out the kind of people God will rescue on that day?

- ✚ They are those who are his *servants*. Not just the hangers-on, the uninvolved, but those who served.
- ✚ They are those who *took refuge in him*. Those who trusted their own strength will see just how puny that strength is when Christ returns. Those who cast their cares on Christ will see that return as pure joy.

BUT – in the meanwhile, there will be trouble. It is the life of the Christian to constantly have troubles and just as constantly have joy. For in times of trouble God rescues his children, and his children rejoice in that fact.

## A Plea For Help - Psalm 144

The reader might note that in some manuscript traditions this Psalm is attributed to David at the time of Goliath. The oldest and best manuscripts do not have this; however, it is in the Vulgate, and Augustine accepted it as fact. Interestingly, when the Vulgate was translated into the Douay-Rheims version, the notation was omitted. None of the modern translations (including King James) carry this notation.

The Psalm is, however, a model for intercessory prayer.

Foundation: Man and God

### The Character of God

Psalms 144:1-2 NIV **Of David.**

Praise be to the LORD my Rock,  
who trains my hands for war,  
my fingers for battle. (2) He is my loving God and my fortress,  
my stronghold and my deliverer,  
my shield, in whom I take refuge,  
who subdues peoples <sup>[1]</sup> under me.

It is no accident that this prayer of intercession begins with the praise of God. If the heart of man is right, it is the normal beginning of prayer; “Our Father, who is in heaven, holy be your name.” Praising the Lord comes naturally to such a soul. Moreover, in every personal relationship there must be an understanding of just who the other party is.

Who, then, does David acknowledge?

- ✚ First, God is his rock – the fortress and stronghold of his life. Remember the Three Little Pigs? God is the house made of brick. Every other person and thing is of no shelter by comparison.
- ✚ God is the one who has given him the skill to become who he is – King of Israel. Note the phrasing: it’s not that God handed him the kingship on a platter, but he enabled David to do it. The experiences of David’s life suited him for the purposes God had planned for him – and David is grateful.
- ✚ In addition to which, God has “subdued peoples” – the phrase may also be translated “subdue my people” – which implies that even with David’s experience and talent, God has been gracious to him in amplifying his gifts.

Work out your salvation; for it is God working within you.

### The nature of man

Psalms 144:3-4 NIV O LORD, what is man that you care for him,  
the son of man that you think of him? (4) Man is like a breath;  
his days are like a fleeting shadow.

If you begin by acknowledging God in your relationship, you must also confirm who you are – at the very least so you are not deceiving yourself.

That confirmation is very humbling. Put shortly, why does God even bother with you, no matter how great you are among men? It’s a standard argument for atheism; if God is so great, why would he

bother with you? (The answer is, because God is so great.) The fact is that he does bother with you; it's just that you don't deserve it. Man is so much fleeting futility; only the things of God last.

### Modern view

That's David's view. The modern view is quite a bit different. What we hear today from the pulpit is more like this:

- ✚ Christ is our "good buddy." We can talk to him *as our equal*. (The absurdity of this should be obvious.)
- ✚ Our new translations (and even more, paraphrases) make the assumption that we *completely* understand the Bible – and therefore do not have to translate it word for word, but can use phrase by phrase or even rewrite it to our taste. This would have horrified the translators of the King James. But if this is so, you can see that intercessory prayer really changes.
- ✚ Man is seen as *intrinsically worthy*. Christ died for you. He did that either because a) you are worthy to have someone die for you or b) he did it out of his great love. My grandchildren do not "earn" the gifts we give them; they are gifts of our love for them.
- ✚ Have you noticed that the words "sin" and "sinner" are now much less frequently mentioned? The postmodern view is that we really can't say what is or is not sin – it's all relative. Therefore we can be confident in our ignorance that we are not sinners, but worthy. (Huh?)

### Plea for Help

[Psalms 144:5-8 NIV](#) Part your heavens, O LORD, and come down;

touch the mountains, so that they smoke. (6) Send forth lightning and scatter {the enemies};

shoot your arrows and rout them. (7) Reach down your hand from on high;

deliver me and rescue me

from the mighty waters,

from the hands of foreigners (8) whose mouths are full of lies,

whose right hands are deceitful.

### The condescension of God

Condescension: Webster defined it as "Voluntary descent from rank, dignity or just claims; relinquishment of strict right; submission to inferiors in granting requests or performing acts which strict justice does not require. Hence, courtesy." This is precisely what we are asking of God:

- ✚ We ask him to "part the heavens" – the words literally mean to "bend" heaven to our desires. The very act of God intervening at all is by definition an act which is contrary to nature.
- ✚ We ask him to intervene – with power. We are not asking him to comfort us in our suffering (though that is proper too) but to use his divine power on our behalf. Indeed, we are asking him to condescend to us.
- ✚ The ultimate condescension is this: that God became the babe of Bethlehem. If you need proof that God will do this, there it is.

### Threat Analysis

David now describes the threat about him. It's not that God doesn't know; it's that we need to acknowledge both the threat and our inability to deal with it. There is no sense here of "God, you take care of that and I'll handle the rest." David is up against the wall.

- ✚ The first thing he describes is “mighty waters” – a phrase that harks back to Moses and the Red Sea. That’s the mental picture: just how did Moses feel thirty seconds before the waters parted?
- ✚ His enemies are described as foreigners. In the Old Testament, that clearly meant those who were not in covenant with God. It’s a reminder to us: what fellowship can the Christian have with the children of the devil? Should we compromise with them, or appeal to God?
- ✚ His enemies are those who manufacture lies and deceit. Let me give you an example: when Planned Parenthood was campaigning for the legalization of abortion, they told the world that every year 55,000 young women died from back alley abortions – a figure still proclaimed. The year of Roe v. Wade, the Center for Disease Control tallied a total of 13 deaths. Not thirteen thousand, thirteen. David’s problems were evidently not at all unique.

### Plea

David is making his plea for (at the least) God’s providential intervention, if not his miraculous intervention. As far as I recall David never received any miracles. He probably did not distinguish between the two types. In this there are lessons for us:

- ✚ First, that we should not be afraid to ask God for his intervention.
- ✚ Second, that we should do so boldly.<sup>14</sup>
- ✚ Finally, that this is not presumptuous – if there is faith.

### David’s Confidence

The sureness of David’s faith can be seen in his ending: things are going to be so great! This is the prayer of a man of faith; confident in the results.

And the rest of us? I believe; help my unbelief.

### Sing a New Song

**Psalms 144:9-11 NIV** I will sing a new song to you, O God;  
 on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you, (10) to the One who gives victory to kings,  
 who delivers his servant David from the deadly sword. (11) Deliver me and rescue me from the hands of foreigners whose mouths are full of lies, whose right hands are deceitful.  
 May we see two things here?

- ✚ Some scholars see the ten-stringed lyre as an image of the Ten Commandments. It is as if David is saying that his praise will be rooted in the commandments of God, not the invention of his own mind.
- ✚ Again, he acknowledges that it is God who gives the victory, and deliverance from trouble. It is a lesson for kings – and perhaps even presidents.

### Blessed are the people

**Psalms 144:12-15 NIV** Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants,

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<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 4:16

and our daughters will be like pillars  
carved to adorn a palace. (13) Our barns will be filled  
with every kind of provision.  
Our sheep will increase by thousands,  
by tens of thousands in our fields; (14) our oxen will draw heavy loads. [2]  
There will be no breaching of walls,  
no going into captivity,  
no cry of distress in our streets. (15) Blessed are the people of whom this is true;  
blessed are the people whose God is the LORD.  
See the blessings David sees:

- ✚ Perhaps our most important one, our children. All good parents want their children to grow up to be strong, and to live in peace. Even more, that they will be people of prominence in the church and the community.
- ✚ Next are material blessings – expressed here in a very agricultural sense.
- ✚ Finally, there are “military” blessings – that is, the blessing of peace in victory.  
Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.

## Summary

May I suggest these steps for intercessory prayer?

- ✚ Begin with the praise and acknowledgement of who God is.
- ✚ Acknowledge your own insignificance to him.
- ✚ Then boldly ask for that which you know you cannot obtain by yourself.
- ✚ Acknowledge that your foes are too great for you, and your troubles beyond your own capability.
- ✚ Acknowledge the sureness of God in replying to you.
- ✚ Praise God for his many blessings.  
Praise: the bookends of the prayer of faith.

## Penitence - Psalm 51

It's a curious thing. The story of Moses and the exodus made for a classic movie on a grand scale. It's still shown on television regularly. But the story of David and Bathsheba, best done by Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward in the 1951 production of that name, seems to be a minor footnote. It's purchased now and then over the Internet, dutifully listed in their filmographies – but causes no excitement. Spectacle sells. You'd think that sex would sell too – except the story isn't about sex. It's about repentance and restoration.

You'll find the story told in Second Samuel chapters eleven and twelve. Briefly, David has an affair with Bathsheba – who's married to one Uriah the Hittite. She gets pregnant. David tries to cover it up, killing Uriah in the process. Nathan, the prophet, exposes David. The baby dies, but then God forgives and restores David. Their next child is Solomon.

In the process David composes Psalm 51. Perhaps excepting Psalm 23 – perhaps – it is the most powerful Psalm in the Bible.

### The Sinner's Cry

Psalms 51:1-2 NIV For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions. (2) Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.

One good thing about David's sin with Bathsheba; he's in no position to bargain. So on what basis does he approach the Holy God to ask for forgiveness and mercy?

- ✚ He appeals to the character of God: his unfailing love. God is love; David knows it – and knows that his situation requires nothing less.
- ✚ He appeals to God's "great compassion." The good news is that God understands David; which is also the bad news, of course. Fortunately for David, he understands God.  
It's interesting to see what David does *not* use as a basis for his appeal:
- ✚ He does not appeal on the basis of his own merit. David, after all, is said to be a man after God's own heart. He could have said something like, "Nobody's perfect, but I'm better than most." He didn't.
- ✚ He could have appealed on the basis of his position. The king is an important fellow, after all.
- ✚ He could have appealed on the basis of his past performance. Look at all he's done for God; surely God could cut him some slack, right?

### Against God alone

Psalms 51:3-4 NIV For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me. (4) Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are proved right when you speak  
and justified when you judge.

Most of us are really proficient at lying to ourselves. Perhaps the reason David's heart is so near to God is that he doesn't lie to himself – he "knows his transgressions." It's an important point. You can tell when you get there because you realize that your sin is against God alone. How so? Often enough we sin against others – but we have the consolation that they have done something against us. Their hands are dirty too.

But it's exactly that which tells us that our sins are against God. In any sin his hands are clean. But his children are the ones sinned against – and if you hurt my children you anger me, right? So it is that our sins are against God.

God alone has the right to accuse us – because his hands are clean. A similar principle is found in criminal law; the state accuses the criminal, not the victim. In crime we judge against the standard of the law. If one Mafioso shoots another, we don't pick between them, we convict the murderer. So it is with God.

### Who goes to hell

There is a significant side point here. Have you ever asked how a loving God could send anyone to hell? The answer is relatively simple. All of us have a choice to make. We sin – that's a fact. The choice is what to do about it. Some choose mercy; others choose pride. Hell only takes volunteers.

### Steps of Redemption

**Psalms 51:5-6 NIV** Surely I was sinful at birth,  
sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (6) Surely you desire truth in the inner parts  
[1] ;  
you teach [2] me wisdom in the inmost place.

Often considered the "proof text" of original sin, this passage points out the problem common to all mankind:

✚ Like it or not, we are all sinners – by our very nature.

✚ God, however, wants us to be full of truth and wisdom.

Which is inherently a conflict. The first step in resolving any conflict is to acknowledge that it exists. So let's face it.

### God cleanses; man rejoices

**Psalms 51:7-9 NIV** Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. (8) Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones you have crushed rejoice. (9) Hide your face from my sins  
and blot out all my iniquity.

A study of the word "hyssop" in the Bible quickly reveals that it is closely associated with two things: ceremonial cleansing – and the Crucifixion. It's associated with cleansing blood. David saw it in the law of Moses; we see it in Christ. His blood is the method of our cleansing.

Notice the reaction! David doesn't mope about, wallowing in his own self-pity. He rejoices. This is not long-faced religion, but joyous. Man should rejoice at his forgiveness.

God, you see, is the one who pays for it. He's the one who has to blot out or hide from the sin. It's always like that; it's the reconciler who pays for the reconciliation. It's expensive, too.

#### The new heart

**Psalms 51:10-12 NIV** Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (11) Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me. (12) Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Here is the core of reconciliation: the new, pure heart. May I point out the verbs?

- ✚ *Create* - only God can create; Satan can only twist what God creates. Only man is the creating creature, in the image of God. Only God and man can forgive. Forgiving creates anew the heart after God.
- ✚ *Renew* - it's not something different; it's the same spirit that was there before the sin. God doesn't want you to somehow be different - but to be in his likeness.
- ✚ *Restore the joy* - What a surprise; God does not want you to be in the dumps about it. He wants you to know the joy of salvation. There is nothing "halfway" about this.

#### Repentant Service

**Psalms 51:13 NIV** Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will turn back to you.  
If restored, we are saved to serve.

- ✚ You can't serve *without* being restored - it just won't work. You don't have the capability.
- ✚ But if you are restored, you *must* serve - you can't help it.  
Have you ever noticed that it's the great sinners who make the great saints? Now you know why.

#### Praise

**Psalms 51:14-15 NIV** Save me from bloodguilt, O God,  
the God who saves me,  
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. (15) O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
Praise?

- ✚ Praise is necessary if you are to have a right relationship with God. It is the fundamental recognition of who God is. It says that you know He is worthy to be praised, and therefore you do. Without it, you are talking to an imaginary God.
- ✚ It is praise for the God who saves *me*. It's personal. I'm happy he saves us; I'm glad he saves you. But it's essential that he saves me. Do you see it?
- ✚ Praise for what? He restores us to righteousness by his righteousness; therefore his righteousness is what we praise.

#### Humility

**Psalms 51:16-17 NIV** You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. (17) The sacrifices of God are <sup>[3]</sup> a broken  
spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart,

O God, you will not despise.

It is a fact of human nature: we'd just as soon buy off God with something we sacrifice. It's like a traffic ticket in our minds – pay the ticket, the speeding is somehow forgiven. But it's not – and if you don't think so, check with your insurance company. It's paid – but not forgiven.

Why doesn't this work? Because sin corrupts all of you – and all of you must be the sacrifice for it. Partial measures won't work – it takes "all." We saw this at the Cross.

But if "all of me" must be sacrificed, then where is pride? Isn't it denied, by the very act of asking for forgiveness? To ask forgiveness is to say you can't pay the price yourself – and that is humility.

#### Sacrifice

**Psalms 51:18-19 NIV** In your good pleasure make Zion prosper;  
build up the walls of Jerusalem. (19) Then there will be righteous sacrifices,  
whole burnt offerings to delight you;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Part of reconciliation is faith that God will reconcile. How does David express this? By saying that things will be restored; things will be good; God will bless the nation again. *And once things are restored*, God will again accept the sacrifices commanded.

Do you see it? As long as you refuse to humble yourself and ask forgiveness, your works mean nothing, for you are not right with God. But once you do, and he grants you forgiveness, then your works will be rewarded in accordance with his generosity.

This lesson is rather much an outline. Letters on paper cannot express what the heart must go through. I suggest you try it out; you won't need this lesson once you do.

## Prophetic Psalm - Psalm 22

If asked to name the prophetic books of the Bible, most Christians would not list the Psalms. But there are prophetic Psalms, as we shall see.

Concept: the prophetic Psalm:

Just how do you recognize a prophetic Psalm? Prophecy, after all, tends to be a controversial subject; one man's prophecy just might be another man's poetry. So, is it like pornography, you'll know it when you see it? Not quite:

- ✦ A prophetic Psalm is one which is validated in the New Testament. Often enough this is by quotation, as is the case in Psalm 22. But much of the Psalm is not quoted, but clearly prophetic.
- ✦ The Psalm is focused on the advent of Christ – either first or second. Psalm 2, for example, is focused on the second while Psalm 16 applies to the first. This Psalm applies to both.
- ✦ Frequently, the Psalm will use the present tense, or even the past tense, in describing the future. Don't be confused by this.

### Details in prophecy

One of the more prominent features of prophetic Psalms is that they often show a very low level of detail – for example, in Psalm 22 we hear of people gambling for the victim's clothes. Why is this?

- ✦ First, that you might recognize the Messiah by the details.
- ✦ Second, so that you might understand his suffering. The Gospels give us the factual account of the Crucifixion; this Psalm gives us the emotional ordeal Christ endured.
- ✦ Details are given in the partial (first advent) fulfillment so that you may be all the more certain of the prophecy concerning his return.

### Christ as exemplar

Much of the Scripture shows Christ not only as savior but as exemplar – the example for us to follow. The principle is always the same: the imitation of Christ. We are quite willing to imitate him – as long as it costs little. But when it comes to suffering, we are reluctant.

Why? If it happened to the sinless Christ, what on earth makes you think you should be treated any differently? Surely you will suffer as well.

And when you do, shouldn't you have the same reaction he had? It is good, therefore, to hear his thoughts as prophesied a thousand years earlier.

### Why So Far?

The reader will remember that Hebrew poetry rhymes in thought. In this section we will see rhymes of the question and answer variety.

**Psalms 22:1-10 NIV** For the director of music. To the tune of "The Doe of the Morning." A psalm of David.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from the words of my groaning? (2) O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,

by night, and am not silent. (3) Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel. <sup>[1]</sup> (4) In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. (5) They cried to you and were saved; in you they trusted and were not disappointed. (6) But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. (7) All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: (8) "He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." (9) Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. (10) From birth I was cast upon you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.

The first question may be taken word by word.<sup>15</sup>

- ✦ *Why* – what cause would be so great that God the Father would abandon his only begotten? Only the love he has for his children.
- ✦ *Have* – note the past tense. Christ accepts it as fact; no sense of “wait a minute.” It is, in a way, non-negotiable. What does this say about our troubles and prayers?
- ✦ *You* – yes, the God of the universe. If he abandons you, who else could possibly cling to you? You can understand Judas and Peter forsaking him, but God?
- ✦ *Forsaken* – we acknowledge the justice of God’s discipline, or chastening. But doesn’t it seem unfair that God has gone beyond that here? We must remember that Christ carried the sins of the world to explain that.
- ✦ *Me* – remember who is really speaking here: Christ. The sinner David would know God’s chastisement, but the Christ is abandoned. It seems so unfair.

It is so strange that the Christ who had intimate fellowship with his Father now asks why he is far away. It is a reminder that we should also expect this feeling at times, when God withdraws for his purposes.

### Holy history

Christ finds his first answer in history: think of what God has done for the nation of Israel. It’s his first resource, and should be ours as well. God does not change, and we need to remember that.

### I am so low

David now proclaims the problem again – this time in social terms. Christ feels like a worm. Imagine it! He who gave up the glories of heaven to join with us now becomes less than us.

This feeling comes from how other people are treating him. It’s a fact of life: all humans – Christ included – need the acceptance by other people. We are social creatures. So when Christ experiences this, you can know that he understands quite well your torment when everyone else turns on you.

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<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to C. H. Spurgeon for the idea.

Christ finds the answer to this again in history – but this time in personal history. It is not the history of Israel to which he turns; it is his own history, from his birth. “Our God, and the God of our fathers.” The torment is social; the God who saves is personal.

## My Troubles

**Psalms 22:11-21 NIV** Do not be far from me,

for trouble is near

and there is no one to help. (12) Many bulls surround me;

strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. (13) Roaring lions tearing their prey

open their mouths wide against me. (14) I am poured out like water,

and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart has turned to wax;

it has melted away within me. (15) My strength is dried up like a potsherd,

and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;

you lay me <sup>[2]</sup> in the dust of death. (16) Dogs have surrounded me;

a band of evil men has encircled me,

they have pierced <sup>[3]</sup> my hands and my feet. (17) I can count all my bones;

people stare and gloat over me. (18) They divide my garments among them

and cast lots for my clothing. (19) But you, O LORD, be not far off;

O my Strength, come quickly to help me. (20) Deliver my life from the sword,

my precious life from the power of the dogs. (21) Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;

save <sup>[4]</sup> me from the horns of the wild oxen.

There is no one to help. Christ suffers alone – and therefore is alone as our Savior.

Again we see the rhymes – this time “them and me”

*Them* – I’m surrounded by powerful people. The word picture is powerful; we still use the lion as a symbol of power yet today. The “bulls of Bashan” is a local reference; Bashan is an area east of the Jordan noted for fine pasture (and therefore fat cows).

*The dust of death* – in vs. 14-15 we see some exquisite poetry:

- ✚ Being “poured out” is a reference to the drink offerings of the Old Testament. Where the sacrifices by fire at least fed the priests, the drink offering is pure sacrifice. 100% of it goes for the glory of God.
- ✚ “Bones out of joint” – anyone who has ever dislocated a bone understands two things: it takes quite a bit of trauma to do this – and it hurts.
- ✚ “Heart melts like wax” – the metaphor’s origin is apparently this Psalm. It’s a common thought now; but remember the last time your courage just utterly failed. He went through that; so will you. Being scared is human.
- ✚ His mouth is dried up “like a potsherd.” A potsherd is a pottery fragment, often used in those days like we’d use a sticky note today. The emotions are so strong his mouth dries up.

## Surrounded

Here, vividly, are those details of the Crucifixion which are so convincingly prophetic. This is the kind of passage that liberal Christians would like to postdate after Christ – but the thousand year gap is just too much. Every little detail is under God’s command.

*Plea for help* – is just that. There is no sense here of why God should help; only the plea of the sufferer. Take heart; if Christ can plead this way, so can you and I.

### Ultimate Result

**Psalms 22:22-31 NIV** I will declare your name to my brothers;  
in the congregation I will praise you. (23) You who fear the LORD, praise him!  
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! (24) For he has not despised or disdained  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help. (25) From you comes the theme of my praise in the  
great assembly;  
before those who fear you <sup>[5]</sup> will I fulfill my vows. (26) The poor will eat and be satisfied;  
they who seek the LORD will praise him--  
may your hearts live forever! (27) 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, (28) for dominion belongs to the LORD  
and he rules over the nations. (29) 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. (30) Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord. (31) They will proclaim his righteousness  
to a people yet unborn--  
for he has done it.

There is a startling shift in tone here. As Paul often does, David expects that you will draw the proper conclusion from this shift without being told how to do it. We have gone from the suffering Christ to the risen Christ – and beyond that to Christ returned.

There is – as usual – a first reaction: praise. The Lord is risen; we praise God. He returns to judge; we praise God. Indeed, as often happens, part of that praise is to command others to praise. Why? For the rescue which comes. And if God rescues Christ, he will rescue his followers as well, for they are Christ's brothers and sisters.

### View of the Church – and beyond

We can see the church era in this:

- ✚ There is the spread of the Gospel over all the earth.
- ✚ We see the resurrection of the dead, those that go “down to the dust.”
- ✚ We see the dominion of God.

Is it sure? Look at the last words: “for he has done it.” It is that sure – praise God.

## Praise - Psalm 107

It is a fact: in a Psalm of praise the first instruction is often a command to others to praise God.

### Prologue

**Psalms 107:1-3 NIV** BOOK V : Psalms 107-150

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;

his love endures forever. (2) Let the redeemed of the LORD say this-- those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, (3) those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south. <sup>[1]</sup>

(The notation starting "Book V" is in accord with the Hebrew notion that the Psalms can be divided into five sections, each one a parallel to the Pentateuch.)

One of the reasons we are commanded to give thanks to God is simply this: there is not much else you can do for him. What do you buy to give the God who created the universe? And for what do we give thanks?

- ✚ First, that he is good. He is a righteous God, who wants us to be righteous too. He does not condone evil. (Consider the opposite possibility for a moment.)
- ✚ Second, that his love endures forever. You cannot exhaust his mercy – though many of us have tried.

In these two aspects – love and righteousness – we can detect the one-word theme of the Bible: redemption. Righteousness demands ransom; love provides it at the Cross. God redeems us!

- ✚ He redeems us from *everyone*. Even when the enemy is us.
- ✚ He redeems us from *everywhere*. Even those of us who have said, "Goodbye, God, I'm moving to Southern California."

### Merchants, wanderers and fools

In this day of post-modern thinking it's fashionable to tell Christians, "Oh, I'm glad that works for you." It works for "whosoever will." The Psalmist (probably not David) gives us four examples.

#### Wanderers

**Psalms 107:4-9 NIV** Some wandered in desert wastelands,

finding no way to a city where they could settle. (5) They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. (6) Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. (7) He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle. (8) Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love

and his wonderful deeds for men, (9) for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

There are unguided missiles (rocks to rockets) and guided missiles. But did you know there are no self-guided missiles?<sup>16</sup> The concept makes no sense. You want the missile to hit a particular target –

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<sup>16</sup> Actually, there are – now. When this was written such things were classified.

not pick out a nearby tree on its own. But there are self-guided people: bold, independent thinkers for whom self-guidance is a point of pride. God redeems such people.

It's interesting how it's phrased here: "by a straight way." Once they cry to the Lord, the wanderer is given a road map showing the straight path. Many such people are wandering, looking for the right answer. But as our Lord says,

**Matthew 5:6 NIV** Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

#### In chains

**Psalms 107:10-16 NIV** Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom,  
prisoners suffering in iron chains, (11) for they had rebelled against the words of God  
and despised the counsel of the Most High. (12) So he subjected them to bitter labor;  
they stumbled, and there was no one to help. (13) Then they cried to the LORD in their  
trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress. (14) He brought them out of darkness and the  
deepest gloom  
and broke away their chains. (15) Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love  
and his wonderful deeds for men, (16) for he breaks down gates of bronze  
and cuts through bars of iron.

Let's be clear about this. Wanderers are self-guided missiles. These people who rebel against the words of God are those who deliberately do what they know to be wrong. The most visible example of this is the prisoner in jail. One of the effects of prison is that it is not supposed to be warm and comfortable – and there is no one there to turn to. Prison society is very perilous.<sup>17</sup>

It's when the prisoner sees no hope, no light that he turns to the hope of the hopeless, the light of the world. Some people have to find the bottom of the ladder to recognize it as such.

#### Fools

**Psalms 107:17-22 NIV** Some became fools through their rebellious ways  
and suffered affliction because of their iniquities. (18) They loathed all food  
and drew near the gates of death. (19) Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he saved them from their distress. (20) He sent forth his word and healed them;  
he rescued them from the grave. (21) Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing  
love  
and his wonderful deeds for men. (22) Let them sacrifice thank offerings  
and tell of his works with songs of joy.

Let's understand this bunch clearly. They are not great thinkers or great criminals; they're rather ordinary people who just want to have things their own way. Their "own way" is what the Scripture calls iniquity; these are the people who suffer from the natural consequences of their sin. Picture a three pack a day smoker dying of lung cancer, for example. Human iniquity healed by God's loving touch.

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<sup>17</sup> My wife and I have worked in prison ministry for some years. The sole redeeming virtue of prison is that it often guides the convict to Christ out of sheer need.

The key is this: they knew what they were doing. It wasn't an accident; they simply ignored God's warning. How great is the love of God; he rescues even these people.

#### Merchants

**Psalms 107:23-32 NIV** Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. (24) They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep. (25) For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. (26) They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. (27) They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end. (28) Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. (29) He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. (30) They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven. (31) Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. (32) Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders.

What about, though, the good guys? In Jewish thought a rich merchant was presumed to be blessed by God. But as Solomon said, time and chance happen to all.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes even the honest man is afflicted by what happens around him. Perhaps this is so that we will see the providence of God. Perhaps even more so that we will praise God for his rescue.

#### Complacent

All well and good, you say – but none of these really fit me. The next section will: it deals with the complacent.

**Psalms 107:33-42 NIV** He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground, (34) and fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who lived there. (35) He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs; (36) there he brought the hungry to live, and they founded a city where they could settle. (37) They sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest; (38) he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased, and he did not let their herds diminish. (39) Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled by oppression, calamity and sorrow; (40) he who pours contempt on nobles made them wander in a trackless waste. (41) But he lifted the needy out of their affliction and increased their families like flocks. (42) The upright see and rejoice, but all the wicked shut their mouths.

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<sup>18</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:11. The phrasing "time and chance" is found in the King James, from a more eloquent time.

### First the Lord blesses

The Psalmist would no have trouble identifying just such a set of circumstances in history; it would be the Exodus. Like so:

- ✚ First, God destroyed the occupants of the Promised Land. They, the wicked, we destroyed or kicked out.
- ✚ Then the poor – the wandering Israelites – were given this land, and God blessed it for them.  
Sound familiar? How was America born?

### Complacency

But soon the Israelites grew fat and complacent. They chased after other gods; they got drunk early and often; adultery became common (temple prostitutes, you know). So God chastised them with:

- ✚ Oppression – he set rulers over them whose only purpose was to squeeze out as much labor as possible.
- ✚ Calamities – natural disasters (think drought).
- ✚ Sorrow – that sense of hopelessness that comes from knowing it's your own stupid fault.

It's interesting to see that God pours contempt upon the leaders of this nation. He knows who's doing it; but he has not forgotten the oppressed and needy. As the leaders grow worse, the humble are quietly blessed. (Does anyone see anything like that today in America?)

### The Upright Rejoice

When they see this, the righteous should rejoice, for it is the hand of God at work.

- ✚ They rejoice over the affliction of the wicked. Every time some corrupt politician is exposed and convicted, the righteous should rejoice!
- ✚ The rejoice over the needy being fed. Think about the smiles that accompanied a truckload of food for Haiti after their earthquake.

This rejoicing is for the righteous – but to participate you have to believe in the providence of God. All good things have their natural causes, but ultimately it is God who works all things together who is to be praised.

### Whoever Is Wise

**Psalms 107:43 NIV** Whoever is wise, let him heed these things  
and consider the great love of the LORD.

May we end with three thoughts for the wise?

- ✚ Look for the providence of God. Things may not be the way you want them now, but God still rules.
- ✚ When you see them, take heed to what he does. It's always cheaper to learn from others' mistakes – or successes.
- ✚ Finally, consider that you can offer nothing but praise to God – in response to his great love. He loved so much that he sent his son; no greater love can be imagined.

## What Right? - Psalm 50

### The Mighty God

**Psalms 50:1-6 NASB** A Psalm of Asaph. The Mighty One, God, the LORD, has spoken, And summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. (2) Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth. (3) May our God come and not keep silence; Fire devours before Him, And it is very tempestuous around Him. (4) He summons the heavens above, And the earth, to judge His people: (5) "Gather My godly ones to Me, Those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice." (6) And the heavens declare His righteousness, For God Himself is judge. Selah.

### The Names of God

It is a common fact of the Old Testament: names are not just labels stuck on people. In this time, people expected that your name meant something — and that it described you in some sense. This is true for the names of God in this passage as well. There are three such names here:

- ✚ El — this comes from the root word meaning "mighty." Sometimes translated as "Almighty," it carries with it the idea of great power.
- ✚ Elohim — this is the plural of the previous word. It is something like to use in the English language of a royal plural; as Queen Victoria once said, "we are not amused." The fact that both the singular and plural versions are used is curious until you read the New Testament. The doctrine of the Trinity is hinted at in the Old Testament, but never really explicitly stated.
- ✚ Jehovah — this is the Hebrew for "I am." It proclaims God as the self-existent one, the one who is not contingent on any other being. It is the personal name by which God identified himself to Moses.

The use of all three names is an unusual combination. We may infer that the psalmist meant to impress us.

### Out of Zion

The interpretation of poetry is never an exact science. Sometimes we are reduced to speculation concerning what the poet really meant. Particularly difficult phrase in this one is the second verse. The clause, "the perfection of beauty," is the particularly difficult one. It has some interesting implications:

- ✚ It associates beauty with God. An artist would see this simply as a matter of perfection. Therefore we must conclude that perfection itself exists. This has enormous implications. For example it implies there is a perfect standard of behavior.
- ✚ Such beauty is said to shine forth. In other words, such perfection is visible to us in some way.
- ✚ Note please that this is not necessarily referring to natural beauty in God's creation. This beauty is associated with God.

In the third verse the poet uses the unusual phrasing, "may our God come." If you read the rest of this section, you cannot help but come to the conclusion that the poet wants God to come in a way most of us would not appreciate. We are all for the gentle Jesus; we appreciate the comfort he brings. But do we really want the God before whom fire devours? Indeed, the poet here gives us three characteristics of this God which might describe the second coming of Christ just as well as a visitation in the Old Testament.

- ✦ First, he is not silent. God has no intention of sneaking up on us. This will be an event quite visible and heard.
- ✦ May I point out the next important word: fire? The New Testament mind leaps immediately to the fires of hell.
- ✦ In a curious phrasing, the psalmist declares that it is "very tempestuous around Him." The modern airplane traveler might think of the word turbulence; think of the most difficult flight you've ever had.

This would be very difficult to interpret without the concept of Judgment Day.

### Gather My Godly Ones

This passage probably made only dark sense to the ancient Jew. We can interpret it in the light of the New Testament. Simply put, there will come a day when God arrives in visible power, accompanied by the resurrection of the dead, resulting in a new heaven and a new earth after he has passed judgment upon all of mankind. This particular passage speaks only of the resurrection of the godly; we are assured in Revelation that those who are in Christ rise first.

Here we find a hidden meaning: the covenant of sacrifice. This would mean the sacrifices he made at the altar in the Tabernacle (when this Psalm was written) and later the Temple. That would be the Old Testament interpretation. But we also know that Christ is our sacrificial lamb, and therefore we are bound to God by a covenant of sacrifice as well. The reason we take communion each week is so that we will remember that sacrifice. Given such a memorial, it must be important.

The last key fact emerge from this section is that God himself will judge. This tells us that the judgment will be righteous; those who have earned the reward will receive it. God is both righteous and abundant. The reader will recall that God himself will use the standard by which we judge others (or refrain from judging others) in judging us. This too is justice.

### Complaint

**Psalms 50:7-15 NASB** "Hear, O My people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you; I am God, your God. (8) "I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, And your burnt offerings are continually before Me. (9) "I shall take no young bull out of your house Nor male goats out of your folds. (10) "For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills. (11) "I know every bird of the mountains, And everything that moves in the field is Mine. (12) "If I were hungry I would not tell you, For the world is Mine, and all it contains. (13) "Shall I eat the flesh of bulls Or drink the blood of male goats? (14) "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving And pay your vows to the Most High; (15) Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me."

### Does God Approve?

This passage is somewhat unusual in the Old Testament for the fact that it does not condemn meaningless sacrifices. Remember that Asaph was a contemporary of King David. Worship in his days was honest and sincere, we may assume. Therefore God approves. We may make the same extension today about our own worship services. Supposing that they meet the standard of sincerity and some attempt to worship in the fashion which God would approve, it would seem reasonable to think that he does approve. This would also apply to our tithes and offerings, which parallel the sacrifices of the Old

Testament time. Note, please, the measurement is not how many decibels the guitar player can crank out his amplifier — but the honest sincerity of the congregation singing along.

### Does God Need?

Note the phrasing here: it implies that God has no need or desire to reach down into the land of Israel and scoop up a few more goats or bulls to be sacrificed to him. In other words, Israel was doing just fine with this. More to the point, God here proclaims his ownership of all things created. As such, we are simply returning to him what he has given to us. Logically, therefore, he has no real need to grasp at anything we have.

The expression here stresses the abundance of what God has. The phrase, "the cattle on a thousand hills," has passed into the English language as a sign of riches. Even more, God makes it very clear that if he wanted more the last place He would go to get it would be from us. It makes sense if you view everything you have as a gift from God.

### So What Does God Want?

Okay, what is it that God wants — if it's not another bull on the altar? The psalmist gives us three things:

- ✚ First, offer him your thanksgiving. Be thankful for the things that he has given you; be vocal about it.
- ✚ Keep your promises to God. If you have made a declaration to him that you will do this, that or the other than follow through. You prefer to deal with an honest man; so does God.
- ✚ Call upon him when you are in trouble. Why? Because he will come to your rescue and give you reason to praise him — as he so richly deserves.

### What Right Do You Have?

**Psalms 50:16-21 NASB** But to the wicked God says, "What right have you to tell of My statutes And to take My covenant in your mouth? (17) "For you hate discipline, And you cast My words behind you. (18) "When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, And you associate with adulterers. (19) "You let your mouth loose in evil And your tongue frames deceit. (20) "You sit and speak against your brother; You slander your own mother's son. (21) "These things you have done and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state *the case* in order before your eyes.

### The Implied Problem

Americans as a rule are quite familiar with the thought that our justice system may be used to protect the guilty. The price we pay for having a system which is intended to be impartial is that we sometimes acquit the guilty. The wicked are entitled to use the laws of our country to escape punishment, if they can. Often enough, this bothers the honest citizen. It appears that the Almighty has the same opinion.

The problem extends to the church as well. In any particular church, particularly in our age, there will be those who are minimal believers. The wicked look at such people and make them their standard of comparison. They criticize such believers. Often enough, so do the serious Christians. The serious Christian challenges this with an eye to correcting it.

The wicked have a different purpose. They look at such people and use them to justify themselves. I suspect this is the primary use of hypocrites — to make other sinners feel good.

Please note that there is no logical sense to this. It amounts to saying, "you are bad. I am worse. Therefore I am justified in being evil." It makes no sense — but it is a common opinion. This in no way fools the Almighty.

### Who Is He Talking about?

It helps us here to see who the wicked really are. There are three criteria:

- ✚ These people accept neither God's word nor God's discipline. Their own pride substitutes for these things.
- ✚ These are people who are pleased with evil. Adultery is "enhancing your marriage." Theft is "redistribution of assets."
- ✚ Most telling of all, these people speak evil. They are quick to defend what is vile.  
It does seem that this makes it rather cut and dried, doesn't it?

### God Kept Silent

There is always a temptation in Christian prayer to give advice to the Almighty. One of the most common bits of advice is this: wouldn't this be a good time to smite the evil? How about a lightning bolt directly in the head of some notable, anti-Christian leader? While we can sense the frustration, we must admit that God has a different point of view. He wants that all men should be saved, that none should perish. Hitting somebody with a lightning bolt is tantamount to saying it is impossible for them to repent. It may be very difficult, but nothing is impossible with God.

That's now. The day is coming when God's patience will run out, and he will return to judge the living and the dead.

### No Fence to Sit on

**Psalms 50:22-23 NASB** "Now consider this, you who forget God, Or I will tear *you* in pieces, and there will be none to deliver. (23) "He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; And to him who orders *his way aright* I shall show the salvation of God."

The choice is quite simple:

- ✚ Either you are one of those who forget God completely, and for you there is no deliverer; you will be torn to pieces, thrown in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- ✚ Or you are one who thanks God, orders your ways as he would desire — and is therefore shown salvation.

As the days approach the end of the age, the fence you want to sit on has sharper and sharper pickets. In the end, you must decide. If you fail to decide, you have decided.

## Under His Wings - Psalm 91

It is the good pleasure of Almighty God to do extraordinary things through ordinary people. Those ordinary people often discover God's power because of a trial in their lives; they turn and run to God, and discover there the protection of God. They are "leaning on the everlasting arms;" they are "under his wings." An older generation of hymn writers knew this well; the old hymns often speak of the protective providence of the Lord.

The Psalmist here knew the same kind of protection. We don't know who wrote this particular Psalm; speculation is Moses or David. It does not matter; this is a man who has turned to God for shelter – and found more than he needed.

Shelter for those who trust

The Holy Bible, New International Version

- 1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.◦
- 2 I will say◦ of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust."
- 3 Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare  
and from the deadly pestilence.
- 4 He will cover you with his feathers,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

Psalm 91:1 through Psalm 91:4 (NIV)

### Staying in the shelter

The word "dwell" is passing from our language. It carries with it the idea of staying for a time, settling down. The mature Christian knows that God desires his children to stay – not run into – his shelter. Other translations use the word "abide" – again, conveying the sense that we live in the shelter of his arms. The key is this: abide. Don't wait for the crisis.

The word "shelter" can also be translated "secret place." This abiding is not something that is prominently displayed. Our Lord counseled us to pray in secret; the results will be public enough.

### Proclaiming the fortress

One aspect of trusting the Lord is "proclaiming the fortress." Others should know in whom you trust. And what are you to say?

- ✚ First, that he is your refuge – the shelter in which you abide.
- ✚ Next, that he is your God – the one who has all authority in your life.
- ✚ Finally, there is the fact that you trust him – tell them that.

You are the leading expert on what God does for you. In these three points are the testimony of the average Christian.

### Deliverance

He promises to deliver you if you will trust him. He delivers us in two ways;

- ✚ He delivers us from troubles – for when we follow his truth he keeps us from temptation and evil.
- ✚ He delivers us out of trouble – if we will but turn to him.

### His Faithfulness

Why is this so hard to accept for most Christians? Because they don't believe in the faithfulness of God. But understand this: he covers you; but you have to run to him to hide. You must make the active choice (run to him) before he makes his active choice to cover you. Then you will see the faithfulness of God. He is not like us; his word always is true.

Do not fear

The Holy Bible, New International Version

- 5 You will not fear the terror of night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,  
6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,  
nor the plague that destroys at midday.  
7 A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.  
8 You will only observe with your eyes  
and see the punishment of the wicked.

Psalm 91:5 through Psalm 91:8 (NIV)

Our Psalmist amplifies his previous thoughts. This is helpful to us, for often we trust God in one thing, but not another. Listen to his fears as they leave.

### Night or Day

Those who have been soldiers know the feeling. It's the middle of the night, there is no one around who is friendly, and the night seems to hold the almost visible forms of your enemy. Alone in the dark, courage ebbs. But we are not alone in the dark.

The day brings its terrors too – in modern times, there is the whipsaw between being employed and being a real human being. So often the boss is one who enjoys pushing other people around. Such a man must rule by terror; but you need not fear him. Your Lord is your shelter.

It makes no difference, the time of day or night – to the one who created time.

### Disease and disaster

Of all fears, that which "might happen" is the worst. Note, please, that the Psalmist does not say you will not get sick; nor does he say you won't face natural disaster (or, for that matter, any other kind). He says you will not fear them. So, I ask you, Christian:

- ✚ What do you say to the elderly gentleman who is worried about developing Alzheimer's disease, or dementia?
- ✚ Or to the relative from Ohio who won't come to California because of the earthquakes?  
Make provision for these things; the insurance companies need the money. But fear them? Why? Do you not know the one who holds all things in his hands?

### One in a thousand

Indeed, it appears that the Lord God Almighty is very fond of you. He chose you before the world began to inherit his salvation. More than that, for those who are obedient, there is protection beyond measure. Remember Esther? Did the fate of the Jewish nation really depend upon a king's insomnia? The Almighty is superior to time, and he therefore is pleased to look after his children.

### You will see the wicked get their due

For his chosen ones, God provides the sight of the wicked getting what's coming to them. Why does he make such things public?

- ✚ So that you might know righteousness. As you see those who are wicked getting what they deserve, you will also see the virtue of doing it his way.
- ✚ So that you might know justice. It is not wise to assume that the loving God is also one who ignores justice.
- ✚ So that you will know that God is sovereign – it's his universe. What goes around, comes around.

### The Providence of God

The Holy Bible, New International Version

- <sup>9</sup> If you make the Most High your dwelling—  
even the LORD, who is my refuge—  
<sup>10</sup> then no harm will befall you,  
no disaster will come near your tent.  
<sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways;  
<sup>12</sup> they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Psalm 91:9 through Psalm 91:12 (NIV)

### Trust rewarded

We need to remember the words Paul wrote to the Hebrews:

The Holy Bible, New International Version

<sup>6</sup>And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

God rewards our trust in him. Abraham believed God; he trusted in him and acted upon that trust. God rewarded him by counting that belief as righteousness. But a word of warning: such trust is not an in and out door; it is the abiding trust of the true believer.

How can this be? No relationship of love can be built unless both persons trust each other. (Try having a happy marriage without trusting your wife!) That relationship is what God wants; he is pleased to reward you when you try to establish it.

### The universe is a moral place

Many have noticed lately that our business leaders are increasingly focused upon the profits of this quarter. That's practically the definition of temptation: trying to sacrifice eternal good for short term wickedness.

A personal instance. When I was young, I was a teacher for a short period of time. During my student teaching, my master teacher took me aside and explained to me what he called "twenty for five." The girls at that school dressed to arouse ("hot pants" were in back then). He explained it simply: statutory rape is even yet a crime; the phrase meant twenty years in prison for five minutes of pleasure. What goes around, comes around.

### Angelic Protection

While there is much nonsense going around on this subject (like the knick-knack that says, "Don't drive faster than your guardian angel can fly"), it is clearly taught that God provides his angels for our protection. Indeed, the basic manner in which God punishes people and nations is not so much to strike them as to cease protecting them. But for those who are strong in the faith, God's protection is something to be claimed in faith. Permit me an anecdote from C. H. Spurgeon:

In the year 1854, when I had scarcely been in London twelve months, the neighbourhood in which I labored was visited by Asiatic cholera, and my congregation suffered from its inroads. Family after family summoned me to the bedside of the smitten, and almost every day I was called to visit the grave. I gave myself up with youthful ardor to the visitation of the sick, and was sent for from all corners of the district by persons of all ranks and religions. I became weary in body and sick at heart. My friends seemed falling one by one, and I felt or fancied that I was sickening like those around me. A little more work and weeping would have laid me low among the rest; I felt that my burden was heavier than I could bear, and I was ready to sink under it. As God would have it, I was returning mournfully home from a funeral, when my curiosity led me to read a paper which was wafered up in a shoemaker's window in the Dover Road. It did not look like a trade announcement, nor was it, for it bore in a good bold handwriting these words: - "*Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.*" The effect upon my heart was immediate. Faith appropriated the passage as her own. I felt secure, refreshed, girt with immortality. I went on with my visitation of the dying in a calm and peaceful spirit; I felt no fear of evil, and I suffered no harm. The providence which moved the tradesman to place those verses in his window I gratefully acknowledge, and in the remembrance of its marvelous power I adore the Lord my God.

Did you notice the key? "Faith appropriated the passage as her own." Moody saw the providential care of God on many occasions, and was not hesitant to testify to that fact.

Nor is angelic protection simply a matter of physical safety. As we see here, the problem was not only disease, but the oppression of death. Our Lord knows your every need; trust him for it.

## Triumph of the Saints

The Holy Bible, New International Version

- 13 You will tread upon the lion and the cobra;  
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.
- 14 “Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him;  
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
- 15 He will call upon me, and I will answer him;  
I will be with him in trouble,  
I will deliver him and honor him.
- 16 With long life will I satisfy him  
and show him my salvation.”

Psalm 91:13 through Psalm 91:16 (NIV)

It is curious but true: it pleases God to give victory over the strong to those who are weak – but who trust in him. Why is this?

- ✚ So that his power might be shown; in our weakness is his strength displayed.
- ✚ So that his purposes might prevail. Somebody has to do it.
- ✚ So that we might be encouraged.

So God tells us what to do about it. It’s a pretty simple thing; in the sense of logic, it is an “If-Then”:

### **IF**

- ✚ You love him
- ✚ You truly know him, and acknowledge his glorious Name
- ✚ You call on him in time of trouble

### **THEN**

- ✚ He will answer you, he will rescue you and protect you
- ✚ He will be with you, You will know his peace; you will feel his presence.
- ✚ He promises you his rewards on earth: honor, long life – and salvation.

You are privileged as a child of God to claim his promises to you; if you do, you will not only shelter under his wings; he will give you the wings of an eagle to soar.

## Envy - Psalm 73

Isaac Asimov, early in his career, wrote one of his rare "Jewish" stories. I cannot find it in my library, but as memory serves me, it went something like this:

Abraham (Abie, as we shall call him) was poor, elderly and Jewish. He lived in a little brownstone apartment in New York. One night, a demon from Hell appeared in his living room - dressed in a three piece suit. After preliminary introductions, the demon announced his purpose.

"I'm here to grant you three wishes - you know, like Aladdin and his lamp."

"What's the catch?"

"The catch? Simple. Your worst enemy gets double what you ask for."

"You're out of luck, booby. I don't have a worst enemy."

"Oh yes you do. It's Bernie."

"Bernie! Bernie's my best friend."

"He's also your worst enemy. It often works out like that. Look, when you want to make a wish, just stand in the center of the room and announce it. Immediately there will be a knock on your door; your wish will be granted."

"Why three wishes? Why not one?"

"Oh, most people waste the first wish, just to prove that this really works. Then they wish for money; then they wish for what they really want - and Hell loves the fireworks then!"

With a flash the demon disappears. Abie has to try it. "I wish for 50 pounds of chopped liver and onions!" Immediately, there's a knock at the door. "Sign here!" As Abie is trying to find places to stuff his treasure into the refrigerator, the phone rings. It's Bernie.

"Guess what? I won 100 pounds of chopped liver and onions on a radio call in show! Not only that, when the caterer got here, he was short for the day. It seems he had an emergency order for 50 pounds that he couldn't fill. So I sold him 50 pounds at twice the retail price!" Abie, of course, is furious.

Abie stews for a couple of weeks, and then decides that, Bernie get double or not, he's got to get rich. "I wish for 100 million dollars - tax free." Immediately, there's a knock at the door. The lawyer explains that his long lost uncle, the black sheep of the family, died at his immense sheep ranch in Australia. Remembering little Abie as the only member of the family who did not condemn him (Abie being six weeks old when uncle left), he has left him his entire estate. By his direction, the estate has been liquidated, the taxes paid, and the remainder sent as a check - for \$100 million. Abie is ecstatic - until the phone rings.

It's Bernie. "I told you should have invested in my nephew's company! I just sold my stock and cleared \$200 million - after taxes! Not bad for a thousand dollar investment!"

Abie stews for a month - and then the light goes on. "I want a woman. I don't quite know how to put this, but she should be just as much woman - no more, but certainly no less - than any one man can handle."

Immediately, there was a soft, sexy knock at the door.

Envy. Whoever "wins" in this story, someone envies. Envy is no light sin; indeed, the medieval theologians considered it one of the Seven Deadly Sins. The psalmist begins his experience with envy thus:

{73:1} A psalm of Asaph. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. {2} But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. {3} For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. -- Psalms 73:1-3 (NIV)

More than any recent time, we can sympathize with Asaph. He "envied the arrogant." Truly the arrogant are dominant today. Like no time in written recent memory, our society considers arrogance a virtue rather than a vice. "If you got it, flaunt it."

In former times arrogance was still seen as evil - which at least gave rise to some "polite" hypocrisy. "Hypocrisy," said Montaigne, "is the tribute vice pays to virtue." The tribute is no longer paid; the arrogant no longer see the virtuous life as worth pretending to. Such arrogance being public, we as Christians are given more temptation to envy.

"Envy," says Dorothy Sayers, "is the sin of the have-nots against the haves." Unfortunately, in one sense or another, we are all "have-nots." Envy then becomes one of the great temptations of our time - all the more because it is almost never preached against. Let's hear Asaph's complaint:

{4} They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. {5} They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. {6} Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. {7} From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. {8} They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. {9} Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. {10} Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. {11} They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" {12} This is what the wicked are like--always carefree, they increase in wealth. -- Psalms 73:4-12 (NIV)

In the background, you can hear Asaph's complaint: why is it that God allows these obviously wicked people to prosper. God says He is a God of justice. God says He is omnipotent. God says He loves the righteous - so why do the wicked prosper?

Interestingly, Christ never answers this argument. He simply advises us to do likewise:

{44} But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, {45} that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. -- Matthew 5:44-45 (NIV)

The answer may perhaps be deduced from this passage. God is also a God of love; it is not his wish that any should perish. There are some other points of interest:

1) Is it not at least a little presumptuous to tell God who He should or should not strike with lightning?

2) And if He struck the wicked down like that, perhaps some in this class would be in the grave, and on to Hell, rather than saved?

So why do we complain? It is the comparison between them and us. If we were rich and carefree too, who would care that the wicked were such? But, says Asaph,

{13} Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.  
{14} All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning. -- Psalms 73:13-14 (NIV)

In other words, I've been good and look where it got me. Once you see that envy is, in the words of Frederick Buechner, "the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you," you see its power. If God won't let me become rich (because I have to be good) why should anyone else get it?

Asaph isn't totally lost, however. He knows when to keep his mouth shut:

{15} If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. {16} When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me -- Psalms 73:15-16 (NIV)

I may not know what's going on, but I know when to shut up. A good thing too, for envy is contagious. If you think not, listen to the conversation around the lunch table at work, especially when the subject of management comes up. It's a real temptation to envy (and condemn) those you may not even know. James gives us some good advice on this:

{14} But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. -- James 3:14 (NIV)

The turning point now comes. We have seen Asaph, in the mind's eye, down in the depths, looking up in envy. We are about to see the virtues of regular worship - worship which obliges the human mind to touch the mind of God:

{17} till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. -- Psalms 73:17 (NIV)

The word "sanctuary" gives us the clue to Asaph's restoration. In Old Testament times, most people could not enter the sanctuary. Indeed,

{10} Appoint Aaron and his sons to serve as priests; anyone else who approaches the sanctuary must be put to death." -- Numbers 3:10 (NIV)

So Asaph was a priest! His restoration then must be thought of as being that of a priest who comes into contact with God. Indeed, the solution to the problem of envy is to see the situation from God's point of view. Now, according to Hebrews, we too are priests - a kingdom of priests. A priest is one who is the bridge between man and God. So let's look at this from the point of view of a priest in our world. What does a priest (in our context, a minister) see? He sees the heart worries of all who come to him. Put yourself in the position of the priest (minister) in our society. The wicked, arrogant man comes into your office for a little heart to heart talk. What does he say? How does this person appear to God? Asaph describes it this way:

{18} Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. {19} How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! {20} As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. -- Psalms 73:18-20 (NIV)

Consider well the secret fears of the ungodly! Arrogance is often the cover of fear; especially if you have the money to pull it off.

Asaph now bursts into one of those characteristic songs found in the Psalm. Consider it as the verse and chorus. Verse by man; chorus by God:

Man

{21} When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, {22} I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. -- Psalms 73:21-22 (NIV)

How like us! Envy turns us into animals, running on emotion alone. But God is patient; He understands and cares for us.

God

{23} Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. {24} You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. -- Psalms 73:23-24 (NIV)

Even when I behave like an animal, God cares for me, gently guiding me back into the right path. And when He does guide me back, I realize how gracious He has been, and what strength He is to me:

Man

{25} Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. {26} My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. -- Psalms 73:25-26 (NIV)

That pair of verses is a chorus of worship yet today. The proper response of man to God's grace is praise. Even to this God gives us guidance:

God

{27} Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. {28} But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds. -- Psalms 73:27-28 (NIV)

It is not sufficient to praise Him in sanctuary; we must tell others of His deeds. This, however, is a result. It is the natural out flowing of God's spirit in us. As James tells us,

**{8} Come near to God and he will come near to you.** Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. -- James 4:8 (NIV)

There is the real solution to envy. Draw near to God; see things as He sees them. Love others as He loves them.

## Let Me Paint You A Picture - Psalm 84

One of the wonders of the Bible is that our Lord uses the experiences and praises of the Jews of the Old Testament as pictures of the nature of New Testament experience. We will see that today in Psalm 84. The picture today is that of three concentric circles. In the inner circle, hidden from the view of all but God, is the spiritual life of the Christian. Next is the outer life, and finally that life as viewed by others. These are the Temple, the Pilgrimage and the Worship. Psalms such as this do not define doctrine; they illustrate it.

### The Temple

The Old Testament picture of the Temple is very explicit. Chapters are written about how it was built; instructions were given in great detail. In Psalm 84 we see the result, as seen by the ancient Jew:

{84:1} For the director of music. According to gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm. How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! {2} My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. {3} Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young-- a place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God. {4} Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah -- Psalms 84:1-4 (NIV)

The temple of the New Testament is the Christian, as Paul says. Here we see some characteristics which might interest us:

First, there is the beauty of the Temple. Where God resides, the building is beautiful. Pardon the repetition, but I know this from living with her. When I first married my wife, I did not regard her as particularly beautiful (I'm nothing to look at either, so we're even). Indeed, among our friends we call our "UCLA bunch" (college chums) I rated her fourth among four. But over the years all the bodies have aged - and the spirits have come out. Now we know who found the real beauty of the group.

How is this beauty of soul achieved? Think how women achieve physical beauty. Exercise, cosmetics, surgery - they all start with desire. Looking in the mirror and saying "not quite what I wanted." Here we see the way to spiritual beauty - the yearning for God. This is a natural yearning, and only Christ can satisfy it:

{13} Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, {14} but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." -- John 4:13-14 (NIV)

The phrase "cry out" in the NIV is translated "shout for joy" in the RSV and Jerusalem versions. There is really no conflict; yearning in any sense comes out. Witness Job in his yearning for God:

{25} I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. {26} And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; {27} I myself will see him with my own eyes--I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! -- Job 19:25-27 (NIV)

From the oldest to newest books of the Bible ("even so, come") we see this yearning on the part of the Christian to meet God.

The personal nature of this relationship is also shown in this Psalm. Notice the use of the sparrow as nesting near the altar, and remember Christ's words:

{29} Are not two sparrows sold for a penny ? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. -- Matthew 10:29 (NIV)

Even the most insignificant of people can draw close to God. And not only the insignificant, but also those even less likely to be suspected of being "church people." Have you ever seen a swallow in flight? It is not a smooth flight - rather it dips and darts in all directions. Even the nest of the swallow is hard to find - hidden up under the eaves. Yet even such creatures (this is the only mention of such in the Bible) are welcome in the Lord's own house.

This section also includes a bit of poetry which is almost a throwaway, yet a great lesson. The Psalmist refers to God and Lord Almighty (Yahweh Sabaoth = Lord of Hosts?) and in the same passage as My King and My God. God rules over the host; God is also in a personal relationship to us.

## Pilgrimage

There is a difference between "getting there" and "going." Think not? Some people travel to far away places - they say "we did Thailand last year, and this year we're going to do India," or something like that. The emphasis is on going to someplace to experience it. Other times we will say things like "we came to Fullerton two years ago." One implies the adventure of going; the other implies the satisfaction of arriving. Christians get to do both. It's called pilgrimage.

{5} Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. {6} As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. {7} They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. {8} Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob. Selah {9} Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one.  
-- Psalms 84:5-9 (NIV)

In this world we do the "going." Strength in this world starts with the desire of the Christian to go where God wants him to go. How often we tell God that we do not like our circumstance, or we wish he would not place us in thus and such a position. We are just passing through, as the old spiritual says. If we set our hearts on pilgrimage they would be ever so much lighter.

Pilgrimage does not, as so many think, mean walking through as much as it does (in the Hebrew) setting up a temporary lodging. "Pitching the tent nightly closer to home" is the closest I can get to this feeling in English. Corrie ten Boom tells this story to illustrate the guiding principle of pilgrimage:

When Corrie Ten Boom of The Hiding Place fame was a little girl in Holland, her first realization of death came after a visit to the home of a neighbor who had died. It impressed her that some day her parents would also die. Corrie's father comforted her with words of wisdom. "Corrie, when you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket?"

"Why, just before we get on the train," she replied.

"Exactly," her father said, "and our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things too. Don't run out ahead of Him Corrie.

When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need -- just in time."

You see the point? We "arrive" only in heaven. Here on earth we are pilgrims. Hence we must ask for our daily bread. Sometimes that bread will arrive with tears. The Valley of Baca translates "Valley of Weeping." The name refers to the trees in the valley, which are Palestinian alders. They "weep" sap. The valley itself is mentioned one other time in the Old Testament - it's also called the Valley of Rephaim. Rephaim were the original inhabitants - they were giants - but by the time the Israelites conquered the land they had been wiped out. Hence "Rephaim" also meant "ghosts" to the Hebrews. Tears, giants or ghosts - these are in our trials. The tears we weep at loss; the fears of the giants in our lives and worst of all the ghosts of our pasts join to terrify us.

But in all these things we are more than conquerors! We take the valley of weeping and make it a fertile place; we go "from strength to strength." This is the life of victory, the pilgrimage of triumph which leads us to the Father's throne.

The Psalmist concludes this section as I might. Now that I have stated what you want (vs. 5-7) it's my prayer that you make me such a man! (vs. 8-9)

## Worship

By worship I mean service, for they are the same word in the New Testament. The Psalmist puts it this way:

{10} Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. {11} 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. {12} O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you. -- Psalms 84:10-12 (NIV)

John Milton took these words and twisted them around backwards and put them in Satan's mouth (Paradise Lost): "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." These are the words of pride, and they accurately reflect the sentiments of our generation. As Milton would have pointed out, however, Satan rules this earth - and is condemned to Hell.

The Christian refuse to try and stand on his own two feet, proud to be dependent upon no one. The Christian looks to God as sun and shield, instead. Sun - as in light to my path. Shield, to defend me against the tempter. As Proverbs puts it,

{5} "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. -- Proverbs 30:5 (NIV)

What the world sees is the strange sight of the Christian taking refuge in God, not in the strength of this world. For those who trust, the world also sees the blessing of God on that same Christian.

While typing up this lesson I was trying hard to think of an illustration. I couldn't bring one up, so I took a walk. Across the street, at Cal State Fullerton, in the middle of a large grassy quad, there was a young man with a trumpet. He was practicing scales. Now, you can't practice a trumpet quietly. It occurred to me: Pride is letting them hear you in performance. Humility is letting them hear you practice.

And that's us: practicing Christians, in every sense of the word. We are the doorkeepers in the house of the Lord. It doesn't appear to be a noble position to those in the world; indeed, the lowest one around. But if someone else is to get inside, someone has to open the door - right? Remember the words of the Lord:

{24} "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. {25} The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. {26} But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. -- Matthew 7:24-26 (NIV)

## On Reality - Psalm 90

A story is told by G.K. Chesterton about the genesis of his Father Brown mystery stories. It seems that one day he was at his club, overhearing two gentlemen speak about some particular priest. The comment was made (approximately) that "what would he know about real life? He's a priest; they're sheltered from reality." Chesterton was so struck by the absurdity of the comment - and its common use - that it gave him the idea for Father Brown.

Indeed, any priest or minister of the Gospel can tell you all about "reality." Discretion may prevent it - one must be able to trust the confidences given - but all that is dismal in human life is taken to the clergy, to be appealed to God. Fiction we may have in life, but in the church we must face reality. No wonder the church seems "other-worldly"; the world is so busy whitewashing reality to make it look pleasant and harmless that it can't imagine why the church would not want to do likewise.

Moses knew the seamy side of life too. He was Israel's lawgiver for forty years, and he must have seen it all. Towards the end of his life he wrote today's Psalm. We take it piece by piece.

God and Man: the reality of death

{90:1} A prayer of Moses the man of God. Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. {2} Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. {3} You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men." {4} For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night. {5} You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning-- {6} though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered. -- Psalms 90:1-6 (NIV)

In this section, Moses shows us three aspects of God and their corresponding realities in man.

God as shelter - and man in need of it. One of the enduring myths of American civilization is the ideal of the "self-reliant" man. The rugged individualist, dependent upon no one, is much admired. Of course, we see him in the movies (the product of a massive organization); on television (which depends upon mass marketing) and ever so rarely in life. The truth is not in him. The truth is that we are all dependent. God has so constructed us that even the hermit relies on others for sustenance. For each and every one of us there comes a time in life when we need help; we cry out for it. Moses here tells us where to cry.

God is eternal - man is mortal. If there is one characteristic of modern man which is most telling, it is his attitude towards death. We ignore it; we pass it off as irrelevant; we trot out reincarnation, mysticism and spiritualism - everything but face it. God, who is eternal, is not amused by our presumption.

Face it. You're going to die. So am I. The issue is not whether or not it's going to happen, or even when it's going to happen. The issue is what are we going to do about it.

God is Creator - man is the creating creature. Modern man likes to imagine that God is the creation of man, not the other way around. So we put God into a box and say that God will do thus and such "when" - and the word doesn't apply. "When" doesn't apply to God - he is the only I AM. Time is God's creation, along with space.

Perhaps an analogy would help. Consider a play and a playwright. In modern theater, the playwright may give the actors freedom to improvise on the dialog - but the play still must contain the essence of his thought, or it fails. We may be able to ad lib, but the plot is still in God's hands. He started it, and He will bring it to a close.

Moses knows all this. He also knows that man is a sinner; and thus he encounters the second aspect of reality.

### The Wrath of God

{7} We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. {8} You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. {9} All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. {10} The length of our days is seventy years-- or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. {11} Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. {12} Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom. -- Psalms 90:7-12 (NIV)

It is fashionable in Christian circles to ignore the wrath of God. This is foolish. We say that God "would never condemn a good man to hell." But who is good? Indeed, as my Bible dictionary has it, the wrath of God is "the permanent attitude of the holy and just God when confronted by sin and evil." God, in essence, has an attitude problem.

Look, He doesn't change. He reacts to sin now as then. We are the one whose attitude has changed. We now believe that either a) God can't see our sins, or (more commonly) b) that He ignores them.

God's universe hasn't changed; the consequences of sin are still the same. Indeed, it amazes me that people think their sins will never come out. The thoughts of our hearts are revealed in our actions to others; how much more is it likely that God sees and knows? When I was a child, my mother would give me cookies - when I was good. Being a prudent lad, I would lard one away in my toy box against those afternoons when mother was not so generous. The trail of ants soon led her to the "cookies in the toys box." The ants of our actions lead to the toy box of our sin.

Sin has consequences. One of those consequences is the shortness of our days. As Thomas a Kempis had it, "Of what use is a long life, if we amend so little? Alas, a long life often adds to our sins rather than to our virtue!" And that life is full of trouble (any questions on that one?)

Recall that Moses is at the very beginning of the revelation to man in an organized fashion. He ponders this, and comes to the conclusion that man has only one thing to do: repent. Jewish tradition holds this story:

Rabbi Eleazar said: Repent one day before your death. His disciples asked him, "Who knows when he will die?" Rabbi Eleazar answered, "All the more then should a man repent today, for he might die tomorrow."

There is wisdom in that answer!

## Reconciliation

Moses sees the futility of it, and now asks for reconciliation with God:

{13} Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. {14} Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. {15} Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble. {16} May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children. {17} May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us-- yes, establish the work of our hands. -- Psalms 90:13-17 (NIV)

Moses specifically asks for four things, each of which finds its answer in Christ:

1) He asks for compassion - that God might be merciful, and deal with us in love, so that we might be joyful. God's answer is Christ:

{3} Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, -- 1 Peter 1:3 (NIV)

2) He asks that we be given gladness in proportion to the suffering we have had on this earth. Christ gives this answer:

{28} Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. {29} And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. -- Matthew 19:28-29 (NIV)

3) Moses then asks for a sign of God's works. Can you imagine this? This is Moses, who saw God part the sea at his command, who met him on the mountain top for the Ten Commandments, who wrought the plagues on Pharaoh - and he wants to see more. Isn't that like us? We constantly seek "blessed assurance."

{18} Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" {19} Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." {20} The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" {21} But the temple he had spoken of was his body. -- John 2:18-21 (NIV)

The sign he gives us is the Resurrection of Christ.

4) Finally, he asks for permanence. Permanence for what we do and who we are. Again, the New Testament carries the answer:

{51} I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." -- John 6:51 (NIV)

{16} For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. {17} After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.  
-- 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 (NIV)

Here we have the answer to Moses' prayer: the Christ. In Him all these desires of our heart are fulfilled. This is the ultimate reality.